



**The Abuse of Power and the Exploitation
of the Weak in Mario Vargas's
Conversation in the Cathedral 1969**

**A RESEARCH IN ENGLISH LITERATURE
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ملخص:

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة قضية هامة وهي الفساد وتحديد الفساد السياسي الذي يؤثر بالسلب على طريقة إدارة البلاد. الفساد السياسي هو سوء لاستخدام السلطة من أجل تحقيق مكاسب شخصية. يوضح هذا البحث هيمنة الدول المتقدمة اجتماعيا وثقافيا واقتصاديا على دول العالم الثالث وتدخلها في الأمور الداخلية لهذه البلاد. يوجه هذا البحث الحالي تحليل لهذه الدراسة من خلال تناول أحداث رواية محادثة في الكاتدرائية ١٩٦٩ للكاتب البيروفي ماريو فارغاس للوزا والتي توضح سوء استخدام القوة وكيفية استغلال الطرف الضعيف.

Summary:

This study aims at addressing an important issue which is corruption specifically political corruption which affects negatively on the way of running the country. Political corruption is the abuse of using power for personal interests. The study will clarify how developed countries dominate socially, culturally, and economically and still interfere in the domestic affairs of the developing countries. The present study addresses such a deep issue with a reference to the analysis of Conversation in the Cathedral 1969 by the Peruvian-Spanish writer Mario Vargas which illustrates the abuse of power and the exploitation of the weak.

Corruption is a spiritual or a moral impurity, or any deviation from the ideals. As an adjective, the word literally means "utterly broken". An extremely fatal type of corruption which affects mankind and different societies is what is known throughout history as Political corruption. It is the abuse of public power, office or resources by elected officials for personal gain, which questions social choices and values for individuals under the constitution. Political corruption could be measured through its consequences over the society. It undermines democracy, and causes poverty, unemployment, homelessness, drug trafficking, diseases, ignorance, and political unrest among other tricky problems which affect the society. The present study addresses such a deep issue with a reference to the analysis of *Conversation in the Cathedral* 1969 by the Peruvian-Spanish writer Mario Vargas which illustrates the abuse of power and the exploitation of the weak (sung).

The study will clarify how developed countries dominate socially, culturally, and economically and still interfere in the domestic affairs of the developing countries. The above argument leads to the interesting questions.

1. How do political values or ideologies shape personal relationships?
2. To what extent is the exercise of political power justified? How much do the forms of corruption affect its nations?
3. Do superpowers function as a helping aid to the post-colonial countries?
4. Who is really in charge?
5. What is the new identity of the decolonized countries?
6. Do decolonized countries have a heard voice in controlling its own matters?

The study concentrates on one of the Third World countries. It is Peru in Asia . It is where Mario Vargas chooses to explain political corruption in the Neo-colonialism era. Neo-colonialism is the last stage of imperialism which is in place of colonialism as the main instrument of imperialism. ("Neo-colonialism")

Conversation in the Cathedral (1969) is a novel by the Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa, the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2010. He was born in 1936 in Arequipa,

Peru. The novel is his third one, which is a multiple layered tale about corruption, violence, greed, cunning, hypocrisy and sexual distortion. The novel is set in Peru. It is a portrayal of the social conditions of Peru under the dictatorship of Manuel A. Odria in the 1950s. It is divided into four main chapters, each composed of unnumbered sequences of units. The first part has ten sequences, the second has nine, the third has four, and the fourth has eight.

As the title indicates, the central piece of the novel is a conversation that takes place in a sleazy bar called the cathedral, not far from the actual cathedral of Lima, which serves as both a symbol of the myth of Peru's glory and at the same time as a sad witness to the degradation of the nation. The novel doesn't present an individual in power; rather it shows a capitalist system that counts for a corrupted social world. (Kristan 41)

Lima, the capital of Peru, is the background of action of the narrative, where characters from different social classes, government officials, capitalists, left and right wing students, servants, prostitutes, and workers, present scenes of conspiracy, corruption and political

struggles between different wings, poverty, and failure (Sollars 181). The chapters are presented and shifted continuously through a stream of dialogues from the point of view of five essential different narrators from different social levels. They are Santiago Zavala, a newspaperman and son of the wealthy industrialist Fermin Zavala; Cayo Bermudez, head of police and intelligence and Minister of Internal Affairs; Ambrosio Pardo, a chauffeur for Bermudez and later for Zavala, Amalia Cerda, a former servant at the Zavala's house and Ambrosio's wife; and Queta, a prostitute at the brothel run by Hortensia, Bermudez mistress.

Their stories are told within the framework of an ongoing single four hour conversation between Santiago and Ambrosio in the Cathedral bar in order to describe and juxtapose different actions, objects, time and space. They met accidentally at a time after Odria's dictatorship to recall life during past years and the fate of other characters in their lives. Odria was described to be, a dictator and a

murderer...suppressed parties and the freedom of the press...jailed, deported and tortured so many people that no one even knew how many...Odria was the worst tyrant in the history of Peru (Conversation in the Cathedral 68)

The novel is doubly concerned with how the quest for power transforms one's life, and with how that quest affects the lives of other people, not themselves immediately caught up in the struggle. The novel therefore depicts in detail the lives of two distinct groups. On the one hand, the politicians and wealthy businessmen who vie for power, on the other hand, several people who are peripheral to the political drama itself, yet immediately involved with its chief actors (Rossman 493).

During an accidental meeting between Zavala and Ambrosio that lasts for hours, Zavala tries to find out the truth about his father's role in the murder of a Peruvian prostitute, shedding light on the workings of a dictatorship along the way. The conversation describes the degradation and the frustration of a town, through knitting different private lives in which the author analyzes the mental and moral mechanisms that govern

power and the people behind it. The writer is basically a rebel, a man who is unhappy with the world that he sees around him, and who therefore writes in order to make people conscious of the problems facing their society.

In the novel, the protagonist Santiago Zavala depicts a pessimistic view of Peruvian society during the 1950s which uncovers the deep roots of corruption and failure in Peruvian politics and government during the time. The novel begins with posing a question "At what precise moment had Peru fucked itself up?" (4). The youth who thinks about himself and his nation at the opening of the novel affirms the corruption of the world with a double question, at what precise moment had Peru screwed itself up and he'd screwed himself up somewhere along the line. When?. It's not about questions but about confirmation for the corruption that stems from the reality around the protagonist .

The opening sequence introduces an atmosphere of decay, depression, and hopelessness that will prevail the whole novel. The protagonist's self-questioning of when it all went wrong for him is a link between the personal state of the protagonist and that of the country.

The fact that the narrative opens with his resigned declaration "there is no solution" is particularly poignant when it becomes clear that this opening chapter is marking the beginning and the end of the novel. (3)

The first chapter of the novel's four sections presents a single tense, which is the present in Lima. It presents the period of the middle life of Santiago Zavala, the son of the late Peruvian industrialist Don Fermin Zavala. Zavala, who was a communist during his university studies, writes editorials attacking the sloth of the city administration's handling of the stray dog problem for the muckraking pages of the *La Cronica*. Lima, at the time, is under the thrall of an epidemic of "rabies" (5). Zavala sets out in the quest of his wife's dog, which has been dragooned by dogcatchers anxious to earn their commission, ironically part of the city's response to Zavala's own editorials. He encounters Ambrosio, a black man, now a dogcatcher, who once drove his father's limousine, as well as the limousine of the notorious Cayo Bermudez, minister of security under the regime of the dictator Odria. Ambrosio is presented

as a man broken in body and spirit, forced to beat the captured animals to death in order to scrape together a miserable existence. At that time, the epic of the conversation commence In "La Cathedral", the bar-restaurant brothel where Ambrosio and Santiago retire for drinks and reminiscences. (Cheuse 178)

By narrating the life of Santiago Zavalita, Vargas Llosa presents his finest portrayal to date the faults and inspirations of the elite. Santiago Zavalita (who in many ways resembles Vargas Llosa) tries to break away from the artificiality of this life as soon as he enters San Marcos University. Zavalita says,

My whole life spent doing things without believing, my whole life spent pretending... and my whole life wanting to believe in something (101)

At some point of his life, Santiago leaves his home and the future his parents draw for him by joining San Marcos which isn't prestigious as the university his parents has meant for him to go. San Marcos is full of professors who are paid "miserable salaries", and gives

classes in private schools. But the "system made them that way: they needed to be stirred up, indoctrinated, organized" (90). It isn't that the professors don't know anything or don't want to teach, they aren't interested in learning either.

Because they are poor and have to work, they are contaminated with "bourgeois formalism and only want to get their degrees" (91).

Also, Vargas sheds more the light on how the governmental people or the people in power thought about the country, the system, and the people at this time in Peru. They talk about elections as simply "a formality", but a "necessary" one. So, they have to make sure that elections have to be pacified and wouldn't "blow up like a bomb in their faces."(126)

This shows how they want to control everything. Elections for them aren't a matter of people's choice; they're simply "a formality", a view for the other powerful countries who want to be visualized as

democratic system that supports the people beforehand.

Furthermore, this crystallizes who is really in power, who is more important to favor with, the people of the country or the superpower countries. On the surface, the superpower countries "so called democratic" appear to support the weak, poor, and unjustified people, but deep down they only care for a system that backs their owns and wouldn't stand against their interests and welfare. "The United States is ready to help a government that maintains order. That's why they backed the revolution. Now they want elections and we have to give them what they want". Even after this whole "formality" ended, "the opposition candidate still in jail", which shows the dictatorship which the government of Peru used to live. (127)

During that time in Peru, Varga Llosa indicated how demonstrations, strikes, unions, meetings, and parties of the opposed side to the government was brutalized and dealt with firmly and without mercy in some cases. Comrades joining secret groups proven to be against the government in any way or evoking the people

against it would be exiled, sent to jail, threatened, beaten up, tortured and forced to sign documents that prove their involvement in illegal acts that would guarantee their sentence to jail for a long time.

One of the most moving scenes, and probably, that represents the climax of Vargas Llosa's portrayal of the hypocrisy of the Zavala family, is when Santiago brings his wife Ana to meet his family for the first time. His mother is unable to hide her dislike for Ana who is opening her arms, but she doesn't embrace her or even smile at her. She seems to regard her son's marriage to a girl who, after all, is from an inferior social class, as a personal insult. She has considered Ana as "a social climber" who wants to turn from a common, poor, and ignorant woman to class "senora."(545)

The evening progresses very uncomfortably until, at one point alone with her son, Senora Zoila explains her intense disappointment, Don't you realize? Can't you see? How am I ever going to accept the idea of my son married to a woman who could be his servant?". This family crisis shatters the image of the "big happy family" (542)

Vargas's purpose is not merely to condemn the illness of this particular social stratum or "firsthand, decent class" as Vargas calls them, but rather to show that similar levels of corruption and selfishness are found in all levels of the nation's social structure. (Kirk 13)

The picture of Peruvian society presented by Vargas Llosa is certainly a bleak one: there are many imposing barriers between the many different levels, and social mobility really appears unknown there. Furthermore, as a result of the clearly defined social standings, all members of Peruvian society know exactly what rung of the complex social ladder that they belong to, and seem able to recognize immediately the position of all other people that they meet.

Meaningful communication between representatives is virtually impossible, since the members of the different strata usually remain in groups consisting of their "equals." Consequently, the only form of communication between different levels is, "vertical communication: from the oppressor to the oppressed." This results in a situation in which there is always someone further down the social scale on whom it is

possible to vent one's rage, as shown by the many examples of Cayo Bermudez's brutality to social "inferiors", or one in which it is possible to adulate a person higher up the social ladder, as in the case of Ambrosio's devotion to Don Fermin. (Kirk 14)

The light is also shed on how the government in Peru dealt with mistrust to any of its ex-workers as how they dealt with Espina, for example, the ex-minister. In the novel he was trying to reach Cayo "Bermudez" who was apparently trying to avoid him, even though Espina was the reason for Bermudez to have this prestigious position. But there is no gratitude in the secret service system. Everyone who used to hold a position in the government, thus having essential information about it, is considered a suspect no matter what is proven. An "eye" must always be kept on them. (199)

Life in Peru, through the time of Odria, isn't smooth and transparent. Everything is monitored, observed and investigated. People should watch their backs. No one is secured, safe or off the hands of the police for any assumed reason. Media and Journalism which are meant to be the doorway for revealing the truth

and unveil corruption in the institutions or the individuals for the sake of the people are just other elements to protect the government and promote for its needs.

Also, a light is shed on how the elections are held by the men of Odria. One incident Bermudez and one of his agents Lozano talk about, are the number of votes for the "Redtails" and the "Apristas", two opponent parties, and how they manipulate the number of votes and lock some of their members. And at the end, they say proudly after seeing one of the newspapers that: "the elections are held very peacefully, that the nonpolitical ticket is elected democratically." Bemudez and his men do whatever they want in the elections, locking people up, torturing them, and manipulate with the final results, but at the same time, everything will appear in front of the people as smoothly as it is supposed to be and that's the outcome of the elections is actually representing the will of the people and their free choices. (208, 209)

After presenting how the relations between the different levels and institutions are at that time, and how everything is complicated and monitored, it is clear that, only the people

who lead luxurious life and never care about anything other than drinking, having affairs and caring for their own business and interests and, thus caring for the government, are the beneficiaries and wouldn't worry about their safety .

The novel then moves along to present how the people start to be fed up from the prevailing injustices. One of the senators called Idiaquez starts to stir up some officers against Odria, and "they'd risen in revolt" (248). Towards the end of the second chapter, there are indications of revolutions and people rising against the dictatorship. Finally, there is a revolution. Thousands and hundreds of girls and boys walking down the streets shouting "FREEDOM, FREEDOM, A-RE-QUI-PA, A-RE-QUI-PA, BERMUDEZ MUST GO". After several consequent incidents, everything has changed. Odria is no longer the president, Manuel Prado is. (311)

As the Peruvian critic José Miguel Oviedo has pointed out, *Conversation in the Cathedral* is not an easy or a pleasant book to read - nor is it intended as such: "Rather, it is that specific mature work which novelists sometimes promise themselves: the unpleasant novel which they have composed with anger, with deep lying

truth, and with an unbearable nostalgia". The Odría dictatorship robbed Vargas Llosa of his youth and of his innocence. On the political level it completed the moral destruction which the Leoncio Prado Military College had begun. As a result then, this novel constitutes a tremendous revenge, a masterly revenge." against the government. (Kirk, 15)

Mario Vargas Llosa has often been criticized for his lack of solutions to the "Peruvian problem," but the fact is that, if there are no constructive suggestions or solutions offered in *Conversation in the Cathedral*, it is because he sincerely feels that there are none. In addition, literature doesn't present solutions; it merely exposes us to the problem. The question which continues to crop up in the novel "At what time exactly had Peru screwed itself up?" is answered on the same page that the question is first raised: "Peru screwed up, Carlitos screwed up, everybody is screwed up. Consider this: there is no solution" (I, 13).

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