

Mexican Revolution and Its Consequences in Juan Rulfo's Short Stories



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ABSTRACT: Juan Rulfo in his short stories has portrayed the historical period of the Mexican Revolution and its consequences on Mexico and its citizens as a witness of that time. His stories also present the impacts of the Agrarian Reform and Cristero Rebellion on the Mexicans, following the great revolution. This qualitative research explores Rulfo's representation of the historical Mexican Revolution and the post-revolution period as found in his short stories. This paper intends to analyze the socio-political crises of Mexico during that period and its consequences on the masses, based on Mexican history and the author's subjective experiences. The findings of this study highlight the tragic suffering of the helpless common people, the dilemmas of the revolutionaries, and the discriminatory socio-political situation during and after the historic Mexican Revolution, as presented by Rulfo in a number of his stories.

KEYWORDS: Agrarian Reform, Cristero Rebellion, discrimination, mass suffering, Mexican Revolution, socio-political crisis.

I. INTRODUCTION

Juan Rulfo, is one of the most admired Mexican writers who is regarded as the last of the novelists of the historical Mexican Revolution because of the themes of his works ("Juan Rulfo Mexican Writer"). Due to his own tragic experiences of the revolution, he has paid profound attention to the representation of this period in his works. Juan Rulfo, born in 1918, is from Jalisco. His family lost everything during the long revolution. He lost his father at the beginning of the revolutionary period and his mother a few years later. He was sent to an orphanage in Guadalajara and later he shifted to Mexico City. His lonely life in the orphanage turned him into a shy introvert. His writing is deeply associated with human sorrow and barren region. He has presented everything he enunciated so realistically and meticulously that the readers themselves can empathetically experience it while reading his stories.

Rulfo's first published work, the story collection named *El Llano en llamas* (1953), contains fifteen short stories of diverse themes. Through only fifteen stories, he has achieved enormous popularity in Mexican literary circles. These stories depict the life struggle of rural masses in the distant deserted regions of the country. In several of his stories, he has also portrayed the effects of the Mexican Revolution on people's lives and the day-to-day exploitation they had to endure during that period. Rulfo's subjective experiences of the revolution, his representation of the Mexican history of that period, and his portrayal of the consequences of that revolution on the country and her people have consistently shown up in a number of his short stories.

Rulfo's novel *Pedro Paramo* has been the center of attention for most researchers when it is about his representation of the Mexican Revolution and its consequences. Mark Anthony G. Moyano's research entitled "Juan Perez Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*: A Microcosm of the Mexican Revolution's

Aftermath" applies a sociological study of the novel. He has analyzed the novel as a microcosm of the dire aftermaths of the revolution. Dylan Brennan in his "The Mexican Revolution: As Photographed by Juan Rulfo" studies the voices found in *Pedro Paramo* according to an Irish language tradition, to unveil

Rulfo's depiction of the Mexican Revolution in his novel. "Juan Rulfo's *El Llano en llamas* (1953) as

Literary Expression of Agrarian Protest" by Rebecca Kaewert analyzes the social inequality and power structures as found in the story collection, particularly during the Mexican Agrarian Reform. As Rulfo's photographs also bear the imprints of the great revolution, they have been a lucrative research topic for researchers. In "Magical Realism Journey of Juan Rulfo's Images: A Cross-Media Photographic

Method for Juan Rulfo's Photographs," Keni Li approaches Rulfo's photographs and published works from a magic realist perspective to find the reflection of that period.

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The aforementioned existing literature available online falls short of providing a thorough study on Rulfo's representation of the Mexican Revolution and the other consequential historic events such as the Cristero Rebellion and the Agrarian Reform, their impacts on Mexico and her people, and the socio-political crises during that time. Rulfo's experience of that period is intricately linked to his depiction of Mexican history in his stories like "They Gave Us the Land", "The Burning Plain", and "The Hill of the Comrades." To ensure "the fullest explanation of any work of literature", the "literary history" surrounding that work of art should be thoroughly studied (Eagleton 6-7). Thus, to understand what shapes and determines an author's aesthetic ideals and consciousness, it is crucial to know about the author's life, background and experiences besides acknowledging the changes an author, the society and that period had to go through.

Juan Rulfo's stories contain his consciousness, thoughts, and experiences of the revolution and its outcome. In an interview with another Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska, Rulfo opened up on his own harsh experiences of that period, "They murdered my uncle, and they hung my grandfather by his thumbs, which he lost; there was much violence and everyone died at the age of 33. Like Christ" ("Nothing of This is a Dream"). Furthermore, he addressed himself as, "Thus, I am the son of moneyed people who lost everything in the Revolution . . ." (Rulfo, "Nothing of This is a Dream"). Like any other author, Rulfo's experiences and memories of the revolutionary era have influenced and shaped his aesthetic bend of mind. Hence, the influences that the Mexican Revolution has had on his stories demand a detailed discussion.

A. Research Objective

This research attempts to throw light on the Mexican Revolution, Agrarian Reform, Cristero Rebellion, and their consequences on Mexico and its people as presented by Rulfo in his *The Burning Plain and Other Stories*.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative research collects and analyzes text-type data. The primary source here is the English translation of *El Llano en llamas*, done by George D. Schade as *The Burning Plain and Other Stories*. This paper dives deeper into the author's personal life and Mexican history to present authentic information regarding the author's representation of the great Mexican Revolution, Agrarian Reform, and Cristero Rebellion. Relevant previous research works available online have also been reviewed by the researcher to ensure a unique outcome. Works have been cited in this paper with their due credits. This study follows the format of the 9th edition of the Modern Language Association (MLA).

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Juan Rulfo's short stories bear the agony of 20th-century Mexico. The revolution and its consequences haunted the people of Mexico. The socio-political crises continued during the postrevolution period, which affected the psychological conditions of the common people and the revolutionaries as presented in the stories. The masses experienced discrimination and injustice. The peasants were exploited and deprived. The rebels encountered their inner dilemmas. The social hierarchy overpowered the spirit of the revolution. As always, the fear of the dominant class of people prevailed and prevented the masses from claiming their rightful opportunities. Rulfo's personal experiences have also had a profound impact on his writing. This research finds and analyzes how Rulfo's stories encapsulate the harsh realities of the Mexican Revolution, Agrarian Reform, and Cristero Rebellion.

As found in the article "Mexican Revolution: Topics in Chronicling America," Mexican Revolution (1910-24) was a crucial armed revolution in the history of Mexico that the masses started against the dictatorship of President Porfirio Diaz in 1910 under the leadership of Francisco Indalecio Madero. For years, Mexican people's dissatisfaction went way deeper than the oppressive ruling class could understand. Madero's declaration of armed revolt against the autocratic President Diaz lit fire to that spark. All of a sudden the revolution spread far and wide. The situation got out of control of the already defeated federal army and new military leaders like

Francisco Pancho Villa, Pascual Orozco, Emiliano Zapata came forth. This revolution ultimately dethroned Diaz and later caused Madero's murder. However, in different phases, it sustained against various authorities for many more years after Diaz's removal and Madero's assassination. Mexico and its people had to bear horrific deep wounds for a very long period.

Alan Knight asserts in his journal article "The Mexican Revolution: Bourgeois? Nationalist? Or Just a „Great Rebellion“?", "In his recent *The Great Rebellion . . .* Ramon Ruiz asserts that Mexico did not experience a revolution but a „great rebellion“ . . . radically changing „class structures as well as the patterns of wealth and income distribution“" (p. 1). If a proper revolution occurred in Mexico, Rafael Ramos Pedrueza also believes that it would be part of a global movement (Ruiz 201). This revolution did not bring any significant change in the class structure of Mexican society. Rather, this revolution and the revolutionaries were suppressed and dominated by the dominant class of people, resulting in promoting different socio-political crises.

One of the prime purposes of this significant socio-political period of Mexico was Land Reform, development of rural Mexico, and betterment of the peasants, which, according to most people was never accomplished. In 1906, to protect the rights of

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the workers, the Mexican Liberal Party made a demand to abolish the debt system that the landowners imposed upon the peasants. Later, the

Constitutionalists also introduced new schemes such as Land Reform and securing the rights of the workers.

Autocrat Diaz enraged the bourgeoisie in his time as most of the country's resources and lands stayed under the control of a certain group of people towards whom Diaz was partial. Madero achieved his support from the bourgeoisie based on his assurance of a balanced allotment of land, property and opportunity. Emiliano Zapata went against Madero mainly because Madero failed in Land Reform, and put forward his own Plan De Ayala to ensure common people's fair right to the country's natural resources and lands. According to Rafael Ramos

Pedruza, from the very beginning, the Mexican Revolution failed to succeed as a unified proletarian movement and the same happened with the Zapatista movement. The lack of coordination between the rural peasants and the urban industrial workers failed to make them stand united against their common enemy – the manipulative superior class, which led the Plan De Ayala to failure (Ruiz 201). And therefore, the discrimination, mass suffering, and exploitation prevailed for good.

However, the Mexican Revolution radically changed the fundamental rules and legal regime of owning and using properties. Finally, the significant Article 27 of the 1917 Constitution came with a declaration of common people's right over land, water, and natural resources. It also empowered the government to take lands from rich landowners and to distribute them among the peasants who needed them.

Article 27, which appeared under the influence of the Agrarian Reform (1911-46) that the Mexican peasants urged during the Revolution, ensured the restrictions on the use of private property, allowed the masses' control over the equal distribution of natural resources, and granted more lands to the rural peasants (KEEN'S Latin American Civilization).

Article 27 claims –

The Nation shall have at all times the right to impose on private property such limitations as the public interest may demand as well as the right to regulate the development of natural resources, which are susceptible of appropriation, in order to conserve them and equitably to distribute the public wealth. For this purpose necessary measures shall be taken to divide large landed estates; to develop small landed holdings; . . . to protect property from damage detrimental to society. Settlements, hamlets situated on private property and communes which lack land or water or do not possess them in sufficient quantities for their needs shall have the right to be provided with them from the adjoining properties, always having due regard for small landholdings . . . Private property acquired for the said purposes shall be considered as taken for public utility (Kelly 543).

Throughout quite a few years the Mexican Government kept on redistributing lands but the developments in the agricultural sector faced an extremely slow pace. The main purpose behind the redistribution was to allocate a noticeable amount of land to the villagers which would secure the mass support for the government while most of the country's resources remained in the hands of the privileged dominant class. Most of the time, the peasants were offered lands which would have brought no good for them. And they neither had anyone or any place to complain against it. All of this resulted in a massive failure of the Agrarian Reform.

Juan Rulfo's short stories have captured his own experiences of the period through his presentation of the frustrating scenarios of mass suffering as the tragic outcome of the revolution.

Rulfo's "They Gave Us the Land" is a classic example of the suffering of the rural Mexican peasants after the historic revolution. The title itself unveils the government's discriminatory strategy of „giving“ lands to the people where the receiver had no liberty to choose the land. The characters of the story received "the plain" (Rulfo, Stories 11) but the question remains, "What's it good for, anyway?" (Rulfo, Stories 10). The narrator describes the peasants' tiresome journey towards the „given“ land from the opening of the story. The story begins as, "After walking so many hours without coming across even the shadow of a tree, or a seedling of a tree, or any kind of root, we hear dogs barking" (Rulfo, Stories 9). The narration refers to a journey to a barren place amidst a deserted landscape. Moreover, their journey appears to be tiresomely long, "We've been walking since dawn. Now it's something like four in the afternoon" (Rulfo, Stories 9).

During the Agrarian Reform, most of the redistributed lands gave the peasants of rural Mexico nothing but suffering. The narrator frustratingly talks about the deserted land they were given –

I turn in every direction and look at the plain. So much land all for nothing . . . Just a few lizards stick their heads out of their holes, and as soon as they feel the roasting sun quickly hide themselves again in the small shade of a rock. But when we have to work here, what can we do to keep cool from the sun? – Because they gave us this crust of rocky ground for planting (Rulfo, Stories 11).

He repeated, "No, the plain is no good for anything.

There's no rabbits or birds. There's nothing. Except a few scrawny huizache trees and a patch or two of grass with the blades curled up; if it weren't for them, there wouldn't be anything" (Rulfo, Stories 10).

Most importantly, the narrator unveiled the discrimination they faced throughout this process, like most other rural peasants of Mexico. He informed them that they had no choice in choosing the land. Their requirements were not even asked, "We opened our mouths to say that we didn't want the plain, that we wanted what was by the river. From the river up to where, through the

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meadows, the trees called casuarinas are, and the pastures and the good land. Not this cow's hide they call the Plain" (Rulfo, Stories 11). He added, "But they didn't let us say these things. The official hadn't come to converse with us. He put the papers in our hands and told us, "Don't be afraid to have so much land just for yourselves"" (Rulfo, Stories 11). When they further complained, the official said, "You can state that in writing. And now you can go. You should be attacking the large-estate owners and not the government that is giving you the land" (Rulfo, Stories 12). But they were not "against the Center", rather they were "against the Plain" (Rulfo, Stories 12). "But he refused to listen to us", stated the narrator (Rulfo, Stories 12).

Rulfo's realistic depiction of the postrevolution period enlightens the psychological state the masses. "So they've given us this land. And in this sizzling frying pan they want us to plant some kind of seeds to see if something will take the root and come up. But nothing will come up here. Not even buzzards" (Rulfo, Stories 12), the narrator represents the helplessness of the discriminated, deprived, and dominated peasants who got no profit from the Agrarian Reform. They were not given the good lands, nor were they listened to. The better properties were as always under the possession of the powerful class of people.

Rulfo, in his famous story "The Burning Plain", writes beautifully about the inner thoughts and feelings of the revolutionaries. The narrator has often referred to how afraid they all were throughout the time of the revolution. He said that they were "cramped with fear" and they even "stayed in hiding" for days (Rulfo, Stories 79). When the revolutionists stopped fighting, which according to the narrator was passing "some time without fighting" (Rulfo, Stories 70), they noticed certain changes in their lives. As he said, "There we were, beginning to feel we were no longer good for anything" (Rulfo, Stories 71). The same revolutionaries who were first eager to "slaughter" (Rulfo, Stories 69), later were more interested in "asking for peace" (Rulfo, Stories 71). After a certain period, the masses were not afraid of them anymore. The narrator said, "nobody was afraid of us anymore. Nobody ran shouting now, "Here comes Zamora's men!" (Rulfo, Stories 71). They knew the government troops were afraid of the rebels but at the same time, the revolutionaries realized that they were "afraid of them too" (Rulfo, Stories 73). When the revolutionaries became certain of their getting caught "like trapped chickens" (Rulfo, Stories 74), to them, the only way to survive was, "making them think there were a whole bunch of us, hidden among the dust clouds and the cries we made" (Rulfo, Stories 74). But in the end, "there was hardly any place on earth left for us to go. We hardly had a bit of ground left to be buried in" (Rulfo, Stories 80). Thus, the revolution had harsh impacts on the lives of the revolutionaries as well. They had to survive against all odds. They also felt a rollercoaster of emotions throughout the long revolutionary period, like any other individual of that time.

In 1926, Mexico experienced a religious uprising as a counter-reactionary result of the Mexican Revolution, named the Cristero Rebellion (1926-29). Mexican Catholics considered the execution of several articles of the 1917 constitution as anti-religious and against the Church which instigated them to revolt violently against the government and form a rebellion. Being ideologically influenced, Catholics including Catholic women assembled behind the church against the state. They were then supported by a Catholic league, initiated in 1925 by the help of some politically banned middleclass politicians, named Liga Nacional Defensora de la Libertad Religiosa. This organization took advantage of the western and central Mexican mass insurrection, and without facing any moral resistance from the Church, it swayed the people in an armed battle in 1926. Within three years, they gathered nearly thirty thousand armed fighters and got involved in continuous battles against the state. Their slogan „¡Viva Cristo Rey!“ named the movement the Cristero Rebellion. The Catholic clergy called themselves „Cristeros“, which referred to „soldiers of the Christ“.

During the post-revolutionary period, the Cristeros spread terror in Mexico. The masses were somewhat forced to abide by the Cristero rebels. In his story, "Anacleto Morones", Rulfo discloses how the people were tortured and forced to take responsibility for the crimes they did not even commit during the Cristero Rebellion. Lucas Lucatero said, ". . . the Cristeros were going to shoot me. They shoved a gun in my back and made me kneel in front of the priest, and I confessed to things there that I hadn't even done yet" (Rulfo, Stories 139). The common people like Lucas were tortured to the extent by the army of Cristeros that they even had to admit to their uncommitted crimes.

In "The Burning Plain", Rulfo uncovers the horrific realities of the Mexican Revolution. The narrator described, "From here we watched the ranches and small villages burning day and night, and sometimes bigger towns like Tuzamilpa and Zapotitlan that lit up the sky" (Rulfo, Stories 75). Here, Rulfo also shows how the revolution revolved around money. The narrator said that Pedro Zamora told them, "We're going to have this revolution with the money of the rich. They will pay for the arms and the expenses this revolution costs. And even if we don't have any flag right now to fight for, we must hurry up and pile up money, so when the government troops come they'll see that we're powerful" (Rulfo, Stories 73). The revolutionaries also knew that whoever had more money, would become more powerful and unyielding. The revolutionaries were, to a great extent, controlled and manipulated by certain people like Zamora. Sometimes they were forced to do things they did not want to, but they were incapable of avoiding the command of such people. They were afraid to talk against people like Zamora, "It was as if our speech had run out or our tongues had gotten balled up like parrots" do and we had a very hard time untangling them in order to say anything" (Rulfo, Stories 68). So, during the revolutionary era, like the masses, the revolutionaries were also manipulated, dominated and exploited by a certain group of people.

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"The Hill of the Comrades" presents the consequences of the revolutionary era of Mexico on the masses. The narrator described people's abandoning the village, "people began leaving the Hill of the Comrades. From time to time somebody would leave . . . disappear among the oaks and never return again. They left, that's all" (Rulfo, Stories 16).

He added, "They left silently, without saying anything or fighting with anybody . . . nobody came back here anymore . . . nobody came back" (Rulfo, Stories 16). Later, he again commented, ". . . only a few people were left among the ranches here. At first they left one by one, but the last ones were almost going in droves. They made some money and they left when the frosts came" (Rulfo, Stories 20). Moreover, he revealed how abandoned the place had become, "Every now and then, too, the crows came flying very low and cawing in a loud voice as if they thought they were in some deserted place" (Rulfo, Stories 17).

In this story, Rulfo points out another discriminating consequence of the reform. When the masses were offered lands from the powerful landholders, they mostly denied taking them due to their fear of those powerful elites. In this story, the Torricos "owned the land there and the houses on the land" (Rulfo, Stories 15). The narrator added, "even though when the land was distributed most of the Hill had been divided equally among the sixty of us who lived there, and the Torricos got just a piece of land with a maguey field" (Rulfo, Stories 15). Everyone was so afraid of the Torricos, that they found it better to leave the village than accept the redistributed lands of the Torricos. The narrator said, "in spite of the fact that the green hills down below were the best, the people kept on leaving" (Rulfo, Stories 16) because, "the Hill of the Comrades belonged to the Torricos" (Rulfo, Stories 15).

After the historical revolution of Mexico, the Agrarian Reform could have been the way to make the masses economically independent. The common Mexican peasants could finally experience a better life with equal rights that they were repeatedly promised. The redistribution of the lands was mostly unfair and the peasants experienced injustice throughout the process. Unfortunately, as always, they struggled and lived under the fear and domination of the dominant bourgeois class.

IV. CONCLUSION

According to Althusser, the masses can rarely succeed in a revolution, because "the interests of the bourgeois class and its political system are utterly foreign to them" (225). Rulfo's stories show how social discrimination prevailed after the Mexican Revolution, even if the revolution was fundamentally called against this biased socio-political structure. His stories have presented the horror of mass suffering of that period, caused by the unfair social system. Not only the masses but the people who actively participated in the revolution and the events that followed it were tormented. The haunting consequences of the revolution and its tragic effects on the Mexican people have been portrayed in these stories with excellence.

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