Gabriela Mistral's Exploration of Loss, Sorrow and Passionate Longing in Select Poems from *Desolacion*

Supromit Maiti

Abstract

Mistral always felt poetry or song to be a manifestation of the wound dealt by love, and *Desolacion* (Desolation), published in 1922 under the supervision of Fredrico de Onis, Professor of Spanish at Columbia University, breathes the wounds of love quite profusely, celebrating the intimate tete-a-tete that sorrow has with life, experienced by every human soul. This collection of prose and prose-poems, as Mistral confessed later in her life, was an outcome of this wound of love dealt by the suicide of Romelio Ureta. Being a woman who never shied away from defining love in her own terms, the lines in *Desolacion* speaks of a world principled by Mistral's sensibility that would reconfigure the identities of Latin-American women in the context of nation formation in the years to come. Despair, passionate longing, solitude, and search for identity amalgamate harmoniously with a peculiar sense of loss in Mistral's writings, and *Desolacion* stands out to be one of the earliest treatises that she hurled at the world right in 1922, carving a niche for herself. The pieces in *Desolacion* borders on being philosophical, probing into the unknown fabric of emotions brewed by personal loss, yet firmly grounded within the bounds of reality. Pieces like "I am crying", "The Sacred Dust", "The Four-Petaled flower", "Thrown out", "The Eternal Grief", "Hide me" all collaborate to consolidate a very personal experience of philosophising loss, love, despair and sorrow which this paper would attempt to analyse, shedding light on the synergic interactions of the darker aspects of life with the mundane, displaying an uncannily organic blending with ordinary human activities. This paper, therefore, would also attempt to delve deeper into the immeasurable depth of her lyrics in order to trace the varied strains of human emotions that Mistral explored quite surreptitiously, drawing inspiration from the intricate nuances of her lived experiences, while also consolidating her feminine identity.

Keywords: loss, sorrow, longing, motherhood, feminine identity

In history have we seen individual figures assuming national importance, and Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957), very early in her career, displayed signs of being one, as she journeyed through her creative outpourings to win the Nobel Prize in literature in 1945. It was, therefore, not a surprise at all when Hjalmar Gullberg, the Swedish poet and a member of Swedish Academy took up the microphone on 10th of December, 1945 and introduced Mistral's already established fame through his precisely curated Nobel Prize Presentation speech. "Her story is so well known to the people of South America that, passed on from country to country, it has become almost a legend" (Gullberg), is enough to gauge the influence that Mistral exercised on the entire Latin American scene during her lifetime and beyond. True, that Mistral's life was unusual from the very beginning and a comfortable childhood was what Mistral could never experience. Her early days were marred with difficulties in Montegrande, both financial and emotional, and this brilliant Chilean poet, who also established herself as an educator and a deft diplomat, took her life as an experiment and expressed herself through her writings. For the readers, her words seemed almost too personal, and could be felt coming from heart. Her expressions had raw emotions in them, drawn profusely from her lived experiences, and this made her a popular figure in Latin American households. For a country that was still nascent in its growth, Mistral took up the baton and shaped the nation's cultural identity while also reconfiguring the identity of the Latin American women at large. This, perhaps, was the reason her simple prose and prose poems touched hearts and inspired many in years to come.

Obstacles and newer challenges had always accompanied Mistral, and fending them off was almost a natural event as far as her disposition as an educator and a writer was concerned. However, one cannot really blame Lucila Godoy Alcayaga for taking up a pseudonym, Gabriela Mistral, perhaps as an attempt to create a sense of mystery blended with proportionate anonymity, apart from gaining the cushion of comfort that it brought with it. Fame did touch her early, and she alternatively used her real and pseudonym with similar dexterity, but it is hard to ignore the choice of her new name. Langston Hughes was one of the first individuals to point out, in his introduction to Mistral's collection of poetry that he was editing, *Selected Poems*, that Godoy probably took the name from Archangel Gabriel and the surname, a sea wind, symbolizing freedom (5). However, it was hard for scholars like Randal Couch to overlook the obvious association of this name with two writers, Gabriele d'Annunzio and Frédéric Mistral, who were associated with the late romantic tradition and influenced Mistral's style and diction in significant ways (Mistral, *Madwoman* 6). One could also associate the selection of the name with the myth of St. Gabriela and a closer reading of her body of literature would reveal the complex dynamic of this nomenclature that she attempted to establish throughout her life.

Denied much of an institutional training due to financial restraints, Mistral found solace in books and her life as an educator taught her the existence of an intrinsic connection between a writer and the society or the world around her. Mistral believed, social responsibility and an artist's participation in the shaping of the society is indeed significant in constructing the core principles that would carry a writer forward, and her works display that quite gallantly. This is also echoed by Elizabeth Rosa Horan in her essay "Matrilineage, Matrilanguage: Gabriela Mistral's Intimate Audience of Women", when she confirms Mirtral's assertion that an artist can never really separate his identity from her role in the society (447). Mistral stood out as a writer who could successfully integrate the woman in her with the role she plays in the public domain, thereby, drawing

interest from the section of her audience who were primarily woman. Isolated and collective struggle of the human sensibility finds concrete voice in Mistral's works and it can be of no surprise that the darker aspects of human life, the gloom, sorrow and despair would figure generously in her writings.

Uncertainties and change were constant companions, and Mistral travelled around the world to find a footing and living, making a statement wherever she went. Thus, having a varied range of experience, she saw life from closer quarters and these experiences moulded her sensibility and influenced her nature in more ways than one. Anguished by the little changes, she did adopt quite quickly and transformed herself into a changed individual every time. Margaret J. Bates, however felt, "not all the poems which have come from the mouth of this 'mestiza de vasca' are cries of anguish" (79). True to this statement, it can be observed that Mistral's works are testament of emotions felt and this might include a wide range available for human intervention. Anguish dominated her lived experiences, true, but an array of other behavioural responses contributes to formation of the texture of Mistral's works.

Gabriela Mistral's 1922 collection, *Desolacion* (Desolation) was no exception to this. As we flip through the pages of this collection, which Mistral held closer to her heart, the readers are bound to experience a flurry of emotional anticipations. The lines, personal and intimate to the core, are at times solitary contemplations on the part of the author, at other times, renderings of emotions felt in the absence of individuals who counted in the life of the author. Shedding light on the internal thematic discourses involved in her works, John Zubizarreta feels, Mistral weaved her lines in a way that projected the maternal woman handling the archetypal power, much ignored in the Latin American domain at the time. In doing so, Mistral achieved synchronization in the elements of motherhood, God's grace, children, their birth and nourishment and somehow integrated them within nature's design (296).These found copious representation in the pieces featuring in *Desolacion.* Mistral felt, giving birth to a child, bringing a life is also a way of participation in the building of nature. In this context, for Elizabeth A. Marchant, female body is the primary source of connection that one can forge with the nation. She argues, "Through biological reproduction and links to the natural world, women come to forge a bond between nation and nature" (50). Reverberating this, *Desolacion* does have innumerable pieces that deals with giving birth to a child, who is not born, for Mistral, and the nurturing of the child. However, the striking majority of the pieces in this collection is dedicated to the manifestation of the sense of loss that Mistral felt throughout her life.

Desolacion, published in 1922, with active intervention and participation of Fredrico de Onis, who, at that time was a professor and director of Spanish at Columbia University had got Mistral in a tangle of thoughts and its pieces provide the readers access to the very intimate recesses of Mistral's psyche (Mistral, *Selected Poems* 10). Peeking into her reflections, the readers realize a peculiar tension in Mistral, coexisting with a desperate attempt to assume a stronger grip over her emotions. These lines, therefore, appears to be fragments of emotional outpourings which might be seen as a product of Mistral's attempt to negotiate the flooding emotions that left her devastated. This could be easily confirmed when one arrives at her confession that *Desolacion* was her eager attempt to come to terms with the death of her lover. Early in her life, Mistral had found love in Romelio Ureta whom she met in 1906 (Mistral, *Madwomen* 6). In an ordinary railway worker, the woman in Mistral found home and developed a strong emotional attachment. His sudden decision

to end his life in 1909 created a huge lacuna in Mistral's terms of living, apart from the initial shock and trauma she had to endure. While discussing coping theories in relation to loss and bereavement in "Loss, Grief, and the Search for Significance: Toward a model of Meaning Reconstruction in Bereavement", Gillies and Neimeyer feels that the death of a loved person necessarily invites a circumstance where one's sense of meaning is found to be lost (34). For Mistral too, this death and its suddenness brought a phase in life with a blurry sense of meaning which she never encountered before. Thus, her works in *Desolacion* appears to be her self-curated attempt of grappling this bizarre emptiness that necessitated a newer shape in rediscovering her lost sense of meaning.

Coming to terms with the world after the initial shock subsided, Mistral picked up the pen again and put ink on paper to scribble down her tumultuous emotional journey that she was forced to undertake. *Desolacion*, therefore, appears to be a testimony of despair, loss, manifestation of internal grief and sorrow and a portrayal of passionate longing. Kathleen Woodward, in her essay "Freud and Barthes: Theorizing Mourning, Sustaining Grief" writes:

> We commonly refer to the deaths of those very "close" to us as "losses." I might say—I have said—that I have lost my husband, my grandfather, my grandmother. Paradoxically this phrase is comforting because it allows us to foreground our role in the story we are telling, to assert a relation, to refer not so much to the event of the death as to what we have suffered by that death, to speak of our pain, our grief. (93)

Attaching a sense of proximity to the death of a close one, Woodward theorises loss while also acknowledging the role of memory in those left behind. It is this memory of the lost person that brings about a catastrophic change in an individual's reaction to the life unfolding after that particular death and the subsequent absence. For Mistral too, this absence of her lover, and the lost father figure since childhood essentially required adequate attention which she could only negotiate through creative outpourings. Woodward also prioritizes the position of the author within the structure of the narrative by pointing out that resorting to the phrase "loss" also situates the author in a more profoundly powerful role which allows her to vent her grief and mull over the consequent pain in a manner that is both comforting as well as relieving. *Desolacion*, therefore, is not an exception in this regard and could be considered a breathing space that Mistral designates for herself in her desperate attempt to come to terms with her "loss". Hereby, this paper would look at some of the brilliant pieces of prose and prose-poems from *Desolacion*, taking one at a time, and examine how Mistral had explored the themes of loss, sorrow and longing within the bounds of her capacity.

The initial sense of loss that Gabriela Mistral had to endure got blended into the fuel that turned into *Desolacion*, and can be felt enmeshed into the texture of some of the pieces. A cursory reading of the poems, however, would feel like unguarded ramblings of a distraught woman. But if we delve deeper into the lines, one can actually experience the intense displeasure, the scathing pain and the desire to come out of it while reading her pieces from *Desolacion*. Mistral, in "I Am Crying" writes, "Fallen to earth, I will cry until my soul understands. My senses, my face, my heart have heard: my soul has not yet understood" (*Selected Prose* 69). The suddenness of the death of a close one, the restlessness that follows and the helplessness that engulfs an individual in such situations is seen in the way Mistral considers herself fallen, more so because she failed to prevent

the death. An overwhelming regret could be seen in her lamentation. A session of self-critiquing and the subsequent search for reassurance can be seen in the above lines, while the author also mentions how she is unable to grapple with the situation.

> Mistral's helplessness and emotional weakness is also manifested in her prose poem "Sensitive":
>
> I am weak, so weak the smell of the roses made me faint during the siesta, when I went down to the garden, and a simple song carried on the wind, or the afternoon's last pulsing drop of blood in the sky, disturbs me, flooding me with sadness. If even one glance from my master were harsh toward me tonight, I might die. (*Selected Prose* 41)

The fragile state of mind is revealed in these lines where the emotional vulnerability of the author is displayed in bright colours. Succumbing to the sweet smell of roses and fainting because of that add up to the desperate attempt of the author in explaining the fragility that she had internalized. She is engulfed by sadness and finds herself disturbed when the wind is too strong for her to endure. The gale here might refer to the usual flow of life which is now affected by sudden turn of events prompted by the unusual "loss". The piece ends with a sense of absolute surrender and the following finality that only death can bring. She feels that a harsh glance from God might her be too much for her to handle, while hinting at the solace she had newly discovered in her proximity with God. In "Hide me", Mistral writes:

> I am ugly without you,
> like things out of place:
> like roots above the ground, relinquished.
> With you, I am natural and lovely,
> like the moss on the tree trunk. (*Selected Prose* 73)

"Hide me" breathes of the personal loss that Mistral encountered. She is almost feeling uprooted and relinquished like a plant without soil, since the lover is absent. She compares this state of being with one where she is happy and content in the company of the lover, much like the moss gathered on a tree trunk. These were the moments of grief and loosening up, giving away traces of one's vulnerability, and Mistral could only be humane enough to succumb and suffer. Throughout this piece that sense of loss can be seen reverberating violently, affecting her sense of integrity. This phase of unprecedented crisis brought out memories of extraordinary trauma form her childhood. In "Thrown out", Gabriela Mistral writes:

> My father said he'd kick me out, he shouted at my mother that he'd throw me out this very night. The night is mild; by the clear light of the stars, I could walk as far as the nearest village, but, what if he's born while I do? My crying has called to him, maybe; maybe he wants to come out to see my face full of tears. And he'd shiver in the raw air, though I would cover him. (*Selected Prose* 49)

These lines speak of a sense of betrayal which is brought back by the sudden suicide of Romelio Ureta. Leaving her in the middle of a journey was identified by her as a betrayal that she despised and suffered for. The existential crisis she felt in the initial days reminded her of a similar kind of crisis she faced during her childhood when her father threatened to abuse her, as mentioned in "Thrown out". Her childhood experience of trauma inflicted by the cruel response from the father and his absence kept ringing within

her psyche and traces of it can be found in many of her works throughout her career. Yet, her communication with the lost person continued and gained life in *Desolacion*. In what might be looked upon as a monologue, but with a dead person involved, "The Sacred Dust" shows Mistral venting an unconvincing discontent towards her present, and, in a way, answering back:

> I have eyes, I have vision; eyes and visions spread throughout me by visions of you, which death shattered. Through all of them, I see you.
> And I am not blind, as you call me.
> And I do love; nor am I dead. I have loves: in me, the passions of your scattered peoples are like terrible embers. The longing on their lips makes me moan. (*Selected Prose* 56)

Mistrals talks of having visions of the dead lover long after he is gone. This shows the intensity of the loss faced by her while the image of the lover is still craftily planted within the recesses of her psyche. The fact that her thoughts are being directed towards him as a conscious choice reiterates her attachment and loyalty towards the dead lover, while also giving a clear sense of the serious emotional involvement. Acknowledging the death, she says, this death has shattered the vision of him that she held as true until then. Yet, all these visions collaborate to form a wholesome image of the lover whom she misses. The poem ends with a note of longing that hints at an unfinished journey that she must undertake alone, henceforth. Therefore, the pieces from *Desolacion* could be seen as an exercise in mourning, as if Mistral is choosing the vocation of creativity as a means to mourn the death of a loved person. Sigmund Freud, in "Mourning and Melancholia" writes:

> Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such a one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on. In some people the same influences produce melancholia instead of mourning and we consequently suspect them of pathological disposition. It is also well to notice that, although mourning involves grave departures from the normal attitude to life, it never occurs to us to regard it as pathological condition and to refer it to medical treatment. We rely on its being overcome after a certain lapse of time, and we look upon any interference with it as useless or even harmful. (245)

In an attempt to define "mourning" Freud ended up commenting on the very nature of mourning while also pitting it against "melancholia", pointing out the minute differences between the two reactions to the death of a near one. The departure from the "normal" or the regular scheme of life that Freud talks about was experienced by Mistral quite heavily and the lines in *Desolacion* were merely her way of negotiating this departure, and investment in coming back to the regular folds of life. The grief, the pain and the loss can be overcome, like Freud says, "after a certain lapse of time", yet mourning appears to be a necessary part of the process, and action undertaken by an individual to mark a movement away from the departure. Gabriela Mistral, through *Desolacion*, is primarily participating in that action, consciously.

In "The Four-Petaled Flower", she compares her soul to a great tree that was once lush and green, thriving in beauty and glory, but with time, it is seen degenerating gradually:

> My soul was once a great tree, on which a million fruits ripened. Then, the mere sight of me offered a fullness; to hear a hundred birds sing beneath my branches was a rapture!
>
> Later my soul was a shrub, a gnarled shrub with few branches, but it could still produce scented resin. Now it is only a flower, a little four-petaled flower. One is called Beauty, and another Love, and they are close together; another is called Sorrow, and the last one Mercy. Thus, one by one, the petals opened, and the flower will have no more. (*Selected Prose* 67)

Like the tree, she was once a happy woman, in the company of her lover, and everything seemed merry and bright, like birds singing beneath a tree. But gradually, since the death of the lover, her soul underwent transformations too. As the ending of the poem rings a sense of sorrow, the readers are, at once, reminded of the sorrow that Mistral carried within her eyes that were now softer. The loss of the petals suggests a sense of emptiness that the loss of the lover has brought to her. A secondary reading of the lines could also suggest the easing of the pain with the flow of time. A great tree changes over time, and human memory, too, undergoes unprecedented manipulations with the gradual flow of life, interpolating its fabric with newer interventions.

Sorrow, therefore, is another crucial element that rules the lines of her pieces. They are, as one might say, tinged with sorrow taken from the folds of her own lived experiences. Sorrow makes her lines more real and invites the reader to participate in the sense experience it creates. Getting engulfed in sorrow, Mistral turned to the woman in her and invested herself in being the imaginary mother, someone she will never be in her real life. Here, it seemed liked a desperate attempt to tip over the suffering by forgetting it. The space that had hitherto been occupied by the lover is now being given to a child who is yet to be born. The image of the imaginary child is now seen usurping the image of the dead lover which has come to haunt her. Yet, she still felt a strong centrifugal pull drawing her back towards the sense of loss. Thus, she names her piece "Eternal Grief", where she imagines carrying a child:

> I go pale if he feels pain inside me; a feeling of broken heartedness presses in on me, and I could die from a single movement of the one who is within me, whom I don't see. (*Selected Prose* 42)

She imagines the unborn child to be in pain, equating her own pain with the child. When the child is in pain, she feels heartbroken, similar to the kind of heartbreak she had when her lover left her. In a striking contrast, Mistral follows it up with a sense of awkward finality, a finality that shows the nerve of a resolute woman who is ready to brave the unbearable. Thus, the last line, although speaking of unsettling turn of events, does bear fragments of hope too.

As one journeys through the pages of *Desolacion*, one could as well observe how Mistral's emotional state is catapulted into a new horizon. It is indeed quite significant for her, and rightly so too, that she is now turning to God for solace and peace with a sense of hope, and not a sense of resignation. In "The Bandage", she writes:

> All the beauty of the Earth can be a bandage for your wound. God has laid it before you like this; He has unfolded His spring fields before you like a painted canvas. His words of affection are a tenderness for the earth, the little white flowers and the dark cobblestones. Experience them like this. All beauty is God's

> compassion. He who holds out thorns to you with one trembling hand, offers you are a son to smile with the other. Don't say that this is a cruel game. You don't know (in God's chemistry) the reasons for the water of tears. (*Selected Prose* 87)

Mistral is now searching for beauty in everything that is natural, which, one might feel, is an attempt to part ways from anything that is painful and unbearable. Trying to cover her sorrow with a bandage, nature is her only resort and she looks up to God whose words of affection is supposed to heal her. She is now ready to revel in the glory of life, life that she now believes is beautiful in itself. At the same time, she also acknowledges that sorrow is a part of life which cannot be dismantled or avoided. She gladly attributes this to God, calling it his scheme of providing thorns and smiles together.

However, *Desolacion* also brings together songs of passionate longing. Moving on, Mistral has now accommodated the sense of loss and has learned to live with it. Yet, the void persists in the periphery of her psyche. The longing to be in the company of her lost lover returns time and again, drowning her reality into a sense of haze. Tussling with reality, she engages herself in contemplation, imagining the unborn child who was never supposed to born. In "What will he be like", Mistral writes:

> What will he be like? I gazed for a long time at the petals of a rose, and I touched them delightedly: I would want that softness for his cheeks. And I played in a tangle of brambles, because I would want his hair to be like that, dark and curling. But it won't matter if it is bronze colored, with the rich color of red clay that potters love, or if his smooth hair is as simple as my whole life. (*Selected Prose* 38)

In reveries, she found comfort that she missed dearly. Imagining blissful circumstances brought delight on the one hand, on the other, relegated her already fading memories of the loss a bit further. Pining for peace, she discovers a way out from the grief that Romelio's death had designated to her. Gradually, she realised the urgency of letting go, and the sense of loss was thus seen moving out, with sorrow cuing it.

Desolacion, therefore, can be seen as a journey from despair to peace, with fair share of participation in the realms of loss and sorrow. The act of mourning that the lines ring in a reader compel us to take into account the innocuous yet intense longing experienced by the author, making her works personal. This very nature of her works worked towards making her a personal and private grief a national sorrow, as she gradually turned into a nation mother figure in the Latin American scene. Her later works would engage with the themes of motherhood and love, engaging with the broader discourse of feminine experience in Latin America, yet *Desolacion* stands out to be her first statement that celebrated the private within the public and consolidated her image as a contributing force behind nation formation in the context of Chile.

Works Cited

Bates, Margaret J. "Gabriela Mistral". *The Americas*, vol. 3, no. 2, Oct. 1946, pp. 168-189. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/978705.

Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia". Translated by James Strachey *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement: Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, vol. XIV (1914-1916), The Hogarth Press.

Gilles, J and R.A. Neimeyer. "Loss, Grief, and the Search for Significance: Toward a model of Meaning Reconstruction in Bereavement". *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, vol. 19, 2006, pp. 31-65.

Gullberg, Hjalmar. "Award Ceremony Speech." The Nobel Prize Presentation Speech, 10 Dec.1945, Swedish Academy. Speech.

Horan, Elizabeth Rosa. "Matrilineage, Matrilanguage: Gabriela Mistral's Intimate Audience of Women". *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1990, pp. 447-457.JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/27762765.

Marchant, Elizabeth A. "The Professional Outsider: Gabriela Mistral on Motherhood and Nation". *Latin American Literary Review*, vol. 27, no. 53, Jan. 1999, pp. 49-66. *JSTOR*,www.jstor.org/stable/20119799.

Mistral, Gabriela. *Selected Poems of Gabriela Mistral*. Translated by Langston Hughes, Indiana University Press, 1957.

---. *Selected Prose and Prose-Poems*. Edited and translated by Stephen Tapscott, University of Texas Press, 2002.

---. *Madwomen*. Edited and translated by Randall Couch, University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Woodward, Kathleen. "Freud and Barthes: Theorizing Mourning, Sustaining Grief". *Discourse*, vol. 13, no. 1, Fall- winter 1990-91, pp. 93-110.

Zubizarreta, John. "Gabriela Mistral: The Great Singer of Mercy and Motherhood". *Christianity and Literature*, vol. 42, no. 3, Winter 1993, pp. 295-311.