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## VISIÓN ELECTRÓNICA

Algo más que un estado sólido

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A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL VISION

**Amartya Sen: A Home in the World. Memories. Bogotá: Taurus. Penguin Randon House Grupo Editorial, S.A.U. 2021, 515 pages.**

***Rosendo López-González<sup>1</sup>, Astrid Ramírez-Valencia<sup>2</sup>***



When questioned about the prosperity of a nation, but above all about the quality of life of its inhabitants, José Arcadio Buendía's utopian idea of social justice emerges; integrity that constitutes the most appropriate moral basis for building a democratic society. Consequently, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel García Márquez affirms:

<sup>1</sup> BSc. In Chemical engineering, Universidad del Atlántico, Colombia. MSc. in Latin American Philosophy, Universidad Santo Tomás, Colombia. MSc. In Chemistry Teaching. Current position: Professor at Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, Colombia. E-mail: [rlopezg@udistrital.edu.co](mailto:rlopezg@udistrital.edu.co) ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6858-4925>

<sup>2</sup> Ph.D. (c) In Language and Culture, Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia, Tunja, Colombia. Current position: Member of the group GITEM++, Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, Colombia. E-mail: [aramirezv@udistrital.edu.co](mailto:aramirezv@udistrital.edu.co) ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3025-5982>

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José Arcadio Buendía, who was the most enterprising man you would ever see in the village, had arranged the position of the houses in such a way that from all of them you could reach the river and get water with equal effort, and he laid out the streets with such good sense that no house received more sun than another in the heat of the day.

Amartya Sen, in his *Memoirs*, anchored in the Buddhist tradition, approaches José Arcadio Buendía's approach to social justice when he states: "Buddha holds that doing good should not be a transactional act, that a person has the duty to do what he considers good unilaterally, even when others do not fulfill their corresponding obligations" (p. 123).

This leads us to think that the Rousseauian utopia of social justice, set forth in *The Social Contract-an idea* that implies a pact, i.e.: each party does good things for the others, on condition that the others also fulfill their commitments to the others-is out of step with the approach of José Arcadio Buendía and Amartya Sen.

Further on, on the same page cited above, Sen links Buddhist thinking on social justice with the practice of Jesus of Nazareth in the *Gospel of Luke*, specifically with the parable of the Good Samaritan:

When the Samaritan comes to help the wounded man, he is not driven by any kind of social contract, either implicit or explicit. He sees that the person on the other side of the road needs help and, since he can provide it, he offers it (p.123).

All of the above, in order to highlight the origins and nature of Sen's idea of social justice, which is a cross-cutting theme in his *Memoirs*. Without forgetting Amartya's emblematic text on political philosophy, entitled *The Idea of Justice*, where the foundations of social justice are developed in greater detail.

*A Home in the World*, is divided into five (5) parts: in the first part, Amartya describes his childhood memories; born in India in 1933; at the age of nine (9), living with his grandparents in Santiniketan, he witnessed something that made him realize the need to seek justice in his environment. He observed the so-called famine in the homes of Bengal in 1943, where three

million people died. In the second part of the book, entitled *The Last Famine*, this situation is narrated. But let Amartya himself describe it:

There were starving people, homeless people in every street, and for the first time in my life I saw people dying of starvation. There were a few feeding centers in different parts of the city, organized by private charities that provided food for a limited number of people. All these centers opened their doors at the same time, so that no one could go to more than one center. The hungry fought to get a place in the queues before the maximum number was reached (p.150).

The experience of observing how human bodies crumble from starvation left indelible marks on Sen's life and, surely, these observations led him to propose a renewed idea of social justice, in the sense of seeking parameters other than Gross Domestic Product (GDP), in order to measure people's prosperity and quality of life. As opposed to GDP, he proposed the idea of Human Development Indexes (HDI).

Sen cleverly links poverty with freedom. He does so when he describes the clashes between Muslims and Hindus very often in the 1940s in India, especially in Dhaka. Clashes that led to the partition of the Indian state in two; in 1947, so-called British India was divided into two states: India and Pakistan. Indeed, the founder of Pakistan, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, and his party the Muslim League, had first demanded autonomy for the Muslim-majority areas, and only later requested a separate state. Jinnah believed that Hindus and Muslims could not live together and that they were different nations. But where is the relationship between poverty and freedom? Sen recounts an encounter between a Muslim and a Hindu who were wary of sitting down to share. Then, the one said to the other: "My friend, there is really no difference between us. You make your living by exploiting the vulnerabilities of ignorant Hindus, and I make my living by exploiting the vulnerabilities of ignorant Muslims. We are in just the same business" (p. 166).

Impossible to overlook the different family intricacies of the Sen family in the anti-colonial process of the Indians; the British built a repressive network, where neither Amartya Sen's family nor Mahatma Gandhi escaped. According to the explanation of the British authorities, any suspect could be preventively detained. Sen states: "... writing and making non-violent

speeches in favor of independence, especially if they were along the lines of Mahatma Gandhi, was sufficient to qualify for preventive detention" (p. 170).

It is worth noting the finesse and elegance, as Sen relates the years of colonial rule by the British in India. Sometimes taking as primary sources the beautiful literature of two Indian Nobel Prize winners: Rabindranath Tagore and Rudyard Kipling. It is important to note, in this last aspect, a pleasant coincidence: Sen's primary studies were in the experimental school located in Santiniketan founded by the Nobel Prize winner Tagore. Having said that, it is worth noting that the *Memoirs*, while emphasizing the role of the personalities in Sen's life, seeks to underline very strongly the ideas of these characters as well. In the long run, the *Memoirs* could be considered as a book of histories of the democratic ideas that influenced Amartya Sen. Here the inspiration of the poet Martí, in *Our America*, fits in: "An energetic idea, flamed in time before the world, for, like the mystical flag of the final judgment, a squadron of battleships".

Although I was already familiar with the joint writings of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum on quality of life, I came to *A Home in the World. Memoirs*, for a section entitled: *What to do with Marx* (pp. 248- 264). Sen makes a big claim, as a student, why Marx was not studied in the content of the teaching at College Street in Calcutta. However, what interests Sen most about Marx are the human implications of all his theoretical formulations and his renewed look at man as a poly-dimensional being, beyond the activity of labor.

Sen notes the Marxist slogan "from each according to his needs" as part of the Marxist ethic, but goes further and links the idea of the Welfare State, initially developed in the Nordic countries, based on loyalty to Marx's principle of necessity, in the sense that it cannot be called a legitimately civilized society if it denies medical care to a person because of his lack of economic means.

Indeed, to read Amartya Sen's memoirs is to fill with spirituality and democratic ideas the lives of students and teachers today, undermined by global technocracies where the humanistic spirit has been discarded. Perhaps what is most striking about Sen's ideas, thoughts and feelings is when he states that poverty inexorably leads to a breakdown of human talent. Bearing in mind that poverty is not only the lack of money, but the inability of people, due to economic conditions, to develop their full potential as human beings. It is most likely that a poor girl or boy from Alta Guajira (Wayuu), in Colombia-if he or she survives-can develop all his

or her capabilities and talents as a human being. For all these reasons I recommend *A Home in the World. Memoirs*.

This review comes to an end. And we end by recalling Gabriel García Márquez's sentence in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: "The condemned races in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* did not have a second chance on earth". Amartya Sen, makes a peremptory call to retake with more force the idea of social justice, of José Arcadio Buendía, so that human beings can develop all their spiritual and material capacities as persons.