

Spivakian Study of Strategic Essentialism in the Autumn of the Patriarch and Waiting for the Barbarians in Post-colonial Literature

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Abstract

In 1980, an Indian Post-colonial theorist and critic, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak publicized strategic essentialism as a major concept in postcolonial theory. She defined it as a special form of essentialism which involves greater scopes of post-colonial studies such as subaltern, otherness, and strategic essentialism. The present paper shows to what extent Spivakian concepts are recognizable through characters of the Autumn of the Patriarch and Waiting for the Barbarians. The present paper's discussion is developed in the light of Spivakian concepts of essentialism, specifically strategic essentialism since a few researches with mentioned concept has been done on the Autumn of the Patriarch and Waiting for the Barbarians. By concentrating on the concept, Gabriel Garcia shows Strategic Essentialism through inferiors of the society and Coetzee tried to demonstrate the strategic essentialism and generally the power of essentialism through character of Magistrate. The paper shows the oppression of the imperial system and outcome of essentializing against oppressors. The major conclusion is that if inferiors of the society unite with each other, find their true identity and stand against oppression, then they can get rid of the oppression.

Keywords: Spivak, Strategic Essentialism, Postcolonial, Coetzee, Marquez

Introduction:

Essentialism has emerged as a key concept in post-colonial literature. Several Critics have defined this term. Essentialism is the perception which considers a set of attributes for any entity which forms its identity and meaning (Catwright 1968). Essentialism involves different aspects of life, political and cultural. In political manner it is defending the rights of margins of society in which Spivak calls them "other". Ashcroft et al. defines its purpose "to expose the falsity of this mode of representing the colonial subject as an "other" to the Self of the dominant colonial culture" (74). In cultural aspect it is necessary for those who are under the pressure and oppression.

Cultural essentialism, which is hypothetically debatable, may be adopted as a tactical political position in the debate against imperial power. It is obvious that certain kinds of practices are strange to one culture and people not to others and these matters may serve as essential identifiers and become the means by which those cultures can resist oppression and face against homogenization by global powers. (Ashcroft et al. 2007)

The term Essentialism in post-colonial studies practically discoursed with such categorized questions like race and nation. On the other side, at a more realistic level there is a link between essentialism and classification of the society into superior and inferior. The marginal group accordingly tries to define itself by its own standards. So in this paper when it is called essentialism we mean strategic essentialism in particular and its related concepts of otherness and subaltern. In this paper, we have tried to study *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975) by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) in the light of Spivakian theory of Strategic Essentialism.

Main Discussion:

Strategic Essentialism in the Autumn of the Patriarch

Gayatri Spivak describes essentialism in her own view, it denotes to a strategy and policies that nationalities, national groups or marginal groups can use to present themselves. They may have various differences but they engage in continuous arguments, it is sometimes helpful for them to momentarily essentialize themselves and to support their social personality and individuality in a simplified way to attain definite goals, or to oppose the leveling influence of international culture (Ashcroft et al. 2010). So it is obvious that strategic Essentialism occurs when there are two groups, one is superior and the other one is inferior. In such society those who are inferiors should use some strategies in order to get rid of being called margins, in Spivak's viewpoint, "other" or inferior. So the term Essentialism is a general word which has other, subalternity which is specifically marginalization of women in society and also Strategic Essentialism.

One of the major elements of postcolonial studies is the matter of Strategic Essentialism. Strategic Essentialism as the major subdivision of Essentialism is so important for the inferiors of the society which help them to express their idea and to take their rights. So it has the issues of inferiority, identity and self-assurance. Spivak says that it is crucial to embrace a strategic essentialism; in one of her interviews she approved the worth of essentialist constructions in many debates for liberation and freedom from the effects of colonial and neo-colonial tyranny and oppression. (Achcroft et. al 2007).

So one of the major criticisms of strategic essentialism is that people who are considered as "others" should come to this power and self-believing and reach to certain level of independency to express themselves, to speak and to show their opposition against cruelty and prejudice. In this novel people are passive and obey whatever the General orders moreover during the course of the story the General humiliate people by his ridiculous commands as he says:

“ . . . dragging his [General’s] great feet of an elephant walking in the snow all through the house as he resolved problems of state and household matters with the same simplicity with which he gave the order take that door away from here and put it over there for me, they took it away, put it back again for me, they put it back the clock in the tower should not strike twelve at twelve o’clock but two times so that life would seem longer, the order was carried out, without an instant of hesitation, without a pause, except for the mortal hour of siesta time when he would take refuge in the shade of the concubines . . . ”(*The Autumn of the Patriarch* 3)

Manipulation of the time is the weirdest section in this novel that Gabriel Garcia explained as he wanted to show the complete supremacy of the General on people’s life. Later on people came to this idea to believe themselves, to temporarily use essentialism and to introduce their common identity in an easy way to attain certain goals. One of those ways is planning to kill the General; that was the first rebellion against tyranny of the General as the evil omen planned to kill the General, which is obvious on page seven of this novel.

As Marquez showed that was the first conspiracy against the General; in this way he came to this idea that he needs more protection because people going to have rebel against him. By this action people understand that they can take the serenity from him. After that People decided to express their voice through rebel and shouting as on page eight Gabriel Garcia depicted a situation in which everybody was shouting from the balconies and starting the rebel against the rebel and wanted the end of blood shedding “ they shouted death to the tyrant . . . , patriotic reconciliation against the corruption and the arrogance of the military” (8)

Since Gayatri Spivak emphasizes on illuminating that the one can no longer see a formal script of moral responsibility centered on knowing the other without considering one’s understanding of complicity exactly in the very script that produces the other (qtd.in Ray 57); Gayatri Spivak in *Other Asias* (2008) illuminated it in this way, “thinking of responsibility is also the thinking of contamination” (61). In *the Autumn of the Patriarch* one of the major characters who tries to show his dissatisfaction and opposition at General is Patricio Aragones, General’s perfect double; he shows it by expressing his real feeling and talking at the bottom of his heart. This character came to this point to express his rebellion when he was about to dye, if he could stand against the tyranny of General earlier he didn’t have to tolerate different tortures and disasters. Garcia shows it through dialogues between General and Patricio Aragones: . . . I [Patricio] will leave you here for a while my general. . . I never loved you as you think (*The Autumn of the Patriarch* 9)

Garcia Marquez wanted to demonstrate the unorganized situation of women in a dictatorship society where women are looked as a tool to supply their needs and they are going to be left alone or even being killed after that. According to Spivak, this inferiority should not keep them away from expressing and believing themselves. Like these parts:

. . . and then he [General] murdered the sick old woman in the hammock so that no one else would know the circumstances of his death . . . I [Poncio Daza] was dying with fear I maintained enough lucidity to realize that my only means of salvation was to let him do everything he wanted to with me on the dinner table (31-33).

Strategic essentialism as the most important subdivision of essentialism is dominant in *the Autumn of the Patriarch*. Spivak declares that through Strategic Essentialism those who were inferiors of the society, could find their true identity and place in society. As mentioned in the novel, after different rebels and

oppositions, people came to this idea that by uniting and believing in themselves, they can reach to the place where they belong. By strategic essentialism people were successful to get rid of the oppressor who was the General.

Strategic Essentialism in Waiting for the Barbarians

According to the sequence of events in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee showed the oppression of the Empire against nomads, Fisher-folks, imprisonment, tortures and killing these innocent people just because the empire considered those who are outside of the town as other, inferior and margin of society. In this situation Gayatri Spivak's Strategic Essentialism finds its meaning that groups should unite and use strategies in order to defend their rights. Spivak advocates that strategic essentialism supports essentialism even though it is not completely believed in, because it is compulsory in the struggling of conflicts, rational arguments, and political conflicts. This theory operates in relationship to the notion of the subaltern. The subaltern is defined as a term which is often used to represent the marginalized or *Other* in society and Gayatri Spivak believes that the elites defines the constitutes of the subaltern (Ritzer and Rayan 2011).

In chapter 1 of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, when Magistrate sees the injustice of Colonel Joll against innocent people who were nomads and fisher-folks, sees the woman with her dead baby changes his mind and he is shameful about being a servant of the Empire for all of his life. "This is the point at which I [Magistrate] begin to see the disadvantages of living, as I have chosen to do" (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 29). This is the first place that we see the ignition of Strategic Essentialism in the Magistrate, which begins with opposing Colonel Joll as representative of the Empire. Later the Magistrate feels remorse of his life and says:

Now herded by their guards they stand in a hopeless little knot in the corner of the yard, nomads and fisher-folk together, sick, famished, damaged, terrified It would be best if this obscure chapter in the history of the world were terminated at once, if these ugly people were obliterated from the face of the earth and we swore to make a new start, to run an empire in which there would be no more injustice, no more pain. (34)

This part of the novel contains both imperialistic issue and essentialism; since it contains the injustice and pain which is brought by imperialism and it indirectly shows the inferiority of the fisher-folks and has essentialism of the Magistrate which begins with his opposition to the Empire. There is not any special and outstanding strategy in this story, but the Magistrate defends himself and other inferiors by opposing the Empire and this is the style of Coetzee. "Most people who use (essentialism) use it as a slur word, intending to put down the opposition" (qtd. in Phillips 2)

We are at peace here," I [Magistrate] say, "We have no enemies." There is silence. "Unless I make a mistake," I say "Unless we are the enemy." I am not sure that he [Colonel Joll] understands me. "The natives are at war with us," he says. I doubt that he has ever set eyes on a barbarian in his life. "Why have you been consorting with them? Who gave you permission to leave your post?" I shrug off the provocation. "It is a private matter," I say. "You will have to take my word for that. I do not intend to discuss it. (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 105)

There is a conversation between the Magistrate and Colonel Joll that Colonel interjected him and said the natives are preparing themselves to invade them, as Coetzee shows the Magistrate deny to stay at his post, rejects Colonel Joll and defends the natives. As mentioned above the opposing is the first step of Strategic Essentialism since it leads them to find their true identity as human being in Society; later Colonel arrests

the Magistrate for consorting with barbarians, in return the Magistrate says "I am aware of the source of my elation: my alliance with the guardians of the Empire is over, I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken, I am a free man" (106). All these oppositions leads to the promotion of essentialism "There are a number of critiques of strategic essentialism, including Spivak who sees the concept evolving into a means for promoting essentialism rather than as a means of analysis" (Ritzer and Rayan 619).

The Magistrate is aware of consequences of opposing the Empire, as he was witness of the imprisonment of the barbarian girl, fisher-folks and nomads; he himself has also experienced those tortures because of consorting with barbarians; by the way all these injustices and inequality make him stronger to fight for what he believes in and declares "It becomes important to stand up, however difficult the pain makes it" (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 143). So standing and tolerating is another element or strategy that Magistrate believes in and asks others to join him. He also believes that the end of standing against tyranny and oppression is victory; "It will be a famous victory, I tell myself, if you can last the night (146).

As mentioned above, three strategies are used by the Magistrate as believing in oneself, opposing and standing against tyranny of the Colonel Joll. He also at the last part of his endeavor verbally attacks the Colonel. In this part, Coetzee deliberately italicizes the pronouns to add influence on the matter of self and Otherness; "The authors of *The Key Concepts in Postcolonial Studies* state that the term Othering was coined by Gayatri Spivak for the process by which imperial discourse creates its "Others" . . . Othering describes the various ways in which colonial discourse produces its subjects . . . the construction of the o/Other is fundamental to the construction of the Self" (qtd. in Nirmala.S. 1). So this attack is the fourth strategy he uses.

Those pitiable prisoners you brought in are — they the enemy I must fear? Is that what you say? You are the enemy, Colonel!" I can restrain myself no longer. I pound the desk with my fist. "You are the enemy, you have made the war, and you have given them all the martyrs they need starting not — now but a year ago when you committed your first filthy barbarities here! History will bear me out!" "Nonsense. There will be no history, the affair is too trivial." He seems impassive, but I am sure I have shaken him. "You are an obscene torturer! You deserve to hang!" (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 153).

By using of Spivak's notions in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the researcher concludes that where the margins of society who were especially women and poor people outside the outpost who live in the wild and the Magistrate who was against the tyrant Colonel, came to this conclusion that oppression of innocent people are enough and he began to believe in himself, helped the barbarian girl and returned her to her people and this was one of the strategies of the Magistrate to show his opposition to the Empire. At last he could push back Colonel Joll who was symbol of other tyrants and oppressors around the world.

Research Background

In Postmodernism, Postcolonial literature is considered as a body of literary writing that replies the scholarly discourse of European and western colonization in the Pacific, Caribbean Sea, Africa, Asia, Middle East, and elsewhere. Post-colonialism talks about the complications and consequences of the decolonization of a country and of a nation, mainly the political and cultural independence of previously dominated colonial peoples; it also involves literary critiques about postcolonial literatures, the traces of which communicates, carries, and justify racialism and colonialism.

In 2010 Elizabeth Eide studied Strategic Essentialism entitled *Strategic Essentialism and Ethnification: Hand in Glove?* In which she discusses Gayatri Spivak's strategic essentialism, its advantages and its

downsides. But in this paper just some important points were taken about Strategic Essentialism. Another study in this case is “Power” in literature and society, The “Double” in Gabriel García Márquez’s *the Autumn of the Patriarch* which is mainly about some rhetorical and socio-political effects of power in the novel of *the Autumn of the Patriarch*.

In 2009, the book entitled *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: In Other Words* by Sangeeta Ray, introduces and argues the works of foremost feminist post-colonialist Gayatri Spivak, by studying the central concepts and themes. It centres on the main themes to develop from Spivak’s work like, literature ethics, feminism, post-colonialism, violence, oppression and war.

Faith N. Mishina in 2013 in the Journal of Intercultural Disciplines wrote an article on *the Autumn of the Patriarch* in which she talks about Colombian culture and the oppression and injustices of the society on the reign of its dictators and also give useful information about Gabriel Garcia’s political attitudes. *What’s wrong with essentialism?* Is an article by Anne Phillips in 2010 in which she identifies and discusses four distinct meanings of essentialism but just some sections of this article are used in the present paper which is about misuse and misunderstanding of essentialism. Susan Nirmala in 2013 in her article entitled “The idea of Othering in J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*” talks about the inferiorities and marginality in the societies and how native cultures are dominated by the western culture.

Research methodology

The adopted methodology for this study is library research in addition of observation and internet research. Concerning the premise ideas either explicitly or implicitly, the data is obtained through various sources by great literary and social figures such as George Ritzer and J. Michael Ryan, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. This paper is in fact, on the basis of cultural studies while regarding a Spivakian reading of two postcolonial novels such as *the Autumn of the Patriarch* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez the Noble Prize winner in 1982 and *Waiting for the Barbarians* by John Maxwell Coetzee Booker Prize winner.

Research Findings

Since both Gabriel Garcia and J. M. Coetzee were born in a colonized society, they are directly influenced by imperialistic situation of colonial power and its injustices. Being under the impression of colonial society, their sense of responsibility motivated them to produce a large number of literary works indicating the voice of the colonized and those being put in margins. By scrutinizing two novels of “*the Autumn of the Patriarch*” and “*Waiting for the Barbarians*” the researcher came to this point that in both novels in spite of their geographical distances one from Colombia and one from South Africa, they have similar essence. Both of them are dealing with postcolonial terms of strategic essentialism. Both of the novels of *the Autumn of the Patriarch* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* have some similarities. The first one is due to the resistance from those who are in power, in which the General in *the Autumn of the Patriarch* who stands for all tyrant rulers around the world is similar to the character of the Colonel Joll in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Both of these characters are oppressors and suppressors. They consider themselves superior than others and suppress any objection which is against their wills. In both novels, women are used as a means of obviating of their needs. The second similarity is due to the resistance of subaltern in society which led them to be the true victorious which Spivak calls it Strategic essentialism.

Conclusion:

Gabriel Garcia Marquez was quite careful in choosing the events of *the Autumn of the Patriarch*. He successfully depicted the life of General who was similar to the real tyrant ruler of Caribbean Sea. By

considering the postcolonial features through Spivakian outlooks, this paper has analyzed how author deals with identity and essentialism and in more specific manner the strategic essentialism which is used by margins of society who were women and those who were not entourage of the ruler, General. By researching on *the Autumn of the Patriarch* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, researchers conclude that where the margins of society who were especially women and poor people outside the outpost who live in the wild and the Magistrate who was against the tyrant Colonel, came to this conclusion that oppression of innocent people are enough and he began to believe in himself, helped the barbarian girl and returned her to her people and this was one of the strategies of the Magistrate to show his opposition to the Empire. At last he could push back Colonel Joll who was symbol of other tyrants and oppressors around the world.

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