

Subjectivity and Humanism as Two Major Factors of Jaun Paul Sartre's Existentialism in: Gabriel Garcia Marquez's 'No One Writes to the Colonel'

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Abstract Existentialism, as the forerunner of twentieth century's thought schools, encompasses and gives far more meaning to the classical work of literature even the most recent ones as Gabriel Garcia Marquez. It is one of the broad schools of thought and philosophy that deeply indebted to the ideas and studies of a French philosopher called Jean-Paul Sartre. "The more fashionable a philosophy becomes", Marjorie Grene states in his Introduction to Existentialism, "the more elusive is its definition" (Grene 23). So, the proponents of existentialism proclaim that though many attacks few understand them" (Elizabeth 1). Regarding the school of existentialism and the Marquez's work called *No One Writes to the Colonel*; this study concentrates on Subjectivity and humanism as viewed in this novel and as applied from the school. Sartre's existential elements, such as Subjectivity and Freedom, to choose as the two basic issues of existentialism, are applicable and seen through this novel. The major character of the novel, a Colonel, makes his mind up to choose waiting and through this decision, he gave meaning to his life and his own subjectivity. Finally the study comes to the conclusion that the Colonel of Marquez's novel—*No One Writes to the Colonel*—is an Existential human being, since he decides, accepts the responsibilities, alienates himself, and becomes a sort of stranger in his hometown. And yet, he does not lose his hope, as far as he is free, liberated to choose for humanism. Therefore, through the challenges he gains his true subjectivity and humanism.

Keywords: Subjectivity, Freedom to Choose, and Humanism

1. Introduction

Gabriel Garcia Marquez is regarded as a renowned author of the South America, mainly dealing with magic realistic issues in his works. *No One Writes to the Colonel* is one of his Macondo novels, which takes place in Marquez's favored imaginary setting Macondo, (the same as William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha), where most of Marquez's fictions take place. It is noticeable to add that, Macondo does not stand for Aracataca the childhood city of Marquez; rather it may stand for any town in the banana zone, for Colombia, even for Latin America or any territory in the world. Therefore, it is not far reached to consider the setting as one for the humanity, in a novel that discusses man's existence and way of decisions.

Existentialism is unquestionably one of the most influential and important philosophical movements of modern time. It seems that existentialism is generally considered as a movement trying to find meaning in the face of meaninglessness. Existentialists refuse to be called by any label and they "tend to deny the value of any system, definition, institution, structure, doctrine or relationship by which one would traditionally define oneself objectively. These qualities, traditionally connected to a person's essence, are uncertain, or subjective, illusory, artificial, or even utter nonsense, and should they be

considered at all? Can they only be authentically treated after, or, perhaps as a product of, one's existence"? (Mireau). This means that, first of all, a person is regarded as one who exists as a thinking, feeling or active subject, then his or her essence will be created. The philosophy of existentialism is mostly indebted to an influential figure, Jean-Paul Sartre, and his ideas. Here the researchers studied to discover to what extent the existential ideas of Sartre is applicable on Marquez's *No One Writes to the Colonel*, to see that how existentiality manifested itself in the novel, and that how the Colonel comes to his subjectivity; all of which had led the Colonel to become a existential figure.

2. Discussion

2.1 What of Existentialism?

Existentialism attempts to liberate humans from the daily life by focusing on the famous statement of Rene Descartes, "I think; therefore, I am," and to direct them toward well-grounded relationships with others and with themselves. Descartes uses "I" instead of any other pronouns just for concentrating on individual; so does an existentialist. He always advises an individual to search within for truth. The common premise upon which various philosophers of existentialism base their ideas and theories is that existence is linked to choice. Even when one chooses not to chose, he makes a choice. Consequently, most existentialists reject any philosophy that defines reality as an objective thing, rather, reality for them is totally subjective and it is created by each individual; because man is free to choose and determine his own destiny. (Mellen 41)

All literary critics consent upon the fact that the sign of a great work is the many ways in which it can be read or interpreted. Marquez chooses literature as his domain because literature has no limitation. He has always spoken of freedom of literature since in literature one can tell anything and travel anywhere as he or she wishes. Among all literary genres he chooses novel as far as he has "become convinced that the novelist's work is the freest work that exist", through which the author gains subjectivity per se (Elizabeth 1). Marquez believes that the novelist is God and the novel is his universe; as God is free to exercise every excess in His universe, the novelist is free to include anything even contradictory elements in his novel. That is, where the novelist assumes the role of a rebel, and his novel turns to a rebellious act "against reality, against God, against the creation of God which is reality" (Vargas Llosa 8). The novelist even can depict the political situation of his society and lifetime in his novel by bringing fictional characters who are the representatives of the factual ones, so he can indirectly criticize the society and people. It is axiomatic that no one single approach "can do justice" (Mellen 155) to the novel the critic is going to study.

Existentialism is one of the many chosen approaches by the researchers and critics as the methodology of the research. Existentialism is the philosophy that places emphasis on individual existence, subjectivity and the freedom of choice. Existentialism especially from Sartre's view, stresses on the freedom of human being and the responsibility aroused from the so-called freedom.

Originated by Jean- Paul Sartre, the phrase "existence precedes essence" has come to be a sort of defining formulation of the existentialism. By this quotation, Sartre insists that the "essence" or "nature" of a thing is no more fundamental than its "existence". Sartre basically applies this principle to humanity. Traditionally, it was assumed that human's essence precedes existence. Because in Christianity people believed to be created by God. God knew what was to be made before humans ever existed. An existentialist, such as Sartre, goes a step further and rejects this idea (essence precedes existence).

Sartre in his '*Existentialism is Humanism*' argues that there is no given human nature common to everyone because there is no God to give it in the first place. Human beings exist, and it is just after their existence that some "essence", that can be called "human", may develop (Sartre). Sartre believes that the nature of every person depends on that person per se. There is a freedom in selecting between this and that; the sort of selection which brings responsibility defines the nature or essence of man. Thus, no longer some excuses such as "it was in my nature" can be acceptable since human beings themselves create their own nature, and also no longer can they blame anyone or even praise but themselves (Sartre). Sartre continues that there may not be a universal human nature, but there is certainly a common human condition: Because we all are living in a society and having common condition, we may all face with the same sort of decisions (Sartre). Locating in the state of decision, man is not just choosing for himself rather for all human beings. So, we are not only responsible for ourselves but also bear some responsibility for others [Sartre]. Knowing that by choosing for yourself, you are choosing for human

beings and also the responsibility of the choice is on your own. Thus, humanism is going to be created by one's choice.

2.2 *Subjectivity and Freedom to Choose in Marquez's no one Writes to the Colonel*

In a small town in Colombia the titular colonel and his asthmatic wife are living with so difficulties out of lacking money. They are trying to sell off their possessions and whatever else they can in order to buy food and medicine. The elderly and impoverished colonel has been waiting for fifteen years to receive a pension check for his service in the army. Every Friday the colonel goes to the post office in the hope that there will be a letter for him, bringing the pension that he is owed. He has been waiting more than a decade, yet no letter is received. They own a rooster that once belonged to Agustin –who had been killed at a cockfight for distributing secret political literature. The rooster is supposed to bring well-being to the colonel, his wife, the school children, and the town, by fighting with other roosters. Though the colonel and his wife are starving alive, the Colonel does sell not the rooster, rather he keeps him to fight.

In this sense, *No One Writes to the Colonel* reflects Sartre's ideas on existentialism, especially subjectivity and humanism. The Colonel experiences his freedom to choose and gain subjectivity when he tries to make a decision. The Colonel seems to be stocked in a dilemma: on the one hand, he does not want to bid farewell to the glorious past and what he had done in the civil war, and on the other, he does not prefer to do something else rather than just waiting for receiving a letter containing his pension. When he meets the lawyer, he murmurs: "well, I've decided to take action." (Marquez 24). Yet, the decision of the colonel in doing an action is again seems to relate to the background of his beliefs: waiting. When the lawyer asks about his decision, the colonel replies: "to change lawyers" (Marquez 24). It shows how much the colonel feels optimistic toward the government that after passing fifteen years waiting still hangs on the bureaucratic solutions. The lawyer tries to confirm him that what he is going to do "will take centuries" (Marquez 27). But, the colonel decides to choose waiting, so he says: "it doesn't matter. If you wait for the big things, you can wait for little ones." (Marquez 27)

Yet, the colonel is free to choose between his options. It is interesting to mention that he even tries to choose some other actions such as: selling clock, asking help or selling the rooster, but he just tried, not exactly did. It seems, a great interior power pushes the colonel toward the idea of sticking to passivity- which the present article prefers not to call it so, rather referring to it as the act of waiting. This great power is his dignity or pride. The colonel's dignity is important to him; he would much rather write a letter requesting the change of lawyer by hand than ask someone to type the letter as a favor to him. (Marquez 27). The colonel even lies many times in the novel in order to save his pride; for example: the colonel is holding the clock with the idea of selling it in order to earn money to buy something to be fed on, but suddenly he realizes that he is surrounded by "expressionless faces" (Marquez 32). "' what have you got there?'" , one of them asks. The colonel lies: "nothing, I'm taking my clock to the German to have him fix it for me." (Marquez 32) Or, when he goes to the harbor to see if a letter comes, the postmaster answers: "'nothing for the colonel'" (Marquez 13). The colonel feels ashamed. He feels his dignity is going to be scratched, so he lies: "I wasn't expecting anything" (Marquez 13), yet, the readers do know that the colonel has been waiting for fifteen years. (Marquez 12). Thus, the present article comes to believe that one -such as the colonel's wife- should not accuse the Colonel for his inactivity. The Colonel chooses to wait; he chooses to be optimistic toward the government and what he had been promised to get as his pension. Here, it is preferred to call it *-the waiting-* an action rather than just mere waiting. At least, the colonel decides to wait. When there is no solution for his problem, the Colonel can wait. Waiting can be considered as an action. Remi Akujobi in an essay called *'Hunger and Waiting in Third World Literature'* concentrates on the theme of waiting and states that: "...'waiting' is portrayed as an important characteristic of human condition in that people always wait for one thing or the other, and so life itself is simply made of waiting suspended between eternity." (Akujobi 41).

2.3 *Humanism in Marquez's no one Writes to the Colonel*

In his lecture *'Existentialism is Humanism'*, Sartre announces that there is no predetermined value so; human being himself invents morality, value and so on. Since, there is no god, man is free to choose and invent the values. Here, Sartre calls the existentialism as a form of humanism. The Colonel in *No One Writes to the Colonel* is the one who tries to create humanity by what he does. The Colonel knows that he is choosing not only for himself but for all human being. Thus, he is responsible for what he does. Since by his choice, human being and humanism is going to be defined. What the Colonel tries to do is not just a

mere waiting; rather he is going to give meaning to humanism. Sometimes hunger and poverty push him to get rid of his pride and dignity- seems to be the two major symbols of humanity for the Colonel. Yet, he resisted on what he believes on.

Sartre marks that man is nothing but his choices. Man shows itself by being able to choose and at the same time to accept the responsibility of the choices. The Colonel keeps his son's rooster alive for much the same reason "he keeps hoping for his pension-to seek a meaning to living beyond the mere fact of eating." (Marquez 9). For the colonel, it takes fifteen years to find meaning. He knows that "humanity doesn't progress without paying a price."(Marquez 20)

3. Conclusion

As discussed in the novel, *No One Writes to the Colonel*, it is arguing the main factors of human existence and subjectivity. Existentialism is a philosophical and literary tendency that typically emphasizes the subjective realities of individual existence, individual freedom, and individual choice. There is an emphasis on each person finding their own way in life, on making choices. Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical writings, as well as his plays and novels spread existentialist thinking, made Existentialism one of the schools of thought. The Colonel of Marquez's novel is an existential human being since he decides, accepts the responsibilities, and creates humanism out of what are important for him. While entangled in a drastic situation he makes a decision by himself; this decision is made in a situation that renders no hope and prevails man to surrender, yet, the Colonel does not lose his hope because he is free, liberated by his own decision to choose for humanism. Thus, the present article calls the Colonel an existential human being.

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