

# The Dictator in *the Autumn of the Patriarch* - Sadistic or Masochistic?

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**Abstract**—The critically acclaimed but not so popular novel by Gabriel García Márquez, *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, has given rise to confusion in the minds of the readers with its intricate deceptive story telling narrative presented with a stream-of-consciousness technique and extraordinary long sentences which fill in pages. The author presents a fictitious Caribbean dictator, who lives for ages defying death and rules for more than a century exercising absolute power. This mysterious figure causes reverence in the minds of the people he rules by curing lepers and showing overt patriotism by denying foreign pressure of seizing the sea, causes fear by extreme violence and atrocities. This paper looks into the labyrinthine working of the General's mind from a Freudian point of view and aims to show the leading character of the novel, the General, as a sadistic or a masochistic character or in cases a mixture of both.

**Keywords**— Dictator novel, Freud, Masochism, Sadism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

WILLIAM Kennedy in his book review sums up the unnamed General's life ruling an unnamed Caribbean nation in *The Autumn of the Patriarch* as one who

. . . lives to be anywhere between 107 and 232 years old, sires 5,000 children, all runts, all born after seven-month gestations. He is a bird woman's bastard, conceived in a storm of bluebottle flies, born in a convent doorway, gifted at birth with huge, deformed feet and an enlarged testicle the size of a fig, which whistles a tune of pain to him every moment of his impossibly long life. [1]

We see several assumed deaths of the dictator who measures his age with the passing of Haley's Comet. The narrative does not take us through a chronological account of his long life but fragmented journey through his reign as we see his trust on and fear of his comrades, his adulation of the simplistic but matriarchal figure of his mother Bendición Alvarado, his craving for Manuela Sánchez who mysteriously disappears during a solar eclipse, his blind love for and faith on his wife Leticia Nazareno whose status changes from a nun to a corrupted woman on power, his lust for indiscriminate and loveless sex, his reliance on a prediction about his death which is to take place during his sleep made by the crippled, half-blind sibyl, his fear of God and nonconformity to the Catholic church when they deny the canonization of his mother after her death, his love for the poor and oppression of the people, his fear and discovery of traitorous cohorts, and his dexterous

ability to curtail those with unimaginable cruelty. In the process García Márquez celebrates the 'solitude' of the protagonist as he slowly becomes imprisoned in the vicious web of power and the desire to hold onto that power. Kennedy writes:

The General deteriorates from a deformed, charismatic stud into a mindless blood beast imprisoned on the "throne of illusions" that his power creates, unable to say what is true now, or what was true in the beginning. He comes to think of himself as God and names his son Emanuel. [1]

## II. BACKGROUND

This Latin American dictator novel is knitted by long winding sentences which perfectly reflect the extraordinary long reign of the dictator. Most of the sentences are pages long, do not have any quoted dialogues, and thus take us from a first person narrative to a dialogue and then to a third person narration. Allen B. Ruch refers to this stream-of-consciousness narrative as "a winding sheet of endless words twisting through the tyrant's head like a macho version of Molly's soliloquy in Ulysses" (qtd. in Yardley) [2]. Most of the times we are into the tyrant's head, but we get the glimpse from an unnamed bystander or a tortured man or a young girl he enjoyed and left hankering for his love making, or a commentator informing him of the present scenario, or any of the characters mentioned and named in the novel. Jonathan Yardley assures the baffled reader in the midst of the bizarre story telling of García Márquez:

If you don't always know whose mind it is you are entering - and you don't -- it doesn't really matter, because the collective portrait of the dictator and the small Caribbean nation that he rules is more important than individual thoughts, memories and voices. [2]

Apart from this surrealistic narrative style *The Autumn of the Patriarch* is stunningly dispersed with violence, cruelty, and gruesome and shocking description of incidents. The relation between power and violence is an age-old established factor and this relation has been exposed in Latin American dictator novels in general. Rebecca E. Biron appropriately finds the connection as she mentions:

Insofar as these Boom authors, all male, write of the search for origins as a goal for male protagonists, patrilinear families, or male protagonist-narrators, they link the dilemma of founding an autochthonous and autonomous definition of Latin America to available definitions of masculinity. And those definitions are neither autochthonous nor autonomous.

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Various associated with heroism in war, benevolent or authoritarian husbandry, fatherhood, violent destruction, archival organization, or literary productivity, masculinity serves as the problematic, if seldom questioned, core models of Latin American identity. (5) [3]

### III. SADISM – MASOCHISM

In line with the relation between power and violence, Freud in his essay “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes” draws our attention to the undergoing of our instincts through ‘reversal into its opposite’ resulting into sadism – masochism (205). The attempt in this paper is directed to the discovery of the fact as to how much the fictitious character of the General in *The Autumn of the Patriarch* is sadistic and/or masochistic in nature. According to Freud, “Sadism consists in the exercise of violence or power upon some other person as object” (206). He details:

In ordinary speech the connotation of sadism oscillates between , on the one hand, cases, merely characterized by an active or violent attitude to the sexual object, and, on the other hand, cases in which satisfaction is entirely conditional on the humiliation and maltreatment of the object. (301) [4]

People sadistic in nature will not only inflict pain on the sexual object and thereby fulfill their sexual instinct, but will also derive pleasure out of acting violently on the object. On the other hand, Freud defines, “masochism, the component instinct which is complementary to sadism, must be regarded as sadism that has been turned round upon the subject’s own ego” (260). In this case the subject wreaks pain upon the self. This might happen either by the help of another person or by the subject’s self.

### IV. POWER

The theme of *The Autumn of the Patriarch* is power and deception of power. The General is sadistic in nature as he clings onto power and exercises power even in the most trifling cases like bringing a change in time, and participating in cock-fight and killing the winner who happens to have an upper hand in the game with him. However, he is masochistic as he is aware of the fact that the bureaucrats or the generals are deluding his perception by providing him a made up newspaper with all positive news about the development of the country with his pictures all over. He is well aware of the greed within the presidential palace itself leading to perfidy and power flourished under the umbrella of power. He blind folds himself fearing all revolt and insurrection, lets this rise, and then axes all attempts against his life and reign with utmost cruelty in a sadistic manner. Thus Kennedy calls the dictator “the pathological fascist tyrant.” [1]

Whenever there is a threat to his absolute power, the General deals with it mercilessly. The novel has explicit incidents of murder and violence perpetuating the dictator’s way to put a stop to insurrections. One of the prime examples is the death of General Rodrigo de Aguilar, his ‘soul comrade,’ his ‘strong right arm,’ his ‘sacred accomplice,’ who gets involved into a plot of palace revolt and untimely meets his death in the most ruthless ghastly manner when he succeeds

“in establishing another system of power within the power as widespread and as fruitful as mine” (Márquez 103). [5]

. . . the distinguished Major General Rodrigo de Aguilar entered on a silver tray stretched out full length on a garnish of cauliflower and laurel leaves, steeped with spices, oven brown, embellished with the uniform of five golden almonds for solemn occasions and the limitless loops for valor on the sleeve of his right arm, fourteen pounds of medals on his chest and a sprig of parsley in his mouth, ready to be served at a banquet of comrades by the official carvers to the petrified horror of the guests as without breathing we witness the exquisite ceremony of carving and serving, and when every plate held an equal portion of minister of defense stuffed with pine nuts and aromatic herbs, he gave the order to begin, eat hearty gentlemen. (105) [5]

When he is faced with a military upheaval in a barrack the General stays calm, carries milk for the barrack people and kills them all with explosives placed in the milk barrels. People or generals or politicians mysteriously disappear or get killed when he comes to know of their involvement into an assassination attempt against his life or the hatching of a plot against his reign. He employs José Ignacio Saenz de la Barra as the head of the police force who supplies sacks of heads of his enemies. After widespread indiscriminate killing the General muses, “I no longer know who is who, or who is with whom or against whom in this snare of progress within order . . .” (Márquez 197). [5] The appearance and reality always get merged in the illusion of power. The only thing that matters to the patriarch is his own existence in the realm of his loveless existence. The fear of being overthrown or getting assassinated gives way to the ruthless punishment to the people involved to ensure the continuation of exercising power “so that nobody would fail to know how those who spit on God end up” (Márquez 97). [5] But all the piled up dead bodies hover in his labyrinthine mind and cross question his god-like existence with a masochistic feeling.

### V. SEXUAL INSTINCT

The sadistic and masochistic instances are also present in the General’s dealing with women. He casually surprises the concubines sheltered around his palace and makes love to the nameless women in the most ignoble manner. While he takes pleasure out of this careless fornication and the remarks of the women about his virility, we see an instance where he degrades himself in front of Francisca Linero who pities him for his misery in early ejaculation. This relates to Freud’s idea of opposites through a reversal. He can become all sadistic and forceful on women playing a power game which is not only physically gratifying but also mentally satisfying, and also can impair his image of “All Pure who watches over the cleanliness of the nation” (Márquez 31). [5] He even orders the death of Francisca’s husband Poncio Daza while he forces himself onto her. This merciless killing and the gruesome end of the ill-fated Poncio who has been cut into “such thin slices that it was impossible to put his body back together again after it had been scattered by the hogs” (Márquez 82) [5] leads us to Freud’s idea of the strong impact of sadism on sexual instinct.

“... we recognized the presence of a sadistic component in the sexual instinct. As we know, it can make itself independent and can, in the form of perversion, dominate an individual’s entire sexual activity” (259). [4] His senile perversion is given expression when he is portrayed as a catcher waiting for the girls in uniform on their way back home from school to lure them with candy and then seducing them on a bed of straw. Soon he discovers that the ‘naïve’ girls are not coming to him from school but they are willing prostitutes employed by the real people in power keeping him content in his illusory throne with satisfaction. His indiscriminate casual sex indicates and conforms to the idea expressed by Biron, “... when the male subject addressed by the discourses of law, duty, and morality is constituted through masculinist projections that denigrate women, a rhetoric of violence emerges” (15). [3] Nonetheless, we can question his unrequited love for Manuela Sánchez. He pursues relentlessly just to have a confirmation of her acceptance of him as her lover. He painstakingly visits her house in the shabby neighborhood and showers her with various gifts until one night she mysteriously disappears during a solar eclipse when he is about to hold her hand for the very first time. He suffers from his unfulfilled desire of a union between them and searches for her in every corner of the country in vain. A man so powerful does not exercise his power in fulfilling his desire with this particular woman. He courts her like a gentleman which is in contradiction to the all forceful image of the general. We might conclude that he is masochistic in fruitlessly wooing her; whereas he is sadistic in indiscriminately enjoying women and young girls.

## VI. ENIGMA

One of most shocking incidents of this novel again proves the tantalizing mixture of sadism and masochism in the General’s enigmatic character. Children involved in the corruptive process of state lottery are first hidden, and then sent to a jungle when a commission from the League of Nations enquires after the welfare of the lost children. To get rid of their ‘evil memory’ he orders those two thousand children to be put in a barge loaded with cement and blow them up with dynamite. This shockingly unnatural description of the incident proves Biron’s point of how extreme violence against citizens perpetuates power in a repressive state as says, “monstrous acts of violence become the only available expression of masculine subjectivity in an abusive, dehumanizing political context” (121). [3] The sadistic nature of the dictator is further enforced when he promotes the three officers who carried out the crime and then shoots them without honors saying, “there were orders that can be given but which cannot be carried out, God damn it, poor children” (Márquez 96). [5] The twist here is the fact that even though he is sadistic in killing those children, he is masochistic in suffering for their death.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The enigma also exists in the General’s understanding of his people’s ‘love’ for him, and the way the image of loyalty and love is projected in him by the people around him. For readers similar confusion arises when we want to assess the

relationship between the dictator and the citizens in the constructed images projected in the novel. The General feels ‘these people love me’, they pray ‘God Save the Magnificent,’ they kiss him when he is resurrected. The killing machine José Ignacio Saenz de la Barra is made a scapegoat of the massacre and the General appears as a savior by acknowledging the public death of Ignacio at the hand of a crazy mob. The dictator deludes himself with the deception of being seen as a god among his people. Yardley makes us see through the complex psychological relationship between the dictator and his people.

Garcia Marquez understands that the relationship between the suppressor and the suppressed is often complex and interdependent. If there is in some of us a powerful urge to dominate, there is in others an inclination -- perhaps even a desire -- to submit. [2]

In the same way the patriarch in the novel is in a complex tyrannical bend of mind where the desire to inflict pain and to be tortured in turn takes turn. Freud concludes, “A sadist is always at the same time a masochist . . . “ (303) [4] after explaining:

When once feeling pains has become a masochistic aim, the sadistic aim of causing pains can arise also, retrogressively; for while masochistically by the subject through his identification of himself with the suffering object. (207) [4]

The General’s inability to kill the dogs which devoured his wife and son in a public square shows how the table gets turned and he is fed with the same violence that he cannot do without to ensure his existence. Towards the end of the book his outrage at the Americans when they take possession of the sea in partial payment of the national debt leaving an endless lunar plain, and his lamentations over the loss of the sea are deep and grave but that does not and cannot evoke our sympathy for him just like the monstrous murder of his wife and son, as we understand that he is drinking the last dregs from the poisoned goblet of power which he himself prepared. Kennedy rightfully concludes, “The book is a supreme polemic, a spiritual exposé, an attack against any society that encourages or even permits the growth of such a monstrosity.” García Márquez, through weaving a story of magic realism, perfectly creates the perplexing image of a dictator who is both sadistic and masochistic in nature.

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