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Abstract

This paper attempts to focus on Jorge Luis Borges’ short story *The Gospel according To Mark*. Borges, an Argentina short story writer and translator, whose motherland is under long-term western colonization, identifies himself unconsciously with the western culture. His works mostly touch upon the themes of religion and philosophy. Along with post-colonialism theory’s springing up, critics began to analyze his works from the post-colonial perspective. The author thinks that this short story with religious implication parallels to the cultural invasion in the period of colonization, from powerful culture to weaker one. The author, thus, aims to use Michael Foucault’s viewpoints concerning power and knowledge to probe into the western cultural hegemony and ideological invasion reflected in this story. Besides, the loss and construction of the ethnic identity of the colonized will be discussed in details.

**Keywords:** Jorge Luis Borges; power and knowledge; inarticulateness; Ethnic identity; cultural hegemony.

INTRODUCTION

The Gospel According to Mark written by an Argentina short-story writer Gorge Luis Borges depicts a story of a medical student named Espinosa, who is invited to spend holiday at the Gutres, an illiterate family of Indian blood, leading a life, which, in the eyes of Espinosa, barely fits in with the modern life in Buenos Aries. At the beginning, the inarticulateness of the Gutres impedes the on-going conversation among Espinosa and themselves, yet the plot twists when a catastrophic flood sets in, dramatically breaking the ice as Espinosa helps the Gutres to rescue a good part of the livestock. Later, Espinosa finds a good chance to read the Gutres the Gospel of Mark in Bible, in which the illiterate family began to take great interest, hence they turn out the enthusiasts of Christianity and our protagonist Espinosa, in their eyes, the incarnation of Jesus Christ, however, ironically ending in a way that parallels to what Jesus Christ has suffered—being crucified.

Obviously, the plot of this short story, with abundant religious metaphors, is arranged in allusion to The Gospel to Mark in the New Testament of the Bible. Critical interpretation on this short story centered around the biblical archetypes of the narrative pattern, and the figure of Espinosa, who is portrayed with resemblance to Jesus Christ in his continuously “working miracles” by rescuing livestock from the flood, healing the daughter’s pet lamb (his medical treatment is mistaken as the healing power that supernatural figure is bestowed with), and also enlightening the barbarian family with Christian doctrines.

The ending part unfolds in a way that Espinosa follows Jesus’s predestined path of being crucified to sacrifice for salvation, just as what has been put in Gospel of Mark, “Jesus is the son who God has sent to rescue humanity by serving and by sacrificing his life” (MK 10:45). Ironically, Espinosa’s death pales into insignificance because he is preaching Christianity, not out of sincere religious faith but the natural complacency and superiority complex to civilize and enlighten the illiterate, barbarian...
and uncivilized Gúes family of Indian blood. The weight of evidence in the text strongly supports
the opinion that Espinosa is freethinker with unfaithful religious belief. His purpose of reading the
Gúes the Gospel of Mark is to practise translation and to test if the Gúes can understand any of it,
and as a result, he is adored respectfully by the family even the crumbs he has dropped on the table
were secretly collected, besides, in the family, he “took over and gave timid orders, which were
obeyed” (Borges 4). Being highly revered and worshiped, Espinosa falls into a labyrinth of his dim
theology, and gives an answer which is against his belief when asked about the sacrifice of Jesus.

Michael Foucault, the French philosopher and post-structuralist, thinks that knowledge has power
which produces a discourse. Such kind of power can make a discourse become into mainstream
while suppress others. The character of Espinosa is, to some extent, the epitome of the group of
Christianity preacher in the early process of colonization, during which the Bible, the carrier of
western Christian culture, is served as a tool to impose the western ideology upon the barbarian and
uncivilized ethics. In the text, the Gospel of Mark bridges “the evitable after-dinner gap” (Borges 3),
the gap between advancement and underdevelopment, modernity and primitive, intelligence and
innocence. Espinosa, living in a state of fear that “in some other parts of the world people might see
them as Indians”, comes, with complacency and pride, to impart theological doctrines to the group,
between whom and himself he indeed draws a clear line to mark the difference. Foucault has put that
“knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of the truth, but has the power to make
itself true…knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraints, regulation
and discipline of practice”(Foucault 27). Borges depicts about the Bible in the story as “gold letters
on the cover lent the book authority.” In fact, it is not the gold letters but the seemly truth imposed by
the western theology that is authoritative. It leaves the illiterate no room for rejection and query.
Minds controlling and disciplining is actually a process of cultural aggression, through which
powerful culture succeeds in controlling over the weaker culture.

The Gúes are described in the text as muted and silenced due to their loss of language ability as
follows, “They are barely articulate”; “After a few generations, they had forgotten English, their
Spanish…none of whom could read or write” and so on. Their state of inarticulateness indicates that
they are deprived of the right to speak, to write and to express their own opinions, that is to say, they
become the passive objects to be described and gazed. In post-colonialism theory, the term of “gaze”,
in most cases, refers to a sort of vision looking down upon the weaker culture from the powerful
culture. The postcolonial gaze, firstly put forward by Edward Said in his “Orientalism”, has the
function of “establishing the subject/object relationship” (Beardsell 8). In the text, the ethnic of
Southern American Indians, represented by the Gúes family, become the group of inarticulate
“objects” to be gazed from and disciplined by the western culture, which is, in large part, attributed
to their loss of ethnic origin, in other words, their roots. Zhao Yi has put that the ethnic identity is
constructed through the real family name and ethnic history (Zhao Yi). Family name helps to trace
back to the original place and the blood of a family. In this story, Borges described the Southern
American Indians as an ethnic group with bad memories of history and weak consciousness of
ancestors’ ties of blood;for example, “Gauchos are apt to be ignorant of the year of their birth or the
name of the man who begot them”(Borges 3). In addition, the Gúes family were “natives of
Inverness”, who came all the way to the new world, but the “chronicle broke off sometime during the
eighteen-seventies, when they no longer knew how to write”(Borges, 4). There is no ethnic group,
when deprived of memory of their land, their blood and the history of their ancestors, can in any way
construct their ethnic roots and identity. Thus, an ethnic group is doomed to fail in their culture
defending when encountered with colonial invasion, and to become the marginalized and inarticulate object at the mercy of powerful culture.

CONCLUSIONS

As the writer of this story, Borges grows up in Argentina, a place where the western economic mold, political mold and cultural mold have begun to take root since the beginning of colonial period. Borges unconsciously takes a stand in favor of the western culture. In Gospel according to Mark, the interaction between the protagonist Espinosa and the Gutres family is an allegory of the confrontation between the powerful culture and the weak culture. The latter one is only depicted as the inarticulate “other”, the object to be gazed, wanting in the power of discourse.

References