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J. M. Coetzee And Allegory: A Critical Study Of Novels

Mr. K. Harikrishnan^a, Dr. R. Soundararajan^b

^aResearch Scholar (Ph.D), PG and Research Department of English, National College (Autonomous) (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University), Tiruchirappalli, Tamilnadu.

^bAssociate Professor & Research Advisor, PG and Research Department of English, National College (Autonomous) (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University), Tiruchirappalli.
soundararajaneng@nct.ac.in

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Abstract

Coetzee's novels occupy a special place in South African literature. Each of Coetzee's novel appears to be a unique masterpiece in itself, creating a new world altogether. Most of the characters of Coetzee's novels display a marked fatalism, thereby making no effort to tackle the problems of their life with grit and perseverance.

Keywords: Discrimination, Violence, Nation, Culture.

1. Introduction

In order to systematically categorize violence, we can divide the term roughly subsections such as physical, psychological, economic, and sexual. However, one form does not automatically exclude the other. Violence occurs in several arenas, both in the public and domestic spheres. As indicated already, rape is an entrenched problem in South Africa. The reliability of crime statistics is called into question due to unreported crime. Because of unreported and undiscovered crime, statistics and police records of sexual violence against women are inaccurate. Nonetheless, they give an indication of the comprehensive problem.

In relation to its population size, South Africa has the highest rate of police reported rape in the world. The nation is ranked above any other country in the world, even those at war or in conflict. Dubious and even unacceptable attitudes are evident in reference to the causes and consequences of rape in this nation. This is a great concern to South Africans and non-governmental organizations worldwide. In fact, the United Nations express their concern on pandemic violence against women in South Africa. In a report with concluding observations from 2011 made by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against women, a concern is expressed at the inordinately high prevalence of sexual violence against women and girls, as well as widespread domestic violence.

Email id : soundararajaneng@nct.ac.in

A great worry of theirs, a statement which also pinpoints the problem with rape at its roots, is that these conditions appear to be socially normalized, legitimized and accompanied by a culture of silence and impunity. In reality, there are low levels of prosecution and conviction, something which adds to the explanation why certain social and cultural measures have proven to be inadequate.

South Africa is a highly patriarchal nation. Although there has been an effort to improve women's rights on paper, they do not exist in practice. The reality of gender-based violence is that democracy ends at the threshold of private households. Throughout the duration of apartheid, several countries and cultural workers boycotted South Africa in the 1980s to show their stand against the regime. As Coetzee established himself as an author during this period of time, several of his novels were influenced by current affairs. In the post-apartheid South African context, much of the discussion about rape has evolved around race and class, and not gender.

Coetzee's novels occupy a special place in South African literature, and this is a context inevitability affects his writing; yet his work influences the development of novel into the 21st century and the great concept of internationalization of the novels is increasingly relevant to the appreciation of his achievement. Coetzee was strongly against the concept of realism that dominated the South African fiction, especially during the apartheid era. His intellectual influences have taken his work in the direction of the complex literary question raised in postmodernism. As a result he developed an indirect manner of expression in his works even about social and political matters. Coetzee's indirect manner is expressed in highly intellectual, somewhat esoteric and difficult to read.

Each of Coetzee's novel appears to be a unique masterpiece in itself, creating a new world altogether. This perspective changes when we read the novels as one collective entity. One can trace a thread of continuity that runs through them. Perhaps it would not be incorrect to state that the novels can be considered as the constituent parts of one large work. The basis of this statement is the incessant repetition of the themes. The characters also seem to reappear albeit different names. After reading the novels we are left with the lingering desire to read a new and fresh work authored by Coetzee. This stems from the fact that none of the novels seem to be what we may perhaps term 'original.' Another noticeable feature about the novels is that they lack a well-defined plot in the strict definition of the term. The narratives stand out more for their social critique rather than the literary features. When we notice this we understand that Coetzee has undertaken to perform the role of a social critic rather than a novelist. The predominant theme in Coetzee's fiction is the eternal battle between the haves and the have-nots. Coetzee's fiction mirrors the tussle between the privileged and the under-privileged and is applicable to nations, races, gender, castes and strategy of society. In each of his novels Coetzee selects one or more of these types of elements and paints a comprehensive picture in words. Often, more than one of these elements also gets tied up and it leads to a rather complicated tale.

Another interesting observation that can be made with reference to the characters of Coetzee's fiction is that they seem to duplicate themselves. Coetzee seems to employ certain stereotypes in his characterization and these typical characters with their idiosyncrasies make regular appearances in the novels. To a major extent the people who inhabit the world of Coetzee's fiction have been robbed of their self-confidence. Most of the characters of Coetzee's novels display a marked fatalism, thereby making no effort to tackle the problems of their life with grit and perseverance. In the face of adversity they do not put up a fight but give up easily. In most cases, the reading of the novels does not leave us with a feel-good factor but instead makes us ponderous or rather depressed. A close reading of the fiction will help me understand whether Coetzee is sounding an alarm or making a call for world peace. There is also a need to trace whether this pervading hopelessness has its roots in his personal life.

The innate negativism that is characteristic of the fiction of Coetzee is deepened by the lack of a conventional plot. The cause-and-effect strategy that builds up the story can be seen in the traditional novel is conspicuous by its absence in the fiction of Coetzee. In most of the novels, the novelists seems to have culled together a cluster of disjointed events to create the heterogeneous entity of the novel. Theoreticians have accorded a great deal of significance to the plot of the novel; but Coetzee has defined this very tenet.

If the fiction of Coetzee has marked a clear digression from the orthodox practices that have helped to shape the identity of this form of prose, the narrative techniques that he utilizes are also in keeping with this. Perhaps the most engaging feature that runs through the fiction of Coetzee is the re-working of earlier texts. It is not a simple writing, but a rather complicated re-writing to which Coetzee has applied himself diligently.

Coetzee's novels seem to re-work each other. Simultaneously, these works of fiction seem to carry a note of contemplation, while ruminating about the past. In doing so, together they form a fascinating collage. Perhaps Coetzee is trying to configure a single text that will cater to his requirements. This text will perhaps form the core of his novels, and each one of them will bear a different peripheral structure.

As a white South African writer, Coetzee is acutely aware that he speaks from a position of beneficiary of the apartheid regime, palpable in the string of anxious intellectuals that populate his novels. Coetzee tried to give voice to slaves and particularly to their desire for freedom is no doubt a courage and provocative act in contemporary South Africa. Nonetheless, *The Life and Times of Michael K*, remains rooted in racial stereotypes. Coetzee has avoided any direct reference to Michael K's colour, there are indirect references.

The novels of Coetzee produce an impression of moral intensity that is decidedly constant. A motif about how certain sensitivities are essential to moral understanding figures significantly in the novels of Coetzee. This motif, which depends on the wider conception of rationality, finds expression not only in the terms in which Coetzee presents his characters and tells his stories but also in the novels' narrative structures. For instance, some of the novels like *Disgrace*, *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace* unfold narratively in ways that to a great extent eliminate traces of an authorial standpoint, inviting readers to view their fictional worlds from the perspectives of morally compromised major characters.

Coetzee has revived the eighteenth and nineteenth century by imitating the different forms of personal literature like memoirs, letters and diaries. He has developed a fictional pact based on simulation. Indeed, Coetzee's revival of this genre in the era of deconstruction is also recognizable among some of his fictional contemporaries. However, Coetzee's fictions remain significant because of their artistry and because they transform urgent societal concerns into more enduring questions regarding colonialism and the relationships of mastery and servitude between cultures and individuals. Throughout his works, we have seen a wide range of interpretative projects attempted with different degrees of commitment and intention. These range from Eugene Dawn's deliberate cruelty in his oppressive rewriting of the Vietcong in *Dusklands*, to Susan Barton's misguided and selfish attempts to interpret the 'secret' of Friday in *Foe*. However, Coetzee never shows us the success or benefits of any of these attempts to interpret. Through their attempt at interpretation, his characters repeatedly abuse, exploit or just get it wrong.

Reading his novels, one can hardly escape the impression that Coetzee, in particular in his early fiction, is scrutinizing and inspecting radical forms of representing aggressiveness. It is as if he were testing the ways to circumvent and miss, but very narrowly, the risks that depictions of violence entail. Needless to say, his liminal strategies do not derive from his unawareness of the traps that such depiction set. Coetzee definitely has the courage to measure himself against the hazardous terrain and never tires of searching for the means to express his ideas and to detect aspects of violence inaccessible from other perspectives.

Coetzee's almost obsessive preoccupation with oppression is related to his South African origin, to his socio-cultural heritage and his situation in history. The political crises in South Africa with its history of colonialism and the apartheid regime, where racism was endemic in the system, have exerted an impact on his works and compelled him to write, in either straightforward or in allusive ways, about colonial violence. In his early works Coetzee does not overtly address the actual situation in South Africa and is not directly involved in the political strife, has making complexities the reception and assessment of his art and has drawn him in his home country into ideological polemic about writers' accountability. What readers read into the text when they interpret literature emanating from South Africa as a

representation of the socio-political situation of the nation, is a direct or indirect representation of reality. In Coetzee's *Foe* this is an indirect representation, whereas in the case of another of Coetzee's works, *Disgrace*, this can be seen as a direct representation. In either case, the story, characters, and events represented, are seen as reaction to or solution for the complex apartheid situation in South Africa. This is what is called an allegorical reading. In an allegory the represented characters and events are seen as a personification or representation of a deeper meaning. The tendency to read texts like this, is not hard to understand and depends for a large part on the necessity of a reader present. Without a reader prepared to interpret the text, the text would remain pretty meaningless. At the same time, a reader's interpretations depend on his historical and cultural context. Without a reader a text remains nothing more than paper ink. For a text to become more than that, a reader needs to read it and translate it into a narrative based on his or her discourse. This knowledge of reality helps the reader to understand the implications of the words written and construct a story. In this way the allegorical is an essential part of literature. Without it, we do not make sense of a text as a story or narrative of some kind.

In this recognition of the allegorical of literature, is a risk of over determination. A reader might be tempted to give too much weight to the context of the text in comparison to the text itself. Especially in cases of apparent direct representation, the reader is tempted to read the text into the given framework of socio-political circumstances. The allegory thus is a necessity in literature for the text to be read as a narrative. In some cases though, like literature emanating from a post-colonial society, the allegorical can get too much attention in an interpretation. In those cases, the artistic value of the text becomes obscured by its own possible relation to reality and is overshadowed by the political context of the text.

The colonized subject is simultaneously empowered with and incapacitated by a deafening silence constantly imposed on victim from without. This silence forced upon the victimized subject is but an evocative literary device Coetzee often uses to represent the overwhelming coercive force exerted against a group of people rendered powerless and impotent by the dominant ruling order. This trope of forced silence also reflects the institutionalized and rationalized violence inherent in the imperialist ideology of the western world. The people were divided along the lines of their races, ethnicities and tribes. The totalitarian laws in South Africa influenced the nature, quality and content of the literary production. The oppressive regime demanded from its subjects an unambiguous loyalty to the ruling ideology, which left the writers of the period with no less conscientious an option than a self-imposed silence about the harsh realities of the day.

2. Conclusion

Africa and its people have always been represented as the other of the western discourses and cultural texts. These cultural texts produced by the west tend to construct the African subjectivity in antithetical terms to the European subjects. The legacy of colonialism has left Africans with no option but to be party to perpetuation of self-deprecatory structures and modes of knowledge production. Of late, writers of African origin have begun to be suspicious and critical of the knowledge produced in metropolitan centers. The process of canonization that accords a considered recognition to literary texts, has been critiqued and deconstructed to be Eurocentric and patriarchal. As a result, the African has taken upon himself the responsibility of reshaping their cultural identity through self-representation.

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