



Available online at www.jlls.org

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTIC STUDIES

ISSN: 1305-578X

Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies, 17(4), 3217-3220; 2021

J. M. Coetzee And South African Writing: An Analysis

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.

APA Citation:

Harikrishnan, K., & Soundararajan, R. (2021). J. M. Coetzee And South African Writing: An Analysis, *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(4), 3217-3220.

Submission Date: 11/10/2021

Acceptance Date: 25/12/2021

Abstract

Much of Coetzee's writing reflects either directly or indirectly on current measures describing within South African society, though critics have cautioned against frank allegorical interpretations of his work. For Coetzee the post-colonial does not sign the formal breakdown of empire, but rather a new, and in many respects more treacherous phase of colonisation. Coetzee has fought writing straight works of fiction and non-fiction, favouring instead to work across classes and genres in ways that produce ontological and epistemological questions for his readers.

Keywords: South African Society, Post-colonial, Oppressed, Community.

1. Introduction

One of a number of youthful, rebellious literary expressions communicating against the apartheid administration in the 1970s and 1980s, Coetzee's typical prose was recognised early on as both expressive/indefinable and as politically crucial. His work has been associated positively with Nabokov, Kafka and Conrad, and by the time of established works such as *Foe* (1986) he had already attained international approval.

Much of Coetzee's writing reflects either directly or indirectly on current measures describing within South African society, though critics have cautioned against frank allegorical interpretations of his work. As the story of his recent Man Booker Prize-winning novel *Disgrace* (1999) establishes (with its meta-fictional essentials, its suspension in the present tense and its generation of critical vagueness) accuracy is somewhat Coetzee pursues to problematize rather than produce.

In Lurie's decrease from Romantic Professor to Professor of Communications we see the wider decrease of art and language to the dominion of the literal, the functional, and the practical. Within this new world academics have become, as Lurie goes on to put it 'clerks in a post-religious age'.

Email id : soundararajaneng@nct.ac.in.

The literary critic Derek Attridge argues that moments such as these notify the reader against decreasing *Disgrace* to an active political function. That to do so is to ignore crucial sections of the text that are hard to 'read off' as conventional messages or communication acts, such as the puzzling role of dogs and animals in the novel, or David's unfinished opera, or the significance of the central (but absent) rape scene in the novel.

When Lurie is disgraced by his university following an affair with a student, the professor retreats to his daughter's isolated smallholding. The personal differences between David and his daughter unfold against this backdrop as tensions rise within the recently emancipated local community. Coetzee's unforgiving vision of South Africa exposes the insecurities of a floundering, but still dominant white culture.

Disgrace lights two of the key concerns of Coetzee's work: the historical inspirations behind colonialism and its inheritances in the post-colonial era. For Coetzee the post-colonial does not sign the formal breakdown of empire, but rather a new, and in many respects more treacherous phase of colonisation. For example, his debut novel, *Dusklands* (1974) includes two novellas that suggest seemingly discrete historical events, one colonial and the other post-colonial, in a way that obviously asks us to reflect upon their relationship to one another and to present-day South Africa more commonly. The first handles America's part in Vietnam. The second is set 200 years earlier and emphasises on a Boer settler in the 1700s. The very different protagonists of these narratives: Eugene Dawn (an expert in psychological warfare) and Coetzee (an adventurer and pioneer), turn out to be involved in strikingly similar forms of oppression. It is this kind of connection between oppressors and oppressed in the second part of *Dusklands* that also structures one of Coetzee's most influential, worrying and fruitful works to date: *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). The novel, which is on one level an examination of the relationship between barbarity and culture, takes its title from a poem by the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy. Winning the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, the spare, razor sharp prose renowned in *Waiting for the Barbarians* has become a trademark of Coetzee's later fictions.

Set in an unspecified boundary, a desert landscape at unspecified point in time, the novel is an allegorical examination of the relationship between coloniser and colonised. The Magistrate, who is in charge of the frontier settlement, finds himself caught between the empire that pays him and the barbarians for whom he feels cumulative compassion. Through the disputed viewpoint of the Magistrate it becomes seeming that the barbarians are not simply a population 'out there' beyond the frontier occupied by the empire. The dreadful, barbaric violence that Colonel Joll deals out to an elderly barbarian and a young child in the opening pages works to draw into question the very difference between civilised and unrestrained. The barbarians, it would seem, lie at the heart of the very empire that builds them as other. *Waiting for the Barbarians* was followed by the brilliant Booker Prize winning *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983).

The allegorical concepts of Coetzee's *Barbarians* are exchanged here for a moving, close account of *Michael K* and his mother. The dilemma of these two characters, both of whom are physically incapacitated, gets worse as they find themselves without a safe home or income in a South Africa uncertain apart by civil war. A dream of a better life in the country inspires their choice to leave the city behind. Their twisting journey out of Cape Town (Michael pushes his mother in a wheelbarrow) offers little sign of freedom or escape. Michael's mum dies, along with the dream they shared, long before they reach the dreamed of destination. Like *Disgrace*, the novel arouses a rural departure, an idyllic setting that eventually fails to materialise and resolve the problems of the central character. (Escape, incidentally, is also the organising theme of Coetzee's most recent novel, *Youth: Scenes from Provincial Life II* (2002)). These are often bleak inflexible works of fiction in which determinations tend to replace solutions.

Coetzee's critically much-admired novel *Foe* hints a temporary leaving from the South African countryside. A short, important book, it reinvents the story of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* from within the city of London. Re-imagining a documented novel of British colonialism, it adopts and adapts a

distinct strategy within postcolonial fiction (including Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Morag Gunn's *Prospero's Child*), as it writes back to the culture of the coloniser. *Foe* is ultimately a tale about tale telling: the female narrator, Susan Barton, states her story in order to find an important person who will publish it. Yet for all its productivity and diversity of voice, *Foe* is most chiefly a novel about muteness, the silence of Friday, whose voice Coetzee refuses to signify. Through the silent centre of this text, Coetzee manages to expose the extent to which language, too, is a key device of colonisation. More recently, in work like *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), Coetzee signs his responsibility to other literary figures and customs particularly the work of Dostoevsky and *Crime and Punishment*. Coetzee's several inspirations can also be found within his critical writing, of which *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays 1986-1999* (2001) is an excellent recent example. Bringing together 29 essays, including pieces on T. S. Eliot, Defoe, Turgenev, Kafka, Rushdie, Gordimer and Lessing (not to mention an account of the 1995 Rugby World Cup) this collection is an important companion volume to Coetzee's earlier collection, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (1992).

If *Doubling the Point* and *Stranger Shores* help improve the characteristically inclined fictional work of a dreadfully secluded and earmarked writer, Coetzee's 'memoirs', *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2002), reassure even greater vision. Nevertheless, *Boyhood* picks to speak of the young Coetzee in the third person and its brief oblique narratives ('scenes', the subtitle tells us) aid to keep the reader at arm's length. Both *Boyhood* and *Youth* can be read either as novels or memoirs and their mixture of fiction and biography serves to frustrate any authoritative understanding of the author's formative years. Coetzee's genre-bending work continues in text like *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (2003), a book defined in *The Guardian* as 'non-non-fiction', and by David Lodge in *The New York Review of Books* as a work 'which begins like a cross between a campus novel and a Platonic dialogue, segues into considerate memoir and imaginary musing, and ends with a Kafkaesque bad dream of the next world.' Some of the so-called 'lessons' of *Elizabeth Costello* are in fact lectures Coetzee delivered at Princeton and published under the heading *The Lives of Animals* in 1999.

Coetzee's next novel, *Slow Man* (2005), acknowledged varied criticisms. It worries Paul Rayment, a 60 year old Australian who loses a leg after being hit by a car. Paul is cared for by a Croatian migrant until he declares his affection for her and she escapes. At this point (and this is the bit that dissatisfied some reviewers) the reader realises Paul is in fact a fictional character in the literary extravagant of *Elizabeth Costello* (the protagonist of *Elizabeth Costello*). The meta-fictional narrative that follows, in which the text examines and leaves various fictional capabilities for Paul, carries the reader closer than either *Boyhood* or *Youth* to the artistic deadlocks of Coetzee the artist. If Coetzee encourages his readers to recognise *Costello* as Coetzee's alter ego, his latest novel, *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), implies a more fundamental misunderstanding of the borderline between character and author. Its dominant figure is an aged author who shares Coetzee's personalises, has newly moved to Australia, and has even written some of the same books. The book takes the form of a series of essays on real subjects, from terrorism and Tony Blair to Tolstoy. But this is not a simply a collection of essays and the books protagonist is not (quite) Coetzee. Since the publication of *Disgrace* in the late 1990s, Coetzee has fought writing straight works of fiction and non-fiction, favouring instead to work across classes and genres in ways that produce ontological and epistemological questions for his readers.

2. Conclusion

Sometimes it is hard to distinct Coetzee's characters from his authenticity. His life and literature are a cheerful testament of the refusal of oppression, prejudice and oppressive governments. His novels discloses human confusion, weakness, evil and flaws and have allowed him to take a noticeable place in literature and become one of the greatest novelists in the world.

References

Attwell, David. J. M Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press. 2004.

Coetzee, J. M. *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. Connecticut: New haven, 1988.

---. "Daniel Defoe, Robinson Crusoe." *Stranger Shores: Essays, 1986-1999*. London: Vintage, 2002.

---. *Age of Iron*. London: Harvill Secker, 1990.

---. *Disgrace*. New York: Penguin Books Ltd, 2000.

---. *Dusklands*. London: Vintage Books, 2004.

---. *Foe*. London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1983.

---. *In the Heart of the Country*. London: Vintage, 1999.