

POST-COLONIALISM IN THE NOVELS OF J M COETZEE

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Abstract

J M Coetzee's writings cover a range of various contemporary issues like modernist legacy, identity, the question of censorship, etc. The important one of these features is post-colonialism. Intellectually, he is a writer associated with the field of post-colonial writing and the context of his novels characterises him as a post colonial writer. Most of his novels are set in colonial period. He was a close witness to the oppressions of the weaker section of South African society. Through his novels he portrayed this oppression and the complex relationship between the colonised and the colonisers. This complex relationship of powerful and powerless is extensively treated in his fiction writing. Coetzee presents a picture of colonial trauma very remarkably. His characters, setting communicate the universal struggle between colonisers and the colonised or the oppressors and the oppressed.

Keywords: *J M Coetzee, Post-colonialism, Foe*

Introduction

J. M. Coetzee, a 2003 Nobel Laureate, has been recognised as a writer of genuine qualities in the present era. He has been a close witness to the history of rise and fall of apartheid in South Africa. In fact, Coetzee has devoted most of his literary creation for the expression of resistance against the established but unlawful system of racial segregation. The cruelties and oppression of society which he had witnessed are reflected in his works which strongly oppose and attack racial segregation. Apart from portrayal of racial segregation, Coetzee's genius is evident through other features which his novels exhibit commendably. His writings cover a range of various contemporary issues like modernist legacy, identity, the question of censorship, etc. The important one of these features is post-colonialism. Intellectually, he is a writer associated with the field of post-colonial writing and the context of his novels characterises him as a post colonial writer.

The present paper studies selected novels of Coetzee to trace how Coetzee has dealt with post-colonialism. The paper also discusses the term post-colonial and post-colonialism as well. This is an attempt to throw a light on post-colonialism in the works of J M Coetzee.

Post-colonialism and Post-colonial literature

Post-colonialism is a derivative of 'postcolonial'. Oxford English Dictionary defines the term 'postcolonial' as 'occurring or existing after the end of colonial rule'. The term 'postcolonial' was originally used by historians to describe the period after colonialism. Following this, post-colonialism is taken roughly to mean the period of time after colonialism. Colonialism is a political domination of weak countries in which cultural and economic issues are imposed on the colonised people. European colonial powers exploited the colonised economically and culturally by destroying their culture and traditions. Colonialism as stated by Bill Ashcroft **"is the system by which dominant groups in society constitute the field of truth by imposing specific knowledge, disciplines and values, upon dominated groups"** (Ashcroft et al., 2000: 42) However, the term post colonialism has many implications, and it becomes necessary to discuss its plural nature, as it does not simply refer to the period after the colonial age. While defining this term, Ania Loomba makes an assertion about the prefix 'post'. She says,

"Post implies an 'aftermath' in two senses- temporal, as in coming after, and ideological, as in supplanting." (12)

It means that post colonialism or coming after colonial period is also an ideology that takes place of colonialism. On one hand, post colonialism signifies an intellectual direction referring to the time after colonialism that exist since around middle of the 20th century, and was shaped as colonial countries became independent. On the other hand, it appears in the context of decolonization which attempts to shake off and remove the colonial impact from culture, religion, literature, etc. taking into consideration the colonial time as well as the time after colonialism. As a term, post-colonialism **"has subsequently been widely used to signify the political, linguistic, and cultural experience of societies that were former European colonies"** (Ashcroft et al., 2000: 186) In fact, the ultimate goal of post-colonialism is accounting for and combating the residual effects of colonialism on cultures.

In context of literature, post-colonialism is a literary critic to text that carry racist or colonial undertones with a particular focus on the racial 'discourse' tracing how it helped and influenced to shape the concept of European racial superiority. The works normally studied under the heading of post-colonial literature are viewed critically by applying the postcolonial theory which stresses race, class and cultural oppression.

In the same direction, postcolonial literature suggests the body of literature that reacts to the discourses of colonization and involves writings that deal with the issue of decolonization. In other terms, postcolonial literature is writing which has been **"affected by**

imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day". (Ashcroft et al., 1989:

2) It also covers the literature produced in countries that once were colonies of other countries. It also deals with literature written by citizens of once colonial countries that portrays colonized people as its subject matter.

Post-colonialism in the novels of J M Coetzee

J M Coetzee is one of the best known South African writers. It is believed that with the publication of *Dusklands* in 1974 began a new era in South African literature. Most of his novels are set in colonial period. He was a close witness to the oppressions of the weaker section of South African society. Through his novels he portrayed this oppression and the complex relationship between the colonised and the colonisers. This complex relationship of powerful and powerless is extensively treated in his fiction writing. This is noteworthy that most of the protagonists of his novels belong to white dominant coloniser class. Even the author J M Coetzee is a descendant of a Dutch settler family. But his temperament gave a positive angle towards the colonialism, and colonisation and coercion. His writing belong to a unique province of post-colonial literature i.e. literature of post-colonisers. Albert Memmi coined a phrase '**the coloniser who refuses**' (2003: 63), can aptly be applied to J M Coetzee. This issue is explained well enough by Stephan Watson in his essay 'Colonialism and the Novels of J M Coetzee' (1996). Watson remarks, "**The one fact most important for an understanding of the apparent anomalies in his work is that he is not only a coloniser who is an intellectual, but a coloniser who does not want to be a coloniser.**" (1996: 22) This is suggestive of the fact, which could be traced out from Coetzee's novels, that Coetzee, though belongs to white coloniser class, does not actually want to be a coloniser. All of his white protagonists want to refuse their role, though not active, in colonisation, and desperately affords to escape from the identity of colonisers. Stephen Watson, in this sense, records, "**With the exception of Jacobus Coetzee, who is determined to play out his role to the bitter end and Michael K as well, all Coetzee's major protagonists are colonisers who wish to elude at almost any cost their historical role as colonisers.**" (1996: 22) Coetzee's main concern is an opposition to oppression and the oppressors.

Foe (1986) is the best example of Coetzee's treatment of post-colonialism. In fact, he has given a post-colonial turn to the story of past years' classic 'Robinson Crusoe' (1719) written by Daniel Defoe. *Crusoe* was written during the span of expansion of European colonies, and as such, written from colonial point of view. The story of Crusoe is told from the perspective of European colonial expansion. Coetzee, showing his clear stand against colonialism, turned the story and retold it from post colonial perspective. He kept the two characters -Cruso and Friday- unchanged from the old story and added another two important characters viz. Susan Barton and

Mr. Foe. The inclusion of female character, Susan, has a particular significance as it stands as a counter to the male centered world of Cruso. *Foe* is a story of a castaway woman who happens to land on the island already inhabited by Cruso and his black, speechless attendant Friday. They all take their return journey. But Cruso dies midway. Susan manages to reach the home. At home, she wants to write a story of her adventures. But she thinks (or probably compelled to think) that being a woman she lacks the qualities of a writer. She says, **“To tell the truth in all its substance you must have quiet, and a comfortable chair away from all distraction, and a window to stare through; and then the knack of seeing waves when there are fields before your eyes, and of feeling the tropic sun when it is cold; and at your fingertips the words with which to capture the vision before it fades. I have none of these, while you have all.”** (Coetzee, 89) She entrusts the task to an author Mr. Foe. *Foe* is essentially a story about writing, being and represented. Mr. Foe writes Susan’s story according to his will and inclinations, thus silencing the true ‘voice’ of Susan and making her ‘other’ on the basis of gender. Friday, on the other hand, is another victim of colonialism who was also silenced. Susan and Friday are two symbols of marginalisation and otherness. In short, *Foe* shows how literary representation plays a pivotal role in forming and formulating colonial ideas and ideals. Both Susan and Friday are victims of this form of colonialism which is entailed through literary representation. By retelling the story from Susan’s perspective and by raising the themes of power struggle and problem of language, Coetzee, thus, provides voice to the voiceless and oppressed.

Life and Times of Michael K (1983) is perhaps the only novel which has a colonial ‘other’ as a protagonist. Michael K, the protagonist, is a very simple man. He has deformed face with harelip and uneven nostril. The story is divided into three chapters. The first and the third chapter have an unspecified narrator while the second chapter is narrated by a Medical Officer in Kenilworth. The story opens with the birth of Michael K which sets the course of his suffering life as it would be in coming years. The description of his facial deformity is suggestive in this sense. **“The first thing the midwife noticed about Michael K when she helped him out of his mother in to the world was that he had a harelip. The lip curled like a snail’s foot, the left nostril gaped”** (Coetzee, 2004: 3). This is a story of human suffering in general and of suffering of Michael K who is, as described by the Medical Officer, an ordinary, slow-witted man, who is not able to express his own feelings and emotions. Coetzee portrays the protagonist with continuous and unconscious quest for freedom and identity. The Medical officer, the coloniser who refuses, tries to become the vice of Michael K.

Coetzee's third novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), throws a dazzling light on how colonial power creates the concept of other to acquire dominance over powerless. The title of this novel is taken from a poem of same title written by the Greek poet Constantine P. Cavafy. The plot is set in an imaginary empire in an unspecified geographical location. The story is told from the perspective of a Magistrate. The Magistrate presents the binary model of self and other as well. 'Self' in the sense that he belongs to white race, and 'other' in the sense that he falls victim to the oppression of the Empire, is imprisoned and tortured. The novel begins with the arrival of Colonel Joll who declares the superiority of the Empire. Colonel Joll threatens the people of the town of the attack from the barbarians. As the story furthers, it comes to the fore that the barbarians are non-existent. The fact that the existence of barbarians, as feared by Joll, is fairly vague shows how the Empire (colonial power) is persistently attempts at creating the myth of 'other'. The plot depicts the issues of coloniser and colonised recurrently.

Though the barbarians do not exist, the natives are tortured and exploited bitterly. Tortured and exploited, they lose their individual identity. They even lose their capacity to voice their suppression and sufferings.

Through the character of the Magistrate, Coetzee again portrays 'the coloniser who refuses'. It is shown that the Magistrate demonstrates great contempt towards Colonel Joll and the Empire or colonial power in general. Moreover, he decides to take the barbarian girl, another victim in the story, to her home. As an act to refuse to be a coloniser he does return the girl to her people. However, by doing this, he falls victim to the tortures of the Empire. The plot is full of violence, oppression the colonial power inflicts on the colonised as a process of erasing the existence of the natives. Commenting on the plot, Wang Jinghui remarks, "**Waiting for the Barbarians is a post-colonial journey back to South Africa, and at the same time, is also a post-colonial journey around the world.**" (2008: 66) Coetzee presents a picture of colonial trauma very remarkably.

Conclusion

J. M. Coetzee, through his novels presents a picture of relationship between the two sides of the binary model of self and other or the colonised and the colonisers. He vehemently attacks on the western hegemonic, racist, and prejudiced views. Through his (re)presentation, Coetzee succeeds in showing the conflict between colonised and the colonisers. The coloniser always considers since he is seat of absolute and dominant power thus depicting him as idolized and idealised before the colonised who suffers from the identity crisis, degradation and alienation. Characters created by Coetzee, though sometimes not explicitly placed in South African setting, are parts of South Africa. The events somehow take us to South Africa. Moreover, his

characters, setting communicate the universal struggle between colonisers and the colonised or the oppressors and the oppressed. Thorough the above study, it becomes clear that Coetzee's main task is to oppose oppressors or colonisers. Most of the central characters portrayed by Coetzee belong to white dominant society. However, they do want to refuel this identity of theirs. Through all the plots of the novel under consideration, the protagonists are shown making desperate attempts to flee from this unendurable burden. The Magistrate, Magda, Dawn and the Medical Officer in Kenilworth-all show an urge to escape from all acts of torture and exploitation.

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