

**Memory and Trauma:
Reconstruction of History in the Novels of
J.M. Coetzee and M.G. Vassanji**

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Abstract

Colonialism for Africans is not an event encapsulated in the past, but is a history whose far reaching impact and traumatic consequences are still actively affecting today's political, historical, cultural and artistic phenomena. Exploring history which brought existential deviation and rupture on Africans through the twin matrix of memory and trauma has become the major area of concern of African writers like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, Steve Biko, Wole Soyinka, Amos Tutuols, J. M. Coetzee, M. G Vassanji, Mandla Langa, etc. The choice for these writers is not whether or not to have a past, but rather ----what kind of past shall one have, and what shall be recollected and what shall be forgotten. This paper examines J. M. Coetzee's *Dusklands* (1974), and M. G. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* (1989) in the light of new historicism and psychoanalysis to expose the traumatic history of apartheid, the post- apartheid aftermath, metafictional experiments in African fiction, gender and identity and imprisonment narratives.

Keywords: Coetzee, Vassanji, Colonialism, Rupture, Trauma, Amnesia, Spiritual liberation, Politics of identity, National consciousness, Counter memory, Diaspora, Psychoanalysis, Postmodernism, Deconstruction.

Memory of Colonialism

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it (Fanon 169).

Frantz Fanon's critical discourses aroused a significant insight to reinvent and reconstruct the African history in the light of colonialism which brought an existential deviation and rupture on

Africa. Colonialism for Africans is not an event encapsulated in the past, but is a history whose far reaching impact and traumatic consequences are still actively affecting today's political, historical, cultural and artistic phenomena. The 'subjugated histories', as Michel Foucault has termed, has to be documented first before providing visions of a new future. In a similar context, the *South African Freedom Charter* declares that **our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting**. Exploring history through the twin matrix of memory and trauma has become the major area of concern of African writers like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, Steve Biko, Wole Soyinka, Amos Tutuols, J. M. Coetzee, M. G Vassanji, Mandla Langa, etc. The choice for these writers is not whether or not to have a past, but rather ----what kind of past shall one have, and what shall be recollected and what shall be forgotten.

Demystifying Effect of Memory

Memory has a demystifying effect if used in a proper order. Memory and past, when interlinked together, provide a politics of identity which plays significantly in the construction of national identity. Its representation in African literary discourses clearly marks the need for a spiritual liberation of African nations from the traumatic effect of colonialism. In this regard, Psychoanalysis, partly a hermeneutics of memory, provides a healing to this traumatic rupturing. The provenance of trauma theory and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) have been practiced by leading psychiatrics like Freud, Breuer, Janet, Jung, etc. for a long time. Freud talked about the "talking cure", and "traumatised individual's story must be heard", (Freud 155) because it's the only way to "unblock" his past neurosis. His "Trauma indicates a shattering break.....in experience which has belated effects. Writing trauma would be one of those telling after-effects" (LaCapra 186). Breaking the "white mythology" (Young 1) African writers, today, are applying memory and trauma to demonstrate the aftermath of colonialism at one side and to provide a strong foundation for future at another. Postcolonial writings, therefore, have changed not only our ideas about history but also challenged the prevailing assumptions of postmodernism itself.

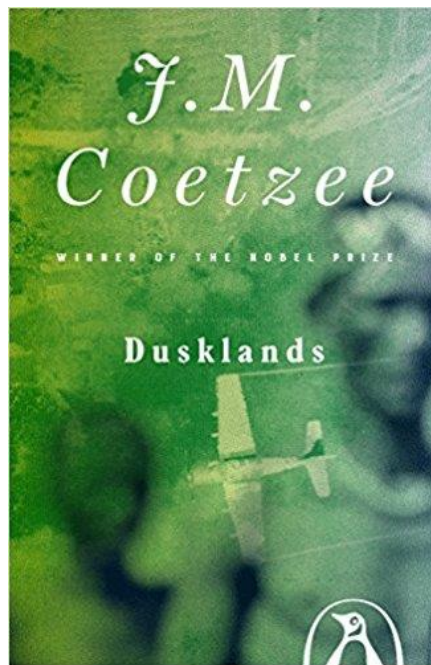
J.M. Coetzee

J.M. Coetzee's writing is indicative of exactly this challenge of raising consciousness about the effective roles of history and colonisation. He articulates more poignantly the widespread feeling among writers, cultural theorists and artists in general that, "History remains a deeply contentious subject in South Africa. The struggle for the right to make up the story of the country is

by no means over“(Coetzee 352). The testimony of the oppressed through narratives of memory and trauma is the most vital condition for the emergence of a new national consciousness, argues Njabulo Ndebele:

Time has given the recall of memory the power of reflection associated with narrative. Isn't it that there is something inherently reflective about memory as there is about narrative? If so, narratives of memory, in which real events are recalled, stand to guarantee us occasions for some serious moments of reflection (Ndebele 1998:20).

Coetzee, like Haden White, believes in a 'narrativised past', a past that cannot be corrected. It is the writers' unequivocal role to act as spokesperson for a community's way of making sense of its social life. Keeping this in view, since the very beginning of his career, Coetzee is engaged in a complex and agonising recasting of the relation between public and private spheres through his literary discourse. His debut work, *The Dusklands* (1974) is a *tour de force*. It is an allegorical representation of history which has challenged the prevailing assumptions of postmodernism itself. Like all other literary works of Coetzee, *The Dusklands* is a site of extraordinary vitality, energy and dynamism, grappling with issues concerning the ethics of presentation, meditation, and dissemination of 'History', all within a confrontation and engagement with multiple languages and cultures.



The Dusklands

Consisting of two different stories entitled, “The Vietnam Project” and “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee”, *The Dusklands* carries “a gut-punching message. Its message about war, about

mythology, about genocide, about ethnicity, about colonialism, about love.....and the message is certainly no less relevant today than it was in 1974” (Levi Fisher 1). The first narrative, “The Vietnam Project”, portrays a brilliant desk worker Eugene Dawn who works for U. S. government agency responsible for Vietnam War. He is preparing a special report on propaganda in reference to the war in Vietnam yet under the suspicion of rejection from his supervisor named Coetzee; he is in a state of psychological dilemma. His scepticism is clearly marked in his saying:

He is going to reject me. He fears vision, has no sympathy for passion or despair. Power speaks only to power. Sentences are queuing behind his neat red lips. I will be dismissed, and dismissed according to form.

(Coetzee 3)

When presented, Coetzee praises Dawn’s writing skill and yet suggested some changes to be made in the report. Not only this, he explains to Eugene that the report is for the military, which is made up of people who are “slow thinking, suspicious, and conservative” (Coetzee 3). Under the supervision of Coetzee, depressed and disheartened Eugene rewrites his report in the basement of the library where he researches topics related to the culture of Vietnam, “Mythography” and propaganda techniques used by US forces which succeeded in some places and failed at some places in North Vietnam. Dawn’s search for books on Vietnam’s culture is symbolic of a ‘chora’, or ‘the symbolic flux’, as Kristeva argues, which gives him “an intellectual happiness” (Coetzee 64) about which he told to Harry, the library clerk. Eugene Dawn recollects his home and tells Harry about his wife and marital life. He blames his wife and calls his son as only her child. Sometimes he doubts his wife and spy on her when she does not pick his call because for him:

She is a conformist who hoped to marry in me her twin. But I have never in my heart been a conformist..... this is because she has a false conception of America. She cannot believe that America is big enough to contain its deviants. But America is bigger than all of us:America will swallow me, digest me, dissolve me in the tides of its blood (Coetzee 9) .

Yet he feels himself addicted to marriage which is a “surer bond than love” (Coetzee11). Even if she would be an unfaithful, she is so much dearer to him. The thought that if strangers praise her she must be valuable makes him assured of this addiction.

Dawn carries some photographs taken in Vietnam, which exhibit the horror and trauma faced by people of Vietnam during war. The torture of Vietnamese in the hand of US military forces was extreme. However, his effort of rewriting the report tolls heavy upon the psyche of Eugene Down though he is a psychologist and a specialist in relation himself. Though his wife had a hope earlier that his “psychic brutalization will end with the end of war and the Vietnam Project,” (Coetzee 10) he not only became insane but also killed his own son in an attempt to search “Father’s voice” (Coetzee 21). His search of ideological state apparatus has brought him in asylum at the end of the story.

The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee

The second part of the book entitled “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee,” in a continuation of the first one, is a tale of horror set in the early 18th century. Here, the Dutch farmer named Jacobus Coetzee enters into then “unexplored” interior of South Africa for a hunting expedition with some loyal slaves. However, he suddenly falls ill and was attended by the native tribes named Namaqua with whom he got into a fight after recovery. Even some of his own men turned against him. Enraged Coetzee returns back alone only to start a punitive expedition against Namaqua tribes and even against his own men in a form of murder rampage which reminds us of atrocities committed by US soldiers in the villages of Vietnam.

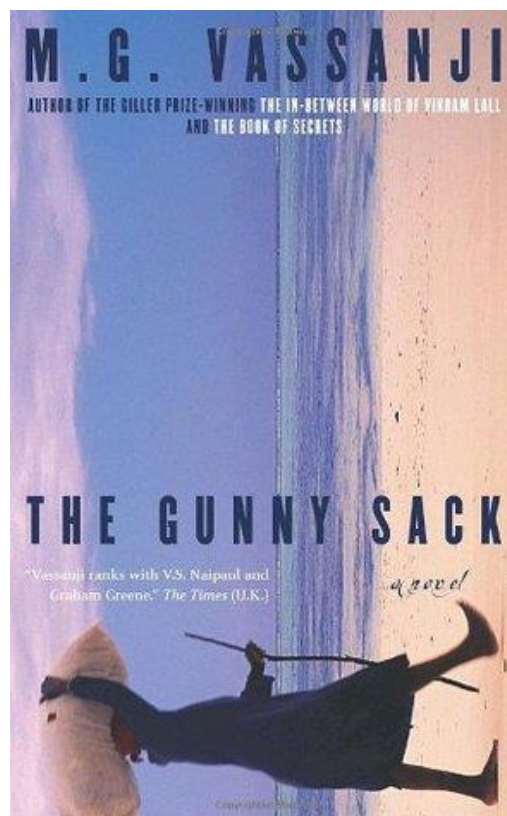
Throughout both texts familiar J. M. Coetzee themes abound. The concept of fatherhood is deconstructed, sexual anxiety runs amok. Coetzee’s main concern in *The Dusklands* is to overt the power of social and ideological structures. Lust of power, real or perceived supremacy, inherent or artificial authority, dominates both the novellas with thought provoking question: “What did the deaths of all these people achieve?” (Coetzee 106)

In an interview, Coetzee said that he was inclined to see the South African situation (today) as only one manifestation of a wider historical situation to do with colonialism, late colonialism, neo-colonialism (Watson 23-24). Invoking the past and memory is one strategy for dealing with the

amnesia-inducing colonialist politics, and the traumatic repetition of cultural rupture and historical loss. Any argument that post modernism signals a forgetting of colonial trauma can be made only because the postmodern is not adequately historicised. Coetzee forces one to be aware of the discontinuities, differences, dispersals and otherness in African literary pasts in the face of any totalising closure of historiographic forces (Wood 254).

M. G. Vassanji

Within the context of Africa, postmodernism is not the ‘cultural logic of late capitalism’ that it may be in the West. Rather, postmodern literary discourses provide an opportunity to challenge the dominant assumptions of western (post)colonial historiography through the portrayal of memory and history. It can easily be traced in M. G. Vassanji’s novels, especially *The Gunny Sack* (1989), *The Book of Secrets* (1994) and his recent *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003). Narrating “the crazy dance of history” (Vassanji10), these novels explore the foundations, developments and repercussions of historical dispossession and Diaspora of a community.



The Gunny Sack, a memory text, is a fabricated saga of a family/community which has played a vital role in the foundation of East Africa. Recounting the themes of migration, border-crossing,

hybrid culture and identities Vassanji has brought to the fore, in cogent fashion, not just the social and cultural life of generations of African/Asian, but their art form. As a repository of collective memory and history, the novel has become the spokesperson of entire community of African Asians.

Salim Juma Huseni (nicknamed Kala), a Tanzanian Asian and the great grandson of an African slave, inherits a gunny sack upon the death of his great grand aunt. The sack named Shehrbanoo and nicknamed 'Shehru', documents a list of characters linked to Indian and African settlement in East Africa; and becomes a symbolic of the significance of memory. Kala remembers that Ji Bai would say that this old sack is real memory which nobody has any use of:

Stroking the sagging brown shape with affection she would drag it closure, to sit at her feet like a favourite child. She would plunge her hand through the gaping hole of a mouth, and she would rummage inside. Now you feel this thing here, you fondle that one, you bring out this naughty little nut and everything else in it rearranges itself (Vassanji 63).

Kala is asked by his schoolteacher, in the beginning, "where do you come from?" and later he is suggested to "Begin at the beginning"(6). Kala's great difficulty is to begin from the very beginning. The novel offers a backward journey of Kala through a stream of consciousness technique. In many respects an African *Midnight's Children*, the narrative in *The Gunny Sack* is partly an attempt by the narrator to organise all those fleeting memories into a pattern that has meaning through oral technique of storytelling. In such an attempt Kala takes a painful psychological journey back tracing the generations of his ancestors. Yet, eventually it gets to the point of resisting the pull of history for a more forward, optimistic outlook.

The running must stop now, Amina. The cycle of escape and rebirth, uprooting and regeneration, must cease in me. Let this be the last runaway, returned, with one last, quixotic dream. Yes, perhaps here lies redemption, a faith in the future; even if it means for now to embrace the banal present, to pick up the pieces of our wounded selves, our wounded dreams, and pretend they're still intact, without splints, because from our wounded selves flowers still grow (Vassanji183).

Presentation of Past

History is intimately tied up with reconstruction in most of Vassanji's works yet his presentation of past is never crystal clear, "the past in (*The Gunny Sack*) is deliberately murky to

some degree. I did not see, nor wanted to give the impression of, a simple, linear, historical truth emerging. Not all of the mysteries of the past are resolved in the book. That is deliberate. It's the only way" (Kanaganayakam 22). As Kala notes memory is always a manifold complex, "I stopped to examine the collective memory- this spongy disconnected, often incoherent accretion of stories over generations"(Vassanji66).

In this novel, personal histories explained through memories are juxtaposed with the contemporary, reminding us that, after all, remembering is something done *now*, not *then*. What Kala discovers is that the "forces of history are not controlled by destiny or regulative mechanism but respond to haphazard conflict"(Foucault 25). Kala realises that he is the bearer of multiple subjectivities which must be articulated and at the same time documented as a form of history. *The Gunny Sack* is, thus, dominated by the issue of subjectivity in terms of Asian African community and their collective effort to uplift Tanzania. While talking about national development and cultural identity Vassanji demonstrates that global truths are of little use in describing non-European strategies for self-determination. Universalist determination is pointless. Yet what is of value is understanding local, temporary 'truths'.

J.M. Coetzee and M.G. Vassanji

J.M. Coetzee and M.G. Vassanji, both, are, currently, redrawing a site of extraordinary vitality, energy and dynamism in their literary discourses to raise the issues concerning ethics of presentation, the inheritance, dissemination of history and cultures. It is the responsibility of thinkers, writers and theorists, regards Homi Bhabha, to contest history's authoritarian tendencies. "Deconstruction involves the decentralization and decolonization of European thought"(Young 18). The notion of "counter-memory" (Foucault 160), deconstruction and demystification of history have totally changed the postcolonial literary discourses in Africa. Novels like, *Dusklands* and *The Gunny Sack* address the past not as a set of collected facts but as something problematic. Both writers are discarding western historical records to foreground their own national history and identity, in response to what Wole Soyinka has said in a lecture delivered at Howard University, "A people who do not preserve their memory, are a people who have forfeited their history,"(Soyinka10) through their literary discourses.

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