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Engaging History through Postmodern Strategies - Coetzee's Fiction in Context

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John Maxwell Coetzee

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Castigating Instance of Postcolonial Literature

Postcolonial literature assumes not only an interrogative and castigating stance to the colonial practices of domination and exploitation but also explodes and explicates the means through which such enterprises are set in motion. In its attempt to provide a scathing attack of the exploitative strategies of the imperialistic Empire, postcolonial literature not only exposes the hidden agenda of colonialism but also generates many forms of narrative/linguistic strategies through the process of abrogation, appropriation and modification.

Re-writing Hegemonic Discourses

Taking recourse to a number of such indigenous narrative strategies, postcolonial literature attempts to counter, deconstruct and re-write the dominant hegemonic discourses. Writing from the postcolonial perspective, writers take recourse to a number of strategies like folklore, myths, orature, proverbs, local legends, etc., in their counter-narratives. The attempt to incorporate these indigenous or native structural patterns/features in their narratives is “a conscious attempt to move away from European styles and influences” (Pramod K Nayar, 2008: 222) and thus to develop an indigenous political position.

Writers from different erstwhile colonies of Asia and Africa, as a result, make an extensive use of such strategies in their writings to provide an alternative version of the European discourses of denigration and exploitation.

Africa’s Postcolonial Literature

In the African context all this becomes evident from the very first generation of postcolonial writers in English. Beginning with Amos Tutuola the list would go on to

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include novelists like Chinua Achebe, Gabriel Okara, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong’O and Ben Okri.

All these writers have in one way or the other experimented with their indigenous narrative and stylistic tools and succeeded in grafting them onto the western novel. The experimentation which among other things included the appropriation and modification of the western form through a process of indigenization was not simply to adapt the form to carry the peculiar African socio-cultural experiences, but a means of “interrogating and undermining the monologic control of the Western forms”(Pramod K Nayar, 2008: 229).

Thus, the experimentation was not only technical but also a political move. By taking recourse to the indigenous content and form, the African novelists not only revived their rich cultural heritage but also began to counter the European discourses about Africa. The attempt at experimentation was, in a way, a step towards “decolonizing the mind” from the complexes of denigration and vilification.

The experiment with linguistic devices and other narrative strategies did not, however, confine itself only to the application of such literary devices as folklore, myths and proverbs but became even more complex, radical and experimental with those writers who come under the sway of postmodernist theories. For example, Buchi Emecheta, Ben Okri, Bessie Head, J M Coetzee, and others who play with the form of the novel.

The experimental fervour remains confined not only to writers from such postcolonial societies as East Africa and West Africa but made itself evident in “South African English Literature” as well. (By “South African English Literature” is meant the literature originally produced in English by both black and white South African writers. Oral literature and translations from the indigenous languages into English are excluded). There are, however, degrees of variation in their experimental approach towards English language.

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Approaches Toward English Language

In the post-colonial societies where English language has been looked upon as an intruder and a colonizing language, its “abrogation” and “appropriation” at the hands of the postcolonial writers became necessary to manifest a political move.

Situation in South Africa

In the context of South Africa, however, the case is different owing to the position and history of English language. It is seen less as a colonizers’ language than Afrikaans. During the period of apartheid (1948-1994) Afrikaans shielded English language from the stigma of being a colonizer’s language since apartheid was enforced in Afrikaans.

In contrast to Afrikaans which was the language of the authoritarian regime, English was “seen as a neutral language of liberation and black unity” and was “chosen as language of communication by the ANC and other black liberation organizations during the struggle” (Phil Van Schalkwyk, 2006:10).

The socio-political and historical reality of South Africa, especially during the apartheid era, was instrumental in shaping every aspect of the life of South Africans including their literature. The historical reality led to the creation and maintenance of fragmented life-structures which in turn created different worldviews and sensibilities. As a result, comprehensible and inevitable differences between the two strands – “black writing” and “white writing” – of South African English Literature are quite discernible. Nevertheless, the concerns of South African writers with the monolithic issue (apartheid) of their history remained a consistent and constant concern.

All South African writers, black and white, condemn the absurd and virulent policies they were forced to live in. In fact, it was expected from them “to write about the one

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monolithic issue..., namely racial injustice” (Phil Van Schalkwyk, 2006: 11) and as a result we come across explicit variations in their approach to this issue. As opposed to the vibrant, defiant and celebratory tone of the black writers, the white writers focus on individual dignity and liberty. The difference in approach is also manifested in the contrasting tones and styles of writers of the two races. Whereas the black writers prefer a pungent and realistic description of the oppression inflicted upon them, the white writers take recourse to an oblique and a variety of subtle devices to explore and analyse the absurdity of the system (John F Povey, www.questia.com).

Coetzee on Socio-political Dilemmas

J M Coetzee, one of the seminal exponents of white English writing in South Africa, also engages in highlighting the socio-political dilemmas of his country. His desire for racial harmony in order to achieve a racially harmonious society places him within the circle of other white South African writers like André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, Nadine Gordimer, and others. However, Coetzee’s approach to the subject and the techniques through which he renders his themes mark him different from the rest. His “fiction remains unmatched in South Africa for its multivalence, formal inventiveness, and virtuoso self-interrogation of narrative production and authority” (David Attwell, 1998: 166).

Distinct Approach of Coetzee to Dilemmas of South African Society

Coetzee’s approach to the dilemmas of South African society, fractured and dislocated by the malevolent policy of apartheid as if moving towards a general holocaust, is different from both his black and white fellow South African writers. And, no doubt, his approach to interrogate and highlight the crucial issues of his society has won him more detractors than defenders; it has its own vivacity and stands quite idiosyncratic. His engagement

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with the problematic issues besetting South African society is a committed one although different from writers like Nadine Gordimer, André Brink, Alan Paton and Athol Fugard.

Coetzee's method seems "to be less straightforward, more ambiguous" (Robert M Post, www.questia.com) in comparison to these writers who portray the South African socio-political vicissitudes realistically. "[I]n South Africa, life under apartheid seems to demand a realistic documentation of oppression" (David Attwell, 1993: 11) and white South African writers have taken recourse to various modes of realism to present a realistic picture of socio-political oppression.

Coetzee, however, could hardly be identified with such a group of writers. Nor could he squarely fit into the Movement (Black Consciousness) represented by writers whose "position was one of self-recovery and self-affirmation in response to the negations of racism" (David Attwell, 1993: 28).

This does not, however, mean that Coetzee avoids engagement with the socio-political scenario of apartheid South Africa. To "a number of South African critics, particularly belonging" to the Left wing politics, Coetzee's "aestheticism" might seem "politically irresponsible, or simply irrelevant," (Graham Huggan, 1996: 3) or he might not "strike one primarily as an 'anti-apartheid' writer" (Graham Huggan, 1996: 4) for not portraying a pure and violent confrontation between colonizer and the colonized, but this does not amount to his being irresponsible and blind to the oppressive colonial issues for which apartheid has been responsible.

Coetzee's Experimentation with Language and Linguistic Theory

It was largely due to Coetzee's experimentation with language and linguistic theory that Marxist critics were confounded by Coetzee's work and considered it insufficiently engaged and therefore not useful to the people of South Africa. Although Coetzee's work

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might not seem to qualify as a “literature of protest,” it is very much grounded in protest – a protest that has to do with colonialism in its myriad manifestations, in its interrogation, castigation and deconstruction.

Not Interested in Conventional Realism

Those critical opinions that raise doubts/questions regarding Coetzee’s engagement and commitment to socio-political reality of South Africa are rooted in the conventional technique of the realistic portrayal of South Africa. The expectations of those readers who believe Coetzee’s works to be photographic representations of South African socio-political reality are shattered as Coetzee betrays his lack of interest in a mode of realism that one expects from a historian’s pen.

Coetzee confesses, in an interview with Tony Morphet, “I don’t have much interest in, or can’t seriously engage myself with, the kind of realism that takes pride in copying the ‘real’ world” (Michela Canepari – Labib, 2005: 25). Coetzee’s non-realistic orientation is not a means of political and ethical escape or, turning away from history which is simply impossible. He betrays his lack of interest in a mode of realism that endeavours to establish itself as a historical discourse/representation simply because he holds a different view of history that is deeply influenced and shaped by deconstruction.

Varying Focus of Approaches to Realism

Viewing the difference between the nature of two discourses: the discourse of history and the discourse of fiction, Coetzee in “The Fiction Today” contends:

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[H]istory is not reality; that history is a kind of discourse; that a novel is a kind of discourse, too, but a different kind of discourse; that, inevitably, in our culture, history will, with varying degrees of forcefulness, *try to claim primacy, claim to be a master-form of discourse* (emphasis added), just as, inevitably, people like myself will defend themselves by saying that history is nothing but a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other (David Attwell, 1993: 16).

History is not an *a priori* Truth

It is obvious that Coetzee rejects to take history as a priori truth. His narrative discourse, however, is not intended to eschew history as a whole, but to evade a history that will, “with varying degrees of forcefulness, try to claim primacy, claim to be a master-form of discourse” (David Attwell, 1993: 16).

Coetzee’s fiction deconstructs and unmask the power structures on which the knowledge and representation of the other relies. Realism, as a mode of representation or intervention, to some extent, replicates such power structures. Coetzee’s non-realistic orientation, therefore, does not aim at escaping reality but instead endeavours to challenge the premises about the realistic representation.

Non-real Feature of Realism

According to Stephen Watson, Coetzee seems to suggest that “realism is not real at all, but simply a production of language, a *code* (emphasis added) that people have come to accept as ‘natural’” and “it is through language itself, through those conventional representations which come to be accepted as either ‘natural’ or ‘universal,’ that we are

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colonised as much as by any overt act of physical conquest” (Stephen Watson, 1996: 17-18).

Manipulation of Ideology

The linguistic construction of a “code” that manipulates people’s ideology parallels the physical domination of a group of people since both are manipulated by the pre-dominant “code” that makes the mental and physical colonisation inevitable. Coetzee cannot be labelled as a realistic writer since he casts doubt on realism as a mode of intervention in South Africa for its (realism’s) obedience to codes of a given system. On the contrary, Coetzee casts his narratives in an allegorical fashion to interrogate or, at least to disengage from, the governing code or ideology that is usually unacknowledged.

Thus, Coetzee’s rejection of realism and the claim that “South African situation” is “only one manifestation of a wider historical situation” (Stephen Watson, 1996: 13) does not mean that he avoids any engagement with history and the specificity of South African socio-political reality. It reveals not only his affirmation of Saidian view that colonialism is a worldwide and ongoing phenomenon but also a political gesture in the context of colonialism, as Stephen Watson views it: “The deconstruction of realism, then, is evidently intended, at the most basic level of language itself, as an act of decolonization and, as such, is very much part of its political meaning” (Stephen Watson, 1996: 18). His novels are always grounded in a reality. They “not only allude to an actual historical reality, but they also give us, in fictional form, the type of psyche and psychology that this reality dictates” (Stephen Watson, 1996: 14).

Choice of Allegory

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Coetzee chooses allegory as a mode of portraying the realities of South African society. This mode has its political as well as artistic underpinnings in Coetzee's context. It not only serves as a means to elude the wrath of censorship but also to lend a powerful and universal appeal to his work. Although his narratives are not explicitly confrontational, yet they give no comfort to the apartheid government as well.

The use of allegorical method is also used as a critical weapon to deconstruct the realistic modes of fictional discourse in South Africa. Quoting Stephen Slemon, Ayobami Kehinde comments on Coetzee's recourse to postmodern allegory as: "[T]he approach is efficient in destabilizing the discursively fixed monuments of colonial history and opens up the past for imaginative revision. Therefore, Coetzee's allegorical fiction seeks to demystify the precursor texts about South African historical realities, that is, the canonized truths of imperialist and colonialist discourses of history" (Ayobami Kehinde, 2006: 73).

Allegories of Oppression, Torture and Exploitation

Keeping in view the allegorical dimension, Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (henceforth referred to as WFB) and *Life and Times of Michael K* (henceforth referred to as LTMK) can be seen as allegories of oppression, torture and exploitation.

In contrast to "mere copying of the 'real' world" Coetzee approaches his subject through a series of indeterminate and ambiguous signs that implicitly indicate it since "Coetzee is reluctant to impose a "master narrative" of his own on his texts" (Sue Kossew, 1996: 24) to guide interpretation.

Choosing an indeterminate language that resists any authoritative definition and holds no inherent signification independent of an interpretative agent, Coetzee's WFB like any Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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postmodern fiction leaves the reader with a sense of “despair before the arbitrariness of language and its essential defectiveness for depicting the world” (Joel Herring, 2007: 3). The unnamed and unspecified setting of WFB is part of the allegorical scheme. Containing no specific reference to South Africa as such, Levin views the narrative as “timeless, spaceless and universal” (J. M. Coetzee and Clive Barnett, www.jstor.org). The mode not only helps Coetzee to elude the “trap imposed upon South African literary writing” (J. M. Coetzee and Clive Barnett, www.jstor.org) as sheer documentary reporting but also to take his themes to a universal plane.

The Strategy of Dislocating the Novel

By “literally ‘dis-locating’ his narrative” (J. M. Coetzee and Clive Barnett, www.jstor.org) and incorporating narrative gaps, e.g., in the form of inexplicable cryptic dream sequence into the fabric of his novel, Coetzee’s novel entices the readers to render the text whole by offering their own interpretations. The text, however, resists any attempt at definitive meaning as the Magistrate himself acknowledges when called upon to translate the wooden slips for Joll:

They form an allegory. They can be read in many orders. Further each single slip can be read in many ways. Together they can be read as a domestic journal, or they can be read as a plan of war... There is no agreement among scholars about how to interpret these relics of the ancient barbarians (WFB, p. 122).

By highlighting the gaps encountered by the Magistrate while attempting to decipher the wooden slips and the barbarian girl, “Coetzee wants to create what Barthes would have called a ‘writable’ text, one which makes ‘the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text,’ one which does not attempt to reduce the potentially multiple meanings, the ‘plurality’ of the text, by fixing one single meaning for it” (Stephen

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Watson, 1996: 17-18). Although the elusiveness of the text, “barbarian girl” and “wooden slips,” can be made to accommodate a variety of readings yet it simultaneously problematizes the authority of such interpretations.

Ambiguity and Indeterminacy

Similarly in LTMK, the setting of which is inferred to be the war-torn South Africa in near future, the ambiguity and indeterminacy permeate the novel. “Except for the reference to Cape Town and to the place-names that are recognizably Afrikaans,” views Cynthia Ozick, “we are not told that this is the physical and moral landscape of South Africa” (J M Coetzee and T Kai Norris Easton, www.jstor.org). The elusiveness, indeterminacy and misplacing of geographical references opens the text to an allegorical dimension that is central to Coetzee’s fictional oeuvre. Commenting on the allegorical dimension of the novel in her review, Nadine Gordimer views “the harried homelessness of Michael K and his mother” (Nadine Gordimer, 1984) as metaphoric of the suffering of the collective under apartheid.

The indeterminacy regarding Michael K’s race as he is simply listed as “Michael Visagie – CM – 40 – NFA unemployed” (LTMK, p. 70) and his inability to express himself create a sort of void in the narrative. Although Michael K is the centre of the novel, there is a hole in the centre that creates a gap between him and the world as becomes evident:

Between this reason and the truth that he would never announce himself, however, lay a gap wider than the distance separating him from the firelight. Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding balked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong (LTMK, p. 109-110).

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In other words, Michael K is the embodiment of the gap which the Medical Officer and for that matter the reader has to fill with words and meanings. Throughout the text Michael K remains a mystery unresolved, a centre with a hole in it that resists any authoritative definition. The Medical Officer's attempt to break Michael K's silence parallels the Magistrate's attempt to decipher the barbarian girl and wooden slippers in WFB. And both projects by extension could be read as the reader's attempt to decode the mystery enveloping the text.

The Elusive Setting

The elusiveness of setting, indeterminacy of geographical and historical referents, and above all, the interpretative uncertainty although "effect a slight spatial and temporal dislocation," (Ayobami Kehinde, 74) the fictional world of the narratives under discussion is not rendered as "entirely fantastic world" (Ayobami Kehinde, 74). The fictional worlds they "float literally free of time and place..., allude to a time and place which is specifically South African" (Stephen Watson, 1996: 18). This is very much evident, among other things, from the language that is drawn from the register of apartheid South Africa. Both narratives, WFB and LTMK are replete with what might loosely be called as the "language of apartheid". (Although there is hardly any prescribed rule to label certain words as "language of apartheid" but since apartheid brings to one's mind torture, dispossession, exile, detention, censorship, police brutality and the words with such associative and connotative meanings, an attempt has been made to group such words under the canopy of "apartheid language").

Some of the words from the two novels are: Empire, Magistrate, Colonel, prisons, torture, offensive, raids, interrogation, permits, sirens, curfew, guards, police, civil war, camps, armed patrols, military jeeps, barbed wires, check points, guerrillas, blasts, etc. All these

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words can easily be identified with the apartheid regime and the specific politico-historical issues engulfing South African life during the 1970s and 80s.

Coetzee is Fully Engaged in South African Context – Exploitation of Postmodernist Devices

From this it can be inferred that Coetzee's WFB and LTMK and for that matter his entire fictional output is conditioned and determined by the South African context it stems from. Although his novels are highly subversive of realism as a mode of writing as is evident from his rejection of realist devices like clear settings, linear plot and close endings, they seem closely engaged with the South African socio-political history. Coetzee's postmodern narrative strategies cannot be seen as an inclination towards a refusal to engage with the history and politics of South Africa for it can be an act of resistance and decolonization as his "linguistic and narrative fragmentation can be read as suggesting the fragmentation of all authoritative systems" (Michela Canepari-Labib, 2005: 16). That is what marks Coetzee's narratives and makes them different from other South African novels is his adoption of various postmodernist devices and strategies. It is, however, not only in the allegorical mode or in his desire to create a 'writerly' text, as Stephen Watson believes, that Coetzee exhibits his postmodernist leanings but also in his recourse to a number of other postmodernist techniques like silence.

The use of postmodernist strategies adds to the density and complexity of Coetzee's narratives and enables him to reflect better the complex socio-political dilemmas of South Africa. The critics, especially belonging to the Left-wing politics, who charge Coetzee of a "rarified aestheticism" and his narratives as lacking politico-historical engagement and a clear-cut strategy, turn a blind eye to the strategies employed in the novels. They fail to take into consideration Coetzee's profound familiarity with intellectual and artistic

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movements like literary modernism, modern linguistics, postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonial theory that has inspired his erudite and intellectually demanding narratives (Brian W Shaffer , 2006: 123). Despite the complexity of style and technique, Coetzee succeeds in highlighting and interrogating the complex dilemmas of South African socio-political reality as David Attwell contends: “Coetzee has absorbed the lessons of modern linguistics – the textual turn in structuralism and poststructuralism – yet seriously addresses the ethical and political stresses of living in, and with, a particular historical locale, that of contemporary South Africa” (David Attwell, 1993: 1).

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