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## JM Coetzee: A Raising Voice of South African Fiction.

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### Abstract

South Africa, was once the Republiek Van Suid-Afrika and apartheid, is now a Rainbow Nation. Having begun to declare their independence from the colonial rule of Great Britain as early as in 1910 through the creation of the Union, the Africans seem to have taken a wrong turn somewhere. Through the apartheid regime the white people continued oppressing and discriminating against the Black (African Coloured) and Indian population of South Africa. The National Party, mainly a white nationalist party, won the 1948 election, ensuring the legal birth of apartheid. In the decades that followed, restrictions and laws were passed which made the border between the white 'masters' and the natives even larger.

There is a tradition in South African literature where the farm represents, or is parallel to the country of South Africa itself. In his essay collection *White Writing*, Coetzee talks about how the plaasroman amongst others, have participated in justifying white land ownership and the construction of an inseparable bond between the Afrikaans man and the land. Thus, his thoughts in *Boyhood* underline the need for the Afrikaner to construct a bond and a justification to a land which he has in his secret heart and does not belong to him.

**Keywords: Coetzee, South Africa, apartheid colonialism, post-colonialism, oppression, discrimination, hegemony**

## Introduction

Postcolonial or post-colonial, is as diverse and complex as the countries it has affected. The term postcolonial refers to the theory of postcolonialism, and the term post-colonial refers to a country liberated from colonialism. Postcolonial literature and theory manifest themselves differently from country to country, but the post-colonial experience itself ensures that they have certain elements in common. Ania Loomba stresses that “if it is uprooted from specific locations, ‘post coloniality’ cannot be meaningfully investigated.” Thus, it is important when studying postcolonial literature to make distinctions according to place. It is important to make distinction between colonialism and postcolonialism. Colonialism includes, amongst other things, the internalization of certain forms of representation through language. It is not given that these internalizations automatically disappear when a country becomes independent because colonialism’s representation, reading practices and values are not so easily dislodged. Post coloniality is achieved through challenging the assumptions imposed by colonialism. In literature the “given” truth is questioned in multiple ways: the idea of the “empire writes back” is one of the many examples, found in Coetzee’s *Foe*. Another is rewriting the myths imposed by the oppressors, visible in *In the Heart of the Country*. Coetzee questions “truth” and meaning in his novels as well as in his articles and essays. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee investigates the silence of torture and its victims, as well as examining the language of authority, which in this novel does not quite correspond with an “objective” perception of the truth. The myth of the empty land in South Africa is central to justifying the Afrikaners’ right to the land, and this leads to the silencing of the other. In a number of his works, Coetzee deals with the silent other, most literally so in *Foe*, where the black Friday has had his tongue cut out. Coetzee’s works are central to writing back, or to the rewriting taking place in postcolonial South Africa. As is visible, reading and writing are important parts of both imposing colonial values onto someone else, and also of freeing oneself from these and finding a new identity. Ania Loomba points out how the term ‘colonial’ wipes out the history of a place before colonization. Thus, we find that the term itself participates in the “colonial” act of silencing the other.

The colonial mission has, to a large extent, silenced or given a new voice to the other, a voice which to begin with has not been theirs, and whose aim has been to impose a set identity onto the other. Often this comes in terms of binary oppositions, where the identity enforced upon the other is the negative opposite to the colonial masters. A myth that justifies the exploitation of the oppressed is created. According to John McLeod, colonial writing of the other relates to representation and interpellation: “Colonialism, then, is an operation of discourse, and as an operation of discourse it

interpellated colonial subjects by incorporating them in a system of representation. ‘interpellation’ means ‘calling’; the idea is that ideology calls us, and we turn and recognize who we are.” Thus, both the colonizer and the colonized are under ideology’s sway by responding and gaining identity and a sense of self through its call. The individual is rendered powerless against ideology. However, there is also a certain sense of assent and dissent involved. If we consider Loomba’s argument, Gramsci’s theory of hegemony also has its place in the issues of imposed identity:

Hegemony is power achieved through a combination of coercion and consent”; one gains power over someone through “creating subjects who ‘willingly’ submit to being ruled.

Thus, we see that the aim for the writing of the other is in part to make the other knowable and harmless. But the distance is still maintained. The same we find in neo-colonial South Africa with the introduction of apartheid, where the cornerstone philosophy promotes separate development for separate “races” or “tribes”. Whereas the thought so far might not sound so bad, the problems start when one begins to consider the division of land and the idea of the “homelands”, a myth created by the South African government. In terms of Africa, an important thing to note is how the borders of the African countries were drawn by the colonial masters, with no regard to the borders already set by the people living there, thus disrupting already advanced social and political structures. Centuries later, when the Afrikaans government of South Africa commenced the homeland policy, indigenous people were relocated to rural areas of the country based on where their homeland was supposed to be, where that specific tribe, according to the government, originated. However, this homeland policy did not send the Afrikaans back to the Netherlands or the British back to England. The argument of the Afrikaans, that they are entitled to the land on the grounds that they have been in South Africa for 300 years or so, becomes devoid of meaning when it is placed next to the expulsion of the already marginalized people who are no more at home in the townships and inhospitable areas set aside for them than the white population would be.

## Discussion

Common language understood by all parties is central for the construction of the nation. In South Africa, this has been problematic due to the ambiguous feelings invoked by Afrikaans. Today, in the New South Africa, we can clearly see the attempts to create a unitary sense of identity through the creation of new national symbols. This includes a new flag, new monuments, and an

acknowledgement of the diversity of cultures and languages. English has become the language negotiating between all the eleven official languages of South Africa. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has also been central in writing a new history for the country, allowing all the voices and stories of both the oppressor and the oppressed to be heard.

The notion of identity and nation are often interdependent, and race and identity have a similar relationship. The construction of identity also involves the construction of the other. In postcolonial theory, a distinction is made between 'race' and 'ethnicity'. The latter is not used for the same ends as the former, but is rather a means of describing diversity than to justify oppression. The main problem with South African postcolonialism seems to be with the relationship between 'race' and 'class'. Whether we agree or disagree with postcolonial argument on how postcolonialism should be conceptualized in South Africa but postcolonial theorists insist that racial identity is always constructed, but the identity constructed is always somehow racial. This critique is that of the devaluation of class compared to race in South Africa. We have already noted that postcolonialism will differ from place to place, depending on different experiences. Considering that South Africa is a country in which race has been the chief denominator, one can defend a postcolonialism which deals primarily with race. Coetzee attempts to distance himself from racial paradigms and stereotypes through making as few references as possible to colour of skin. However, racial distinctions seem impossible to evade altogether, and Coetzee in his writing is somewhat evasive in representing Black or Coloured voices.

Postcolonialism in South Africa is problematized further still in its relationship to race and class. According to Gillian Whitlock:

The unique polarization and institutionalization of class and racial politics, and of apartheid and resistance, in South Africa have led some critics to argue that discourses of post-colonialism are inappropriately applied to literature written by whites. The hold of the post-colonial label on 'white writing' in the South African context is a particularly uneasy one.

The experience of apartheid and colonialism, though perhaps most keenly felt by non-whites, is a shared experience of the nation and should not be limited on racial grounds. J. M. Coetzee is an example of a writer who holds a mediating role between the colonizer and the colonized, but is also placed within the category of the European Empire novel. Gordimer has always been clear on the fact that she considers herself part of the struggle, something which is hard to overlook when reading her

novels. Coetzee has a different approach; his novels often portray the feelings of marginalization and estrangement caused by apartheid to people of any colour and background in South Africa. The role suggested by Brennan finds support in Bhabha's notion of the diaspora and hybrid identities. According to Bhabha, the border represents a place where past and present, inside and outside, no longer remain separated as binary oppositions but instead commingle and conflict. New possibilities are found at the border; especially for notions of identification, and it is important to note that this new way of looking at identification rejects binary oppositions and moves away from old concepts of it. Coetzee's works offer an attempt to find new notions of identification. Both *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *In the Heart of the Country* undertake a border crossing in terms of identity. Magda crosses the border into the land of authority through authorship. The magistrate enters the territory of the other. In one of Coetzee's later and most acclaimed works, one of the main characters realizes that the way she has been thinking about identity has been wrong and is no longer applicable to the New South Africa.

Lucy in *Disgrace*, who is a white South African, shows that she is able to put herself into the position of the other, of seeing herself through their eyes and in that sense be critical to herself as the "I". However, this can also be seen as the process of suppression, where Lucy is made other by her rapists, and submits. If we consider the term 'invasion', it covers the colonial aspects of Coetzee's writing, something that pervades several of his stories. Colonization relates to the "I": the seeing/perceiving "I" or "eye" of the colonizer, the one who sets the standard, who sees the other, and makes the agenda through his or her own point-of-view. This can be connected to the role of the author or narrator. Thus, writing itself can be seen as an act of colonization, of imposing one's authority through culture/meanings/ language onto someone else.

In *in the Heart of the Country* the narrator is always changing the story. The problem of language is central in this work, as the narrator Magda finds herself unable to speak the master language and gain command over her servants. We find that she is always experimenting in her thoughts. The changing versions of her story can be seen as thought-experiments. Further, she also guesses how things are invading, the nuptial bed of both her father and his new bride, as well as that of Hendrik and Klein-Anna. Her fantasies allow her to use the authorial imagination to write her versions of incidents. It is her story, and even if she lacks authority in the "real" world, in her story it is she who decides what is going on. Thus, we find that she can as quickly kill her father as she can bring him back to life.

*Waiting for the Barbarians* offers colonial invasion in the literal sense, in addition to imposing one's meaning onto others. The plot revolves around a colonial frontier settlement. Here we find the outer invasion of Empire upon the place the story is set, in addition to a more symbolic one of Colonel Joll and the soldiers upon the settlement, even if they are all servants of Empire. The magistrate of the settlement attempts to invade the mind and soul of a barbarian girl through reading the marks on her body. Further, torture, which is a central theme in the novel, is also a form of invasion, an attempt to penetrate a person's mind. The colonialists "write" the natives as other and barbarians, both in a symbolic and a literal way. This is especially visible when Colonel Joll writes "enemy" on the back of the natives, and then precedes to whip it off. Colonel Joll is convinced that to be a barbarian also constitutes being guilty, being untruthful and so forth, and he uses this to justify his torture. The magistrate, on the other hand, has a view of the natives which contradicts Joll's views. The natural response to this is for Joll to decide that the magistrate must be guilty too, and thus he is made guilty, written as whatever colonel Joll wants him to be. This is reflected in the wooden slips the magistrate has attempted to read, and which Joll demands a translation of. The magistrate is aware that Joll is already convinced of his guilt, and also of the guilt of the slips which offer Joll a translation which is exactly along the lines of what Joll wants to hear. This is the same as the philosophy of 'if you call me a bully, a bully I will be'. Further, we can also see how the magistrate attempts to read/write the barbarian girl through his own value system. Unable to put himself in her shoes, so to speak, his attempted invasion of her remains outside her body alone. Whereas Joll was able to penetrate her through the use of torture, the magistrate could not symbolically or sexually hurt her. At one point, he asserts that he will not let her go until he has understood her, solved the riddle of her, but the broken body is impossible for him to puzzle back together again, and finally he takes her back to her own people.

We can also see that colonialism and invasion is presented as a disease or physical flaw in several of Coetzee's other works. There is something rotten *In the Heart of the Country*; the community presented in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is one of apathies and hatred where even little children will be entertained by the torture of others, something which bears witness to an infected society. In *Disgrace*, the body of the raped Lucy has the signs of society's infection written upon it, and the question is if whether her growing belly is a sign of healing or of getting worse. Coetzee has made more of a point of this in other works such as *Foe* and *Age of Iron*. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, we have entered the modern world, and the virus which has infected is on the narrator's computer, rather

than in his body. Age, however, is a factor his body is unable to withstand, something which he seems painfully aware of. This echoes the expectation of death found in *Age of Iron*.

## Conclusion

Colonization is also closely linked to isolation. The aim of colonization is to impose one's culture/language/meaning onto the other. However, the colonialists also isolate themselves from the other and from the culture that is natural for the place. Colonialism represents an attempt to assimilate the locals' natives to the culture of the oppressors. Thus, the oppressors themselves feel the need to assert their own identity and set themselves apart from the natives through, for example, othering. Apartheid is the epitome of this. Identification, as we can see, is central in such a society. An example from apartheid is the pass laws, where people needed to have identity cards confirming their racial status. Here we see how identity is constituted through language. The classification of race allowed people to enter places or be excluded from them due to this. Thus, identity was literary established through language, where one word would determine people's liberties. However, the classifications were not necessarily fixed, as the apartheid system had its branch of people who worked on determining and revising the labels. A person who was classified as White one day could be labelled Coloured the next day. Parent and child need not have the same limitations/liberties. No heed was paid to people's own opinions of their identities, and the increased number of racial classifications, such as Coloured, Cape Coloured, Indian, White, Black, etc, seemed to accomplish nothing but the "divide and conquer" policy of the apartheid regime.

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