CHAPTER- 6

CONCLUSION
Coetzee's novels occupy a special place in South African literature, and this is a context inevitably affects his writing; yet his work influences the development of novel into the 21st century and the great concept of internationalization of the novel is increasingly relevant to the appreciation of his achievements. Coetzee’s works highlight the strong ‘links between colonial fictions, history, and exploitation’ (Kossew 1996: 33). Coetzee’s fictions remain significant, according to Penner, apart from their South African context, because of their artistry and because they transform urgent societal concerns into more enduring questions regarding colonialism and the relationships of mastery and servitude between cultures and individuals. Coetzee was strongly against the concept of realism that dominated the South African fiction, especially during the apartheid era. His intellectual influences have taken his work in the direction of the complex literary question raised in postmodernism. As a result he developed an indirect manner of expression in his works even about social and political matters. Coetzee’s indirect manner is expressed in highly intellectual, somewhat esoteric and difficult to read. His style of expression however, is not only meant to represent verbal or stylistic complexity but the themes he has chosen, which are representing the innermost psyche of human mind based on the darkest phases of human evolution history, are naturally précised in such language and structure.

Coetzee’s novels persist in this attempt to circumnavigate consciousness. Through the holes in his narrators’ self-regard, we gain glimpses of the materiality of the other’s suffering. Suffering, the term here plays extremely important role when Coetzee is being discussed. Almost all the characters depicted by Coetzee are either suffering from the racially subjugated and subaltern existence. This suffering has been very convincingly universalized with dark shades of subjugator’s mentality. His
works, as Derek Attridge has argued, cannot be simply categorized as making assertions, statements and claims, are not examples of non-literary positions but rather use fiction to do precisely what philosophy and theory cannot. Each of them make singular explosions of the mind, the form and content of which are inaccessible save in the form in which they present themselves as novels. They can’t simply be filed under pre-existing categories but demand further and continually more nuanced understanding, building on established concepts and developing judgments. Indeed, it is precisely the centrality of this ‘hard to grasp’ aspect of his work combined with its intellectual and aesthetic range and discipline that has made Coetzee so rewarding for critics and theorists. This shouldn’t be a surprise: as thinkers like Adorno and Derrida have argued, it is precisely that which can’t be grasped or comprehended that most stimulates the desire to grasp. His novels are best seen as processes that inspire or, better, demand thinking and responses. And the range of the thought they demand is enormous.

As a white South African writer, Coetzee is acutely aware that he speaks from a position of beneficiary of the apartheid regime, palpable in the string of anxious intellectuals that populate his novels. JanMohamed points out, “to give voice to slaves and particularly to their desire for freedom is no doubt a courageous and provocative act in contemporary south Africa” (64). Nonetheless, The Life and Times of Michael K. remains rooted in racial stereotypes/archetypes. Coetzee has avoided any direct reference to Michael’s colour, there are indirect references (the initial CM for coloured male on his papers).

At the same time, he has tacitly positioned himself as marginalized, as a modernist writing against the grain of oppositional writing and, in childhood, as an
English speaker of part-Afrikaner stock and a Protestant attending a Catholic high school (DP 393–94). However, whether today Coetzee can be talked about as marginal is doubtful given the intense global interest in his work.

Coetzee’s implicit appeal seems to be a truly moral plea: that it is worth stepping back from the endeavour to grasp, hold, and define that which cannot be grasped, or held, or defined. This appeal is echoed by Susan Barton in Foe as she acknowledges the arbitrariness of her colonial gesture of definition:

I say Friday is a cannibal, and he becomes a cannibal; I say he is a laundryman, and he becomes a laundryman. What is the truth of Friday?

. . . No matter what he is to himself, what he is to the world is what I make of him. (Coetzee 1987: 121–2).

As a white South African, Coetzee’s relation to black South Africans—or rather to the apartheid construction of ‘the blacks’—is perhaps closest to Lyotard’s conception of the relationship of ‘European consciousness’ to ‘the Jews’. As Coetzee laments in his 1987 Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech,

You cannot resign from the master caste. You can imagine resigning, you can perform a symbolic act of resignation, but short of shaking the dust of the country off your feet, there is no way of actually doing it.

(DP 96).

This awareness of his own implication in the oppression of black South Africa opens up an irreducible gap in his narratives between the privileged position of his narrators and the oppressed position of the figures of alterity whose lives the narrators so desperately want to relate. Rather than attempting to recover the
subjectivity of black South Africans, his novels bear witness to the act of Forgetting that underpins apartheid. The materiality or objectivity of his figures of alterity is a function of his inability to relate to them as subjects, his inability to transcend the ‘stunted’ relations of apartheid. They stand in for a base level of suffering that resists narrativization not simply because the suffering is in itself unspeakable, but because his awareness of his own position of privilege prevents him from speaking on behalf of their suffering. In this sense, Coetzee’s narratives are unable to work through the history of apartheid; they bear witness to a history of suffering that they are powerless to lay to rest. Like the work of Beckett and Kafka, Coetzee’s novels attempt to remain speechless before history (Adorno 191). Their fundamental position is that of Mrs. Curren in Age of Iron, called upon to witness and to name the destruction of a township, “the crime being committed in front of her eyes”: “‘To speak of this’—she waved a hand over the bush, the smoke, the filth littering the path—‘you would need the tongue of a god’” (AI 91). Like Coetzee’s novels, her speech is a mode of remaining silent. In an interview, Coetzee himself underlines his own speechlessness by speaking of how he is ‘overwhelmed’, how “his thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness by the fact of suffering in the world” (DP, 248). Coetzee’s novels are located in the nexus of history and text; that is, they explore the tension between these polarities. Behind the narrative subjects of each of the novels, behind Eugene Dawn, Jacobus Coetzee, Magda, the Magistrate, the Medical Officer, Susan Barton, and Elizabeth Curren, lies an implied narrator who shits stance with and against the play of forces in South African culture. In other words, Coetzee’s figuring of the tension between text and history is itself a historical act, one that must be read back into the discourses of South Africa where one can discern its illuminating power. We might call this narrator the self-of-writing, or the
"one-who-writes," as Coetzee himself puts it ('Note on Writing' 42). Edward Said speaks of the ‘worldliness’ of texts, which have "ways of existing that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society—in short, they are in the world, and hence worldly" ('The World’ 35). This is no less true of Coetzee's novels.

Coetzee was a philosophical idealist whose fiction graphically portrayed the breakup of the dominating, rationalist subject of colonialism but who offered—depending on where the argument was grounded—neither an analysis of the play of historical forces nor a moral anchor in the search for a humane response to colonialism and apartheid. Coetzee’s works are philosophical, as Anton Leist and Peter Singer, points out for three prominent reasons; firstly, for an unusual ‘degree of reflectivity’; secondly, for the deep layered intellectual attitude of ‘paradoxical truth seeking’ and thirdly, for an ‘ethics of social relationships’ in his novels (Leist and Singer 6). There is a reflective distance to the conventional understanding of everything, which expresses itself, strangely, through a normally rather sparse, sober, precise, restrained selection of words and descriptions. Coetzee’s texts match well with the standard linguistic analysis of his texts as ‘allegorical’, ‘perceptive’ or ‘singularizing’ (7).

As a novelist and linguist with a European heritage, working on the experimental fringes of his genre, Coetzee leans toward a reflexive examination of the constitutive role of language in placing the subject within history; yet as a South African, and one who returned to the country after a prolonged but finally unsuccessful attempt to emigrate, Coetzee cannot avoid having to deal with his national situation. Every attempt in the novels to hold South Africa at arm’s length, by means of strategically nonspecific settings or socially improbable protagonists,
simply confirms the intensity and necessity of this struggle. In fact, he bridges the gap between the ‘West’ and the so-called Third World, yet because the novels are steeped in the dominant Western literary tradition some critics have questioned his postcolonial credentials. Benita Parry, for instance, argues that because the fictions are underpinned by Western cognitive frameworks, Coetzee is unable to craft marginal characters that are outside and beyond Eurocentric discourse (‘Speech and Silence’ 150). The oeuvre has even been read by a number of critics as ‘allegorized theory’, as Graham Pechey points out (‘Post-Apartheid’ 66), drawing as it does upon the work of European philosophers and theorists like Blake, Rousseau, Lévi-Strauss, Levinas, Foucault, Sartre, Benveniste, Lacan, Freud, Derrida—a so-called ‘pied noir’—and Irigaray. From the European literary tradition, Dante, Defoe, Dostoevsky, Kafka, D. H. Lawrence and Beckett number amongst Coetzee’s acknowledged influences. Not only is all his writing steeped in the European literary tradition, the novels also borrow from thinkers from the so-called Third World: Fanon, Ndebele, Césaire, Gordimer and Breytenbach amongst others make sometimes veiled appearances.

The novels of Coetzee produce an impression of moral intensity that is decidedly constant. A motif about how certain sensitivities are essential to moral understanding figures significantly in the novels of Coetzee. This motif, which depends on the wider conception of rationality, finds expression not only in the terms in which Coetzee presents his characters and tells his stories but also in the novels’ narrative structures. For instance, some of the novels like Waiting for the Barbarians, Age of Iron and Disgrace unfold narratively in ways that to a great extent eliminate traces of an authorial standpoint, inviting readers to view their fictional worlds from the perspectives of morally compromised major characters. Through the kinds of
qualified identifications that the novels thus invite, they call on us as readers simultaneously to respond to and think about features of these worlds in particular ways, and, in doing so they position us to better understand the features in question. These works are preoccupied with the idea that a certain emotional responsiveness is internal to moral understanding in ways that go beyond treating it as an element of a story. They are, as novels, designed to get us to follow up ourselves on lines of thought that take for granted this idea’s cogency.

For modern humanists and moral theorists, in principle every human life should be respected, even if political systems through their compromises fail to honor this principle. Kristeva’s appeal to the gap between the human and the animal carries forward this same humanist moral focus. What modern humanism cannot claim is that residual ethical force that disturbs our ordinary moral sensibilities in even the most humane use of animal lives for the sake of our own. The protagonist does not try to stop the euthanizing of any of the dogs, he does not depict their death as the same as murder, and he even assists with the process; yet the narrative does solicit a residual ethical lack of ease sufficient to acknowledge the deaths of animals as the sacrifice that underlies the modern utilitarian or otherwise rational state—the sacrifice of animals for the sake of the human community. There may be no way out of this kind of disgrace, but there is need for an ethics to deal with it. The Coetzee narrative reasserts a morally significant difference between humans and other animals. It doesn’t have any real arguments against the inevitable uses that animals will continue to serve for human beings. It doesn’t insist upon bringing animals into a community of equals with humans. However, the final image would lack the poignancy that gives this story its ethical force, if it were not for the ethical crossing over of the boundaries between humans and other animals that occurs here as
throughout the novel. Coetzee’s ethical narrative reverberates around the thought that “we are of a different order of creation from the animals...not higher, necessarily, just different. "As predatory animals we likely will continue to ‘colonize’ other animals for the sake of our own species. Certainly, our moral codes permit the use of animals, even the killing of them, for no other reason than that they are different from us. How they are different is of secondary concern. Everyone has his or her theory about what this difference is. But when the protagonist of Coetzee’s narrative recognizes some distant and deeper possibility of himself in the maimed dog, and specifically, in the dog’s ability to love arbitrarily and unconditionally, the narrative gives us a glimpse of an ethical force beyond normal moral codes that is, in part, learned from animals.

In his novels the truth seeking is paradoxical in the sense that ‘truth’ most relevantly is the truth of ‘truthfulness’ and that truth-fullness is the engagement in a never-ending spiral movement that at no point leads to ‘full’ truth. It is paradoxical in the sense that there is always a counterargument to an argument, a second story to a first, another description to a given one. Lest total skepticism set in, truth is to be substituted by the subjective attempt to search for truth, the engagement in relevant work, and usage of adequate language.

Coetzee, according to Lejeune, has revived the eighteenth and nineteenth century by imitating the different forms of personal literature like memoirs, letters and diaries. He has developed a fictional pact based on simulation. Indeed, Coetzee’s revival of this genre in the era of deconstruction is also recognizable among some of his fictional contemporaries. However, Coetzee’s fictions remain significant, according to Penner, apart from their South African context, because of their artistry and because they transform urgent societal concerns into more enduring questions
regarding colonialism and the relationships of mastery and servitude between cultures and individuals. Coetzee’s novels are often described as ‘novels of ideas’ because of their undeniable intellectual force. However, the ideas in his novels are, significantly, always embodied and tested up to and beyond their limits in a suffering, mortal being, and the language and narrative forms in which they are expressed are constantly interrogated.

Throughout his oeuvre, we have seen a wide range of interpretative projects attempted with differing degrees of commitment and intention. These range from Eugene Dawn’s deliberate cruelty in his oppressive rewriting of the Vietcong in Dusklands, to Susan Barton’s misguided and selfish attempts to interpret the ‘secret’ of Friday in Foe. However, Coetzee never shows us the success or benefits of any of these attempts to interpret. Through their attempts at interpretation, his characters repeatedly abuse, exploit or just get it wrong.

Coetzee, a writer who has been examined under the light of post-colonial and various other theories, is a writer who is in fact beyond all theories. A writer who has not just examined, observed, reported and penned the pain of subalterns but felt it and expressed it very subtly in a format which is often called ‘loose baggy monster’. Novel, the popular most form that literature has cherished since one and a half century, has memorably played under the lexicons, felt and designed equally by J.M. Coetzee. Being a computer programmer by profession—computer the nearest device to human life in reference of its mechanism of action—has very nicely programmed the feelings of almost every human being living or lived on this globe, the characters not limiting to any race or colour, subsidizing greatly to the most widely read format of literature.
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