Research Paper Title: Reconciliation, Recreating and rewriting the past:
Coetzee’s ‘Waiting for the Barbarian’

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Reconciliation, Recreating and rewriting the past: Coetzee’s ‘Waiting for the Barbarian’

One of the most thought-provoking features of English Literature is the exploration of post-colonial literature, that literature written in English in formerly colonized societies. This field has given rise to a great range of theoretical ideas, concepts, problems and debates and these have been addressed in a great range of articles, essays, talks, and books published or written from every continent. If there is one theme that could be said to dominate post-colonial literature, it is perhaps the meeting of two cultures and in particular, the way in which an indigenous order has been established by alien and intrusive value. The gap between two cultures, between black and white, is also something that is inevitable at the heart of South African Literature. Indeed, it would seem impossible in the context of the political regime that dominated South Africa up to the 1990s to write about anything other than the country’s apartheid policy. New apartheid has its roots in the colonization of South Africa during the 17th century by the Dutch Settlers.

Coetzee, a descendent from 17th century Dutch settlers, was born in Cape Town in 1940. He spoke Afrikans at home and with relatives while his parents have chosen to educate him in English. He faced the problem of identity at the early age. He speaks English while his surname is Afrikans which surprised his schoolmates. In fact Coetzee seen himself as English and has always felt excluded from complete identification in a country controlled by racial and cultural restrictions. After the Sharpville crisis in South Africa in 1960, he spent 10 years outside the country as a student, lecturer and an employee in a multi-national company. In 1971, he returned to South Africa to teach English at the University of Cape Town.

J.M. Coetzee was the first author to be awarded the Booker Prize twice, first for ‘Life and Times of Michael K’ in 1983 and again for ‘Disgrace’ in 1999. In 2003, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. The violent history of his native country has provided Coetzee much raw material for his more than 10 novels, essays and articles. In his works, Coetzee has always tried, though indirectly, to denounce injustice to unmask fears and express uncertainties about South Africa, giving voice to those social, political and racial elements that in the South African Apartheid era for a long time silenced and deprived of any form of expression. Since his first novel, Coetzee has centered his fiction, more or less, on the past, present and future of South Africa. In his first novel ‘Dusklands (1974), has traced the origins of Afrikanner society. Afterwards in his second novel ‘In the Heart of Country’ (1977) has developed the theme of the formation of national identity through the representation of the search for a personal identity. This investigation reaches its apex with ‘Waiting for the Barbarians’ in which, Coetzee has dealt with the past cruelties, racial dissonance and the ways of so called civilized people.

First published in Britain in 1980, J. M. Coetzee’s ‘Waiting for the Barbarians’ was intended as an allegorical attack on Apartheid South Africa. However, by constructing the narration entirely in the present tense, and situating the story in an anonymous frontier settlement of an unnamed ‘Empire’, Coetzee eschews the limitations imposed
by specificities of temporal, geographical and historical context and succeeds in attaining a universalism to which all writers aspire, but only the greatest realize.

The novel details the fall from grace of an unexceptional magistrate of the Empire, and addresses the social perversions that necessarily attend to colonial and imperial projects driven by expansionist ambitions, pre-emptive philosophies and/or delirious self-righteousness.

To expose the brutality and bankruptcy of such projects, Coetzee juxtaposes his magistrate narrator – a kind of everyman colonial bureaucrat – against two other central characters. The first is Col. Joll, an official of the Empire, who serves in an intelligence agency that bears the inspired name the ‘Third Bureau’. The second character is a young barbarian (read indigenous) woman who has been blinded by Col. Joll's enlightened form of intelligence gathering.

For her part, the (unnamed) barbarian woman says very little. Her role is largely objective. All but adopted by the magistrate, who makes no effort to conceal his infatuation with the oppression she has suffered, she represents the captive native upon whom the magistrate is able to project his colonial gaze. It is also to this young barbarian woman that the magistrate reveals a central theme of the novel- the terror of colonial paranoia. “Nothing is worse than what we can imagine,” he whispers in a moment of intimacy. As with all colonial cultures, in Coetzee’s literary creation it is above all the settlers' fear of the indigenous other that both threatens the dominant society and justifies the violence exacted in the name of a search for that always-elusive state of security.

A magistrate in charge of administering the law in a colonial town witnesses the torture of the invaded indigenous population. The colony or the place is unspecified. Most characters have no names, although the circumstances surrounding the events indicate that the colony is South Africa while the barbarians indicate the black population. The magistrate is of unspecified age although he refers to himself as approaching retirement. At first loyal and dutiful the magistrate becomes skeptical about the legal system he represents. He questions its effectiveness, but if he were to leave his successor could be more ruthless.

The magistrate is content with his life until the investigation to examine the alleged barbarian uprising occurs. Colonel Joll is sent to establish the extent of danger that the barbarians, who live behind the border may pose to the colony. The magistrate shows the garrison to Colonel Joll, sent by The Third Bureau to investigate the rumors about a barbarian uprising. The magistrate discovers a blind girl begging on the street for money on a cold winter day. Due to her injured ankles, she carries sticks with her to be able to walk. He gives her money, being concerned about her health as well as attracted by her beauty. When she disappears for a while, he inquires about her. He approaches her when seeing her back on the street, offering her cleaning work at his house as she is not allowed to ask for money in town, especially that winter is coming. When he brings her to his house, she feels unworthy of the work he offers her and
leaves. He finds her back on the street begging and brings her to his house again, while he washes her and bandages her ankles and her hands.

When winter ends, the season for animal trapping begins. The magistrate frustrated with the relationship between him and the girl decides that it is best to take her back to her people. He wants to notify the Bureau about his trip, justifying its purpose as an attempt to restore good relationships with the barbarians. After writing a letter he decides against sending it. Without informing anyone about his trip, he takes four soldiers with him, the girl, and heads for the mountains. They travel south towards the desert and then the valleys, where the nomads winter and usually follow the old dead river-bed. To shorten their trip they choose a different route never previously attempted. Even though winter has passed, the wind blowing through the ice makes breathing difficult. Upon arrival, the magistrate meets a warrant officer from the Third Bureau, who accuses him of conspiring with the enemy. When the magistrate accuses the army of triggering conflicts, being itself the enemy rather than the barbarians he becomes imprisoned. In his solitude he analyzes the events of the last few weeks. More prison cells are built for the barbarians tortured in front of their relatives. Unable to defend themselves, they are vulnerable and deprived of their humanity. He analyzes his feelings for the native girl who stayed with him, questioning his pity for her. She became less of a human being during her torture, turning into a creature who believes in nothing, only awaiting her end. The fire is set to assure protection clearing the river banks. It destroys wildlife. The barbarians arrive before dark, stealing clothing, food, and anything of use, inspiring fear that turns into paranoia. The rumors that the barbarians arm against their invaders spread, encouraging angst and conflicts. Drunkenness spreads among the soldiers.

The magistrate is released from prison without any means of survival. He is forced to live on the street. The barbarians hide while their huts are destroyed. They reappear in other places, being cheated when they try to trade with fish. Policeman Mandel wants the magistrate to work. When he responds that he is still awaiting his trial, he learns that there are no records of him. The magistrate is at odds with Mandel, who seems to be unaffected by his torture of other people. When he asks Mandel how he can eat and get on with. People in town as well as the fishermen nearby live in fear of barbarian attacks. The magistrate advises everybody to grow root vegetables that can survive winter while new wells are being built. Children gather shallows that are smoked and packed. Helmets placed alongside the rampart simulate the presence of soldiers. Children, who pass by every now and then move them as if the soldiers also moved. With three men guarding the town, the magistrate assumes the leadership in town along with legal administration. No one wants to gather wood after the fishermen claim to have seen the barbarians nearby.

Coetzee borrowed the title of his novel from the poetry of the Alexandria-born Greek poet Constantine P. Cavafy. Like Cavafy, Coetzee understands that it is against the image of the diabolical dark barbarian that Eurocentric cultures have constructed their own fragile sense of civilization and identity. Take that away, and the proponents of the colonial mission to civilize find themselves disoriented and redundant, deserted in the desert.
South African Apartheid collapsed in part because of novels like this - and those it provoked to take action. Revisiting the novel today provides an urgent reminder of the critical need to work ceaselessly towards the dismantling of contemporary colonial projects and the political recovery of our common humanity.

Various aspects of Colonization like the long and painful history of suppression and its expression shaped as anger; complex relationship between colonizers and colonized; cross-culture seduction are effectively expressed by Coetzee. Here is an attempt to understand and feel the pain which is felt successfully and expressed artistically by Coetzee. Coetzee seems, though denotatively, to enlighten the dark patches of African history- the darkness of which was the result of his own fellow countrymen. Without unnecessary anger or aggression, Coetzee very emotionally represents the pain and despair of African people, in fact the colonized people throughout the world.

The study of Post-Colonialism is not limited into the boundary of a literary theory here. It has much wider meaning, which touches humanity. In the contemporary world of chaos, understanding the deeper and truthful sense of Post-Colonialism would certainly help the world to retain the peace and happiness-intended by the seers of the Vedas; wished by almost every human being on this globe.

“Sarve bhavantu sukhinaha, sarve santu niramaya
Sarve bhadraani pashyantu, ma kaschidukhamapnuyaat”

The narratives of Coetzee have a power to establish this in the intellectual but partially blind world.

Colonies have vanished almost but not the colonialism. The social, cultural, economical, religious and administrative effects of Colonialism still exist on many parts of this world. This paper intend to try to establish a new facet of Post-Colonial writing which can be very useful to illuminate the minds of students and scholars with an understanding of universal fraternity and equality; the very elements which are sung by a Coetzee-, not a linguist, not a computer programmer, not even a writer; neither a white nor a black…Just a human being who FEELS…

References:

Research Paper Title: Disclosing Phalocentricism through Reshaping Literature:
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Disclosing Phalocentricism through Reshaping Literature:

A Dwelling inside the Retold Classic

J. M. Coetzee’s fifth novel, Foe (1986), is a rewriting of Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe. Coetzee, a South African writer who now lives in Australia, has throughout his career been attuned to the uses of literary heritage, engaging openly with the authors whose sensibilities inform his own. In addition to Defoe, Kafka and Dostoyevsky resonate explicitly in his early work, particularly in Waiting for the Barbarians (1980) and the Life and Times of Michael K (1983). With Foe, however, Coetzee attained a lyricism that separates this novel from his other works even as it “made canonic inter-textuality a fundamental principle” (Attridge 69). Coetzee has summed up Foe in terms of authority and its literary counterpart, authorship: “My novel Foe, if it is about any single subject, is about authorship: about what it means to be an author not only in the professional sense (the profession of author was just beginning to mean something in Daniel Defoe’s day) but also in a sense that verges, if not on the demiurgic: sole author, sole creator” (“Speaking in Tongues” par. 26). In this vein the reader of Foe is called upon to be mistrustingly mindful of the relationship between author and text. As Coetzee puts it, “‘the nature and processes of fiction’ may also be called the question of who writes. Who takes up the position of power, pen in hand?” (Kossew 161). Coetzee’s novel alters Defoe’s story. He shows us not Defoe’s life—the decades of entrepreneurship, political engagement, affectionate family life, and a writing career at the forefront of the emerging forms of journalism and fiction—but the bleak circumstances of his death: “away from his home, hiding from a creditor who had the power to seize all his goods and throw him into prison for debt” (Novak, Daniel Defoe 6). Coetzee’s revisions both to the character of Crusoe and to the novel’s plot draw out these differences. Coetzee’s castaway is about sixty years old—which makes him older than his literary forebear Crusoe and “roughly Defoe’s age at the time when his novel was published” —nor is he at all concerned with getting off the island. He is a more primitive presence, “an illustration of the futility of Empire” rather than an exultation of its strengths (Newman 96).

It is well-known that Robinson Crusoe is a novel without women. The central character is Robinson Crusoe. However, the book contains no female characters. Coetzee deliberately introduces Susan Barton, a female castaway who is washed up on the island inhabited by Crusoe and Friday. Coetzee’s introduction of a white woman as a heroine in first person makes up for the missing voice of femininity in the original piece. Their voice has been suppressed. Barton is designated the main narrator of Foe (she narrates the first three of four parts), while Robinson Crusoe, is relegated to the margins.
After an uneventful stay on the island, the three are rescued: Cruso dies on the homeward journey, and Susan and Friday are safely delivered to England. Susan, who returns from the desolate island, she wants to note everything she experienced on the island. But due to the lack of the education women received in the 18th century, she realizes she is unable to write a complete story freely. Thus she turns to Foe, a writer in debt. She tells “You have not heard a story before like mine. I am new returned from far-off parts. I have been a castaway on a desert island. And there I was the companion of a singular man,” She adds (p. 48). She presents herself as a story worth attending to adding that “I am a figure of fortune, Mr. Foe. I am the good fortune we are always hoping for” (p. 48). He takes Susan and Friday into his room and promises he can write a book which conveys her voice. Mr. Foe in the novel is Daniel Defoe. Susan persuades Daniel Foe to turn her account of life on the island into a popular and interesting book of adventure. Susan tries to write the story as ‘The Female Castaway’, however, Foe is not much interested in Cruso and Friday. He calls their island a monotonous and boring place. Foe insists on her telling the story of Cruso, though in his desired way, she feels intimidated by the shadow of this patriarchal presence on her own narrative. Sensing the frames the patriarchal author is trying to impose on her existence, she feels to be “a being without substance, a ghost beside the true body of Cruso” (p. 51) and writes to Foe: “return to me the substance I have lost, Mr Foe: that is my entreaty. For though my story gives the truth, it does not give the substance of the truth”(p. 51). To erase the obsession Foe has with Cruso’s story, she resolves to present it as dull as her own is. The existence of cannibals and the frightening appearance of their footprints were of great significance in Robinson Crusoe; similarly, in Foe they are those exciting parts of Cruso’s story in which Foe is interested. Susan completely negates such an existence in the following words:

“As for the cannibals, I am not persuaded, despite Cruso’s fears, that there are cannibals in those oceans […] I saw no cannibals; and if they came after nightfall and fled before the dawn, they left no footprints behind” (p. 54).

She uses her power to tell the story to include whatever parts she chooses. Instead he shows interest in the two years Susan spent in Bahia. However, Susan is not content with this author/character’s insistence to add “lies” to her story. She even refuses to include the Bahia section in it. Of Bahia she briefly says “Bahia, and the life I had lived there, had taught me not to be dainty” (p. 19). We do not exactly know what kind of woman she was in Bahia, surely not the kind she desires to be known by now”. During the time that Foe is in a hiding place, Susan in effect lives in Foe’s house and assumes his role as the author of the story. It is also during this period of authorship that she starts to think about the nature of writing and even comments on such notions as literature, writing and authority just as a critic does. This double role of author/critic is another
disrupting element of meta-fictional novels. As Stonehill notes, “This notion of criticism of the text within the text offers a second guise in which literary history appears inside the self-conscious novel” (p. 8). Mr. Foe’s authority is not inaccessible now that Susan has his pen, his ink; she even claims that “the pen becomes mine while I write with it” (p. 66). She comes to realize that what gives Foe his power is not something inside him but it is the power of the pen, i.e. writing itself. It is not Susan but the pen itself which writes the title of her story: “The Female Castaway. Being a True Account of a Year Spent on a Desert Island. With Many Strange Circumstances Never Hitherto Related” (p. 67). Graham Allen relates the power of the pen to its being a “traditional symbol of the phallus” (p. 145) and contends that, In societies in which women are traditionally excluded from ‘serious’ literature, and even from formal education, the woman writer’s anxiety is concerned first and foremost with the culturally dominant images of women which would deny her access to intellectual and aesthetic achievement, which would marginalize her as an ‘angel in the house’ or as a dangerous ‘other’ (witch, madwoman, whore) (p. 145). By assuming the patriarchal power of the pen, these two dominant images are the very images that Susan tries to avoid, by excluding the stories of her daughter and the Bahia part; respectively, she denies both the role of the angelic mother, and, possibly, a prostitute in Bahia, hence resisting being framed by the dominant constructions of feminine identity.

This awareness of the power of pen, however, has paradoxical effects on her. It also makes her aware of her situation as a woman, and more specifically as a female writer. She realizes that this very power is ultimately Foe’s. Macaskill and Colleran also observe, Susan Barton’s decision to tell her version of the island’s history implies that “Coetzee’s text will resist bondage to its patriarchal master text, will reread the Hegelian master/slave dialectic from a feminine perspective, will suggest correlations between the experiences of racial and sexual subjugation” (p. 440).

Susan later admits:

“It is still in my power to guide and amend. Above all, to withhold. By such means do I still endeavor to be father to my story” (p. 123).

She chooses to use her power to withhold because her true voice will not be heard. She chooses silence. Realizing that she shares Friday’s marginalized space, she compares her silence with that of Friday and concludes that her silence is chosen and deliberate but Friday’s is imposed. Susan’s silence, however, does not seem to be a completely deliberate one. It is imposed upon her by the society which silences the voice of the subaltern in general. In Spivak’s discussions in her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” the crucial point is that the examples of subaltern resistance are always already filtered through dominant systems of political representation. As Spivak states, the ‘subaltern cannot speak’ means that “even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to
speak, she is not able to be heard” (Landry & Maclean, p. 292). This is not to suggest that particular disempowered groups cannot speak, but that their speech are not heard or recognized within dominant political systems of representation. Attridge elaborates, All canons rest on exclusion; the voice they give to some can be heard only by virtue of the silence they impose on others. But it is not just a silencing by exclusion; it is a silencing by inclusion as well; any voice we can hear is by that very fact purged of its uniqueness and alterity (p. 82).

Therefore, Susan in effect decides not to relate her story anymore, because she does not want to be misrepresented, or in Attridge’s terms, “to be silenced by inclusion”. On the whole, at the same time that Coetzee represents the story through the voice of a female narrator, he enacts her erasure from the novel to show how women are deprived of their rights and also to question the authenticity of Defoe’s text by suggesting that Susan was the true storyteller and Defoe just has (mis)used her tale. The world never meets Cruso, for he dies on the voyage home, having been rescued by a merchantman, the John Hobart.. Susan is left to tell a sorry tale. Though home and relieved of Cruso, she cannot shake his mastery of her; after all, she continues to be burdened by his mute slave, Friday, and by his difficult, plotless story. But Susan challenges his authority, repeatedly asserts she is "free," author of her own destiny, her own narrative. Susan declares: ‘I choose rather to tell the island, of myself and Cruso and Friday and what we three did there: for I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire’.

Conclusion

Coetzee resists the dominion, the force of traditional novel writing. He wishes to speak to real historical conflicts, but resists what Linda Hutcheon calls a "consolatory structure." Foe takes up some central postcolonial issues, which include the following: who will write? (that is, who takes up the position of power, pen, in hand?); who will remain silent? (the issue of silencing and speech); how do colonial regimes distribute and exercise power? (and, in consequence, create zones of powerlessness) He reminds the reader that “‘authors’ do not simply ‘invent’ novels […] They are themselves ‘invented’ by readers who are ‘authors’, working through linguistic, artistic and cultural conventions, and so on”(Waugh, p. 134). According to Dovey, Foe has dramatized the Foucauldian notion of the "author-function" as a regulatory principle (Novels of J. M. Coetzee 333–34). Coetzee exploits the concept of the "fathering" of prose narrative through a parody of one of its "founders," Daniel Defoe. Annamaria Carusi has taken this process further in a materialist-psychoanalytic analysis of the novel as an allegory of narrative as a form of commodity in which a chain of association is created between notions of truth, the body, and story, to be installed and circulated as Law (“Foe ” 137–39).