MORAL SQUALOR IN J. M. COETZEE’S WORKS

MAHESH KUMAR KUSHWAH
RESEARCH SCHOLAR

One of the defining characteristics of the works of J. M. Coetzee is the moral squalor shown in his works. ‘The Life and Times of Michael K’ is Coetzee vintage. The protagonist Michael is a simpleton to the point of being mentally challenged, having been institutionalized in childhood. The apartheid war is going on all around him, but his is a life completely calm, until his mother falls ill. He then embarks on a journey to her birthplace.

This becomes his quest, his purpose. On the way his mother dies but he continues the journey. At last he reaches the supposed birthplace of his mother and stays in the wilderness there, trying to live off the land. He is drawn into the war a few times but he refuses to participate in it and again and again returns to try living a simple life. At last he returns to the city, with the same sense of confusion and disorientation of war.

The protagonist Michael is a non-conformist, who is unwilling to join the war between the civilization and the barbarians, on either side.

Coetzee treats Michael K differently than his previous heroes. He is neither a brutalized caricature of a racist-colonialist like the hero of Dusklands, nor is he the romantic hero of ‘Waiting for the Barbarians’ who, in a Quixotic act, turns against his own civilization, completely taking the side of the black Africans.

Coetzee shows a mature stance in this novel. Unlike his unequivocal leftist sympathies of previous works, in this novel he just theoretically sympathizes with the barbarians. In practice he prefers living off the land, unconcerned with any side of war and favouring a Romantic return to the nature.
This is a disturbing novel. Ten pages into it and you feel dejected, confused and overcome by a sad lethargy.

In varying degrees, this is true of every work of Coetzee. Every page of his reflects the confusion arising from the African history. The delicate intellect of Coetzee looks with confusion at the innate violence of South Africa, the hopelessness of a nation made of irreconcilable halves and irresolvable issues, a nation clubbed together by historical accidents of its racist-colonialist past. The only emotions it can evoke are of horror, dismay fear and pity. But at the end every feeling mutates into a melancholic confusion. This is Coetzee’s reaction to the African tragedy. And this is the hero’s reaction too. Michael K is Coetzee, minus his intellect.

Michael also reflects the political orientation of Coetzee:

“Politically, the raznochintsev can go either way. But during his student years he, this person, this subject, my subject, steers clear of the right. As a child in Worcester he has seen enough of the Afrikaner right, enough of its rant, to last him a lifetime. In fact, even before Worcester he has perhaps seen more of cruelty and violence than should have been allowed to a child. So as a student he moves on the fringes of the left without being part of the left. Sympathetic to the human concerns of the left, he is alienated, when the crunch comes, by its language – by all political language, in fact.”

Skimming along the fringes of left but not completely owning it. The novel asserts that a ‘simple’ man like Michael does not take any side. The only wish he has is to live a ‘simple’ life with Nature. But the reader suspects that the simplicity of Michael is not that simple at all. He muses whether it is an indifference forced upon a simple personality by a superior intellect, an intellect committed to a certain point of view, certain ideology.

A simple man would not have remained indifferent to such a human tragedy. He would have reacted with anger, pity, sorrow or dejection.

Such a vision as that of Michael can only be that of a white male of South Africa who is fiercely committed to the race, which is not his own and in consequence rejected by both of them. Only he can be so detached, so unable to take sides.

Any less delicate personality than Coetzee may have reacted otherwise. Such a literary genius as his deserved to be born in the pre-Victorian or Victorian England, patronized by the court or nobles. But unfortunately for him and fortunately for us he was born in a deeply disturbed time and a deeply disturbed place. All of his works stacked one upon other tell us this story, the story of a delicate literary genius trying to comprehend and prevent all the misery but at last unable to
do so. The fact that Coetzee finally migrated to Australia shows that it came to a breaking point finally where he could no longer watch what he considered as moral squalor.

Though ‘Foe’ is on a completely different theme but it also shows moral squalor. Foe is a play on the name of Defoe. The title is very suggestive. It tells us that Defoe told the story from the point of the view of the white colonial master. The story is a twist on the famous story of Robinson Crusoe. In this case the castaway is a woman, who meets Friday on the forsaken island. To her, Friday is not such a slave as he was to Crusoe. But Friday is not communicative and it is hard to know what he feels. It seems that he has almost no feelings and no reactions.

After they are rescued the heroine, Susan Barton goes to a writer Daniel Foe to write hers and Friday’s story. But Foe radically changes Susan’s version and the story which is finally published has no resemblance to the original one. Coetzee is making the charge that every story told by the Europeans is a lie.

But he goes further. He does not only doubt the intentions of European colonialists. He doubts the very process of story-telling. In his view, it is not possible to tell a story at the first place. The story is corrupted as it is told. Even more, reality is corrupted as it is witnessed. So the meaning which comes out of Foe is: the story of Robinson Crusoe and by extensions, the story of the European conquest of the world was distorted at three levels, first at the level of witnessing, then at the level of story-telling and at last as a wilful distortion by the Christian, white European colonialists.

Here Coetzee misapplies some concepts of modern science disastrously. He falls prey to the fashionable nonsense as is expected of post-modernist writers. They hide their artistic incompetency by calling simple story-telling as old-fashioned and misapply some modern scientific concepts, which make their craft incomprehensible. At last they insert their leftist political agenda. This is what is done to Foe.

Although Coetzee does not believe in the art of story-telling but still he keeps writing to further his political agenda. After reading Foe, one is left with a confused story but with strong feelings against the Europeans.

Coetzee’s fiction can be divided into three periods: early, middle and late Coetzee. Early and late periods are similar in structure and orientation. They are abundant in traits dominant in Coetzee: despair, loneliness and boredom. In the Heart of the Country is one such early work.

Like Dusklands, its style is very obscure. Like most authors, Coetzee was more experimenting in his style at the beginning of his writing career. In IHC dreams blend into reality, making them
highly indistinguishable. The themes are again colonialism, racism and sex. The story is told from the first person point of view of Magda, the daughter of a white colonialist. There is almost no story, which is not surprising. Whatever story is there, it is rendered meaningless by the obscure style. What the reader encounters is a 150 pages long succession of dreamy, meaningless sequences. Oh, but there is the quintessential Coetzee rape scene…

Andre Brink’s comment on the book is highly revealing:

“It says something about the loneliness, about the craving for love, about the relation between master and slave and between white and black, and about man’s earthly anguish and longing for salvation…”

As Brink observes, it says ‘something’. What is this something, nobody knows. Not even Coetzee. He was not able to find out what this something is, till the end of his career. And it would be highly disrespectful of a reader to ask him what this something was, as an artist does not have to explain his art; as an artist is not responsible for the stuff he creates.

A reader does not have to look for definite answers when he reads a work of art. But what if the writer makes highly spurious charges in an obscure style and then refuses to be accountable for his insupportable claims? ‘In the Heart of the Country’ is such a case. Coetzee could have rewritten the novel in just a few lines by changing Brink’s comment a bit: I want to say something about the loneliness, about the craving for love, about the relation between master and slave and between white and black, and about man’s earthly anguish and longing for salvation.

REFERENCES

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