Abstract

The aim of the dissertation is to look at the various facets of pain that regulate or shape life. Specifically, the dissertation brings forth the importance of narrative in the understanding of pain, in the context of J. M. Coetzee’s works. It aims to engage with the nature of pain that Coetzee deals with in his novels, the relevance of narrative to have a clear knowledge about the complexities of pain and the understanding of pain beyond medical parameters. The dissertation also aims to show how the discourse is essential for traversing the different unexplained aspects of pain in human and nonhuman animal life.

J. M. Coetzee’s proclamation “pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt” (Waiting for the Barbarians 03) invokes pain as a fundamental category. Such an invocation raises several questions: if pain is truth, what kind of a truth is it? What is the substance of this truth? Is pain truly representable? How is this knowledge of truth important? Why is everything else a matter of doubt except pain? Who authenticates that something is pain? How do we contextualize different forms of pain? How does pain guide our sense of being? How does a narrative of pain help understand the complexities of pain? How do narratives help in understanding the psychological, social, and political aspects of pain? This dissertation examines such questions and other related issues by looking at the narrative of pain in selected works of J. M. Coetzee spread over four decades: Dusklands (1974), Waiting for the Barbarians (1980), Life & Times of Michael K (1983), Age of Iron (1990), Disgrace (1999), The Lives of Animals (1999), Elizabeth Costello (2003), Slow Man (2005), and The Childhood of Jesus (2013).
The basic premise of this dissertation is to explore the meaning of pain in Coetzee’s selected works; further, it intends to show that both physical and mental pain can be uttered, but that utterance is always subject to the individual’s ability and circumstance through which s/he expresses her or his pain. I investigate the various dimensions of pain as it is represented through the texts. I also observe that the knowledge of the anatomy of the body helps in understating the complexities of pain. I believe that the narrative of pain allows one to see pain as a hermeneutic tool that helps in understanding what it is to be human in all its bewilderment and confusion.

I focus on the narrative dimensions of pain in the first and second chapters. I demonstrate that fictional engagement in the understanding of pain helps unfold various sociocultural and economic issues related with psychological pain. Citing the works of different artists, poets, novelists, and dramatists, I show how art and literature express pain and engage our attention towards the role of agency in understanding pain. I embark on an interdisciplinary exploration of the dynamics of the importance of J. M. Coetzee’s work in the understanding of pain. The thesis elaborates upon the point that physical and emotional pain are intricately fused and difficult to disentangle. I try to see Coetzee’s engagement with the idea of discontent, its relationship to his critical activity and fiction, which rests upon the concept of ‘higher truth,’ without claiming that there is only one form of truth. The third chapter contextualizes Coetzee’s notion of mother and motherhood. It demonstrates his representations of mother characters from different strata of life to emphasize that motherhood is also a matter of choice, though in many societies it is controlled and accepted as a role. Coetzee does not deal with the pain of pregnancy as of becoming-a-mother but moves towards become-a-mother. The chapter shows that writing is a process of becoming. In the process of becoming, one transgresses one’s self and plays the role of the other. In the fourth chapter, I argue for the inclusion of the nonhuman animals as the Other. The
nonhuman animal’s pain has been ignored in various medical definitions and explanations. Human beings have attributed meaninglessness to the nonhuman animal’s pain, and have ignored the sheer amount of cruelty directed at them. I engage with this question in relation to the analogies that Coetzee draws through his fictional characters, especially Elizabeth Costello in *Elizabeth Costello*—the pursuit of those intentions being not rhetorical but a constitutive feature of Coetzee’s work. In the fifth chapter, I argue that Coetzee develops a way of writing that is philosophically slow in nature, which is characterized by a moral and ethical endeavour. His narrative emphasizes that slowness in pain is a process of learning and understanding experiential entities through existential, political and social crises. Finally, I move towards the end of the dissertation *without-an-end* as I believe that there is no end to pain. The study invites for further interpretation in the ellipsis of my arguments and observations. I suggest that pain is essential to human beings for self-understanding, and life itself summons pain when it first comes to existence.

Pain is our way of negotiating with the world we inhabit, problematizing our relation to ourselves. Suffering, vulnerability, mortality, loneliness—these are the fundamental conditions of life. There is no immediate access to understand the meaning of this truth. There is a need to approach the study on narratives of pain with an open mind, welcoming its multiple facets—sensory (a physiological fact), perceptive (cognitive or emotional experience), literary, and philosophical.