

TRACES OF POWER DYNAMICS AND CLASS STRUGGLE IN J.M. COETZEE'S WAITING FOR BARBARIANS AND DISGRACE.

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to study the traces of Power Dynamics and class struggle in the two novels, *The Waiting for Barbarians (1980)* and *Disgrace (1999)* by the eminent South African writer, John Maxwell Coetzee. Both the novels are world renowned works which earned Coetzee international fame. Coetzee received James Tait Black Memorial prize, Geoffrey Memorial prize and CAN prize for *Waiting for Barbarians* and *Disgrace* added more feathers to his reputation by giving him Man Booker Prize (1999) and Nobel Prize (2003). South Africa had to face racial discrimination, violence, torture, and inhuman treatment under Apartheid rule till 1994. Apartheid was a legal policy of the Government which segregated and discriminate the whites from the blacks. It was used as a tool to exert social and political power and subdue the natives of the country. The black natives were brutally tortured if they tried to oppose or attack the whites. Under the guise of Apartheid the white rulers operated superiority and hegemony. J.M. Coetzee, in the two novels, has attempted to depict the workings of power dynamics and class struggle in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. *Waiting for Barbarians* is gloomy and vivid portrayal of the torture and violence inflicted on the Magistrate and the black natives of the land by the Empire. *Disgrace* narrates the disgraceful incidents of life of David Lurie, a professor of Communications, in post-apartheid South Africa. His life meets innumerable incidents of ups and downs, when he is disgracefully expelled from the university on the charge of rape of a student.

Keywords: Apartheid in South Africa, Violence and Torture, Power Dynamics, Class Struggle

INTRODUCTION

South Africa is a very significant country in Africa continent. It has a very diverse cultural, political and social history. It is very faithfully reflected in the literature written in South Africa. African literature refers to both the oral and written literature. The oral literature of Africa was exposed to the Europe only during the slave trade. The stories of African myths, songs and sayings are still found in the Caribbean's and America. As Anisa G. Mujawar argues "An important feature of the African oral traditions is their close link with music, folktales, proverbs, riddles and myths. The African writers began with scratch because of the absence of the traditions of writing. They had to depend on oral tradition." (*Violence in the novels of J.M. Coetzee, 2011, 1*)

African literature of the late colonial period (from the World War I to African Independence) was increasingly written on the themes of Independence, liberation and negritude. Since most of African countries got their independence in 1950s and 1960s, the African literature has grown tremendously. Many writers who were once deprived from education, started writing about their people and countries. They have given expression to torture, violence, and structure of power dynamics and class struggle which was faced by them. Consequently they got world recognition and fame. Wole Soyinka was the first black African writer to get the prestigious Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986.

South African literature particularly refers to the literature written in South Africa. It has 11 national (official) languages like Africaans, English, Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Pedi, Tswana, Venda, Siswati, Tsonga and Ndebele. But the majority of literature is written in English and Africaans. South African literature holds a significant place in the history of literature by focussing on much debated themes like violence and racial discrimination. The black African writers, in their writings, expressed their anger against racial discrimination. They harshly and strongly condemned the scornful and discriminatory attitude of Whites against the Black natives. The racial friction is often depicted by the literatures of all languages of South Africa. South African English writers like Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer, Lewis Nkosi, ZakesMda, EskiyaMphahlele, Bassie Head have made a significant contribution

in in making and enriching South African Literature. J.M. Coetzee too occupies a very significant place in South African Literature.

John Maxwell Coetzee is a renowned writer and novelist of 20th century. He occupies a prominent position among the white South African writers. He was born in 1940 in Cape Town, South Africa. He taught English at State University of New York in Buffalo from 1968-1971. After returning to South Africa, he taught at Cape Town University. Apart from that, Coetzee also taught at State University New York, John Hopkins University, Harvard University, Stanford University and the University of Chicago. He is a multifaceted personality as a novelist, essayist, professor of literature and linguistics, translator and literary critic. He has written 11 novels so far. His debut novel *Dusklands* was published in 1974. His novel *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) won South Africa's literary prize, the CNA prize. He received international recognition and fame with the publication of *Waiting for Barbarians* (1980). He was awarded Britain's Booker prize for his novel, *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983). His other great works are *Foe* (1986), *Age of Iron* (1990), *The Master of Peterburg* (1994) and *Disgrace* (1999). Coetzee has written some fictionalised memoirs like *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2002). In 2002, he took the citizenship of Australia and settled there.

In the year 2003, he was awarded Nobel Prize for literature. He was awarded the Order of Mapungubwe (gold class) by South African government in 2005 for his exceptional contribution to literature for putting South Africa on world stage. Coetzee belongs to the lineage of South African white writers. In their works, they have raised the voice against the violent and exploitative system of apartheid of South Africa. His novels depict how the white minority rulers in the name of apartheid perpetrated violence on the black native people of South Africa. He deals with the themes of racial discrimination, oppression, violence against the natives, exploitation, human rights, injustice, moral and ethical issues. His novels faithfully depict the power dynamics of a dominant and violent state which affects peoples' life under apartheid and post-apartheid system regimes.

South Africa has been notoriously popular for its policy of Apartheid which started (unofficially) as racial segregation in 17th century by the white European settlers. The term *Apartheid* is taken from Afrikaans or Dutch meaning "apartness" or "separateness". Apartheid etymologically means separateness. Apartheid was a social and political system in South Africa. When National Party formed government in 1948 in South Africa, it implemented apartheid which continued till 1994. It was a system of institutionalized and legalised racial discrimination, oppression and exploitation. It had legally granted the minority whites the legal rights and power to rule over the majority blacks. Because of apartheid, racial segregation and white supremacy had become a central and major policy of the government. It segregated a majority population of black natives who were living there since thousand years from the minority and threw them into darkness. They were deprived from all facilities and rights, and were treated as sub-humans. Personal freedom, freedom of movement, and freedom of speech were badly curtailed during this period. It inflicted huge cultural, ideological, social, economic and psychological destruction on the South African blacks. Apartheid as a law forced South Africans to live in separate colonies from the white minority. Consequently, it affected every aspect of social life on a large scale. It was a tool to exert power and domination upon the blacks. Bishnupriya Padhi & Gopabandhu Das in, *Dismantling Apartheid in South Africa...write:*

Apartheid, considered most abhorrent by the civilized world, was the order of the day in South Africa. Blacks comprising nearly 85 per cent of the total population were subjugated by the minority whites employing the most reprehensible tactics. All humanitarian considerations were trampled upon. The blacks were denied the necessities of life. Exploitation-political, economic and social formed the very cornerstone on which the edifice of apartheid was erected. Popular leaders of the majority population were put into jails for years together. Women and children were also not spared. There was hardly any facet of life on which the impact of racism was not felt. (Padhi and Das, 2004, 1)

J. M. Coetzee's all novels are faithful portrayals of the exploitative and violent system of apartheid. All the characters of his novels directly or indirectly have been victims of this heinous and oppressive system. The oppressive state of South Africa mercilessly uses violent means to torture and crush the natives. All his characters i.e. the Magistrate & the Barbarian girl in *Waiting for Barbarians*, Lucy & David in *Disgrace*, Michael K in *Life & Times of Michael K*, are victims of the oppressive system. Chandra Sekar Pandian in, *The Impact of Oppression in Select Fiction of J.M. Coetzee* writes; "Coetzee's works are fictional and symbolic statements opposing oppression. In most of his novels, the element of oppression and the attitude of the oppressor are displayed effectively to argue against them." (Pandian, 8)

Waiting for Barbarians (1980) and *Disgrace* (1999) very faithfully present this oppressive world of Apartheid, its cruelty and violence. *Waiting for Barbarians* is about the oppression and torture of the Magistrate who is the protagonist and the native people of an unknown land. The Magistrate has been posted there by the Empire to save the land from the attack of Barbarians. Since the Magistrate is posted there, he becomes familiar with

the natives of the place. He has developed his image as a good and benevolent person. The empire wants to hunt down the natives of the land, whom it calls as Barbarians as they pose a threat to empire and its establishments. They put forth a counter insurgency against the empire, as the empire has graven their land and resources for economic and political purpose. Thus the empire, through Colonel Joll, adopts very coercive and violent means to kill and suppress the barbarians. Captain Joll has captured a barbarian girl, whom he beats and tortures mercilessly to know about the whereabouts of the barbarians. The magistrate feels sympathetic towards the barbarian girl and takes her to his room and cures her bounds.

When Colonel Joll finds that the magistrate has helped the barbarian girl whom he crippled, he considers it as an act of treason. He punishes the magistrate very harshly and inhumanly in public spectacle. He is physically and mentally tortured. The empire which holds the absolute power, adopts all kinds of powers to punish and crush anyone who tries to rebel against it. The magistrate too is not spared from such brutality. The magistrate says; "I stand before them hiding my nakedness, nursing my sore hand, a tired old bear made tame by too much baiting. 'Run' Mandel says. I run around the yard under the blazing sun. When I slacken, he slaps me on the buttocks with his cane and i trot faster."(*Waiting for Barbarians*, 127).The empire in order to crush the barbarians and the magistrate, inflict the worst kind of tortures. They are treated as animals, put into hellish captives, and are not given food also. The magistrate is forced to bear the pains and stench of his wounds.

The novel "*Disgrace*" is about Professor David Lurie, who teaches communications in a technical university at Cape Town. He is twice divorced and unsatisfied with his personal and professional life, and consequently loses everything in life: his reputation, peace of mind, his job, success and daughter. Being fond of teaching Romantic literature, he does not take interest in teaching communications. He is rumoured to be a womaniser and has illicit relations with many women. His life is engulfed into troubles when he rapes one of his students, Issac Melanie. He is found guilty of the rape by the authority, and disgracefully expelled from the university. He moves to his daughter Lucy's place (farm) at East Cape Town. His agony and disgrace is further aggravated, when his daughter is raped by three black men. Both the father and daughter suffer from disgrace in different ways. Lucy Valerie Graham, in *Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J.M.Coetzee's Disgrace* comments:

If *Disgrace* is 'half campus novel, half anti-pastoral novel, then the two rapes taking place in the novel reveal the power dynamics in each setting, and in the respective literary mode. Lurie's misuse of Melanie exposes power operating at the level of gender and institutional level...(Graham, 437-8)

The story of "*Disgrace*" is located in post-apartheid South Africa, where all political, social and cultural institutions have changed and reversed. The whites, who once used to have power and domination in apartheid, are in minority now. Still at certain places, especially at academic institution and others, the whites have some representations and influence. David Lurie, attempts to exert authoritative influence and rapes his student. He is summoned by the investigating committee to confess his guilt, which he deliberately declines. Instead in his defence he says; "I was not myself. I was no longer a fifty-year-old divorcee at a loose end. I became a servant of Eros." (*Disgrace*, 52).

Both novels, *Waiting for Barbarians* and *Disgrace* are fine portrayals of Violence, torture, oppression. While *Waiting for Barbarians* is set into colonial and apartheid and *Disgrace* in independent and post-apartheid and South Africa, both novels expose the traces of power dynamics and class struggle at the core. The apartheid state authorities used to apply not only all coercive forces of power but ideological forces also to suppress their enemies. It was powerful and all seeing and held utmost power and worked as Gramscian *Hegemonic* state and Foucault's *panoptic* state to have surveillance. As Peter Barry in *Beginning Theory* says: "The panoptic state, however, maintains its surveillance not through by direct physical force and intimidation, but by the power of its discursive practices".(Barry, 171-172). *Waiting for Barbarians* also exposes the brutality of the powerful empire upon the natives. The magistrate and the barbarians both are tortured like animals. In "*Torture and the Novel: J.M. Coetzee's 'Waiting for the Barbarians'*" Susan Van Zanten Gallagher and J.M. Coetzee argue:

This man of conscience, known only as the Magistrate, is the chief administrator of a small village on the frontier between the civilization of the empire and the wastelands inhabited by the nomadic Barbarians...As Colonel Joll interrogates and tortures Barbarian prisoners, the magistrate becomes increasingly sympathetic towards the victims.(Gallagher & Coetzee, 278)

Lurie and his daughter in *Disgrace* are the victims of the new and horrible system. When Lucy is raped by three black men in *Disgrace*, David Lurie says; "It was history speaking through them, a history of wrong". (*Disgrace*, 156) In *The Politics of Shame and Redemption in J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace*, Sue Kossew states:

Disgrace is a novel in which bodies are very strongly linked to power, desire and disgrace. It through the exercise of his social power and authority, as a university professor having an affair with a young female

student to satisfy his sexual desires, that David falls from grace. Lucy's rape on her farm by three black men is, similarly, the exercise of power by those who have it over who do not. (Kossew, 156)

In conclusion, *Disgrace* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, unfold before the reader the traces of power dynamics and class struggle through their stories. J.M. Coetzee tries to portray these traces in the form apartheid and post-apartheid state. Violence, exploitation, injustice, oppression, etc. are significant traces of power dynamics and class struggle. In Coetzee's novels, women are main victims. They are raped, oppressed and kept silent by whether they are, the Barbarian Girl or Melanie and Lucy. The situation of both women in *Disgrace*, signals to a system where victims are forced and compelled to be silent and thus make collude with their rapists. In *Disgrace*, Lucy decides not report about her rape to the police instead she prefers to be calm and bear the brunt of rape. J.M. Coetzee like other South African white writers attacks apartheid of South Africa in his novels. He presents before us an allegorical story to depicts the injustice, violence in the world of South Africa. He attempts to explore the complex strands of power which underlie a colonial society. He also wants to make us aware of the violation of human rights by the powerful, which is a great threat to the world peace and humanity.

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