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**THE QUEST AND STRUGGLE
FOR RECOGNITION IN
J. M. COETZEE'S DUSKLANDS**



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John Maxwell Coetzee is South African by birth and at present he has become an Australian citizen. His father was a lawyer and his mother was a schoolteacher. He is descendent of early Dutch settlers dating to the 17th century. He has also Polish roots, his great-grandfather Baltazar Dubiel was a Polish immigrant to South Africa. On 6 March 2006 Coetzee became an Australian citizen in a ceremony presided over by Australian Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone. Following the ceremony, Coetzee said that “I was attracted by the free and generous spirit of the people, by the beauty of the land itself and—when I first saw Adelaide—by the grace of the city that I now have the honour of calling my home.”¹

As a novelist and literary critic as well as a translator, Coetzee won the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature. He is influenced by Samuel Beckett, Ford Madox Ford, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Daniel Defoe, Franz Kafka. Coetzee's novels are remarkable parables of the contemporary political situation in the Republic of South Africa. It is equally true that they are remarkably 'intertextual works'. Nadine Gordimer rightly comments about the writings

of J. M. Coetzee in the Preface which is written to the *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*, “That a critique is firstly a dialogue between critic and critic is clear in this collection, where the pollen of an insight garnered from Coetzee's work is blown through the pages of scholarly journals to fertilise a second generation of insights or mutations in contradiction.

The exchange serves as both expansive and corrective in the placing of a work within the confines of current literary theory, which, in the regime of the intellect, arrives from successive intellectual traditions at the linguistic, philosophical, metaphysical and material possibilities inherent in contemporary consciousness, rather as in the regime of governments the frontiers decided in past wars, the price of oil and the possibilities of extending human life or destroying for ever its sustenance determine the ethos of sociopolitical power.

Criticism, like the literature it propagates itself on, seeks to transcend its time and is formed by its time; this is reflected fascinatingly in a dominant debate in this collection.”²

Coetzee is a first-world novelist writing out of a South African context, from within a culture. South Africa, his native land, appears

at once central and marginal to his concerns. There are the existential anxieties of Coetzee's novels to the context of South African colonialism. Coetzee, since his first novel *Dusklands* (1974), has deliberately focused and centred his fiction on the South African situation. He has tried to denounce injustice to unmask fears and express certainties about South Africa. He has given voice to the social, political and racial elements that in the South African era, were silenced for a long time. His focus on the South Africa has begun with an exploration of the origins of Afrikaner society.

It has been explored through the narration of the adventures of Jacobus Coetzee who is the protagonist of 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' [a novella]. This together with 'The Vietnam Project' forms his first published book *Dusklands*. Jacobus Coetzee is a fictitious character. 'Coetzee' is nonetheless modelled on a precise historical figure Jacobus Coetse whos is an ancestor of the author himself. Through this, the author has tried to quest for 'self' and he has struggled for his own recognition, identity in the South African apartheid situation. Coetzee's novels expose the fact that identity does not exist. Identity is understood as a fundamental truth about the individual. Identity does not exist because identity is achieved in language. It is simply mediation. The meaning of the literary text is reader-oriented.

It is just as the individual's identity which is determined by the contexts the person finds himself or herself in. In Coetzee's novel, the context becomes the intertext. This lies at the heart both of our lives and of the work of art. Coetzee's most self-reflexive novels can be read as part of a larger discourse on identity. Coetzee, in his later novels, has developed the theme of the formation of the Afrikaner national

identity. It is through the representation of the search for a personal identity which is enacted by the protagonist Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*. Coetzee deals with the formation of identity in *Dusklands*, *In the Heart of the Country*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

There are single individuals or the entire Empires who try to achieve recognition from the Other. Coetzee has set out to investigate the role of language that plays in the constitution of identity and the correlated issue of the power. His novel stages the confrontation between the 'I', the 'You' and the 'Other' in its various expressions. Towards the closing of the war in Vietnam and beginning of the dramatic increase in state violence, Coetzee published *Dusklands* in 1974. The first draft of the novel was written when he was in the USA (1965-1971). Coetzee's objects of interest are the thorny issue of power, the representation of the relationship between Western and non-Western cultures, the analysis of the discourse of colonialism.

Dusklands demonstrates all these objects. *Dusklands* can be described as the kind of 'historiographic metafiction'. It is a typical example of postmodernist literature. It is a novel which is both self-reflexive and yet exposes the history as a human construct. In *Dusklands*, we witness the attempt of Eugene to obtain some sort of recognition from the Other and achieve the identity that in his opinion could follow. There is the tension between the sense of impotence and the omnipotent attitudes.

The tension between these two impulses leads Eugene to the final crisis and his self-deconstruction. It is his self-destruction. The protagonist's way towards annihilation is depicted in the novel. It has identified its origin with the unconscious disgust which Eugene

feels for himself. The novel opens with the sentence, “.. my name is Eugene Dawn. I cannot help that..... here I am under the thumb of a manager, a type before whom my first instinct is to crawl.”³ [p. 1] This makes clear his self-pity. These are his attitudes in his private life.

He describes his marriage as a ‘sad connection’. His sexual relationship with his wife Marylyn becomes a mere duty. His sexual difficulties become symptomatic of his incapacity to have meaningful relationship with the surrounding women. He cannot accept to suffer transforming the thought of Marylyn in the company of other men in a source of excitement. [p.11] He is unable to satisfy his wife. Therefore, he perceives the woman as a hole which he cannot fill.

He replaces the ‘real object’ that tendencies entail with his fantasies. His obsessive relationship of sex he has with the photographs problematic. Eugene did every attempt to obtain recognition from his manager and his wife and he failed in it. Then he tries to achieve that recognition and a form of identity in different arenas. His relationship with the child seems doomed to fail. Soon he begins to feel resentment towards the boy. He punishes him and accuses him of being a burden. According to Eugene, Marylyn is responsible for every fault he can find in his son’s character.

He declares that “All faults of character are faults of upbringing.” [p.44] Eugene, isolating himself at the Loco Motel, tries to set himself free. He could not realise the core of all his problems residing within himself. Then he attempts to ascribe his problems to external causes like his job, his manager, his wife, his mother. Eugene increasingly isolates himself in his own world. Eugene, completely out of his control, stabs his son. This is the elimination of

his past ‘self’. He looks for a solution to his problems both in his professional and in his personal life. His attempts fail which are contrary to his expectations. This brings him very close to the total destruction of his ‘self’. The family drama of Eugene finds a correspondence in the Vietnamese conflict. In his private and professional life, he feels great contempt for himself.

In relation to the Vietnamese population, he develops an omnipotent attitude. This enables him to suggest the total destruction of Vietnam. Eugene imposes his veto over the union of the Vietnamese children with their mother country. Thus, he struggles for the recognition at all levels. He attempts to disrupt the family constellation.

The plan of destruction of Vietnam becomes the cause of conflict which takes place within his unconscious. He tries to transform his powerlessness into a position of power. He makes many efforts but he cannot search for recognition. He cannot assume an identity within his own family and in his work relationships. Thus he remains a failure in his achievement of recognition as a representative of USA military. Eugene tries to achieve the position of mastery.

This leads him to alienation, deformation and madness. Thus this brings him to the destruction of the ‘self’. In the second novella of *Dusklands*, the protagonist Jacobus is a problematical character. Like Eugene, Jacobus has strong sense of omnipotence and feelings of impotence. This takes the form of a fundamental fear of the Other. Jacobus plays at once the role of both the victim and the victimiser. He becomes both the violator and the violated. As a victimiser, his act is characterized by the violence which differentiates his sexual relations with the native

women. He is afraid of the fact that there is no distinction between the dream and reality, the interior and the exterior, the self and the Other. He expresses after Klawer's death : "I was alone. I had no Klawer to record. I exulted like a young man whose mother has just died. Here I was free to initiate myself into the desert. I yodelled, I growled, I hissed, I roared, I screamed, I clucked, I whistled ... I composed and sang a little ditty : 'God, I shouted : God, God, God, why do you love me so ?' ... " [95-96]

This kind of fear leads him to search for ways to distinguish himself from the external world. Then he admits to his fundamental dependence on the Other for his own existence. Finally, there is the final stage of the process of self-destruction. Jacobus admits that he glutted himself on a "a day of bloodlust and anarchy." [p.99] With the final bloodshed, the text concludes.

Thus he has failed to achieve recognition and a form of identity within the Symbolic System. Then he tries to evade language in

order to obtain an identity of 'self'. He tries to overcome all taboos in an attempt to ensure his real existence. At last, the only identity he could achieve is that of the exterminator of the 'savages'. He reveals the total degeneration of his self and his total self-absorption. Then he concludes his narrative as : "The truer truth is that my death is merely a winter story I tell to frighten myself, . . . A world without me is inconceivable. . . when the day comes you will find that whether I am alive or dead, whether i ever lived or never be born, has never been of real concern to me. I have other things to think about." [107]

Thus the major issues of identity and struggle for recognition constitute the central elements of Coetzee's fiction. The search for the identity of the protagonists becomes emblematic of the Afrikaners' search for national identity. Coetzee presents distinct historical settings in this novel in which there is quest for identity and struggle for recognition and the narrator's violence presents itself as unconstrained expression of his nature.

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