

DISCOURSE OF SILENCE - WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE NOVELS OF COETZEE

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Abstract:

JM Coetzee's writing falls under the post modern philosophies as his writings can be interpreted in a different way as he didn't focus any particular concept of writing. Moreover, he didn't want to term himself under any particular theory. As a writer, he is capable of making people to think on their own about the concept of Post modern ideas, where they are familiar and inculcated it and that are the reason for his success as a writer. This paper brings in a concoction of the ideas of the writer based on Existentialism, where the oscillation in the characters, especially women, are harnessed between socio cultural aspects and existentialism, with respect to J M Coetzee. In his writings, the woman characters are given less importance compared with the male characters. Coetzee, being a man, was ignorant of the female emotions and that is one of the reason for failing to express the portions of the female characters.

Keywords

Existentialism, Absurdity, Social –Cultural aspects, Survival and identity

John Maxwell Coetzee's involvement to literature has been recognized globally and awarded with Nobel Prize for literature in 2005. He is an expert in exposing the political and social condition in South Africa and in his writing; the reality of the other world is exposed in depth. Many of his novels deal with the idea of isolation and survival of characters in times of apartheid. In the most awful situation, the characters in his novels try their best not to lose their dignity also they attempt to make sustenance from the worst. As a piece of literature, his writing has received both positive and negative critical claims for writing about the South Africa. In an interview Coetzee mentioned, "I don't respond to Europe or the United States in the same way as I do to South Africa. And I would probably feel a certain sense of artificial background construction if I were to write fiction set in another environment." (qtd.Rhedin 10). In his writing, there is no direct accusation of the oppression is given but through symbols he had expressed his opinion about the suppression of the others characters. Even though he has not

mentioned any particular place or time still it is easy to figure out that is the silence protest against the realistic situation in South Africa.

The novels taken for this paper, includes, *Disgrace*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and *In the Heart of the Country*. The female characters in these novels were not much importance to speak their mind out or to take their stands. In Coetzee's writing, there is a void in portraying the female characters and this emptiness is considered in this paper. *Disgrace*, it is narrated in the perspective of the male character, David Lurie. David Lurie, works as an English professor and was not happy with his personal and professional life. He takes solace, by having a physical intimacy with a prostitute and due to circumstance; he ends up in the urban community with his daughter. The novel takes a turn from urban to rural place and there he is pushed to a situation where he takes a drastic step in order to end the chaos in his heart and continues surviving in the urban place with his daughter.

In David Lurie's life, he encounters three women and they inflict different kinds of emotion and pain. In the beginning of the novel, David is having a relationship with a prostitute, Soraya and it can be said that she is of his daughter's age. Still they didn't find it hard to get into relationship even though there are differences between them. David, by seeing her on weekends, shares his professional problems with her and she listens to him patiently. "Soraya is not her real name that he is sure of." (3) Both of them decided that they should not interfere in their personal life and know their purpose of meeting well and they didn't try to know much about them especially Soraya wants to hide about her life. David, once he meets her on the road along with her children, on seeing them he wants to greet her; but Soraya ignores him and leaves from the place. From then, she stops meeting him and tries to break all the ties with him. Even though he was born and lived among women still he failed to understand the emotions of them. "His thoughts turn, despite himself, to the other father, the real one. Does he have any inkling of what is up to, or has he elected the bliss of ignorance?" (7) He kept chasing her as he feels attachment, behind the attachment; there is curiosity to know the reason behind her disappearance which shuns the behavior. "You are harassing me in my house. I demand you will never phone me here again, never." (10) David was surprised for hearing the shrillness in her tone also she was commanding him not to call her again. This is the place where the female character is not explained by the writer.

J M Coetzee failed to express the perspective of Soraya and there is no reason given from the writer for her behavior. According to David, Soraya, the most mysterious women as there are many questions lingered in the mind. Secondly, Melanie, the relationship between them is not welcomed in the society, as they are breaking many constraints in the society. David ends up with a physical intimacy with his student, Melanie Isaacs, from his Romantics class. He knows well that he is not going to develop any feeling for her as he is clear about the differences between them yet he gives importance to the waves between them. "Like falling in love. Do the young still fall in love, or is that mechanism obsolete by now, unnecessary, quaint, like steam locomotion? He is out of touch, out of date. Falling in love could have fallen out of fashion and

come back again half a dozen times, for all he knows.” (13) Even in their first meeting, they casually hook up without any hesitation. He knows that his act of being extra friendly with a student can affect his life but he is not ready to deal with it as he wants to precede his relationship with her.

He knows well that she is too young to understand the relationship and he ignores it well as he is not afraid of the consequence of their relationship. “Beauty’s rose: the poem drives straight as an arrow. She does not own herself; perhaps he does not own himself either.” (18) Even though he knows that she is just a child still he is occupied with the desire which makes him to forget about the aftermaths also he assures her that he will not take their relationship too far but the intent meaning of “too far” was not explained by him. Things are new to Melaine and she didn’t know of how to react to it so she started ignoring him after their first physical intimacy but David is not ready to give up as he wants to take the relationship further. As a professor, David tries to manipulate the ideas of Melaine by teaching her about the Wordsworth poems where he questioned the archetypes in the society. He wants to deconstruct the archetypal ideas in the mind of Melaine. “We cannot live our daily lives in a realm of pure ideas, cocooned from sense-experience. The question is not, how can we keep the imagination pure, protected from the onslaughts of reality? The question has to be, can we find a way for the two to coexist?” (22)

Melaine, realizes her importance in his life and understands of how he sees their relationship moreover she discusses about his past and this is the point where she ends the relationship with him as there is no emotional bondage between them. This is the place where her consciousness haunts. She enquires about his past and the relationship which he had earlier, “Do you have pictures? I don’t collect pictures. I don’t collect women. Aren’t you collecting me? No, of course not.” (29) This incident disturbs her a lot and she wants to isolate herself from him and she didn’t want to continue any relationship with him as she wants extra attention which he is not able to give it to her. This is the place where we need to understand the psychological perspective of a woman. It is natural for a girl to get emotional attachment to David after the physical intimacy because Melaine, even though she dresses her up as modern still she is a girl of conservative ideas moreover Melaine is timid in nature. Basically Melaine’s parents are traditional and even drinking wine is denied in their family whereas Melaine after joining college, she got influenced with the modern life and got adapted to the drinking habits. In the character of Melaine, the oscillation between rural and urban ideologies takes place and she is too young to understand the nature of David.

In the nature of David, a sense of existentialism is seen as he gives more importance to the self and his personal needs. Melaine didn’t know to react to David’s need as she was not used to it. She wants to hide from him but David forces himself to her. “You are going through a difficult time, I know that, and I don’t want to make it more difficult. But I must speak to you as a teacher.” (34) She withdraws from the course but it makes her parents to worry about her. After a point of time, when she was not able to handle things so she had complains to her parents regarding the mess which she had caused in her life. David didn’t understand the nature of

Melaine which leads to losing his job and dignity. Even after this, he will not regret for the mistake which he had done instead he flees from his place. He reaches his daughter's place that stays in a rural place. His daughter, Lucy stays there in such a place as she is a lesbian. Again this is the place, where the writer failed to give detail regarding her stay in the rural place. The act of escapism from the reality is not explained by the writer as well as by David.

David, as a father didn't ask the reason of his daughter to stay far away from the family members as well as he didn't inquire his daughter. He knows well about her relationship status but he was not happy about it as he expects her to have a relationship with a male than a female. "The truth is, he does not like to think of his daughter in the throes of passion with another woman, and a plain one at that. Yet would he be any happier if the lover were a man? What does he really want for Lucy?" (86) During his stay with his daughter, he doubts Petrus, who works for her in the farming. At this time, his daughter was raped by some strangers and he wants to protect her but he was harmed by them so feels dejected for his helplessness. To his surprise, his daughter didn't want to complain to police but this gives a lot of tension to David, as he feels that she will fall sick after getting raped. "There's the risk of pregnancy," he presses on. "There's the risk of venereal infection. There's the risk of HIV. Shouldn't she see a gynaecologist as well." (106)

In the character of Melaine, there is a big transformation after the rape. In the beginning of the novel, it is mentioned that Melaine is a lesbian but after the rape she accepts to marry Petrus. It is not explained by Melaine as well as by the writer for the reason of getting married to Petrus. Moreover David wonders the nature of Melaine, "He wonders whether women would not be happier living in communities of women, accepting visits from men only when they choose. Perhaps he is wrong to think of Lucy as homosexual. Perhaps she simply prefers female company. Or perhaps that is all that lesbians are: women who have no need of men." (104) In the beginning of the novel, Melaine was more independent as she had taken decision for her life without thinking about the societal constraints but after the rape incident, there is a sense of dependency, as she got married. The act of getting married shows the change of Melaine moreover it represent the idea of archetypal. "Conscious experience is at once the most familiar thing in the world and the most mysterious. There is nothing we know about more directly than consciousness, but it is far from clear how to reconcile it with everything else we know. We know consciousness far more intimately than we know the rest of the world, but we understand the rest of the world far better than we understand consciousness." (3 Chalmers)

Waiting for the Barbarians, is narrated by the magistrate and it is set up in an unnamed land. Unlike the other colonial chief, Magistrate is kind to the Barbarians and helps them during difficult time. It is not encouraged by Colonial Joll and he wants the Magistrate to be unkind to the Barbarians, which triggers a battle between them. Colonial Joll is an exact opposite in nature when compared with the Magistrate, Joll wants to suppress and show the authoritative power to the barbarians. Colonel Joll feels superior by harming and exploiting the barbarians. As the novel proceeds, the Barbarians try to revolt against the oppressors. In order to get the truth about the

Barbarians, Colonel Joll arrest an old man and a little boy, where he harms and drains their energy physically and mentally. In the process of getting the truth, he kills the old man and scares the little boy by keeping the corpse of the dead man in the same room. All these incidents make us to understand the villainous nature of Joll similarly in these entire situations Magistrate remains quite even though he is the head of the place.

Magistrate rescues a visually challenged barbarian girl, who was begging on the streets and he wants to salvage her as she was blinded by his people. She was not born with deformity but Colonel Joll and his troops had infected the wound. There is an unidentified feeling develops in the Magistrate, while providing shelter to the Barbarian girl. He bathes her and applies ointment for the wounds. "First comes the ritual of the washing" (32) slowly the girl tries to adapt to the environment and that is the time where the magistrate wants to drop her in the forest along with her community people. Here in this novel, colonel Joll decides her life and he didn't give her space to decide, most importantly he controls her life. Again the typical colonizer attitude is seen in him as he tries to control her life unknowingly. "Where civilization entailed the corruption of barbarian virtues and the creation of a dependent people, I decided, I was opposed to civilization; and upon this resolution I based the conduct of my administration." (41) He is against to civilization still he controls her life especially this is the place where the mentality of the patriarchy is seen. He dominates her life unknowingly as he decides her place of stay. It looks like that he is helping her still there is sense of supremacy which is seen only in the nature of Magistrate. The only female character which is discussed in this novel is the barbarian girl, but the writer didn't mention any name for her as well as there is no much dialogue for her to converse. So it is understandable the life of woman in the barbarian community as well as the frontier. Whether you are civilized or uncivilized, the mentality of the people remains the same. They want to control the women and they try to take over the freedom easily with so various names, here in this novel, the magistrate instead of harming her, he gives comfort and shelter by doing this act, he takes her freedom and individuality.

Magistrate bathes her regularly and applies ointment and he didn't think about the girls feeling and he will never understand till the end of the novel. He makes every effort to check her reaction as she is emotionless. "What do I have to do to move you? These are the words I hear in my head in the subterranean murmur that has begun to take the place of conversation. 'Does no one move you?'" (47) There is subtleness in the character of Melaine and it is understandable to the audience for the weirdness in the nature. Unlike other colonizers Magistrate understands that the barbarian girl was hurt badly which leads her to stay emotionless. Compared with Colonel Joll, Magistrate is not harmful still he fails to understand the emotions of the barbarian girl. She wants to stay with him in the frontier forever, which she fails to explain to the magistrate.

She wants to have physical relationship with him as he touches her frequently to apply the ointment on the body and this makes her to get into a relationship with him but she will not express her feelings to him till the end. When Magistrate decides to drop her in the forest, he will not consult her opinion and he takes decision for her and he arranges people to accompany them

to the forest. On the way to the forest, they encountered a lot of difficult situation and the men accompanied them in their journey blamed the barbarian girl as she was bleeding. “The girl is bleeding, that time of the month has come for her. She cannot conceal it, she has no privacy, there is not the merest bush to hide behind. She is upset and the men are upset. It is the old story: a woman’s flux is bad luck, bad for the crops, bad for the hunt, bad for the horses. They grow sullen: they want her away from the horses, which cannot be, they do want her to touch their food.... You should not be waiting on me she says. I should not even be in the tent. But there is nowhere else to go. She does not question her exclusion.” (76)

This is the place where the cultural constraint is seen and especially the constraints a woman need to follow in the society. The acts of making her stay away from the daily life shows that the people especially the men’s attitude and how they see the menstruation of a woman. They find it as ugly and dirty so they alienate her and woman don’t have an option other than following it. Here the barbarian girl didn’t raise her voice when she was isolated and when someone was taking decision for her life and she didn’t reject it. During this time, Magistrate gets into intimacy with her and she didn’t refute it. It shows the mentality of the colonized where they accepts everything which is said forth to them. Moreover it shows the colonizers attitude towards the other especially the woman. This phase is witnessed universally by the majority of the woman in the world.

Colonel Joll harms the Magistrate badly and imprisons him in a separate place. At the end of the novel, the members of the frontier flee from the place along with Colonel Joll as it was captured by the native people of the land. Magistrate was set free by Colonel Joll and he was waiting for the Barbarians to return to the land.

“Guilt in a being takes over when a person violates the norms in the society. When a person gives importance to the personal bias based on his own religion, caste, and creed, racial discrimination will affect the others. One’s bias will affect the other in terms of the norms, which is constrained in the mind. When a person dares to accept the fault, which he had done to the other being and to the society then it means that a person is gaining the sense of socio-cultural awareness. Socio-cultural awareness is built only when a being is possessed with all ethical qualities that are taught in the society that groomed him/her since childhood. The society serves as a backbone in mending the culture of a person and supports him/her in certain situations. The rituals, atmosphere, culture, knowledge of the past, generations and hierarchies, create and re-create a person. The guilt is formed through the pavement of the socio-cultural economy, very individually and that which transforms his Self, to a much broader sense of reality (the society). The transformation gains momentum when a person is subjected to a much subjective experience and struggles through the same. The moment of realization happens when the subjective experience is intense with experiences and the socio-cultural

consciousness paves its way to a futuristic mode of wellbeing that makes a person understand and emote along with the other.” (178 Shalini)

Throughout this novel, the guilt of the magistrate made him to show concern for the barbarian girl and he wants to save the barbarians.

In the Heart of the Country, The whole story is narrated in the chronological order and it revolves around South Africa. Magda, stays with her father in an isolated farm and she is not allowed to have any friends nor hanging out with people. As a spinster, she listens to her father’s wish in the midst of her personal choice also her father is dominating in nature. Things didn’t change much until he got married and bought a new wife. On seeing the romance of her father, Magda fumes and she starts hallucinating things as she longs to have a relationship. In the second half of the novel, Magda’s father started having a relationship with the wife of the black servant, who is also newly married. This leads to mental trauma in Madga and she desires to kill her father. After her father’s death, there is a new phase, where Hendrik starts to take advantage of the situation. He dominates and violates her physically. At the end of the novel, Hendrik and his wife flees from the place and Madga stays alone in the deserted land with the memories of her father. “I am a spinster with a locked diary but I am more than that. I am an uneasy consciousness but I am more than that too. When all the lights are out I smile in the dark.” (Coetzee 4)

In the Heart of the Country, Magda, in her lifetime had dealt with the problem under the eyes of the father and to some extent it can be said that she had treated her father as her problem. When he was alive, she wished to kill him and after his death, she took solace with the thought of her father. Throughout the novel, she expects to get freedom and liberation.

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