

---

**PROTAGONISTS AS COLONIZERS IN THE NOVELS OF J.M. COETZEE**

V PRADEEP RAJ

---

**Abstract:** Over the past half-century, postcolonial literatures and postcolonial studies have gained the attention of many readers and scholars throughout the world. Writers like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka from Nigeria, Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy from India, Derek Walcott from the Caribbean, Seamus Heaney from Ireland, Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje from Canada, Peter Carey and Patrick White from Australia, and J M Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer from South Africa have been prominent when major literary awards such as Booker Prize or Nobel Prize have been announced, and their works appear on numerous school and university syllabuses. Concurrently, their writing has provided the nourishment for a variety of postcolonial theories concerning the nature of such works.

J M Coetzee, the South African novelist and noble laureate, has engaged in exploring the ontological issues in the fictional discourse. Coetzee's reflexive self-consciousness that runs through his novels informs his understanding of the historical, political, and social forces as they act and interact with each other in the context of South Africa. His fictions have followed different narrative styles and the basic issues he discussed in his works are writing, authorship, language, domination, marginalization, colonization etc.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Post colonialism, Postcolonial literature, Postcolonial studies and theories.

---

Post colonialism: - It deals with the effects of colonialism on cultures and societies. It addresses the matters of post-colonial identity (culture, national, ethnic), gender, race, racism and their interactions in the development of a post-colonial society. The English language attained an international prominence due to several reasons; one of the most important reasons is colonialism. English was imposed on Anglophone Africa as a means of easy communication and for administrative convenience. It is a historical irony that the same language serves the African writers in voicing their thoughts and feelings to the world at large. J. M. Coetzee, the South African novelist has won an international reputation due to the prestigious awards his novels have received over the last decade. He is the first world novelist writing from a South African context. Almost from the beginning, his novels strike one as ways of escape from the most immediate contexts, the South African, in which they were. There is also, for instance, that Coetzee is partly admired among his small body of readers in South Africa because his work embodies sophistication, at homeliness, from which the nation has been relatively isolated through the repressive effects of apartheid and the recent cultural boycotts. Coetzee has produced the novels of identity for the multi-national age, by focusing on the colonial as a kind of generic precursor of the multi-national. J.M. Coetzee is eloquent in another respect. He is not simply a South African writer; in fact, he repeatedly calls into question any effort to find an identity in national terms. He takes granted what many other South African writers had difficulty in acknowledging that he is contemporaneous with the present world. J. M. Coetzee is one of the dissident

literary voices speaking against apartheid regime in the 1970s and 1980s; his distinctiveness was identified early as both eloquent and as politically urgent. His work has been compared favourably with Nabokov, Kafka and Conrad. By the time his mature works such as *Foe* (1986) appeared he has already achieved international acclaim. Much of Coetzee's writing reflects either directly or indirectly on recent events unfolding in South African society, although critics have warned against straightforward allegorical reading of his work. However Coetzee's writings contradict any easy correspondence between fictional representation and the rapid changes that have transformed and continue to transform South Africa. In an interview conducted in 1978, J. M. Coetzee remarked that he was inclined to see the South African situation as only the manifestation of a wider historical situation to do with colonialism, late colonialism, and neo-colonialism. This colonialism he concluded was evident even in publishing in this country:

“Our literary products are flown to the metropolitan centres and re-exported to us at a vastly increased price...That very fact should give people pause before they start talking about South African literature”.

*Dusklands* (1974)

Comprises two novellas that evoke apparently discrete historical events, one colonial and the other post-colonial. The first handles American's part in Vietnam. The second is set 200 years earlier and focuses on a Boer settler in the 1700s. The very different protagonists of these narratives Eugene Dawn is an expert in Psychological warfare and Coetzee is an adventurer and pioneer turn out to be involved in strikingly similar forms of oppression. In

the Heart of the Country (1977), a lonely farmer seeks comfort in the arms of a black concubine. But his embittered spinster daughter Magda feels ashamed; this lurch across the racial divide marks the end of a tenuous feudal peace. As she madly dreams of bloody revenge, Magda's consciousness starts to drift and the line between and fact and the working of the excited imagination becomes blurred. *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), is a Coetzee's finest novel and is a novel imaginary empire of an imperialism which is merely an extension of colonialism. The novel is an allegorical exploration of the relationship of black and white colonizer and colonized. The Magistrate, who is in-charge of the frontier settlement, finds himself caught between the empire that employs him and the barbarians for whom he feels increasing sympathy. The novel is also an exploration of the relationship between black and white barbarity and civilization. *Life and Times of Michael K* (1987) has something related to colonialism. Its protagonist is a man intent on including colonialism, whether it is the colonization of the body through labour camps or the colonization of the mind through charity. The allegorical abstractions of Coetzee's *Barbarians* are exchanged here for a moving intimate account of Michael K and his mother. The plight of these two characters is both of whom are physically disabled, gets worse as they find themselves without a secure home or income in South Africa for a dream of a better life in the country that motivates their decision to leave the city behind. Their tortuous Journey out of Cape Town offers little sign of liberation or escape. Coetzee's critically acclaimed novel *Foe* (1986) signals a temporary departure from the South African landscape. A short, powerful book, it reinvents the story of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* from within the city of London. Re-imagining canonical novel of British imperialism, it adopts and adapts a distinct strategy within postcolonial fiction (including Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Morag Gunn's *Prospero's Child*), as it writes back to the culture of colonizer. *Foe* is ultimately a tale about tale telling: the female narrator, Susan Barton, tells her story in order to find somebody who will publish it. J M Coetzee's recent Man Booker Prize Winning novel *Disgrace* (1999)

demonstrates (with its met fictional elements, its suspicion in the present tense and its generation of critical uncertainty) veracity is something Coetzee seeks to problematic rather than produce. At the centre of *Disgrace* is 52 year-old David Lurie. He falls from Romantic Professor to Professor of communication. We witness the wider reduction of art and language to the realm of the literal, the fictional, and the practical. Lurie goes on to put it clerks in a post-religious age. The curtailment of creativity implied here is ironically captured in the transparent literalism of the new courses. The literary critic Derek Attridge argues that moments such as these warn the reader against reducing *Disgrace* to an instrumental political function that to do so is to ignore critical sections of the text that are hard to 'read off' as conventional message or communication acts, such as the puzzling role of dogs and animals in the novel, or David's unfinished opera, or the significance of the central rape scene in the novel. *Disgrace* illuminates two of the key concerns work: the historical motivations behind colonialism and its legacies in the post-colonial era. For Coetzee the post-colonial does not signal the formal disintegration of empire, but rather a new, and in many aspects more insidious phase of colonialism.

**Conclusion:** J.M Coetzee's *Dusklands* (1974), *In the heart of the country* (1977), *Waiting for the barbarians* (1980), *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), *Foe* (1986) and *Disgrace* (1999) are the novels of a man who is himself a colonizer, at least objectively speaking. The one fact most important for an understanding of the apparent anomalies in his work is that he is not only a colonizer who does not want to be a colonizer. Even if this were not a matter of historical, biographical record, it would be evident in Jacobus Coetzee, who is determined to play out of his role to the bitter end and Michael K as well, all Coetzee's major protagonists are colonizers who wish to elude of almost any cost their historical role as colonizer. All of them are wrought to a pitch of desperation in their efforts to escape the intolerable burdens of Magda, the Magistrate, even the medical officer in *Life and Times of Michael K* are all of a piece in their single hunger.

## References:

1. Dovey, Teresa, *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories*. – Cape Town : Donker, 1988
2. Penner, Allen Richard, *Countries of the Mind : the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee*. – New York : Greenwood Press, 1989
3. Gallagher, Susan VanZanten, *A Story of South Africa : J.M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context*. – Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard Univ. Press, 1991
4. Attwell, David, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*. – Berkeley : Univ. of California Press, 1993
5. *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee* / edited by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson. – Basingstoke : Macmillan, 1996
6. Kossew, Sue, *Pen and Power: a Post-Colonial Reading of J.M. Coetzee and André Brink*. –

- Amsterdam : Rodopi, 1996
7. Head, Dominic, J.M. Coetzee. – Cambridge : Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997
  8. Critical Essays on J.M. Coetzee / edited by Sue Kossew. – New York : G.K. Hall, 1998
  9. Helgesson, Stefan, Sports of Culture: Writing the Resistant Subject in South Africa (Readings of Ndebele, Gordimer, and Coetzee). – Uppsala : Dept. of Literature [Litteraturvetenskapliga institutionen], Univ., 1999
  10. Viola, André, J.M. Coetzee : romancier sud-africain. – Paris : Harmattan, 1999
  11. Attridge, Derek, J. M. Coetzee & the Ethics of Reading : Literature in the Event. – Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2004
  12. A Universe of (Hi)stories : Essays on J.M. Coetzee / Liliana Sikorska (ed.). – Frankfurt am Main : Peter Lang, 2006
  13. J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual / edited by Jane Poyner. – Athens : Ohio University Press, cop. 2006
  14. Clarkson, Carrol, J. M. Coetzee : Countervoices. – Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan, 2009
  15. Susan vanzanten gallagher's, A story of south African JM Coetzee in fiction context (1991). Cambridge Mass Harvard Univ Press.
  16. David Attwell, JM Coetzee: South Africa and the poloties of writing (1993). Berkely: University of California Press.

\*\*\*

Lecturer in English, Satavahana University,  
Karimnagar, AP. India.  
[Pradeep\\_vootla@yahoo.com](mailto:Pradeep_vootla@yahoo.com)