



REFLECTION OF RACIAL SEGREGATION (APARTHEID) IN THE NOVELS OF J M COETZEE

AVINASH L. PANDHARE

Asst. Professor, Department of English
Anand Niketan College, Warora, Dist. Chandrapur (M.S.)



AVINASH L. PANDHARE

ABSTRACT

Coetsee along with many South African writers like Nadine Gordimer, Alan Paton played an instrumental role in bringing apartheid to global attention. Coetsee's literary career has grown up in South Africa under the apartheid regime. As such it is obvious to have presence of references in his works to the system of racial segregation and its consequences on the victims. Racial structure of his country provided Coetsee much raw material for his writing. He has used his countries 'apartheid system' to project the harshness of human conditions. In fact, Coetsee condemns the apartheid regime by clearly distancing himself from the late colonial Afrikaner identity with which the regime is associated. He wanted to and kept himself away from racial atrocities as well as the perpetrators of atrocities. Moreover, he finds a sense of complicity within him which he expresses through his writing. Coetsee's first six novels are written under the shadow of apartheid. It was the first phase of his career and he focused on reflecting racial themes through his works. Coetsee's novels written during this period have some indirect response to the era of apartheid.

Keywords: Apartheid, Segregation, Violence, Torture, Coetsee

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INTRODUCTION

John Maxwell Coetsee, South African writer, is a novelist, essayist, academic of great repute, literary critic and above all a Nobel laureate. He is a writer who divides critics especially on the issues of race. Coetsee along with many South African writers like Nadine Gordimer, Alan Paton played an instrumental role in bringing apartheid to global attention. He was born and brought in South Africa and was raised and socialized as a member of white ruling minority group. His literary career has grown up in South Africa under the apartheid regime. As such it is obvious to have presence of references in his works to the system of racial segregation and its consequences on the victims.

What is 'Racial Segregation/Apartheid?'

Racial segregation has appeared in all parts of the world where there are multiracial communities. In the United States slavery existed for two hundred years making whites and blacks use separate facilities. Later blacks initiated Civil Rights movement to break the prevailing pattern of racial segregation and discrimination in voting, education, and the use of public facilities. The Native Americans received brutal treatment from white rulers who settled there through Columbus.

However, racial segregation was practiced with the greatest severity in South Africa. In fact, South Africa has world's most complete system of racial segregation. South Africans use a specific

term for racial segregation- 'apartheid'. This term has, probably, originated in 1940s from Afrikaans language, one of the official languages of South Africa. It developed in 17th century, around the period when Dutch invaders settled in South Africa. The Dutch word 'apart' means 'separate', and 'heid' is equivalent of hood (as in neighbourhood). The two words combined to make 'apartheid' meaning **apartness**.

South Africa is a racially charged society. It has long and complicated history of subjugation of the black population. Racial discrimination in South Africa did not begin in 1948. Its roots are lay deep in the history. It began with setting of Dutch colony at Cape of Good Hope. Colonisation consolidated slave economy. 350 years of colonial oppression provided political and economic base for racial segregation which lasted for centuries. Such a long history of discrimination resulted in an evil system of apartheid. Colonialism toughened the politics of apartheid. Apartheid is a product of white racism. Racial segregation reached to its peak in 1950s during the reign of National Party government. The National Party designed a policy that would promote the complete separation denying equal status to blacks maintaining superiority of White race. The segregation imposed heavy burden over most South Africans who were turned to 'wretched' in every social and political aspect- income, education, housing and life expectancy. Racial segregation was not a matter of doing injustice against one person. The entire class of African black communities suffered injustice. The rights of majority non-whites were curtailed. The blacks, as they were deprived from their fundamental rights, were left in a very miserable condition. They were denied freedom of speech, of association, of movement, and of worship. The economic gap between whites and non-whites was enormous. The Africans were reduced to extreme poverty due to the economic exploitation. Commenting on the chaotic situation in the then South Africa, Irving Howe remarks, "an endless clamour of news about racial injustice, the feeling that one's life is mortgaged to society gone rotten with hatred, an indignation that exhausts itself into depression, the fear that one's

anger may overwhelm and destroy one's fiction. And except silence or emigration, there can be no relief." Apartheid has been the subject of abundant literature. In the apartheid literature race is the main focus. It is the aim of this paper to outline how Coetzee's text deals with issues pertaining to race and/or racial segregation, and how apartheid/racial segregation and the relationship between different groups of people in South Africa is described in Coetzee's novels, particularly in those novels which are written during 1974 and 1990.

Reflection of Racial Segregation

Racial structure of his country provided Coetzee much raw material for his writing. He has used his countries 'apartheid system' to project the harshness of human conditions. "A fundamental theme in Coetzee's novels involves the values and conduct resulting from South Africa's apartheid system." (Kakutani 6). In fact, Coetzee condemns the apartheid regime by clearly distancing himself from the late colonial Afrikaner identity with which the regime is associated. He wanted to and kept himself away from racial atrocities as well as the perpetrators of atrocities. Fictional autobiographies written by Coetzee make this clear. In *Boyhood*, the young narrator "thinks of himself as English." (124). In *Youth* the emigrated author-narrator thinks that he "would prefer to leave his South African self behind."(62). In *Summertime*, adult Coetzee "feels soiled" (4) in his South African identity. Coetzee has always the temperament of reacting against racial segregation. The protagonist of *Youth* is shown to be living in the US, his cousin and her friend comes to visit him. When his cousin Marianne speaks Afrikaans with him, he becomes uneasy. He says, "Speaking Afrikaans in this country... is like speaking Nazi, if there were such a language." (*Youth* 127) Moreover, he finds a sense of complicity within him which he expresses through his writing. The complicity is about his linkages with the Afrikaner heritage that links him, historically, with colonial activity in Africa. (Doubling the Point 342-3)

Dusklands (1974), *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), *Foe* (1986), and *Age of Iron* (1990) are Coetzee's first six novels

written under the shadow of apartheid. It was the first phase of his career and he focused on reflecting racial themes through his works. Coetzee's novels written during this period have some indirect response to the era of apartheid. Dominic Head while analyzing this phase of Coetzee's career asserted, "His works has embodied a form of intellectual challenge both to the late-colonial violence and oppression of apartheid, and to the retributive violence in the period of transition to democratic rule." (22)

Some critics condemn Coetzee for his failure to deal directly with historical and political questions. However, in Coetzee's writing, particularly in novels written in this phase of time between 1974 and 1990, we can find that the prevalent conditions in South Africa during this time is permeated through the fictional settings of his novels. He has engaged certain themes in his novels which, though implicitly, projected racial segregation or apartheid. Even in the novels whose setting is not South Africa and the region other than South Africa, the apartheid makes its presence. Michiko Kakutani in her article 'Chronicling life perched on a volcano's edge as change Erupts' makes an analysis of Coetzee's characters and the setting they are set in. She asserts,

Whether they are enduring the injustices of apartheid or grappling with its aftermath, whether they are living in a really identifiable South Africa or a more allegorical realm, all his characters forced to come to terms with precariousness of their existence, their susceptibility to the cruelties of history, to authoritarian, barbarian or merely random violence. (6).

His first novel *Dusklands*, published in 1974, has its protagonist an American man working at warfare during Vietnam War. However, Coetzee indirectly projects Boer setting out their colonies in South Africa as well as the beginning of apartheid and its further consequences as discussed earlier in this paper. This novel depicts colonial violence inflicted upon the natives of Africa.

Life & Times of Michael K and *Waiting for the Barbarian* are set in allegorical worlds but in some way or other have some resemblance to

recognizable places. In these two novels, though the time of action and the name of the country are not given but both novels are set directly or indirectly in the political uproar and chaos that South Africa have suffered in the apartheid period.

Age of Iron (1990) is Coetzee's last novel to be clearly written and set within the apartheid era. 1986-89 is considered to be the time of composition of this novel which historically is the period of state of emergency enforced by National Party government to crush black protest which finds some reference in the setting of novels. The scenes of township violence clearly evoke the unrest in Cape Town of 1986. The scene of five dead bodies lying in front of the gate of the school is representative of the brutalities of apartheid, which also shows how black protest is crushed by white minority rule. *Age of Iron* shows the oppression through the disfigured hand of Mr. Vercueil. Coetzee has shown scars or disfigurement of marginalized characters which is "...the positive connotation and authority Coetzee has frequently assigned to the disfigured, scarred or mutilated body in his novels, as the repository- and the 'text'- of colonial oppression." (Head 70). In fact, racial segregation is a strategy of colonial oppression. Other instances of racial oppression, brutalities, disfigurement are the pictures of marginalized others Coetzee has given through *Friday (Foe)*, *Michael K* and the barbarian girl of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The process of colonisation, enslavement of local Khoekhoe people, forced labour-all these "historical events looms large in Coetzee's writing and played a formative role in his education." (Meskell and Weiss 89)

Coetzee has been criticized for not taking any direct stand against apartheid. However, Coetzee did remarkably well in showing the true picture of then South Africa and its brutal system of racial segregation, though implicitly or allegorically, when most people did, in fact, support the system. He attempts at exposing the evils of apartheid as well as their detrimental effects. He tried, in the words of Canepari-Labib, to

...denounce injustice, to unmask fears and express uncertainties about South Africa, giving voice to those social, political and racial elements that in South African era

were for a long time silenced and deprived of any form of expression. (23)

By doing this Coetzee has frequently "given voice to those outside the hierarchies of the mighty with intellectual honesty and density of feeling in a prose of icy precision, unveiled the masks of our civilization and uncovered the topography of evil." (Gregory O' Dea 2)

Coetzee has also been criticized that he has made use of South African violence for making his name and acquiring fame. His detractors feel that he has not worked actively for bringing the change. Some question his loyalty to South Africa as he relocated in Australia in 2002. But then one can say that Coetzee is a writer, and not an activist, whose primary task is to write, which he did well. Again we have to take note of what Irving Howe says while describing the scenario in South Africa. Alan Riding defends Coetzee by quoting Jonathan Lear, a Professor of Philosophy, who worked with Coetzee at the University of Chicago, as "If you read his works, it's really a surgical, clinical diagnosis of what's going on here [in South Africa]."

It seems that Coetzee makes an appeal to all, particularly to white perpetrators of atrocities, to cease the oppression of black and to feel empathy for them. In an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee expresses his views on violence with a probable suggestion that if one feels and senses the agonies suffered by victims of racial segregation as agonies suffered by himself/herself, everyone would prefer peace. He says,

Violence, as soon as I sense its presence within me, becomes introverted as violence against myself..... I cannot but think: if all of us imagined violence as violence against ourselves, perhaps we would have peace. (Doubling the Point 56)

Conclusion

Coetzee has been considered as genuine writer who is unflinchingly honest in his portrayal of the nation's racial and political conflicts. Above discussion presents that many of his novels have political issues as main focus which are concerned with South African apartheid system of racial segregation. In short, his fiction is concerned with violence against blatant racial and marginalized

others. Through the portrayal of the evils of apartheid or racial segregation in his works, Coetzee makes an attempt at recollection the past and articulating fears and tensions. He does this with certain intentions, the foremost of which is to make people aware, through such remembering, of repeating the mistakes in the future.

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