



Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)

Volume 4, Issue 3, June 2019

e-ISSN : 2504-8562

Journal home page:
www.msocsciences.com

Construction of White Male Hegemony in Coetzee's *Waiting for Barbarians* and *Disgrace*

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Abstract

This article will investigate how Coetzee's white male characters confront their pasts that revolve around abuse of power in both familial relations and the community. For a long time, Coetzee has been in a difficult position regarding his literary identity. He is both criticized and praised by many people about his writings. In this article, I will be investigating how he draws both praise and criticism in the way he constructs white male identity. It is possible that many of these critics do not agree with the writer's construction of both African and white identities. Coetzee was required to betray his ancestors and oppose the white male dominance. I will determine whether he chose either of them. It is a known fact that none of Coetzee novels were banned by the Apartheid regime. The most probable reason that is often cited by many of his critics is that he was politically correct. An investigation of his representation of white hegemony might put to rest this criticism. Furthermore, it is important to understand his stand against white supremacy at a time many of his colleagues from the civil rights movement were writing about equality and human rights. I will investigate how the characters of his novels feel influenced by those who exercise power in the society. Most importantly, I will examine how masculine identities in the novels fit in the wider society and how they respond to changing power structures because they influence their behavior. My objective is to investigate whether Coetzee ascribed to the patriarchal Boer societal values that marginalized both women and servants into silence. Since masculine discourse is recurring in his other works, it is both an ideological and political discourse representing oppression and colonialism.

Keywords: hegemony, masculinity, construction, coetzee

Introduction

White Minority rule was introduced in the South Africa in 1948 and was only abolished in 1994. During this period, there was social and political unrest because the minority rule introduced Apartheid to promote parallel and independent development for Whites and Black South Africans. Apartheid was used to perpetuate white minority rule in the sphere of politics, the economy and culture. White people, mainly from Britain and the Netherlands dominated and subordinated the other races. There was preferential treatment of whites in all aspects of life. For instance, the white minority controlled a whopping 87 percent of arable land compared to the black populations' 13 percent. Furthermore, the infant rate for blacks was between 20 and 40 percent depending on the locality when the white population had an infant mortality rate of 2.7 percent. This pattern of disproportionate treatment was

visible in social aspects of work and housing. Therefore, the white minority remained the upper class in the society (Plaatje, 2014).

John Maxwell Coetzee became a renowned author during the Apartheid period in South Africa. His works are both impressive and difficult to read. For these reasons, he has attracted both criticism and respect. This is particularly the case because he covertly or overtly responded to issues affecting South Africa at the time. He won the prestigious Booker Prize twice and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003. People continue to read, question, and reflect on many aspects of his literary works. Many of these works are fiction but comment on the power structures in both South Africa and the world.

In the 1960s, patriarchal values that were based on the heterosexual man were questioned by social movements such as feminism. This led to a critique of the hegemonic rules of gender. Women and some men were concerned how power structures were used insubordinate them. Later, the interest shifted to masculinities and expanded to include demand for racial equality between blacks and whites. White supremacy pervaded every sphere of society, both in America and some colonies such as South Africa. This means that Masculinity and whiteness are believed to be interdependent because they are constructed based on their association with each other. Therefore the civil rights movement sought to critique white hegemonic masculinity.

During the early settlement of Europeans, Capitalist practices transformed the South African Economy and culture. Again, this only served the interests of white supremacy, particularly white male patriarchal happiness. There was both imported and transfer of slaves to support capitalism, which gave rise to colonialism. These practices were rooted in the country. The Europeans subdued the indigenous populations and used them as a labor force to create wealth. All rules and regulations that were developed favoured the White South African population and tightened control over the black population. Later, following the 1948 election, the National Party instituted the apartheid policy after winning.

Double Oppression, Masculinity and Racism

Coetzee's fiction is grounded in historical reality because his novels indirectly speak to this reality, particularly white supremacy. For instance, the *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Disgrace* are important literary contributions to political discourse in South Africa both during and after apartheid. For that reason, contextual and historical aspects are central to this paper because it is important to relate them to major events in the country. Therefore, I will include them in my discussion.

McGlynn (2012) posited that Masculinity has been turbulent times since World War II. As a result, the discourse of 'crisis' is popular in many literary works. She believes that the masculinity crisis is as a result of feminism and equality movements in which men are ostracized and vilified. Their vulnerability attracts the sympathy of the audience in many literary works. The masculinity crisis is depicted as a catastrophe, disaster and trauma. She believes that the creation of a crisis is meant to defend the masculine male who alone can and must be defender, father and earner. This constitutes re-entangling men with masculinity and masculinity with patriarchy. The implication is that some writers particularly men are increasingly at pains with the way gender has been deconstructed in many spheres of life. My article employs Masculinity theory to examine the construction of white male hegemony in select novels by Coetzee.

I am alert to the complexities of the masculinity crisis and how it fused with changing power relations and imbalances. Although Connell (1995) posits that the masculinity crisis emerged from the dismantling of gender roles that allowed men to perform certain duties and use them to define themselves, it is also because some men who were considered inferior gained power and changed power relations in the society. This article argues that Coetzee constructed the white male as a hegemonic oppressor who finds it difficult to fit in an equal and open society. It seems that the writer

was worried that the traditional and dominant white male was being destroyed by freedom and empowerment campaigns.

Men enjoy what Connell (1995) called the patriarchal dividend in their relation to women but have a choice as whether to occupy an oppressive position against women and other men or resist it. Hegemonic masculinity can be used as a vital instrument to identify practices and attitudes that perpetuate gender inequality involving some men's domination over both women and other men (Jewkes, et al.2015).

The mythical identity of Afrikaner during the first decades of the twentieth century was a masculine force conceptualized as angry, loveless, all-demanding and negating. This narrative pervades many of Coetzee novels. It is important to understand how Coetzee conceptualized this kind of supremacy. Certainly, Coetzee uses some of this Afrikaner mythology in his novels because it cannot be by chance that some of his characters mirror real people in the society. For example, following the British colonization of South Africa, about 12,000 Afrikaner men and women left the colony and moved inland with their livestock.

Today, it is important to examine the literary representation of white masculinity, which continues to dominate the world. New masculinities written by women often imagine new and alternative models of manhood. Their objective is to deconstruct the traditional masculinity and construct a new one. Many critics have attributed these works to women writers because male views on masculinity have largely been ignored by literary criticism (Hughey, 2012).

Disgrace

In the *Disgrace*, the male protagonists are faced with a crisis of authority and legitimacy. It is a feature of being a man in a changed society where gender roles are blurred. The novel records experiences of a father whose masculinity is fluctuating. Surprisingly, the protagonists are comfortable with their new found identity. However, a violent attack unsettles that shaky peace that the protagonists enjoyed. They start feeling uncomfortable. This is a representation of crisis in these men (Kucala, 2013). It shows they are finding it difficult to reconcile with the future and fit in a changing society. They cannot believe that someone else can have power over them. They soon realize their irrelevance and alienation from their jobs, families, and even bodies. In his works, Coetzee tries to imply that men are actually under threat. The writer is concerned with essentially wild nature of white male because he locates his protagonists in a domestic space where they define themselves using their role as a provider, protector and oppressor. Therefore, his novels trace the deconstruction of white supremacy (Poyner, 2000).

As we shall see, violence is a recurrent theme in Coetzee's works. Female characters experience oppression and violence in *The Waiting for the Barbarians*. Also, *Disgrace* presents an incident in which a white woman is gang-raped by black men. This was a bleak assessment of the new South Africa. It was viewed and depicted as black violence against whites. Coetzee uses first-person narration in *The Waiting for the Barbarians* and a third-person narration in the *Disgrace* to illustrate important aspects and perspectives.

Coetzee's numerous novels were largely allegorical. Furthermore, Critics of his novels have argued that his writings were politically correct. It is worth noting that none of his work was banned despite his opposition to the policies of the National party. Additionally, his novels cannot be described as resistance writing because he did not explicitly oppose the apartheid regime like other contemporary South African writers such as Nadine Gordimer, who addressed the issue of apartheid. It is writers such as her that brought international attention to the political situation in South Africa (Opheim, 2016). Instead, Coetzee failed to address the political system of oppression in South Africa. Criticizing Coetzee's 1974 novel *Duskland*, Kno-Shaw wondered why "a writer of such considerable and varied talents should play down the political and economic aspects of history in favour of a psychopathology of western life." In fact there lies Coetzee major obsession: The changing power structures of western hegemony (Opheim, 2016). Scholars also criticized Coetzee for not addressing "material factors of

oppression and struggle in contemporary South Africa." It is perhaps for these reasons that many scholars continue to interrogate Coetzee's literary works.

Surprisingly *Disgrace* deals explicitly with a contemporary issue in post-apartheid South Africa in ways that his previous novels did not. It is important to note that this was one of Coetzee latest novels before he left South Africa. The protagonist, David Lurie, finds himself displaced in the "new times". He has been "rationalized" from his position in Modern Languages and Romantic Poetry to an adjunct of communications (Opheim, 2016). Coetzee also paints a sorry state of the new South Africa by scenes of rape and violence in the *Disgrace*. During the attack Lucy tells David "Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity" (205). People interpreted that in the new post-apartheid South Africa the whites lost their cards, their weapons, their property, their rights, and their dignity (Opheim, 2016). This representation, particularly the rape of Lucy was met with anger in South Africa but celebrated in the western world. Some found the scene regressive (Opheim, 2016). The ANC rejected it as racist while South Africa playwright Athol Fugard thought it was "a load of bloody bullshit" (Opheim, 2016)." These scenes in the *Disgrace* create the impression that Coetzee was protesting at the displacement of white South Africans from their privileged status. A new government by Africans had taken over and whites were being replaced by blacks in virtually all spheres of the economy. There was a quota in all public employments and other economic opportunities. Suddenly, Coetzee realized the importance of addressing a contemporary issue in South Africa. It is curious that the writer would come to the rescue of South Africans at this time when they were supposed to be celebrating freedom from white minority rule.

Coetzee wrote from the perspective of belonging to a privileged colonial group (Mahmoud, 2014). I want to examine how dominant groups impose their categories and beliefs on their subjects, particularly people of color and women. The identity of whites as constructed by Coetzee subordinates both men and women as dependents of white authority (Mahmoud, 2014). The notion of female and natives inferiority was inscribed in the thoughts and beliefs of white South African males including Coetzee. There was an attempt to deconstruct patriarchal tendencies in his recent novels particularly the *Disgrace*. Some critics believed it was a little too late. But it could also be a consistent mission in some of his past works.

The writer constructs a restricted gender image for his protagonists thus exposing them to intense pressure whose expectations they cannot meet. For example, the son of a South African Boer shatters the ideal image of a white South African male by exposing his homosexuality (Gruber, 2014). For instance, Coetzee casts his characters, Dawn, John, and Jacobus in and out of symbolic order. He represents them as people who have failed to form self-gratifying reciprocal relationships with the community. They do not personify the patriarchal identity associated with white hegemony. Even Jacobus, who appears the ideal white hegemonic male, is ultimately exposed as deficient. The characters identity and roles are in conflict with societal norms and alien to the society in which they live. As a result, the characters are inherently anxious, fearful, sensitive and vulnerable. Eventually, they conduct themselves with shame and guilt. Coetzee deliberately portrays them as misfits and deprive them of loving relationships. It is evident that the characters are unable to reconcile with their personal identity that is associated with abuse of power in both familial relations and the larger society. Coetzee constantly exposes essentialist masculinity as a farce.

His language is alleged to contain patriarchal hegemonic discourses that are associated with oppression. Violence is common in Coetzee's fiction. There is brutal weaponry and rape in torturing of a girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) brutality, rape and prostitution in *Disgrace* (1999).

Waiting for Barbarians

Coetzee constructs the hierarchical systems of oppression in South Africa in *Waiting for Barbarians*. He seems concerned with the problem of torture. After Jacobus Coetzee, travels to the interior on an elephant hunting mission, he returns to punish the servants and natives for 'humiliating' him. These stories expose the psychology of oppression and colonialism that informs the US involvement in

Vietnam and the Colonization of South Africa by the Dutch. These events are central to white masculinity.

Coetzee exposes the story of domination and oppression that are perpetuated by men of white descent. Later, he allocates violence to blacks in the post apartheid South Africa to show the challenge of white supremacy. Some of Coetzee's protagonists in a select of his novels attempt to escape from the prison of their mind. They find it difficult to shake off past memories: memories of abuse and lost innocence. Severing of their roots is seen an impossibility because the past is etched on to their personal psyche. The writer shows that though the white man is a masculine hegemony, he is not the measure of everything. The change of power structures exposes him to ridicule and transforms him into a misfit into the evolving social fabric. Coetzee's characters in a select of his works exemplify the weaknesses and problems associated with being a white South African. It is a reflection of the author's own struggles to find his identity. This article examines the construction of white male hegemony that represents both oppression and colonialism. It exemplifies the psychological dilemma of those who are subsumed with power (Buboltz, 2009).

Touched by the torture of the Empire army on the barbarians the magistrate during a questioning secession found a blinded crippled barbarian girl. He took her to his house nurse her back to health and the scars on her body are traces of torture where are clearly unbearable. The magistrate decides to return the barbarian girl to her people, which viewed as a protest against the rules of the Empire. Colonel Joll's major torture technique has a significant representation about of which feminist seeks to address in the quest for equality, which is the victimization of a woman in the society. Subsequently, as torture to humiliate the Magistrate and break the power he had. Colonel Joll equates Magistrate with a woman by hanging him on a tree with woman clothes on and showing him struggling in front of his town (WFB, 1982 p.g 117). This obviously criticizes the unreceptive and silenced position of a woman in the society which does not have any access to gain authority in the society evident in the manner the barbarian girl was unable to her herself. The magistrate is also humiliated and equated with women, in front of his town by being hanged on a tree, in woman's dressing clearly shows the lack of respect for women. This particular incident also indicates the typical treatment of women as the weaker sex. Colonel Joll individual's attitudes and actions reflect his prejudice against the barbarian, and women as a social group which is viewed as oppression of women (Jansen, 2013).

Conclusion

Masculinity studies in the west, particularly the US were limited to gay, lesbian, and queer studies. It is now difficult to distinguish between gay and masculinity studies in the US because they share common features. However, recent studies on masculinities incorporate issues of race to analyze gender. Therefore, the theory of masculinities demonstrates the importance of race in our social and political lives. Recently, the theory of masculinities has become an interdisciplinary field. It is important to use the same theory to examine the literary representation of Manhood because it can help to question the traditional, patriarchal representation of manhood in Coetzee's novels. Furthermore, it may help future authors to develop alternative masculinity models that are less sexist, racist and homophobic, which is common in the works of female western writers. It may help develop fictional literary models of manhood that are less individualistic, hegemonic, competitive, and sensitive to the needs of the society.

Therefore, there is a need to investigate the construction of white male hegemony by male writers, particularly white to understand whether they are part to the phenomenon of of constructing new identities of manhood or are complicit in perpetuating white supremacy.

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