

Violence in the Novels of J. M. Coetzee

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Abstract

Violence is a part of human nature and an integral feature of human life. People from every walk of life have used violence as means to noble and ignoble ends. Modern man is caught in a web of his own making. He therefore struggles desperately to deal with violence which is not only external but also to affirm his own being. When the individual is denied his identity over a period of time, there occurs the ultimate explosion of violence. A man buffeted by threats from all sides will have a depression and has to rebel for his self-respect. There are many factors and reasons that contribute to the violence. J.M.Coetzee, through his novels, has interpreted violence in many ways with different purposes as: to find 'truth', to impose and to destroy identity, as a weapon of rebel, a way of survival and an act of colonialism.

KEYWORDS: J.M. Coetzee, violence, novel.

J. M. Coetzee, Nobel as well as Booker Prize winning novelist, is probably the most complex intellectually engaging writer to emerge from South Africa. His work chronicles the inner history of his countries transformation from racial dictatorship to a post-apartheid society. It gives voice to the anguish of his home country. His novels traverse the difficult ground of sketching the possibilities facing the reflexive consciousness in a world structured by inequality and dehumanization. They also tell us something we all suspect and fear that political change can do nothing to eliminate human misery. Coetzee is not only a novelist and a writer but he is a man interested in a variety of subjects. He has been concerned with important moral issues including apartheid and race relations in his native South Africa, human rights, social and political injustice. His work offers many possibilities for interpretations to different themes: imperialism and colonialism, quest of identity, silence and isolation, and humanism. Among them, violence is one seems dominant also interpreted in many ways through his fiction. In this paper, attempt is made to present violence as disturbing theme in Coetzee's novels with particular reference of novels such as: *Dusklands*, *In the Heart of the Country*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and *Disgrace*.

Violence is part of human nature and an integral feature of human life. People from every walk of life have used violence as a means to noble and ignoble ends. Modern man is caught in a web of his own making. He therefore struggles desperately to deal with violence which is not only external but also to affirm his own being. With human, mere physical survival is not enough, but survival with self-esteem. When self-respect is encroached upon or self-affirmation meets resistance, we make greater effort to assert who we are and what we believe. This leads to self-assertion, a stronger form of behaviour more over than self-affirmation. When the individual is denied his identity

over a period of time, there occurs the ultimate explosion of violence. Violence manifests itself in a variety of ways. It may be personal- by a man or a woman against another, social wars; racial-conflicts, and psychological or sexual harassment. There are many factors that contribute towards the violence. e.g. religious, political, socio-economic and psychological factors. Besides, there are other reasons for violence; violence is a weapon of rebel. It is the way of survival. A man buffeted by threats from all sides will have a depression and has to rebel for his self-respect. He is also going to find freedom and identity by killing his oppressor, e.g. violence. Violence in its modern connotation would seem to be and to recover or establish one's identity by rape or killing. Man seeks to restore his sense of worth as a human being through violence, drugs and sex. Today, violence became commonplace and, more disturbingly, became a cult of the day. The mob or the Mafia spread its tentacles in almost every sphere of activity: politics, economics, clubs, culture houses, casinos, universities, filmdom, breweries and prostitution. And significantly, the most potent weapon of the Mob was the gun, and as its effect, violence became a subject for contemporary writers. The most South African writers including J.M.Coetzee focus primarily on monstrous epitome of man's inhumanity to man—the apartheid system in South Africa. The white minority has tried to perpetuate its position of supremacy over black majority. Prison, police, rape, land, military harassment and racial humiliations are common things in South Africa and constant themes of African novels. The base of them is violence which hangs thick in the air of South Africa.

J.M.Coetzee has tried to present the physical, psychological and sexual violence in human nature through his fiction with different purposes. His first novel, *Dusklands*, is an agonizing encounter with colonialism's violence and American imperialism. In this novel, it is seen that the use of violence stands for colonization, self-assertion and survival. The protagonist, Jacobus Coetzee, was the agent of European order in Africa, uses violence to take revenge on the native people and to light his superiority as a white man. When he was on expedition to the land of the Great Namaqua with his Hottentots and slaves, he was robbed, then vilified by the villagers and deserted by his servants. Being angry he takes revenge on them by killing and destroying their village. The violence of Hop expedition in Jacobus Coetzee's narrative is so startling that demonstrates his brutal, violent nature and his sadism with horrifying clearly. He states:

Stand up', I said, 'I am not playing, I'll shot you right here.' I held the muzzle of my gun against his forehead. 'Stand up!' His face was quite empty. As I pressed the trigger he jerked his head and the shot missed. Scheffer was smoking his pipe and smiling. I blushed immoderately. I put my foot on Adonis's chest to hold him and reloaded. "Please, master, please," he said, "my arm is sore." I pushed the muzzle against his lips.....I stamped. His lips seeped blood, his jaw relaxed. I pushed the muzzle in till he began to gag. I held his head steady between my ankles. Behind me his sphincter gave way and a rich stench filled the air.....The shot sounded as minor as a shot fired into the sand. Whatever happened in the pap inside his head left his eyes crossed. Scheffer inspected and laughed. I wished scheffer.¹

The 'gun' is a symbol of violence. The gun can be used for self-assertion, power, as well as for survival. For Attwell, "American violence imaged in guns, fire, a knife, and finally rape."² When Jacobus was on expedition, there was fear of attack of Hottentots. He says:

The instrument of survival in the wild is the gun. I too could survive in the wilderness armed with only bow and arrow.³

Besides, Jacobus says that the gun stands for the hope that there exists that which is other than oneself. The gun is our last defense against isolation within the traveling sphere. The gun is our mediator with the world. The tidings of the gun: such and such is outside, have no fear. The gun saves us from the fear that all life within us. He also asserts:

I am an explorer. My essence is to open what is closed, to bring light to what is dark,' 'through their death Iagain asserted my reality. No more than any other man I enjoy killing.⁴

It reflects the intension behind his violence and gun. According to Attwell, the narrator, Jacobus Coetzee, attempts to manage their world and achieve self-affirmation and mastery through violence.

The novel *Waiting for the Barbarian* is written in response "to repressive state violence in apartheid South Africa, especially acts of torture perpetrated by the South African security forces on those deemed enemies of the apartheid state."⁵ The novel addresses the twining of epistemic and physical violence inherent in imperialism. Torture as means of violence seems very dominant and powerful in this novel than any other novels of Coetzee:

The issue of torture, in this novel, can be read as a more general reference to the violence by the Empire. Through torture the Empire writes and creates the Barbarians, and through the physical pain and the mental distress it inflicts on its prisoners it creates its own version of the truth.⁶

Torture has been used by imperialist and colonizer as a tool to 'find truth' and to impose their identity and interest on oppressed, colonized and hunted. It violates the right to human dignity. We could see apartheid, physical, psychological as well apartheid violence in this novel.

One of the primary purposes of the Empire's torture is "to producing the 'truth' necessary to sustain the determinate meanings and categories on which it relies."⁷ One could see three kinds of torture in this novel, e.g. interrogational torture, spectacular torture and terroristic torture. The interrogational torture which takes place in "twilight of legal illegality"⁸ is for the purpose of extracting 'confessions'. Spectacular torture invites the public to witness and participate in the torture of captives; the terroristic torture whose purpose is to paralysis of resistance. The interrogation and spectacular tortures are dealt with to psychological violence and terroristic torture to physical violence. The guiding

principle of colonel Joll's handling of barbarians is 'prisoners are prisoners'. On his return journey with group of twelve barbarian captives linked to each other with wire which runs through the flesh of their hands and holes in their cheeks, is physical violence that ensues is spectacular. It invites the public to witness and participate in it. Four of the barbarians are forced to kneel. Joll rubs dust into their back and with a stick of charcoal writes the word 'ENEMY'. The prisoners are then beaten 'till their backs are washed clean' by sweat and blood. The soldiers are instructed by Joll to offer their canes to the public so as enable the crowd to participate in the beating. It is a public torture used in terroristic sense: its purpose is the paralysis of resistance, is to make the crowd aware of the supreme power of the sovereign through the body of the tortured. Such torture directed by Joll indicates the triumph of the Empire's power and authority. Through the public torture, the Empire wants crowd to inspire their fear and to experience the potency of the Empire's power. Here torture as violence or extortion is retained as a strategy of imperial or colonial domination.

Colonel Joll was harsh, cruel, brutal, sadistic and violent by nature. He is on mission to abort the probable attack of the barbarians and teach them a lesson for causing disturbance to the smooth conduct of Empire. The Colonel's job is precisely 'to find the truth.' He has decided to find out the truth by his own process. When the magistrate asks him how he can tell when he is told the truth. Joll replies that 'there is a certain tone', which enters the voice of a man who is telling the truth. The training and experience teach the torturer to recognize that tone:

The tone of truth! Can you pick up this tone in everyday speech? Can you hear whether I am telling the truth? -----No, you misunderstand me. I am speaking only of a special situation now; I am speaking of situation in which I am probing for the truth, in which I have to exert pressure to find it. First I get lies, you see--- this is what happens---first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, the truth. That is how you get truth.⁹

The narrative reminds us the brutal and sadistic nature of Colonel Joll and the torture inflicted by him on the natives are the indications of his barbaric nature. Here, Joll seeks to restore his sense of worth as a colonizer through violence. His process of prolonged torture forces victims to try to comprehend the torturer's interests and present themselves in a way which is most likely to satisfy their torturers. Rosemary Jane Jolly says, "this process of diving the truth corresponds to the historical process of colonization, to the relationship between conqueror and conquered: his quest is conquest."¹⁰ Joll has used psychological as well as physical violence through torture to produce the 'truth'. In this novel the magistrate is struggling with psychological violence. He is seen succumbing to the stifling pressure of Joll's violence that seeks to destroy his self-esteem, wreck his psyche and nullify his attempts to affirm himself. He is victimized by Joll. After the magistrate has voiced his opposition to the spectacle of torture by accusing Joll of wanton cruelty and corrupting 'the heart of the innocent' spectators, he is imprisoned, not to be interrogated about what he may have said to the barbarians but to be reduced to powerlessness. Mandel, another warrant officer of the third Bureau, and his assistant force a pipe down the magistrate's throat and pour pints salt water into his stomach until

it ‘coughs and retches and flails and voids itself.’ It is not only the climax of the physical violence but human cruelty and dehumanization. Besides, the magistrate is also forced to attempt ‘tricks’ that his weakened body is unable to perform and wear women’s clothing. He is made to move, to jump or skip or crawl or run. A salt bag is placed over his head and he is forced to balance on the top rung of a ladder trying not to waiver. All these impositions cause him, at least initially, ‘agonies of shame’. The motivation behind the torture is to terrify the magistrate and its purpose looks political. It circumscribes the possibilities of political opposition of magistrate. It is also seen that violence operates in the Empire as an instrument of domination.

Along with physical and psychological violence Coetzee has used sexual violence among the disturbing themes of his novels. There are many factors of sexual violence as colonization, decolonization, racial conflicts which found in Coetzee’s novels particularly in *In the Heart of the Country* and *Disgrace* dominantly. The novel *In the Heart of the country* is an extra-ordinary tale of bloody revenge, and inevitable madness conveyed with the power and certainty. The novel is set up a situation in which the Master of the farm falls into desire for the new bride of Hendrik. Both the bride Anna and her husband Hendrik became victims of sexual and apartheid violence. They were black and oppressed servants of the white master who has the power to choose the bride and handle her as a puppet. The act of the master indicates white superiority over black. Here, sexual violence has shade of colonialism, because being white master he has used his power in form of rape or sex for his own benefits. The bride was black and she didn’t oppose the rape, it means that she does not have right to refuse. The Master’s violence is forced violence which leads to self-assertion. The Master seeks to restore his sense of worth as a ‘master’ through the sexual violence. Being an Afrikaner farmer and a representative of white civilization in South Africa, Magda’s father represents the power that white civilization exerts over the native population. The master can be identified as the colonizer of the situation. But same sexual violence reversed against him at the end of the novel. After his death his daughter, Magda, becomes a victim of sexual violence done by his black servant, Hendrik. He, considering the indignities and harassment practiced on him and his bride by both the Master and the Mistress, becomes more rebellious and seemingly rapes the Mistress. As violence is a weapon of rebel, Hendrik has sexual violence over Magda. It may be his way of survival and protect himself. Perhaps, his rape is as payback. It is also seen that Hendrik’s action is not simply payback but it is an assertion of a newly acquired power. His action also reflects the old ways are crumbling. This act would be seemed to be decolonization.

Disgrace is a strong statement on the political climate in post-apartheid South Africa. It is a brilliant novel written after demise of the apartheid regime in which violence manifests itself in a variety of ways, as sexual, physical and post-apartheid violence. The first part of the novel deals with David Lurie, the protagonist, having respectful social position as a professor at a Cape Town University. He is too passionate for sex which destroys his life and position. He is twice married and twice divorced. Like the Master *In the Heart of the Country*, David Lurie does not consciously understand the implications of his action. He doesn’t hesitate to fill the gap of sexual appetite by making oppressive sex with Melanie, his student in her twenties. In his sexual intercourse with

Melanie he forgets the social status, his role and responsibility as teacher and shifted their student-teacher relationship to sex partners. Her complaint about sexual harassment brings David's flaw. As she becomes victim of David's sexual violence, Melanie loses her concentration on study, drops out classes, misses the exams and finally withdraws her enrolment from the college. Lurie also is dismissed with immediate effect and forfeited all benefits and privileges. Means, sexual violence not only destroyed the academic life of both but also destroyed their identity, David as teacher and Melanie as student.

The second part of the novel also deals with issue of sexual violence and racial conflict from which Lucy, daughter of David Lurie, suffered. She was raped and her father was attacked by black rapists. Rapists had used sex as the weapon of exploitation as well as the means of enjoyment. They rape Lucy, kill the dogs violently and exercise spirit to burn Lurie and leave them destroyed. The rapists practice sexual violence upon Lucy and physical violence upon Lurie and dogs. They violently kill the dogs which were the only guards to Lucy on the farm. Being suffered from the sexual violence-rape, she restricts her life within the room and abandons her daily routine. She feels 'hatred' towards the oppressive sex, rape which for her like killing and murdering. As suffered by the rape and forced by Lurie, Lucy reflects her anger about the sexual violence imposed by men upon women merely for enjoyment as:

Hatred-----when it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me anymore. May be, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange-----when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, pull all your weight on her-----isn't it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife in; exciting afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood-----doesn't it feel like murder, getting away with murder? ^11

The account of rape given by Lucy presents her opinion about lust of sex that man preserves. Here, Lucy, the spokesman, is the representative of the entire womanhood which suffers from sexual violence.

Both narrative settings of Disgrace, David Lurie and rapist, are acts of sexual violation. But rapists' activity is more vultureous compare to David Lurie that mirrors the post-apartheid violence also. Through the sexual and physical violence on Lucy and her father, Coetzee tries to point out the Master-slave conflict with racial touch where slaves rebelling against master. The three attackers were black, and Lucy sees the rape as a sort of retribution for historical racial injustice. She thinks herself the 'Other' in South Africa and naturally develops the thought that she has paid her chastity for being their in the country. She is pregnant as a result of the rape and is determined to keep the child. She thinks that what she suffered is due to the past history of apartheid. David Lurie is horrified by her response; but he too sees the assault in the terms of historical inevitability, as the result of a sort of inherited guilt. In nutshell, through the violence in this novel, Coetzee tries to represent the relation between the whites and the blacks in which the relations of power have utterly changed. As Lucy herself suggests, after years of exploitation, racial discrimination and violence perpetrated against the black

population, the violence which she is subjected to is the price whites have to pay to earn the right to live on a land which was never theirs.

As a man of humanistic concern, Coetzee points out that violence hurts both the victim and the victimizer. For him, by using violence the colonizers were able to rule over the colonized people. It is also seen that violence made fissure, division and conflict among the colonizers themselves. It indicates the institution of colonialism is brutal, destructive and exploitative not only for the colonized but for the colonizers as well. In nutshell, it is seen that through his fiction Coetzee has presented violence with different purposes: to find 'truth', to impose and destroy identity, as a weapon of rebel, a way of survival and an act of colonialism.

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