

Quest for Identity: A Study J. M. Coetzee's Novels

P.M. Patil

Head, Department of English Arts, Commerce & Science College, Palus
Dist- Sangli. 416310, Maharashtra, India

Abstract

The theme of quest is a recurring theme in the post-colonial fiction. The quest takes shape in various forms – quest for one's root, quest for knowledge, quest for self, cultural, social, national identity and vision. The quest for identity is a dominant theme in African fiction. The identity is formed through the 'self' and 'other'. It represents the process by which the person seeks to integrate his various statuses and roles. Identity may be individual, social, cultural, national and patriarchal. The theme of violence is projected in the terms of social and psychic forces moulding individual identities. The identity of the individual or Empire is attained by confronting the 'other'. The 'other' is constructed as the servant and the inferior. It is always at the place of negation. By positing it as enemy, weak, and powerless, one achieves strength and identity. Empire uses torture, violence and power on barbarians or natives to force its identity. It attempts to achieve identity by projecting evil on the other. Without the 'other' or enemy, the empire can't have status or recognition. For Hegel, the master cannot be recognized without slave just as the empire cannot exist without its opposite. It is seen with the characters of J.M.Coetzee. His characters are problematic individual. They always struggle with 'others' to achieve a form of identity.

KEYWORDS: Coetzee, identity, novel, character, quest.

The first author to win the Booker Prize twice and also recipient of Nobel Prize for literature, South African novelist, J.M.Coetzee invents a sort of history that creates a catharsis in people about the issues of Apartheid and South African oppression. Coetzee is called a postmodernist. Various traits of postmodernist theory are very dominant in his oeuvre. He uses them throughout his novels in referring to themes like silence, isolation, freedom, violence, a quest of identity etc. The quest for identity is a dominant theme in African fiction. The identity is formed through the 'self' and 'other'. It represents the process by which the person seeks to integrate his various statuses and roles. Identity may be individual, social, cultural, national and patriarchal. The theme of violence is projected in the terms of social and psychic forces moulding individual identities. The identity of the individual or Empire is attained by confronting the 'other'. The 'other' is constructed as the servant and the inferior. It is always at the place of negation. By positing it as enemy, weak, and powerless, one achieves strength and identity. Empire uses torture, violence and power on barbarians or natives to force its identity. It attempts to achieve identity by projecting evil on the other. Without the 'other' or enemy, the empire can't have status or recognition. For Hegel, the master cannot be recognized without slave just as the empire cannot exist without its opposite. It is seen with the characters of J.M.Coetzee. His characters are problematic individual. They always struggle with 'others' to achieve a form of identity.

J.M.Coetzee embarked on his rich literary career with the publication of *Dusklands* in which we witness Jacobus' attempt to obtain some sort of recognition from the other and achieve the Identity. Jacobus Coetzee is distinguished by a strong sense of omnipotence and a simultaneous feeling of impotence, but he is also marked by his fundamental fear of the other. As Frantz Fanon suggests on various occasions, 'the white man, of whom Jacobus becomes an emblem, is scared of the Blackman, and for this reason he feels compelled to construct him as the Other, the enemy to defeat in order not to be in his turn destroyed' (Labib 2005:75). From the very beginning of the novella, Jacobus assumes very aggressive attitudes in relations to the natives. He sees them in terms of profit, exploitation and imposition of power. As a white colonizer, he also treats them badly and looks them as inferior or other.

Jacobus Coetzee uses his power and violence to project his identity. He claims that he is simply an instrument in the hands of history. He assimilates his judgement to the figures of God. He conquered the lands of natives by violence which distinguishes him as a colonizer, brutal and victimizer. His conviction that future history is affected by the choices which he makes. It is clearly determined by his feelings of omnipotence and his conviction that he is a tool in God's hands. So, in order to justify his final bloodshed, he states:

Through their (the Hottentots' who deserted him) deaths, I [-----] again asserted my reality. No more than any other man do I enjoy killing; but I have taken upon myself to be the one to pull the trigger, performing the sacrifice for myself and my countrymen, who exist, and committing upon the dark folk the murders we have all wished. All are guilty, without exception. I include the Hottentots. Who knows for what unimaginable crimes of the spirit they died through me? God's judgement is just, irreprehensible, and incomprehensible. His mercy pays no heed to merit. I am a tool in the hands of history (DL, 106).

This narrative indicates Jacobus' try to obtain his identity. Although Jacobus is convinced the natives are no different from 'dogs' or 'wild animals', that they are only 'callous thieves' and 'barbarians', he nonetheless seeks their recognition in an attempt to achieve a form of identity.

Coetzee has centred his fiction, more or less explicitly on the South African situations. He has also tried to develop the theme of the formation of Afrikaner national identity through the representation of the search for a personal identity enacted by Magda, the protagonist of *In the Heart of the Country*. The structure of the novel is founded on the repeated *failure* of the single woman narrator. The narrator, Magda, is a woman on a Karoo farm, who spends her time engaged in introspection or railing against her omnipotent father. Her character is identified as problematic individual. It is sketched through her unconscious conflicts and fantasies. She calls herself the grim widow-daughter of the dark father. She calls herself a land full of melancholy spinsters. The relationship of her father and her as a daughter has undertones of oppression, sexual, physical, mental and emotional. Magda's life is an exercise in self-definition, obsessively mistaken. She wishes to be recognized not as the meek, submissive daughter

of a domineering father, and gullible mistress of a cunning servant but as Magda, the individual. She strives relentlessly to be identified as a unique individual free of all relationship.

Magda is a fragmented being. Her life is an eternal emptiness which she tries forever to substantiate, a hole trying to be whole. All her life she struggles to find herself a unique identity. But eventually she comes to terms with the fact of her life, 'the medium, and the median that is what I wanted to be! Neither master nor slave, neither parent nor child, but bridge between so that in me the countries should be reconciled!' (HOC, 133). From a potential victimizer, Magda is turned into victim. She becomes 'the victim of double colonization'. She is subjected to her father's and Hendrik's patriarchal orders. Magda's relationship with her father and Hendrik is always contradictory. As a daughter, her father dominates her psyche to such an extent that eventually the relationship begins to border on incest. She is the discontented child who longs to be a parent, but can never really be one. When Hendrik forces her into having a physical relationship with him, the master-slave relationship eroded. Hendrik abuses her sexually and deserts her later. She asks Hendrik:

What more do I have to do before you will believe I am telling the truth? Can't you see that you and Anna are the only people in the world I am attached to? What more do you want? Must I weep? Must I kneel? Are you waiting for me to become your slave? Tell me! Speak! Why do you never say anything? (HOC, 118).

Here one could see that Magda could never achieve recognition from her father – neither as a daughter nor as a woman. She is unable to achieve an identity in her relationship with Hendrik. The servant no longer recognizes her as his mistress, and his attitude makes plain, he does not recognize her as a woman.

The novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* demonstrates the ways in which imperial discourse constructs its 'others' in order to confirm its own identity. It deals with the search of identity. There is the struggle for recognition as enacted both by the individual characters and by the Empires, they represent. Coetzee's magistrate and the emissaries of Empire, in fact, try to obtain this recognition from the Barbarian girl and the prisoners. In undertaking their existential search the characters try to reach a form of identity in a direct confrontation with the 'other'. To exist means for them to be called into being in relation to an other, and in their struggle for recognition, they seek to through the other. In this novel, first, Empire constructs the Barbarians as the 'other', and then addresses them in order to achieve recognition, mastery and identity.

The construction of the Barbarians as enemies becomes imperative for the preservation of the Empire's power. Through torture the Empire creates the Barbarians, and through the physical pain and the mental distress, it inflicts on its prisoners and creates its own version of the truth: the Colonel's job, as the Magistrate tells us, is precisely 'to find out the truth' and in the reality he inhabits, 'pain is truth'. In many situations, interrogation and torture are used to elicit the 'truth' and 'protect' the Empire.

These two practiced to force Empire's power and identity. In the attempt to achieve its identity, the Empire tries to project the evil and the barbarity intrinsic onto others.

Generally, it is seen that Coetzee's characters are 'problematic individuals'. They always struggle with others to achieve a form of identity. In *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Foe*, the two black characters, Michael and Friday, are perceived as others by the doctor and Susan respectively, who turn to them in order to obtain recognition and achieve identity they believe should follow. Besides, as Gallagher points out, 'in *Life and Times of Michael K* Coetzee emphasizes how in a deeply bureaucratized and militarized state, 'individual identity' is far less important than one's social role and place in the power structure' (Gallagher, 1991:47). Moreover, the fact that Michael's name is changed into 'Michaels' by the medical officer, has the effect of suggesting the doctor's 'colonization' of Michael, pointing to identity's linguistic nature. The same situation could be seen in *Foe*, where Susan's attempt to make Friday's silence speak parallels the doctor's effort to get a truthful story out of Michael and equally deprives the native of subject hood and identity. Just like the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, who paternalistically objectified the barbarian girl, Susan turns him into an object of sympathy, thereby denying him humanity and relegating him to the position of the subhuman Other. By trying to save him and tell his story for him, Susan attempts to recreate the natives in her own terms.

With quest of identity, Coetzee has also tried to present the problem of white identity through his novels. Susan Barton is also problematic individual. Much against her will, she is forced to become Cruso's widow and Friday's guardian after having spent a very short time with Cruso on his island and without entering into wedlock with him. Susan's tale is that of the female castaway. She attempts to get her story written by Mr. Foe but fails. Her attempts to give Friday a voice also fail. As an individual she has no control on her life. Her life is influenced, shaped and governed by others. This recalls Magda of *In the Heart of the Country*. Magda's over powerful father virtually cripples her. The father and her daughter share a relationship bordering on incest. Magda's father dominates her life to such an extent that even after his death she is unable to leave the lonely-farm-home. His presence looms large and she is unable even to imagine a relationship with any male outside the farm.

The characters like Magda and Michael are prototypes for Susan and Friday. Susan is a far less sympathetic figure than Magda. Susan has many of the same problems that Magda has. Susan also believes, as Magda does, that she should be able to communicate across the racial bar. Both women naively believe that 'women can communicate with blacks more easily than the white men can because blacks are more closely related to nature than white men' (Bishop, 1990:55). Susan and Magda's misunderstanding is symptomatic of their whole problem. They have preconceived notions of what blacks are like at the same time they do not understand their own roles as oppressors. Susan differs from Magda, however, because she is saner and therefore more competent to change her political circumstances. As Susan is more moderate figure than her prototype, Magda, Friday is a more extreme version of Michael. The oblivious connection between Michael and Friday is clear. Both Michael and Friday are black.

Michael's harelip symbolizes his crippled political voice. Friday's tongue has been cut out by slave trader or by Cruso. Just as Friday's physical impairment is more extreme (is indeed horrific), so is Friday, as a symbol of oppression, more extreme than Michael. Michael's bane is the regulations that control his rights to travel and have residence in the country, and those regulations came to him in the form of paperwork, permits, bureaucratic paraphernalia designed to control his life. Friday's freedom is completely entrenched in his inability to use language, and he is impotent against any language.

The movement of the characters from their prototypes to their culmination in Susan and Friday shows that Coetzee's concern for political identity becomes increasingly evident throughout the course of his work. Issues of personal identity and political power have been increasingly expressed in issues of language. As a writer, Coetzee is morally compelled to speak at the same time that he is aware of the suspect nature of representation, authorial voice and even language. The figures of Magda and Susan deal most directly with the divided identity of the oppressor and the paradoxical nature of the authorship. The figure of Michael and Friday illustrate the effectiveness of language as political tool.

In *Age of Iron* the issue of personal identity is closely connected to the issue of national identity. It depicts the physical struggle of the black population of South African townships conducts against the white systems of oppression in an attempt to destroy the identity the system has imposed upon them. Elizabeth Curren, narrator and protagonist, is a white woman, a retired classics lecturer who lives in Cape Town. She is isolated and lonely white woman surrounded by a hostile colonial culture with which she is unable to empathize. Elizabeth Curren is also a 'problematic individual' like Magda and Susan. Her story is situated at the time of the State of Emergency of 1986 and she is dying of cancer; so that the metaphor of the body politic being destroyed from within is activated. Coetzee uses the cancer imagery to problematize the very notion of a diseased society by linking Elizabeth's cancer with her sense of 'shame'. Elizabeth characterizes her own disease as arising from her own parasitic existence within the apartheid body politic, stating:

I have cancer from the accumulation of shame. I have endured in my life. That is how cancer comes about: from my self-loathing the body turns malignant and begins to eat away at itself (AI, 145).

Here, her self-loathing is linked with her own personal identity as a white South African, an identity which she sees as like that of doll. Her identity is manipulated by the outside forces, without agency, and hollow, lacking substance. She asks herself: 'A doll's life? Is that what I have live?' (AI, 109). She describes whites as 'doll-folk' and implicates herself in the description, too—'I am hollow, I am a shell----Were I to be opened up they would find me hollow as a doll, a doll with a crab sitting inside licking its lips' (AI,112). It is seen that the cancer eating away at the heart of the hollowness is an image of Mrs. Curren's own complicity within the apartheid state as much as it is an image of the infecting and infectious nature of apartheid itself. Ironically, she tries to link this self-destructive disease with pregnancy, describing her cancer as an image of 'motherhood ---

---parodying itself' and then relates this image of cancerous growth to the nation itself----
- (AI, 65).

Mrs. Curren's body is both host and parasite: she is both parent and child. She is simultaneously inside apartheid and outside opposition to it. She contrasts the black 'childhood of iron' of 1986 with her own white 'children of sleep'. She describes her generation as 'we children of that bygone age'. The implication is that by cutting themselves off from reality, the white colonizers have remained as children, asleep in a doll-like unreality. Elizabeth's awareness of her own ambivalent position makes her text extremely poignant as she recognizes her own 'shame'. As white colonizer, she feels the powerlessness of her voice when pitted against the black voices of revolution. As she says to Vercueil:

Yet who am I, who am I to have a voice at all? -----what am I entitled to do but sit in a corner with my mouth shut? I have no voice; I lost it long ago; perhaps I have never had one. I have no voice, and that is that. The rest should be silence. But with this---whatever it is ---this voice that is no voice, I go on. On and on (AI, 164).

Here, it is seen that as white colonizer Elizabeth's identity becomes powerless and defeated. While the voice of the *colonized* has become a shout, a slogan, the voice of the *colonizer* has become less and less audible.

The Master of Petersburg is Coetzee's first post-apartheid novel. The relations of power depicted in the text and the fight against the central government enacted by anarchist nihilist Nechaev parallel South African reality and the blacks' opposition to the apartheid policy of racial discrimination, and could therefore be read as a further investigation of the dichotomy superior/western vs. inferior/non-westerns. Though the setting of the novel removed from the South African situation, the writer still engages with issues related to language, thereby approaching the issue of identity. Like *Age of Iron*, *The Master of Petersburg* depicts society which temporary, finds itself in the interregnum between a decaying, old order and a new one seeking to establish itself. Like Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron*, Dostoevsky is also problematic individual and embodies the values of western society confronts revolutionary nihilist who challenges his ethical assumptions. Mrs. Curren's confrontation with the nihilism of John leads to an ethical judgement being passed on him and his political cohorts:

Comradeship is nothing but a mystique of death, of killing and dying-----I have no sympathy with this comradeship-----It is just another of those icy, exclusive, death driven male constructions. (AI, 150).

In *The Master of Petersburg*, Dostoevsky echoes this judgement in his condemnation of nihilism of Sergei Nechaev and his associates:

Nechaevism is not an idea-----It is a spirit----It is a dull, resentful and murderous spirit. When asked to assign a name to this spirit, he responds with the name 'Baal' (MP, 43-44).

Dostoevsky's response to Nechaev may be compared with Mrs. Curren's initial moral condemnation of John. After Bheki's death and her visit to Guguletu, Mrs. Curren appears to realize that the system of western values and ethics in terms of which she judges and acts has lost all validity and relevance in the historical context in which she finds herself. Dostoevsky receives 'intimations' in the form of the vision which he has of trying to communicate with his son underwater and which initially encourage him to reconstruct the filial bond like Mrs. Curren who is inspired by 'intimations' of an original identity to reconstruct the between of the primal I-Thou in her relation with John. As the novel advances, however, these 'intimations' are progressively blocked out by the exigencies of the dynamics of power in Russian power. So, towards the end of the novel, Dostoevsky comes to feel that "he has lost touch with Pavel and with the logic that tells him why, because Pavel died here, he is tied to Petersburg" (MP, 204).

The novel ends by suggesting that Dostoevsky- who at the beginning returns to Petersburg to find the truth of his son's death, whether it was police or the revolutionaries who pushed his son from tower. Coetzee has depicted here the father's responsibility for his son's death is related to actual Dostoevsky's sense of guilt. As a father, the identity of Dostoevsky is also collapsed. Like Mrs. Curren, he did not also be successful to change Nechaev and his followers from their destination. However, Nechaev tells him as:

You are nothing but a dry old man, a dry old workhorse near the end of life (MP,186).

He also adds:

I will tell you. Your day is over. Only, instead of passing quietly from the scene, you want to drag the whole world down with you. You resent it that the reins are passing into the hands of younger and stronger men who are going to make a better world (188).

Here the identity of Dostoevsky as 'self' seems to be defeated.

It is also seen that the problem of white identity and reversal role of identity are projected throughout the novel *Disgrace*. Like Magda in *In Heart of the Country* David Lurie in *Disgrace* is also problematic individual. David Lurie, a white ageing professor of Romantic literature, finds himself at odds with the new dispensation where old certainties are gone. In this new age, he is deprived of the privileges of the race and anchorages. While he is morbidly aware of his ageing body; he is also a victim of the dehumanizing effect of the 'great rationalization' of global capitalism. Once a professor of Modern Languages, David Lurie is now relegated to the role an adjunct professor of communications, with the re-christening of his institute from Cape Town University to Cape Technical University. The consequence of his unchecked impulse ultimately leads

to his disgrace in the academy. He is slapped with a case of sexual harassment and loses his position in University. Banished from the University and its 'respectable' white South African citizens, David steps out into the stark and harsh geographical, social, racial and political realities of post-apartheid South Africa—a life for which nothing in his cloistered and self-preoccupied life in the academia has prepared him to face. With two failed marriages behind him, He turns to Lucy, his only child and seeks temporary sanctuary on her homestead in the rural Eastern Cape. The idyllic reunion is short lived as Lucy's homestead becomes the target of a vicious attack in which Lucy is raped and David assaulted by a trio of black men. Lurie tries to raise the subject of the rape, but he gets no any political and legal protection there. Besides, his daughter Lucy comes to see the rape as a sort of retribution for historical racial injustice. She is pregnant as a result of the rape and is determined to keep the child. Lurie is horrified and frustrated by Lucy's incomprehensible decision.

The attack on Lucy's smallholding and her rape is the manifestation of the economy of hate that operates in the structure of racial otherness. A white woman settler and small-scale farmer in the rural Eastern Cape, Lucy is the 'Other' of Petrus and the majority black population settled there. The violence and rape in the smallholding is a manoeuvre to subjugate and eliminate her white female alterity from the land of the majority of black male. In a situation where the white hegemony is slowly and inexorably replaced by black cruelty, David Lurie discovers that like the dogs in the Animal Welfare Clinic, all that is left at his disposal in his physical body, a shroud of flesh without transcendent meaning. Lucy enunciates the lack of transcendent meaning when she tells to David that "there is no higher life. This is the life which we share with animals there" (74). Later, after the assault at the smallholding, she exemplifies the non-position of the white self when she states her decision to adapt to a situation where she is bereft of every thing

Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity....like a dog (D,205).

The relegation of the white character to the position of 'dogs', represents their possibility to save and somehow redeem themselves. Here one could see that through the white characters, Coetzee explores the predicament of white complicit-marginalized self while struggling for an ethical reconstruction and integration in a country that renders all such efforts futile. In nutshell, the novel *Disgrace* deals with the depiction of new South Africa and the changes which have taken place in the balance of power between the whites and the blacks clearly leads Coetzee to develop his questioning of the very concept of identity.

By the given view, it is seen that in his novels Coetzee exposes the 'identity' which individuals may reach by their confrontation with Other as a metaphoric substitution for what Western philosophical tradition has accustomed us to think of as an individual 's 'real' and 'fundamental' identity.

REFERENCES:

1. Michela Canepari-Labib. 2005. *Old Myths-Modern Empires: Power, Language and Identity in J.M.Coetzee' Work*. Peter Lang AG, European Academic Publishers , Bern, p-75.
2. Gallagher, Susan Van Zanten. 1991. *A History of South Africa: J.M.Coetzee's Fiction in Context*. USA. Harvard University Press, p-47.
3. Bishop G. Scott. 1990. *J.M.Coetzee: Culmination and Solution to a Problem of White Identity*. World Literature Today, Vol. 64. No.1. Winter, p-55.