

AN EXPLICATION OF MOTIFS IN SELECT NOVELS OF J.M.COETZEE

Severine Pinto
Assistant Professor
Department of English
St Aloysius College (Autonomous)
Mangaluru-575003, India
Email: severine_pinto@staloyisius.edu.in
OrcidID: 0000-0001-6690-7682

Abstract

John Maxwell Coetzee, a descendant of Africaner parents, developed a sensitivity to the happenings in South Africa in terms of colonialism, imperialism, racism, human oppression and loss of dignity to man. Impact of colonialism is even seen on earth, as the riverbanks burn, desertification sets in, fields are flooded. As a dissident literary voice speaking against the apartheid regime in the 1970's and 1980's, Coetzee's writings bring to public his frustration with powerful themes and motifs. This paper lists the various motifs that are to be noticed in the works of J. M.Coetzee. Motifs in terms power conflict, racial supremacy and marital discord, the idea of cannibalism, optimism for better future have been used in *Dusklands* (1974), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life &Times of Michael K* (1983) and *Foe* (1986) that reinforces themes of relationships between colonizer and colonized. Review of literature indicates that the focus of the researchers has been on the motifs embedded in the protagonists and narration. The present study explores the literary strategy illustrating the point of view of the colonised and the characters at the periphery. Therefore, the study is directed to define motif, identify various motifs especially the optimistic ones in nature, illustrate the role of certain motifs employed only to reinforce the theme of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized and explore the colonial discourse as a major motif. The research problem is analysed, discussed and interpreted in the spirit of investigation and literary interpretation. An adequate attempt of the descriptive and conceptual research has been made to identify the nature of literary motifs, the dominant motifs and the motifs used particularly by J.M. Coetzee to unearth the colonised and the colonizer divide, deeply rooted during the apartheid South Africa.

Key words- motifs, themes, colonialism, imperialism, oppression, desertification, colonial discourse

1.RUDIMENTS OF LITERARY MOTIFS

One of the literary techniques used by authors to give clues to theme or reinforce ideas they want to emphasize is 'motif.' It is a repeated element, a dominant or recurring idea in an artistic work that has significance at the symbolic level in any literary narrative. "A motif is a symbolic image or idea that appears frequently in a story. Motifs can be symbols, sounds, actions, ideas, or words. Motifs strengthen a story by adding images and ideas to the theme present throughout the narrative" (Literary Terms). A motif could easily be recognised either by the repetition of a particular image, word or phrase. It could also be a recurring action. The recurring factor could be a smell, a colour or even a reference to climate like rain, sunshine or snow. Therefore, the very purpose of a 'motif' as intended by the author in a narrative is to educe a frame of mind, irradiate major subject matter, engage the assemblage on an intuitive level, discover distinct symbolic meanings using the technique of recurrence and initiate a pattern of ideas.

Themes and motifs are interchangeably used to refer to the running thread of the work. They are different and to be understood as separate tools of interpretation. Themes are, the matter or content, in fact, the principal ideas in a literary work that constitute the meaning as well as evoke a series of questions that formulate the narrative. Motifs, on the other hand, are repeated elements that indicate these themes. In other words, motif as a device is employed to craft theme. A differentiation between the two is- themes are abstract and conceptual, wherein motifs are tangible and concrete. The theme is a matter of elucidation, they are debatable, but the motif is an inarguable scheme in the text.

Similar to the correlation between motif and theme, there is another set of devices that would appear similar but are varied and they are motifs and symbols. Motifs oftentimes merge with symbols, but a symbol is not consistently a motif. A symbol stands for something to represent. Normally a red rose symbolises love and a crown represents power. A symbol can appear just a single time in a story. As per the frequency of appearance, a symbol might appear only once but motif runs through the narrative. When it comes to literary context, Freedman concludes that "...when we combine the literal and the figurative into a single-family unit, we emerge with what is perhaps most accurately called the literary motif" (123). Some of the instances drawn from the select novels of J.M. Coetzee would illustrate the dominant motifs used by the author to reinforce the theme of universal brotherhood.

2. RELATED WORK

The purpose of the term ‘motif’ in the context of J.M. Coetzee’s novels may extensively be understood. To start with, Yadav & Yadav have effectively brought out the recurrent idea of ‘sex but no love’ that results in shame and dishonour of David Lurie, Melanie, and Lucy in *Disgrace*. The situatedness of humiliation, embarrassment, indignity initiates the characters to seek consolation and solace in the sexual relation especially, that of David Lurie with Soraya, Bev, other prostitutes, colleagues’ wives, and the university assistant. On the other, Thamarana & Mounika have highlighted in their study the portrayal of imperialism and power thirsty nature of men using first person narration. In particular, in *Waiting for Barbarians*, the motif of power can be identified in the magistrate who from his supremacy, authority and competency is subjugated to abuse. *Michael K* symbolic of something, to do one’s utmost to make him speak, as silence becomes a subtle form of resistance. These works have focussed on the motifs embedded in the protagonists and narration. The present study explores the literary strategy illustrating the point of view of the colonised and the characters at the periphery.

3.OBJECTIVES

The paper is based on concept analysis identifying the purpose of the literary technique, motif in the select works of J.M.Coetzee especially from the point of view of the colonised and the Afrikaners. The study brings forth the unexplored aspects of society in the Apartheid South Africa, reviewed logically to support the research proposition. Hence, it engages itself:

- To define motif in the contemporary literary context
- To enlist various motifs noticed in the select works of J.M.Coetzee
- To identify the dominant motifs found in the early works of J.M.Coetzee that are optimistic in nature and people can go on with life with a sense of decency and conscience despite troubled, stressed circumstances.
- To illustrate the role of certain motifs employed only to reinforce the theme of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized
- To explore the colonial discourse as a major motif harnessed to display power politics

4. METHODOLOGY

The above-stated research problem is analysed, discussed and interpreted in the spirit of investigation. The discourse has collected and described the recent information in the related research area to establish the research problem. An adequate attempt of the descriptive research has been made to identify the nature of literary motifs, the dominant motifs and the motifs used particularly by J.M.Coetzee to unearth the colonised and the colonizer divide deeply rooted during the Apartheid South Africa.

5. MOTIFS IN SELECT WORKS

Use of motifs has been skilfully done in the select novels of J.M.Coetzee to reinforce the theme of power, conflict, optimism, the coloniser and the colonised. All Coetzee’s novels have been published since his return to South Africa and most are concerned with the life of people. Coetzee’s novels, written up to 1993, may be described sequentially as beginning with: “aggressive imperialist violence in *Dusklands* followed by a settlement of uncertain standing and duration in, *In the Heart of the Country*. A defensive phase of anticipated revolution is presented in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and in *Life and Times of Michael K*, there is a stage of open civil warfare. *Foe* departs from the sequence but is no less concerned with questions of power and authority and colonialism” (Attwell, South 14). Despite being understood as a writer of postmodern era, he has not been involved with any nationalized or world movements. In his early novels, Coetzee described the life, relation and situation of the native South Africans, the Afrikaners or the white South Africans and the people from the colonial authority in the apartheid society of South Africa through the use of postmodern elements. Coetzee’s novels focus on underprivileged and abused characters. His interest in injustice stems from social and political oppression in South Africa. Coetzee’s novels extend beyond the geographic and social boundaries of his native country to encompass universal themes and characters. He combines elements of allegory and fable with an understated prose style and a political narrative view point, projecting a world where an offence against an individual becomes an offence against humanity.

6.1 Dusklands

J. M. Coetzee’s two-part novel *Dusklands* (1974) namely *The Vietnam War* and *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee* are set in twentieth century and eighteenth century sequentially. The protagonist Eugene Dawn unfolds the first part *The Vietnam War* which is a self-examination and requires tactfulness. Eugene is a professional in psychological warfare employed at United States military amid Vietnam War. As this work of Coetzee gains ground, Eugene being subject to pressurized circumstances of his duties jabs his son Martin, summing up the narrative. The narratives are in progression in the next part of the novel, *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee*. Jacobus Coetzee, a Boer moves ahead on a hunting excursion towards the woods of South Africa, conquers the lands of Hottentot tribe, by whom he was protected formerly. “Coetzee through his first-person narratives succeeds in portraying the imperialism and power thirsty nature of men that’s being megalomaniac.” (Thamarana S. & Kallepalli Mounika 58). The narrator unconsciously indicates in his narration a sense of limits and a definition of his self. Dawn’s remark about the prejudice formed by Americans towards the Vietnamese illustrates it, “Our nightmare was that since whatever we reached for slipped like smoke through our fingers, we did not exist. . . We landed on the shores of Vietnam

clutching our arms and pleading for someone to stand up without flinching to these probes of reality . . . but like everything else they withered before us.” (*Dusklands* 17). The main focus of the novel is about interrelations between the coloniser and the colonized. There could be many motifs in *Dusklands* like power conflict, racial supremacy and marital discord. Ultimately it is the coloniser and the colonised that overpowers the rest of the minor motifs.

6.2 Waiting for the Barbarians

Along with the theme of isolation and hostile environment resulting in mental imbalance of the characters, it is the motif of power that gets explored in the novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). The work of J.M.Coetzee pivots on the life of the Magistrate, who works for the Third Empire, which is an imaginary entity and the novel is set in an undefined historical period showing racism and the horror of colonisation. The Magistrate acts as an arbitrator between the Colonel Joll from the Third Empire and the barbarians or the natives. As the Empire tries to conquer the land of Barbarians by coming to blows, the Magistrate pities the Barbarians. Ahmad has rightly said “The power and skill of the Empire, its art, lie in its capacity to generate and then interpret its own signs” (148). The reader can identify, connect and compare the motif of power here as the Magistrate plunges from the man of power to that of an oppressed man. The novel contains another image to express the author’s motif, the image that haunts the magistrate’s dreams: children playing in the snow in the town square. The children make a snowman not to indicate a model of the empty town but the faceless girl being not among them. The magistrate realizes the meaning of a strenuous journey wherein the magistrate and his group of men approach the barbarians in person, without an intermediary in the mountains. He eventually gives the girl back to them, as she reveals her preparedness, her readiness, to quit him and civilization.

The evolution of Coetzee’s treatment of violence in *Waiting for the Barbarians* very likely to be related as an onward movement from his examination of the perpetrators and torturers, to his close attention on the oppressed with their endurance of agony, with their experience of hardship and unwillingness to his projection of purposeful, meaningful relations centred on ethical values. However, it differs from one another. Therefore, the problems which are experienced by the native South Africans (barbarians) are enforced upon them by the imperial authority of the Empire. Thus, Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* clarified that the South Africans or the ‘barbarians’ were controlled by the dominant-power of the white imperial authority over them.

6.3 Life & Times of Michael K

The motif of optimism gets explored in the novel, *Life & Times of Michael K* that has earned Booker Prize for J. M. Coetzee. If a person actively works to recognise the positive aspects of life, the person naturally starts to see positive energy in challenging times. This novel examines the predicament of an innocent man hounded by life circumstances, fails to comprehend and control during a civil war in a future South Africa. The novel is set in Cape Town from where Michael launches into his journey during a fictitious Civil War that takes place in Apartheid era. The theme is the investigation of South African history through the inner narrative of a young gardener, Michael K. This gardener embarks on a journey to set foot on the village where his mother had lived her girlhood and gets the better of all the hurdles of war to set foot on his destination. “Furthermore, not only is race the absent signifier in the novel, but the eponymous ‘hero’ of this novel is a singularly passive figure” (Barnett 295). As Leon de Kock observed: “Michael K, a South African Houdini, seems to be an escape artist from meaning . . . The terms of meaning, the interpretation, are put upon Michael, just as the camps enclose him, yet he slips away every time an attempt is made to pin him down” (de Kock 45). Thus, optimistic individuals have been portrayed as more prone to adaptive behaviour to have good expectations about future achievements and to personal efficiency. Accordingly, the novel ends with the motif of hope and confidence that people can live with a sense of morality standards even under the dire compulsion and severe circumstances of life.

Life & Times of Michael K is further viewed as an allegory of persecution, abuse, suppression, torture and exploitation. Set against the background of the South African police state, it strives, it ventures to preserve apartheid by any means; the plot unfolds as a relentless, persistent dissection of the logic of exploitation and suppression. It could be observed as an attempt to convey, to address and resolve the social and political injustice, in the tradition of realism. Indeed, the tension between realism and metafiction came to light, as the novel gestures toward the metafictional reflection on the nature of the textuality, the complexity, the ambiguity of authority, and the ethics of representing the ‘Other’. The very title of the novel indicates the life time of Michael K as the oppressed South African. He was born with hare-lipped and disfigured condition as a son of the South African parents. Michael K and his community also represented the sufferings, struggles, displacement, dismemberment, oppression and repression of the South Africans during apartheid movement. The presence of the white in this novel represents the ruling of the South African country with domination, oppression, force, and assaults of ‘Others’ through their power. The authoritative power is represented in this novel through the presence of the State Police, the Doctor and the Medical Officer.

6.4 Foe

Language is of no good when it fails to reveal the truth of history, its violence and horror, its brutality and ferocity, instead has narratives of islands where cannibals learn to become good Christians. It’s nothing but the genuine expression of feelings in Coetzee’s novel, *Foe* (1986). Further, “...it is in *Foe* that Coetzee has made canonical intertextuality a fundamental principle: the novel’s manner of proceeding is to rewrite, and fuse together, the biography of Daniel Defoe and those of several of Defoe’s fictional characters” (Attridge 169). Friday in *Foe* is tongueless, castrated, scarred and more importantly the sufferer of an extensive historical trauma. Secondly the victim is ineffectual to communicate his own tale. Thus, the meta-fictional work of Coetzee becomes a historical novel, exemplifying the significant aspects of slavery and brutality. *Foe* also explores, inspects and delves into the post-colonial theme. Susan Barton, the female protagonist is marooned on an island and finds

Crusoe and Friday which reminds us *Robinson Crusoe*. The issues of gender, power, race relationship between colonizer and colonised, get explored in this novel.

Cannibalism could be cited as one of the examples for the motif intended by the author to reinforce the theme of the colonizer and the colonized. Friday along with many others is suspected to be a cannibal. The idea has been established by Cruso. Hence, Susan is engulfed with the idea that these cannibals would last with the taste of human flesh. She even imagines that Friday possesses a covert cannibal mentality. The concept of cannibalism has been employed as a motif to reveal the fearful mind set of the colonizer towards the colonized. Susan further justifies her stand of taming the suspected cannibal, despite the fact that she never experiences the aggressive behaviour of Friday.

6.5 Colonial Discourse

The analysis of these works clearly reveals the underlying colonial discourse that plays as a major motif to suggest the power of the coloniser over the colonised. The native people of South Africa were forced to be mute under the worst condition of the lack of communication. The colonial authority also imposed their Eurocentric power by marginalizing the life and the culture of the native 'Others' through their Western education, culture, language and religion. In the South African, people were marginalized by the white colonial and the capitalist power on the basis of race, class, creed, civilization, wealth, status and labour. These kinds of enforcement became the painful reasons for the violent outburst of the native 'Others' in order to stabilize their life and culture. Colonial authority also became the root cause of the existence and continuation of the poverty in South Africa and the other colonized countries. Naturally, South Africa suffered the gruesome effect of poverty and that condition of poverty got its growth with roots, rootlets, stems and branches through the arrival and the rise of the dominant power of the colonizers.

Universal colouring of the ruler and the ruled proved that the experiences of sufferings and tortures are common to all the people of the world, wherever the hierarchical power structure exists. In such structures there exist wars, violence, struggles, deaths, dislocation, non-location, dismemberment, sufferings and depression. The struggles and domination of the ruler sometimes forced the ruled to remain unspoken and unspeakable. The Native South Africans underwent many hardships and hurdles in their struggle for freedom, equality, liberty, fraternity and rights to rule their country by themselves as a new nation. Therefore, it is clear that these kinds of struggles for full freedom were common in all over the world, under the existence of hierarchical power structure of the society. It is proved that the stories and the experiences of the South Africans were real but they were fictionalized by the ruling authority through their reflective or interpretative attitudes. The social reality of South Africa is considered as the universal condition. The white imperial authoritative people failed to maintain a good and convergent relationship with the native people, because of their unconscious desires of self over the colonized 'Others'. Coetzee's protagonists and other white people, not only read themselves through the life of 'Others', but write and construct their self through their interpretations of the life of colonized 'Others'. So, there is no limit for the sympathetic imagination, because of the divergent relationship between the colonizers and the colonized.

The native South Africans were primarily considered as the barbarians by the white authority. Basically, the South Africans were not the real barbarians but it is imposed upon them by the white authority. Ironically, it is clear that, the white colonizers got all the barbarous qualities within themselves to colonize the 'Others' by their ruling and Eurocentric power. The capitalist and the colonial authority tried to extract the truth about the life of the natives through their own interpretations. The truth which is extracted by the authority about the natives is projected and enforced upon them by imposing physical and mental tortures. The life of Coetzee's characters such as the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Michael K in *Life & Times of Michael K*, Bheki and John in *Age of Iron* proved the truth of truthfulness, that is, the truth of pain is the truth of reality. Thus, the native people expected that, the truth of pain and the reality of colonial domination should come to an end. Coetzee is conscious of the fact that, it is the colonial discourse which builds and establishes the binary structures such as self and 'Others'. Colonial discourse also created the consciousness of blacks and whites. The blacks are blacks as far as the whites assume and construct themselves as whites. In his novels, J.M. Coetzee visualizes the vision of the attitudes of the colonial and the capitalist authoritative power and their exercise of tortures on the bodies of native.

7. CONCLUSION

In general, the major themes and motifs of Coetzee are balance of power, clash of races, desire to establish one's identity and above all it is for a man to live a man's life. Hence, it is imperative for any scholar of Coetzee's novels to know not only the background information about the author but the colonial concerns in terms of dominant motifs as well.

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