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EVOLUTION IN NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE THROUGH FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN
COETZEE'S *FOE AND DISGRACE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with enlightened female's position through Coetzee's technique though they are subjugated in both the novels in the context of South African history. It focuses on the two characters Susan Barton (*Foe*) and Lucy Lurie (*Disgrace*) who has subverted the conventional idea of dominancy of maleness in the society. The question asked is simply: how do these two women shine their position in the novels as both are marginal characters in post apartheid period? Narrative perversity here becomes the place where change, experiment and reality meet. This diverse significance is largely seen in postcolonial narrative. Coetzee's mastery over the technique can be easily summarized the answer of this puzzle in the paper. *Disgrace* and *Foe* engages the reader with these characters but is restrained from finding answers. This deliberate shaping of the narrative highlights the marginalization of women in the narrative of history and the history of literature itself. The paper uses a gender perspective and it can be considered a new light on development of women's position in *Foe* and *Disgrace*.

Keywords: Coetzee, Narrative technique, Feminism, Post-colonialism, Post-apartheid.

Everything influences and changes everything over the time. Whenever there is transition, different shades of changes hover around it. The history of South African is no more exception from these changes which are evident in selected works of John Maxwell Coetzee. As a postmodernist/postcolonial writer, Coetzee investigates how colonialism and its aftermath have affected the representation of identity in his writing. His upbringing in between the two countries as born in Cape Town in 1940 and educated in South Africa and the United States, Coetzee feels himself as marginalized like blacks or white women in South Africa. Hence by placing the protagonist at marginalized place in his novels Coetzee tries to show his presence and whose sensitivity to the colonial history of his native country confronts the reader towards the reality. The feeling of alienation in his own country has forced him to give the voice to voiceless in his novels. He employs various strategies to highlight the idea of change as reflected in the experience of his characters and narrators as well as the respective roles of the writer and reader in his work in order to promote a more progressive society. *Foe* is set in apartheid period and *Disgrace* is set in post-apartheid South Africa. Even though apartheid has legally ended, its legacy still haunts the country. Like the new constitution has given men and women equal rights but still women are marginalized. Coetzee reconstructs histories through marginalized voices that are neglected and oppressed. In this way, Coetzee breaks the official historical discourse. In South Africa, non-

whites and white women are marginalized and long-deprived of voices to express themselves. After the end of apartheid, the blacks have returned to the center of power from voiceless status. In a male-dominated society, women are bound to lose their voices. Whenever the existence of women is at the centre of question, feminist narratology makes its presence by drawing their struggle against an existing male tradition. In this struggle, women often use male weapons and transform them.

Coetzee's mastery over the narratives has proved in the paper through his technique. In order to reveal the different positions of women in apartheid to post-apartheid period he has enfolded the narrative of coloniser and colonized attitudes in two different novels. In this way narrative technique is not secondary but a primary tool of novel. With the employment of right narrative technique only the writer would be able to convey his ideas to the readers. Narrative technique is the base for writers, without which they can write nothing relevant. Henry James states that 'the story and the novel, the idea and the form, are the needle and thread, and I never heard of a guild of tailors who recommended the use of the thread without the needle, or the needle without the thread'.

Coetzee's narratives are instrumental in the process of constructing and voicing new identities especially those who are at the margins in the postcolonial society. From the journey of *Foe* to *Disgrace* the characters actively assist in voicing the struggles of a variety of people searching for acceptance and assertion of their identities. But as the demand of the title in order to show the feminist perspectives we will summarize two women characters; Susan Barton from *Foe* and Lucy Lurie from *Disgrace*. Before analyzing the comparative study in regards to Coetzee's evolution in narrative techniques first we have to analyse the context in which both the novels are written. *Foe* is a novel written by J.M. Coetzee in 1986, and it builds on Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* from 1719. In Coetzee's novel, the female character, Susan Barton and the black slave, Friday are treated as less valuable due to gender and skin colour respectively. They are Others in terms of the white man as norm. Susan is white, but she is a woman, which gives her a position as "in-between" in the society of the Enlightenment. On the other hand in 1994 when the South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has created the equal wall for colonizer and colonized; a transition to a new enlightened order takes a new shape as country is started suffering with reverse racial tolerance, consequently both stand against each other and make the situation more worse. Thus the oppositional force of history is germinated the seed of *Disgrace* in 1999.

Character is a person who plays the central role between the narrator and narratee who discloses the entire activity of the novel from his words or actions either the narration in first person or third person. Characters include main and supporting characters but both have their own position which is most remarkably noticed in Coetzee's novels *Foe* and *Disgrace*. Through characters, readers can identify the challenges, the main focus of the story and the theme. It has been observed that Coetzee is fond of employing a character/narrator as an oblique vehicle for commentary.

In the novel women at the margin and their subversion brought about by Coetzee turns to them an affirmative quality, as it is not forced upon the subject but rather chosen- therefore subverting the act of dominance. Hence women come to represent the margin between male and female, receding and merging both into the chaos of the outside and the order of the inside. It seems logical that the identity of woman, as opposed to the historical hegemony of patriarchy. The inherent ambiguous tension in the white woman's positions in both the novels *Foe* and *Disgrace* who are simultaneously a colonizer and a colonized. In order to more evolve woman's position Coetzee draw comparing Lucy Lurie though minor in position but her silence has become the voice of South African society with first person narrator, protagonist or the main character Susan Barton but at the marginal position in the novel *Foe*.

The main protagonist of the plot is Susan Barton. Susan in *Foe* starts out as a first-person narrator but soon is subjected to being a castaway, marginalised by her fellow shipmates. Although liminal narrators have specific qualities which set them apart, individual differentiation is possible while focalisation and ascription also play a role.

In *Foe* Coetzee remodels the character of the Western man of the Enlightenment, which is at the focus of Defoe's book. Coetzee's Cruso differs from Defoe's, not only by the spelling of his name, but also in his behaviour.² While the Crusoe of Defoe has all the characteristics of the white, rational man of the

Enlightenment who can survive against all odds and take care of himself in any situation, Coetzee's character is a disillusioned, shabby male with poor health who has resigned and excluded himself from the world around him. Defoe's Robinson Crusoe is superior to black people who are portrayed as wild cannibals whom the white man has to civilize, teaches Christianity and enslave, which is evident in his treatment of the character Friday. Coetzee's Cruso has a slave too, but his Friday is mute, he has not got his own voice and cannot speak for himself.

In terms of female characters, Defoe's Crusoe mentions his mother only a few times, leading the reader to believe that she is unimportant. By contrast, Crusoe talks about his father for several pages. Furthermore, Crusoe only refers to his wife and children in one sentence at the end of the book; women are thus absent from Defoe's novel.

By introducing the new character Susan Barton, and by the representation of Friday as someone who defies all access to this though process, Coetzee's *Foe* subverts the linkage of rationality and Western masculinity, the construction of woman as the Other and of the non-white as the Other. Susan Barton, the female narrator and the main character in *Foe* very often acts independently and rationally. She is not like the women of that time supposed to be, and she does not want to depend on men. She refuses to be like the females de Beauvoir describes in *The Second Sex*. According to the theories de Beauvoir describes, women are irrational (632) and inferior to men (267), which means that the white European male is the norm and woman is the one who is different in negative meaning: she is the Other and subordinate. Nevertheless, in *Foe* there is a different situation: Susan is the one who is rational and Cruso has resigned. He is not the strong character who represents the Empire. She works for changes and she is brave. She has ideas on how to improve the lives of the castaways or how to leave the island, while Cruso is apathetic and has no wish to change his life.

In addition to the occasions when Susan depends on men, there are also several situations in the novel where she is self-confident, firm and claims her independence. One of these situations is when she does not obey Cruso, as she "should", as women are expected to do (de Beauvoir 629). She walks around the island against his will: "'I am on your island, Mr Cruso, not by choice but by ill luck', I replied, standing up (and I was nearly as tall as he). 'I am a castaway, not a prisoner'"(20). Another example is when she makes the sandals herself, instead of waiting for Cruso to do it for her as he wants. She also shows her self-confidence when writing letters to Foe, because she believes that writing is quite a simple task. These actions of Susan exemplify subversion of the hegemony of the white European male in Coetzee's novel.

Susan Barton wants to be independent and equal to the men of the age of reason, when the white, European male is a norm. In many aspects she is the rational person of the Enlightenment. She has goals like making money and gaining power and independence. She comes up with new ideas and does not wait passively for things to happen. The white males around her, Cruso and Foe are reduced to a secondary position. By that the norms of the period are challenged and subverted.

In *Disgrace* we can perceive woman's position from different angle as already discussed. Here the protagonist is not woman not or she is the main character inspite of that she becomes the hope for society. The protagonist is David Lurie, a dominant personality which becomes the marginalized figure in the end. In order to make situation more contradictory Coetzee has created a character of the same race with same blood but in different attitude. He feels more alienated when his daughter moulds herself with society of Eastern Cape like "a solid countrywoman, a *boervrou*...Curious that he and her mother, cityfolk, intellectuals, should have produced this throwback, this sturdy young settler. But perhaps it was not they who produced her: perhaps history had the larger share" (60-61).

Though Lurie is a main and voiced character throughout the novel but in order to keep him a realisation to accept present reality on his part Coetzee has created a character of the same blood as daughter Lucy, voiceless character in the novel. Sometimes "Silence makes Noise" is influentially characterized by Lucy and her living place. When one day three colored men appear and they rape her and set fire on David. Though Lucy a minor character in the novel becomes a voice for patriarchal society when she refuses to tell the police about the rape incident as she says, "'The reason is that, as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, in this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone'" (112).

David has become voiceless when he returned to farm and find that Lucy is pregnant. These sentiments are voiced by Lucy in the most important speech of the novel:

'Because I couldn't face one of your eruptions. David, I can't run my life according to whether or not you like what I do. Not any more. You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn't make an appearance until halfway through. Well, contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor. I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours is to you, and in my life I am the one who makes the decisions. (198)

Reversion of space brings shift in power which takes place in post-apartheid period. If the location is particularized, the psychology takes root. Lurie moves from city life to country life out of the desire. Lurie's early life "He earns his living at the Cape Technical University....adjunct professor of communications." (3) When he arrives at Lucy's house and sees "how she makes a living: from the kennels, and from selling flowers and garden produce", his first reflection is that "[n]othing could be more simple" (61).

After amalgamation of Lucy with the country life David describes Lucy as "[a] frontier farmer of the new breed. In the old days, cattle and maize. Today, dogs and daffodils" (62). Lucy also refutes the traditional definition of what a farm is and what it means to farm when she declares "'Stop calling it *the farm*, David. This is not a farm; it's just a piece of land where I grow things'" (200) or "a child of this earth" (216).

In the end we see David's transformation. He now more or less sees women as independent and not as a part of a man's possession. It makes him wiser and free from troubles. Although he loses all his visible power, he gains an inner peace. He releases the exaggeratedly perfect picture of himself and once even compares himself to a dog:

Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing.

Nothing with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights,

no dignity.'

'Like a dog.'

'Yes, like a dog.' (Coetzee 205)

Hence at the end of novel we can say that Coetzee is able to evolve woman's position. Like Susan in *Foe* Lucy is also very strong woman who takes care of herself and breaks all the traditional gender roles. To conclude, Coetzee as the witness of history tries to give the voice to woman in post-apartheid or postcolonial world.

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