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Discourse, Power, and the Body

— A Study of Postcolonialism in the Works of J.M. Coetzee

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Abstract: J.M. Coetzee, one of the most esteemed authors in the English-speaking world today, exhibited clear postcolonial tendencies in his early works. In his later writings, he gradually shifted his focus away from the South African context to explore themes such as rewriting classics, marginalized communities, and immigration. This paper, rooted in Foucault's theory of discourse-power and theories of the body, examines Coetzee's reflections and critiques of the discourse-power relationship and social disciplinary practices in his works. Furthermore, drawing from postcolonial scholars like Homi Bhabha, the paper investigates the consistent central-peripheral colonial geometric relationships in Coetzee's works and summarizes the strategies of "appropriation" and "mimicry" as means to challenge and subvert these power dynamics.

Keywords: Coetzee, discourse, power, body, postcolonialism

1. Introduction

J.M. Coetzee is one of the most renowned authors in the English-speaking world today, and his literary career can be roughly divided into three phases. His early works, such as "Waiting for the Barbarians" and "Life & Times of Michael K", often set their narratives in South Africa or use allegorical fiction to address historical issues in South African society. In his middle-period works, such as "Foe" and "The Master of Petersburg", he gradually moves away from the South African context to explore themes of rewriting classics and intertextuality. His later works are predominantly set in Australia, including "Diary of a Bad Year" and "Elizabeth Costello". Despite the changing settings, the core themes in Coetzee's works remain consistent, delving into topics like discourse, power, and the fate of marginalized communities.

Most existing research on Coetzee primarily focuses on his major works centered around South Africa, interpreting them through postcolonial theory. However, Coetzee has consistently exhibited a tendency to decontextualize his narratives through allegorical writing, and the mentioned research methods are not applicable to Coetzee's later works. Certain themes in Coetzee's writing are continuous, such as the representation of discourse, the body, and central-peripheral power relations. These themes can be considered as extensions and expansions of Coetzee's early postcolonial writing. This paper, from these perspectives, takes Coetzee's works from various periods as its research texts,

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employing relevant discourse, body, and postcolonial theories to identify specific patterns in Coetzee's works, emphasizing his consistent literary thought and attitudes.

2. Operation Modes of Discourse and Power

2.1. Knowledge, Discouse and Power

French philosopher Michel Foucault posited that discourse, power, and knowledge function as an inseparable triad, with a certain form of power always underpinned by specific knowledge. Power is omnipresent, manifesting its diffuseness, pervasiveness, and multiplicity from the bottom up. Coetzee, through his writing on marginalized characters, reveals the mechanisms of this micro-level power and, by depicting numerous unequal power relationships, questions and subverts authoritative discourse and grand narratives.

Taking the novel "Foe" as an example, Friday has his tongue cut out, rendering him voiceless and devoid of language knowledge, thereby becoming the Other. In the story, the female protagonist "I" repeatedly intervenes in Friday's life with good intentions. For instance, "I" teaches Friday to recognize English words with the aim "to educate him out of darkness and silence" [1]. "I" is also aware that, in this process, she merely employs words as the most convenient means and tool to make Friday submit to her will. What Friday lacks is not just the organ for vocalization, the "tongue", but the knowledge of using language. Foucault asserts that modern forms of knowledge and power are entangled, each conditionally supporting the other's existence. "I" employing language knowledge to unilaterally influence Friday is an embodiment of this "knowledge-power" relationship.

Similarly, unequal power dynamics permeate "I"'s interactions with writer Foe. When "I" requests Foe to write a book about her experiences of being stranded on a desert island, Foe decides to make her quest to find her daughter the main focus of the book, relegating the island ordeal to a secondary chapter. In this relationship, what "I" lacks is not knowledge of "speaking" but knowledge of "writing". Foe, wielding his writing power, freely reshapes "I"'s discourse. Faced with Foe, "I" also becomes a voiceless Other and decides to resist Foe's rewriting through silence. Coetzee, through "I"'s perspective, highlights the difference between the silence of "I" and Friday: "Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others…Whereas the silence I keep…is chosen and purposeful: it is my own silence… I choose not to tell it because to no one, not even to you, do I owe proof that I am a substantial being with a substantial history in the world" [1]. However, "I"'s resistance through silence is, to some extent, unsuccessful, as she begins to doubt the authenticity of her identity and personal experiences during her interactions with Foe. Foucault believes that the determination of individual identity is socially constrained and historically constructed. Individuals or souls are bound by power. Writer Foe, through this "discourse-power" relationship, exerts influence over "I"'s personal identity.

2.2. Discipline and the Body

According to Foucault, the body is docile, subject to conquest, use, modification, and improvement. Discipline shapes "docile" bodies, making them more compliant when they become more useful and vice versa [2]. Characters in Coetzee's works are often constrained by discipline, finding themselves in situations where they are compelled, either willingly or unwillingly, to resist and rebel against the forces of discipline.

Discipline often begins with the allocation of physical spaces. Sometimes, discipline necessitates closed spaces, demarcating a distinctive, self-contained place [2]. Such enclosed spaces are abundant in Coetzee's works, such as the various military camps and relief centers that the protagonist K is repeatedly forced into in "Life & Times of Michael K" and the special educational schools extolling the virtues of boarding in "The Childhood of Jesus". The division of space in Coetzee's works carries

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deep significance, as seen in "Diary of a Bad Year", where two characters inhabit the same apartment building: the aging protagonist Señor C, representing old-school thinking, resides on the first floor, while the female protagonist Anya and her boyfriend, symbolizing new ideas, reside on the top floor with a harbor view. Here, space allocation is an art of hierarchy, distinguishing and treating each body differently.

A disciplined body is a prerequisite for efficient postures, and discipline regulates every relationship between the body and the object it manipulates [2]. In "The Childhood of Jesus", Simon, while carrying sacks at the harbor for the first time, evolves from an initial unsteady stance to realizing that "if you rest your chest against it then the weight of the sack, instead of threatening to topple you off balance, will stabilize you" [3]. In this process, Simon consciously adopts a more efficient and standardized bodily posture, becoming the object of this controlling technique, an object, as Foucault describes, that can absorb specific operations with particular orders, steps, inherent conditions, and structural factors, a trained body manipulated by authority [2].

According to Foucault, every individual is governed by a temporal series that determines their level or rank. Through this "serialization", power ensures control and utilization of time [2]. In "The Childhood of Jesus", Coetzee mentions numerous courses that emphasize progressive leveling (elementary, intermediate, advanced). When the protagonist David reaches school age, the conflict in the entire book reaches its peak. It turns out that David does not fit into public school education: "the practical problem of David's comportment in the classroom. His insubordination. His failure to make progress" "He means continual challenges to his authority as teacher. He means refusal to accept direction" "Refusing to listen to his teacher does not mean a child is exceptional, it just means he is disobedient" [3]. In this context, David is classified as a "special student" because of his "inability to progress" and "indiscipline". Throughout this process, David becomes the object of discipline.

In summary, the purpose of discipline is to create an object that is both docile and utilitarian. Fortunately, characters in Coetzee's works, though sometimes unable to escape the constraints of discipline, often actively or passively manifest a spirit of resistance against discipline. The protagonist K in "Life & Times of Michael K" repeatedly manages to break free from the social identity and camps forcibly assigned to him, despite adopting a passive attitude of withdrawal rather than active resistance throughout the process. Anya, the female protagonist in "Diary of a Bad Year", moves out of the top floor apartment after realizing her elite boyfriend's hypocrisy, inadvertently disrupting the hierarchical order established by space allocation. In "Youth", the protagonist "he" refuses to adhere to the correct sequence of learning the piano and resists wasting time on elementary and mundane exercises, choosing to start directly with complex pieces he enjoys, thereby subverting the "sequentiality of time series" involved in planning. In "The Childhood of Jesus", David's family decides to leave the city to resist the educational institution's evaluation of David. These examples illustrate Coetzee's keen observation of disciplinary phenomena in life and his critical and resistant attitude toward discipline.

3. Center-Periphery: Colonial Geometries

3.1. The Geography of Power

Throughout J.M. Coetzee's writing career, the portrayal of the relationships between marginalized characters and centers of power has been a consistent theme. These narratives often exhibit a geometric structure based on the binary opposition of "center-periphery", commonly referred to as colonial geometries or the geography of power.

The geographical relationship between the center and periphery expresses the power dynamics of metropolitan cultures and colonial cultures [4]. Peripherality is a condition constructed through a set of relations with a dominant center, where the self becomes the other under imperial authority [5].

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The power position of the imperial urban center stems from control over language and the very order itself, which is the essence of imperial authority. Disorder and chaos at the periphery correspond to a fundamental lack of power. One of the primary characteristics of imperial oppression is language control, as language becomes the medium through which concepts like "truth", "order", and "reality" are established, thus perpetuating the hierarchical structure of power. The reason for the lack of power at the periphery is the lack of the authority to express.

Coetzee's works often reference this geometric structure of power, highlighting the binary opposition between the center and periphery from a linguistic perspective. In "Waiting for the Barbarians", the story is set in the border region of a fictional empire, emphasizing the cultural differences between the imperial capital and the imperial border. The novel begins with the description of an imperial officer wearing discs of glass, claiming that in the imperial capital, "everyone wears them" [6], even if wearing them indoors among the strange furniture means he is uncertain to pick his way. These discs of glass undoubtedly symbolize the culture of the urban center, representing the colonizers as the center of power. The protagonist's friend states, "If there was anything to be envied in a posting to the frontier... it was the easy morals of the oases" [6], underscoring the opposition between order at the center and disorder at the periphery. Furthermore, the indigenous language at the imperial border is also in opposition to the imperial center's language and is in a disadvantaged position. In the novel, the imperial army detains indigenous people and transports them back to the military camp for interrogation, rather than interrogating them on the spot. Ironically, the reason for this practice is that no one in the troop can speak the indigenous language. The army's detention of the indigenous people can be seen as an accusation of their inability to speak the imperial language. Here, the imperialist discourse system occupies an absolutely dominant position in the center, causing the periphery to be in a state of dependency and passivity.

This pattern of colonial geometries is also evident in Coetzee's autobiographical trilogy. The three books are subtitled "Scenes from Provincial Life". The word "provincial" in "Provincial Life" carries a dual meaning, referring both to "regional" and negatively to "non-metropolitan" and "narrow-minded". The "metropolis" in contrast to "provincial" here refers to the Western cultural center, represented by cities like London. In "WHAT IS A CLASSIC: A Lecture", Coetzee analyzes the means by which T.S. Eliot constructed his cultural identity, suggesting that Eliot "had targeted London as the metropolis of the English-speaking world, and... had made himself into the deliberately magisterial voice of that metropolis" [7]. Similar to Eliot's journey from America to England, Coetzee, in his autobiographical trilogy, describes his desire to break free from South Africa and his aspiration to embrace European high culture. In Coetzee's writings, language serves as the means to achieve this goal. "He", in contrast to the Afrikaans, prefers using English and considers himself English. He is grateful to be placed in an English school rather than an Afrikaans school. After completing university, he directly leaves South Africa for London to pursue a career in programming. However, throughout the entire process of "escaping from the periphery to the center", "he" remains unable to shake off a sense of colonial "provincial" marginality, pondering, "How long will he have to live in England before it is allowed that he has become the real thing, become English?" [8] The opposition between the European high culture center and the South African colonial periphery is a central theme running through Coetzee's autobiographical trilogy, particularly in the first two parts, "Boyhood" and "Youth".

3.2. Resistance at the Periphery

The marginalized protagonists in Coetzee's works, whether actively or passively, tend to resist the centers of power to some extent, posing a threat to the binary "center-periphery" opposition. Often, these acts of resistance begin with language, as they appropriate and mimic the discourse patterns of the centers of power, thereby undermining the authority of center discourse.

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As mentioned earlier, language perpetuates hierarchical power structures. The imperial education system imposes a "standard" urban language as the paradigm, marginalizing all "variants" as impurities. To describe post-colonial experiences, the "standard" urban language needs to expand into a form of "appropriation". This usage questions and subverts imperial cultural forms [5]. Inherent concepts of power in the center-periphery model are appropriated, leading to their disintegration. Homi Bhabha contends that the imitation of the colonizer by the colonized is both an act of resemblance and a threat; it disrupts the represented identities and power relationships, transforming observers into the observed [9]. "Mimicry marks those moments of civil disobedience within the discipline of civility: signs of spectacular resistance" [10].

In "Foe", "I" demonstrates a transformed version of the word "house" by modeling the deformed "hous". This act in itself constitutes a form of "appropriation" of standard English and serves as "I"'s resistance to the center of writing power held by writer Foe, situating "I" on the periphery. "Friday wrote the four letters h-o-u-s, or four shapes passably like them: whether they were truly the four letters, and stood truly for the word house, and the picture I had drawn, and the thing itself, only he knew" [1]. In this context, Friday's imitation of the already appropriated term constitutes a dual resistance against imperial discourse. Similar to the appropriation of writing is Friday's appropriation of speaking, stemming from his objective condition of lacking a tongue. When asked by the character Cruso to repeat the sound "la-la-la", Friday can only produce "ha-ha-ha" from deep in his throat. Spivak interprets this "h" as "the failed echolalia of the mute" [11]. However, Coetzee's treatment here is undoubtedly ironic. "Ha" serves here as an appropriation and mimicry of "la", but it can also be seen as a double entendre. This mimicry of the sound of laughter can be seen as mockery and noncompliance with the colonizers. Witnessing Friday's transformed mimicry of speech, the female protagonist develops a sense of fear about Friday's impairment, reflecting an inherent rebelliousness in the structure of any dominant discourse.

In "Waiting for the Barbarians", when interpreting the meaning of barbarian characters on the slips of wood, the protagonist, who does not understand these characters at all, hears "with surprise the thick nasal voice that is now mine" [6]. The protagonist takes advantage of "translation" to interpret the barbarian language using the imperial center language, framing these barbarian characters as accusations against the barbaric colonial acts of the colonizers: "Now let us see what the next one says. See, there is only a single character. It is the barbarian character *war*, but it has other senses too. It can stand for *vengeance*, and, if you turn it upside down like this, it can be made to read *justice*. There is no knowing which sense is intended. That is part of barbarian cunning." [6] Here, the once indecipherable "dead language" of the barbarians regains the power of expression through "translation" into the imperial center language, becoming a more profound language that surpasses the imperial language. This is a subtle act of appropriation and imitation, but it clearly illustrates that the language imposed by the imperial center upon the colonial periphery can be appropriated and utilized by the periphery as a tool of resistance.

4. Conclusion

The power dynamics between the center and the periphery are undeniably complex. Paradoxically, the centers of power, in the process of establishing their authority, offer pathways and tools for resistance to the periphery. These pathways and tools are primarily manifested in the periphery's imitation and appropriation of the center's discourse, as portrayed prominently in J.M. Coetzee's works. Through the acts of resistance by his protagonists, Coetzee questions and challenges the imperial discourse, which is in fact the extension of Foucault's theories of discourse-power and body as well as the applications of them in certain contexts.

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