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COLONIAL UNCONSCIOUS IN POSTCOLONIAL BILDUNGSROMAN: A READING OF
J.M.COETZEE'S BOYHOOD AND YOUTH

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Abstract

It is generally assumed that a bildungsroman is a kind of narrative depicting the growth of the protagonist usually from childhood to maturity. The issue of identity construction, therefore, naturally becomes a relevant topic and so forms the chief concern of this paper. As a country of racial and ethnic plurality, the quest for identity represented in South African literature is never homogeneous, but fractured and often conflicted. South Africa comprises different racial and ethnic communities – African, Afrikaner, 'coloured', English, Indian – all have their own discovery of self-trying to come to terms with what it means to be a South African. J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth* are interesting not only for its postcolonial geographical context but also for the documentation of identity construction of the subject in a racially torn, multiethnic country.

Keywords: Autobiography, Bildungsroman, Diaspora, Identity, Race, Postcolonialism

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Introduction

'Whiteness is a lie...Whiteness is nothing more to me than the absence of pigment. Yet, the centuries old rule of my homeland by Europeans has left permanent mark on the way people are looked at.'-Anonymous¹

The epigraph is not quoted from any writing of some eminent postcolonial critic. It is an excerpt of a statement of a white South African undergraduate student, written and submitted anonymously in fulfillment of an in class assignment: "Complete the following Sentence: 'Whiteness is...'",. Such response undoubtedly points to the respondent's wish, conscious or not, to dissociate himself from whiteness as it applies to his own life.

It also articulates the respondent's psychic and ontological dilemma when confronting the legacy of his colonial past. The question is: what kind of life does produce such a sensibility? For an answer, I am going to examine the two volumes of memoirs- *Boyhood* and its sequel *Youth* – written by the eminent South African writer J.M.Coetzee. Subtitled 'Scenes of Provincial Life', *Boyhood* reflects Coetzee's life from the age of ten to the age of thirteen while *Youth* picks up at nineteen and ends when he is roughly twenty three. In this paper, I am going to analyze both the works as postcolonial bildungsroman, powerfully delineating how the legacy of colonialism shaped the personality and psyche of the postcolonial subject. Also, I will deal with the other interesting and related issues such as the discursive construction of subjectivity and the

problems facing the artist in a racially divided society.

In *Postcolonial Studies*, John Thieme describes *Boyhood* and *Youth* as ‘memoirs’², while William Deresiewicz says that both are ‘fictional autobiography’. The later argued that both *Boyhood* and *Youth* ‘are not an objective record of Coetzee’s young life; they are ... Coetzee’s reconstruction.’³ Whether *Boyhood* and *Youth* are Coetzee’s own reconstruction or not is indeed a fascinating subject to study but is not my concern here. Instead, I return to the concept of bildungsroman. A bildungsroman is a fiction that recounts the development - psychological and sometimes spiritual - of an individual from childhood to maturity to the point at which the protagonist recognizes his place and function in the world. The genre includes not only earlier works like Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, Dickens’ *David Copperfield* but also the 20th century works like James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Doris Lessing’s five volume work *Children of the Violence*. Coetzee’s *Boyhood* and *Youth* are significant for two reasons. First, the location is South Africa, a land with a colonial past; and second, it depicts the growth and development of a white South African in a racially divided country.

In his essay, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, Coetzee reveals the strange dilemma of the white South African liberals. By vouching for the equality of mankind, on the one hand, they are torn away from their colonial ancestors while, on the other hand, their white skin compels them to remain alien among the native black or ‘coloured’ South Africans. Coetzee terms these doubly alienated people as people ‘no longer European not yet African’. Like Alan Paton, Helen Suzman and Andre Brink, Coetzee also felt this double alienation and both *Boyhood* and *Youth* powerfully delineate this alienation.

Interestingly, Coetzee’s memoirs also question the generic concepts of bildungsroman, offering an anti-essentialist narrative that refuses to be termed by a Eurocentric sense of ‘growth novel’ or ‘education novel’. Coetzee, here, does and does not fulfill the structural requirements of bildungsroman. The protagonist does move

experientially through the narrative from ignorance (or, passivity) to knowledge (or, active awareness). But, that knowledge will not necessarily help him to find his place in post-apartheid South-African culture. In both, *Boyhood* and *Youth*, the protagonist’s growth into a final unproblematic identification with his culture, as the structure of bildungsroman would require, is frustrated.

Boyhood chronicles Coetzee’s childhood in a small city, 90 miles from Cape Town, in the 1940’s and 50’s. Born into the middle ranks of white privilege to Afrikaner parents, Coetzee portrays himself as a sickly bookish boy, deeply absorbed in reading. While the stories he loves tend to the heroic and romantic, reality confronts him with his parents’ quietly embittered marriage, casual cruelties practiced at school and the massive inequity of apartheid. Being sensitive to all of it proves a source of endless shame. The young boy lives in fear that the “ugly, black, crying, babyish core of him” will be revealed, “Like a crab pulled out of its shell, pink and wounded and obscene”. His mother, he worries, has turned him into “something unnatural, something that needs to be protected if it is to continue to live.”⁴

From the very beginning, the young protagonist shows a distinguished quality of reading. But his reading of national history serves, unfortunately, only to deepen his sense of alienation from the national spirit:

“Although, in examinations, he gives the correct answers to the history questions. He does not know, in a way that satisfies his heart, why Jan Van Riebeeck and Simon van der Stel were so good while Lord Charles Somerset was so bad.”⁵

Also significant is young Coetzee’s learning about a significant issue like Boer War. His primary knowledge of it comes in the form of a story that his grandmother had told.

“When the Boers arrived on the farm... they demanded food and money and expected to be waited on. When the British soldiers came they slept in the stable, stole nothing and before leaving courteously thanked their hosts.”⁶

This story weighs heavily in the young protagonist's mind like the authoritative discourse of his schoolbook. So despite the boy's limited awareness of the Boer war as a straggle for liberation from British colonial rule, he nevertheless persists in his sympathies for the British.

"In stories of the Boer war one is supposed to side with the Boers, fighting for their freedom against the might of the British Empire. However he prefers to dislike the Boers, not only for their long beards and ugly clothes, but for hiding behind rocks, and shooting from ambush, and to like the British for marching to their death to the skirl of bagpipes."⁷

The protagonist's anglophilia is something associated with the admirable code of conduct or honor or, with the romantic image of war. Englishmen, in this context, represents whiteness at its apex, a nostalgic cultural idea that the young boy transforms through his fetishization of traditional English icons (the light Brigade, Victoria cross, Robin Hood) into a cultural aesthetic. This is a cult of English whiteness whose grace and beauty would protect him from the debased, guttural whiteness of the Afrikaners.

Interestingly, young Coetzee is also sceptic about his own Anglophilia. He knows that loyalty is not enough to be accepted as truly English. He will have to face the essential 'tests', 'some of which, he knows, he will not pass'. This is manifested in his attitude to another English boy, Trevelyan. It is Trevelyan, 'the very English' lodger who volunteers to beat the indentured servant Eddie after an attempted escape.

"Trevelyan snorted with every blow working himself into as much of a rage as any Afrikaner. How does Trevelyan, then fit into his theory that the English are good?"⁸

This particular moment evokes, out of the anxieties of the racial privilege, a fear of revenge in some distant future.

"One thing he knows for sure: Eddie will have no pity on him."⁹

The image of South African society, Coetzee portrays in *Boyhood*, is dark and gloomy. Young

Coetzee's life is full of shuddering. The memoir opens with a gloomy evocation of a disease that strikes the family's chickens:

"The hens develop gross swellings on their legs, like elephant skin. Sickly and cross, they cease to lay. His mother consults his sister... who says they will return to laying only after the horny shells under their tongues have been cut out. So one after another his mother takes the hens between her knees, presses on their jowls till they open their beaks, and with the point of a paring knife picks at their tongues. The hens shriek and struggle, their eyes bulging. He shudders and turns away."¹⁰

Sadism percolates through South African society. Teachers are known by their caning styles. Coetzee's father and uncles remember with 'nostalgia and pleasurable fear', about 'cold winter morning when the cane would raise blue weals on their buttocks and the sting would linger for days of the memory of the flesh'. Coetzee himself is tormented by the black Afrikaner schoolmates who, in one horrifying scene, drag him into a corner and force him to swallow a live caterpillar. At home, he also witnessed the cruel flogging of Eddie.

It is noticeable that, for the young protagonist of *Boyhood*, the psyche is the site of a submerged tension between unspoken desires and the fear of punishment. Interestingly, his desires are not focused on any single object. His erotic desire is apparent when he glimpses of a coloured boy in the street:

"He likes to gaze at slim, smooth brown legs in tight shorts. Best of all, he loves the honey tan legs of boys with blond hair."¹¹

However, it is only through a range of fragments or impressions from the boy's life that the larger pattern of desire and identification emerges. Two such sequences, here, are significant. The first is the protagonist's momentary glimpse of a 'Coloured' boy in the street, as mentioned earlier, and the second is his brief friendship with Eddie, the 'Coloured' servant of his family. In both cases, Coetzee's desire mixes with the sense of guilt or shame - not only in an erotic sense, but in the more generalized sense of his own privilege of a white

subject and the non white other's subjection to that privilege.

The presence of the dark skinned boy is crucial since it focuses not only on sexual desires but also on the protagonist's realization that the other's body is already subjected to him to an extent that he finds disturbing.

"So this boy ... who is slim as an eel and quick as a hare and would defeat him with ease in any contest of swiftness... in nevertheless subjected to him in ways that embarrass him so much that he squirm and wriggles his shoulders...."¹²

Coetzee's remembrance of Eddie, "a seven year old coloured boy" is also significant. He remembers Eddie's helping him mastering the bicycle as "a debt he still owes Eddie". Also crucial is young Coetzee's interest in the smell of Eddie's body during the friendly wrestlings on the lawn.

All this is marred by Trevelyan a white lodger. The white man, Trevelyan, for some minor misbehavior flogs Eddie severely with a leather strap. Coetzee's subsequent feelings of guilt and shame are also noticeable:

'One thing he knows for sure Eddie will have no pity on him.'

Two things, in this particular area of postcoloniality, become significant. The first is the issue of the innocence of the racial other. It is the coloured 'other' who embodies the path of nature and innocence. While the white observer casts himself as a dark and guilty soul. The second is the issue of land. The land is the racial 'other's' rightful possession of which they are deprived by the white minority.

"The land comes with them, is theirs, and has always been."¹³

The protagonist's casting of the non-white other as a sexual innocent is read, in this context, allegorical of his longer perception of the other's nescience. The 'Coloured' boy in the strict is absorbed in himself. He does not glance at them. Eddie also is not troubled by the white boy's voyeurism. This innocence of the other stands in

opposition to white guilt, which eventually returns to accuse him:

"Beauty is innocence, innocence is ignorance, ignorance is ignorance of pleasure. Pleasure is guilty. This boy with his fresh untouched body is innocent, while he, ruled by his dark desires, is guilty."¹⁴

The desire and the guilt are thus together bound. They grow from the same source: they are the traces of a colonial legacy that manifests in the former colonizer as collective guilt over both the colonial desire to dominate and the length to which whiteness has gone to maintain its ascendancy.

Relief comes from his grand father's sheep farm, where in the solitude of fields and woods Coetzee finds intimations of an ecstatic freedom. He says "I belong to the farm' but interestingly, not "the farm belongs to me".

'Belong' is thus the secret and sacred word that binds him to the farm. It is, however, a relation of identification without mastery.

"Voelfontein belongs to none. The farm is greater than any of them."¹⁵

But even Voelfontein and the belongingness Coetzee feels to it are not enough to make him stay in South Africa. In the second part of his memoir, *Youth* we find him plotting an escape from his native country from the stifling love of his mother, from the conflict of a racist society and from, what he is sure, is impending revolution. 'Studying mathematics, reading poetry, saving money,' he tries do ensure that when he arrives in the real world, wherever that may be, he will be prepared to experience life to its full intensity and transform it into art. *Youth* begins with Coetzee at a University in Cape Town. But within five short chapters he has decamped for England. The Sharpsville massacre, the unrest that follows and the threat of the draft finally pushed him out of South Africa.

Desperately seeking a job and having a degree in mathematics as well as English, he finds a position at IBM. The work is deadening and it eventually turns out, that his move to England will make the psychic wounds of the young colonial more visible.

Arriving in London, he finds neither poetry nor romance. Instead he succumbs to the monotony of life as a computer programmer from which random, loveless affair offer no relief. Devoid of inspiration, he stops writing. Everywhere he looks, he sees the sophisticated beauties of London ignoring him, its bohemians disdaining him. The life he dreams is of out of reach. He fantasizes about passing as English but knows he never will. An awkward colonial, a constitutional outsider, he begins a dark pilgrimage in which 'he is continually tested and continually found wanting.' This is apparent in his short affair with Astrid, a girl from Austria:

"Downstairs he has tea with her and her employer an English women whose cool eyes take his measure and find him wanting. This is a European house, her eyes say: We don't need a graceless colonial here, and a Boer to boot."¹⁶

The anxiety reflected in *Boyhood*, that he would not pass himself as a European, proved true in *Youth*. Coetzee says in another section. :

"It is not a good time to be a South African in England. With great show of self-righteousness, South Africa has declared itself a republic and promptly been expelled from the British Commonwealth. The message contained in that expulsion has been unmistakable. The British have had enough of the Boers and of Boer-led South Africa, a colony that has always been more trouble than it has been worth... They certainly do not want forlorn South African whites cluttering their doorsteps like orphans in search of parents. He has no doubt that Astrid will be obliquely informed by this suave English women that he is not a desirable."¹⁷

Interestingly, the idea about art and love that rule young Coetzee's inner life unconsciously imitate the high Modern ideology of 40 years earlier. He believes that art is born of suffering, even madness; the true artist must expect to endure exile obscure labour and obloquy. He says:

"Like Pound and Eliot, he must be prepared to endure all that life has stored up for him, even if that mean exile, obscure labour and obloquy."¹⁸

Yet, there is one consolation: "because they are creators, artists possess the secret of love" and women wanting to be brushed by "the sacred fire" instinctively recognize this. Coetzee's models, here are those writers whose 'life' he tries to imitate rather than their 'works'. His models are Eliot and Pound for their proud endurance of calumny and exile, and Picasso, for his legendary success with women.

It is not until chap 19, where in a used bookstore, he discovers Beckett's fiction. This is undoubtedly the model for his own mercilessly spare style and characteristic focus on the consciousness of a single isolated character - an influence most evident in his second work *In the Heart of the Country* (1977). But this flicker quickly fades and by the end of the book his psyche is more badly logjammed than ever.

His friendship with Ganapathy, the Indian programmer, is not a relief. Yet, Coetzee feels that "he and Ganapathy are two sides of the same coin". Perhaps both he and Ganapathy bear a colonial past (however different), or perhaps, both of them disdain their motherland, or perhaps, both are the colonial and constitutional outsiders in London. Whatever the reason(s) is (are), both Coetzee and Ganapathy are struggling with their hollow and sterile life in London and with each struggling move they are pushed into a corner and into defeat Coetzee ends his narrative:

"One of these days the ambulance men will call at Ganapathy's flat and bring him out on a stretcher with a sheet over his face. When they have fetched Ganapathy they might as well come and fetch him too."¹⁹

In *Stranger Shores*, the collection of critical essays, Coetzee speaks of a crucial experience of his childhood. Roaming around the backyard of his house in suburban Cape Town, one afternoon, he suddenly heard the sound of music coming from the next house. It was Bach and he was transfixed. After this, he writes, 'everything changed':

'The revelation in the garden was a key event in my formation'²⁰

It was the first time, he felt the impact of great art. And yet, neither *Boyhood* nor *Youth* makes any mention of this significant, momentous and epiphanic experience. An experience that can be a crucial stage in a narrative of bildungsroman, is thus consciously omitted and thereby the unproblematic concept of growth or, education is, once again, shattered.

Conclusion

Both *Boyhood* and *Youth* are written in the third person. Coetzee refers to himself (not probing into the autobiographical debate) as 'he'. They are written in the present tense. All these, according to William Deresiewicz, are 'against the entire autobiographical tradition'. But, this third person, present tense voice also effaces an adult perspective in the narrative and lends harsh immediacy to the inner agonies of a child and then the youth. Both *Boyhood* and *Youth* unceasingly interrogate the psychic machinery of a white subject. The struggle of the young protagonist with the meaning of his own whiteness and its intersubjective relation with otherness in postcolonial context is repeatedly reflected in Coetzee's other fictions like *In The Heart of The Country*(1977), *Waiting for the Barbarians*(1980), *Age of Iron*(1990), *Disgrace*(1999)and even in *Elizabeth Costello*(2003).

Read in this context, therefore, the incomplete or, broken bildungsromans of Coetzee become a different narrative of progress for whiteness itself. The challenge that remains for such a narrative would thus come not from without (in the form of an angry avenging other), but from within, from the lasting legacy of colonialism that has left an indelible mark on the postcolonial world of multiple colours. To interrogate whiteness can never mean to undo it, either in its historical tradition or in the memory traces of empire. Both *Boyhood* and *Youth* are, therefore, about the moving towards a new script of narrative of a postcolonial, post-mastery whiteness – a whiteness that can enter into a relation of mutual recognition with its others without admonitions, without fear and without shame.

Notes

¹ Anonymously quoted in *Posts and Pasts: A Theory of Postcolonialism*. By Alfred. J. Lopez (State University of New York Press; Albany, 2001) p.87

² John Thieme, *Postcolonial Studies* (London : Arnold Publishers, 2003) p.53

³ William Deresiewicz, 'Third Person Singular' (New York Times Books Review, 2002) p.2

⁴ J.M.Coetzee, *Boyhood : Scenes of Provincial Life* (Penguin Books, 1998) p.8

⁵ ibid. 66

⁶ ibid. 66

⁷ ibid. 66-71

⁸ ibid. 74-75

⁹ ibid. 77

¹⁰ ibid. 1-2

¹¹ ibid. 56

¹² ibid. 61

¹³ ibid. 62

¹⁴ ibid. 60

¹⁵ ibid. 95-96

¹⁶ J.M.Coetzee, *Youth* (Secker and Warburg, 2002) p.86

¹⁷ ibid. 87

¹⁸ ibid. 20

¹⁹ ibid. 169

²⁰ J.M.Coetzee, *Stranger Shores* (Vintage, 2002) p.10

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