



## DISCOURSE AND POWER IN J.M. COETZEE'S WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS AND THE MASTER OF PETERSBURG

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### ABSTRACT

Award winning novelist John Maxwell Coetzee who emerged in the mid 1970s, has based many of his writings on his own experiences and struggles of life in post-colonial South Africa. In *Dusklands* (1974) and *Foe* (1986), his writings have reflected and consistently logged many fundamental post-colonial themes such as stereotype universality, being the voice of the society's neglected and gender discrimination based on the power structures of patriarchal society.

Power and Discourse have been one among the many extensively written themes in literature over the years, and works like Gabriel García Márquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* are but a few examples. Mirroring aspects of postmodernist writings, some of Coetzee's early works have also echoed anarchy – a system of brokenness, chaos, budding rebelliousness and an insatiable thirst for power. Most of the characters in his novels have been involved with assessing their self powers, understanding power in social relations and even participating in authoritative activities or revolting against political powers.

In addition to capturing aspects of Coetzee's life in a post colonial nation that has experienced civil wars, periods of unrest with government authorities, gender and racial discrimination, there is a breaking of human spirit that comes with submission to authority and powerlessness. By understanding how Coetzee has discussed the aspects of discourse and power, and looking for an echo in his characters, there is a better revelation on how power relations work in the society, among individuals and even within oneself.

**KEYWORDS:** Discourse, Power, Foucault, South African

In his book *The History of Sexuality*, noted French philosopher and social theorist Michael Foucault wrote –

“Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society” (93).

Religion, politics, sexuality, relationship, death are a few among the many themes that have

been widely used in English literature. While the theme may not be generalized to all political scenarios, power relations have featured in many literary works and were reflective of the time period in which the work was produced. Homer in *The Odyssey* talks of how power relations were exhibited through raw human emotions like ambition, lust and hatred. *The Prince* written by Machiavelli talked of how rulers ought to utilize and maintain political power. Another prominent work that dealt with the

theme of power was William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies*, where the marooned boys struggle with individuality, morality and the desire to take control of the group.

Michael Foucault has put forward extensive psychoanalytical theories of power relations, knowledge and sexuality. He claimed that as he analyzed how culture made human beings subjects, he began to grasp that "power is everywhere, because it comes from everywhere" and in being knit into the very fabric of the society, it marked its presence in cultural and social relations. He added that in their quest for self-identity, human beings constantly evolved and adapted to their needs, thus transcending power structures. Foucault is among the few writers who say that one of the positive effects of power was that individuals gained knowledge (Foucault 194). Gaventa too supports this notion and stated that power was a positive, necessary force in society, since it "produced" instead of "repressing", "censoring", "concealing" or "masking" (Gaventa 2).

Foucault suggested that discourse referred to "ways of constituting knowledge, together with social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledge's and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, the unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern" (Weedon 108). Both discourse and power are mutually constitutive - suggesting that discourse influences the relations of power, while power itself can influence the manner of the discourse, over a period of time. At a given time, discourses (a structured lot of texts and allied practices for producing texts) shape the power system (distribution of power, form of power etc for the actor) existent in that context. However, over a period of time, the power of the actors permits them to construct and dissect the texts, hence involving wider discourse and impacting the discursive text. Discourse analysis involves the isolation of controllable elements presented as oral or written texts which confirm hypotheses pertaining to mental processes. With regard to literature, this involves the detection and analysis of "unconscious codes" in the written texts.

In this paper, the topic of discussion will include the analysis of discourse and power in two of J.M.Coetzee's novels - *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *The Master of Petersburg*. Coetzee is a South African author who emerged in the early 1970s, from a country recouping from decades of colonialism and struggling with the full blown vice of racial discrimination. His writings have reflected many fundamental post-colonial themes such as stereotype universality, and gender discrimination based on the patriarchal society, presenting a picture of anarchy – a system of brokenness, chaos, budding rebelliousness and an insatiable thirst for power. Most of Coetzee's writings leave the readers wondering if the attack on the whites in the post-colonial era was any justification for the long years of struggle and oppression that the blacks had to face.

*Waiting for the Barbarians* was Coetzee's third novel, written in 1980. The lack of a precise geographical location or time has been criticized by some as a historical and apolitical. However, it has been argued that by the use of allegory, one can come face to face with the barbaric aspect of any civilization. The setting of the story is a small frontier town, which is under the authority of the 'Empire', and overseen by the town's aging colonial Magistrate, who also acts as the protagonist and narrator of events. Matters take an unfortunate turn when a state of emergency is declared. Special Forces under the Empire, referred to as the Third Bureau, headed by Colonel Joll are deployed to the settlement. The Magistrate himself has seen no unrest, but rumours reach him suggesting that the barbarians could be uniting to rebel. A team arrives to investigate and snuff any uprising of the native barbarians either by torturing them, or killing them. From the title, we can see a state of purposelessness, with the Empire 'waiting' for the Barbarians to attack. The title is suggestive of the Magistrate's life. Additionally, there is reference to the 'other party' who is suppressed or wishes to gain power (i.e. the Barbarians). There are a couple of aspects that need to be considered with regard to discourse and power relations in this novel. The network of power is headed by the Empire through the Magistrate and then through Colonel Joll, over the citizens of the town. The enemies of the Empire

whom they refer to as the 'barbarians', are the natives who lived in the lands before the rule of the Empire began. It has been suggested the Empire could have established their power over the citizens by ensuring their protection from potential Barbarian 'attacks'. Both the citizens and the Empire are in constant wait for any signs of aggression. The use of the term 'Barbarian' to refer to the enemy is rather ironic in the fact that they who addressed themselves as more civilized and who are in authority of the Empire eventually adopt barbaric practices including the torture and murder of their own citizens.

In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), Franz Fanon wrote, "A national culture is the whole body of effort made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence." The national narrative that evolves from these efforts will invariably claim that a given nation's pre-eminence is 'natural', thus 'certifying' its validity and making the correctness of its actions incontestable, its conquests inevitable. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the influence of this nationalist narrative on the Magistrate is evident in a number of ways. Even after his imprisonment and humiliation at the hands of the Empire, the Magistrate's comments on many occasions are ambiguous. The narrative of the Empire has been internalized by the Magistrate to such an extent, that he cannot genuinely apply his intellect to contest its legitimacy.

For Edward Said, a nation and the self-justifying narrative that it creates are inextricably linked. At the beginning of the novel, the Magistrate is skeptical of the imperial discourse, especially of the man most associated with the Empire, Colonel Joll. As part of the Empire's hegemonic apparatus, Joll constantly expresses discontent and worry over potential Barbarian invasions, stressing the need for a pre-emptive strike, and censuring all those who questioned the legitimacy of his discourse and the manner in which issues were handled.

Robert Post writes, "The nomadic Barbarians retaliate by destroying crops at the fort and... by leading the garrison into the desert and then vanishing so that the troops perish from starvation" (32). Since the novel has not even a

single battle scene, Derek Wright claims that "The Barbarians... are really a mental fiction born of colonial paranoia and a political convenience" (56). He suggests that the 'war' taking place was fictional and that it was meant to create fear in the minds of the people of the Empire, therefore securing their allegiance towards the nation. The Magistrate seems to doubt that the Empire is really at war. He says, "The men have not been to war...at best they have met no one at all."

Another instance when the Magistrate betrays his complicity with the 'Nationalist' narrative is when he describes the Barbarians. When the Magistrate chides Colonel Joll for his actions in committing "*filthy barbarities*"(125), one would wonder and maybe even expect that the Magistrate, having understood the Barbarians a little better, would avoid the use of the word which connoted savagery. Although many readers feel that the Magistrate's support for the Barbarians may have made him one among them, he fails to relinquish the imperial notion that they are nothing more than barbarians. Towards the end of the novel, he calls them 'others' in a conversation with Colonel Joll. Although he is criticizing the imperial policy, he still considered the Barbarians less human, and not too much of a hindrance before the ordained goal of imperial expansion.

There is an aspect in the novel about the enforcement of power on the human body – in the form of tortures inflicted on the Barbarians by the Empire and those on the girl by the Magistrate, and also the physical punishment the Magistrate suffers at the hands of the empire. For instance, when the Magistrate looks back on the one year with the barbarian woman, he seems to tell himself that he recognizes "the unbounded freedom of this past year in which more than ever before, my life has been mine to make up as I go along. For example: my freedom to make the girl whatever I felt like, wife or concubine or daughter or slave or all at once or none, at whim, because I had no duty to her save what it occurred to me to feel from moment to moment..." (86). The Magistrate's sexuality is indicative of the imperialist attitudes that he feigns to abhor. The influence of hegemony on the Magistrate is so complete that even his sexuality has itself become a two-way channel of discursivity. For

the Magistrate, the barbarian woman is one for which "there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry" (43).

Foucault's theory of knowledge suggested that knowledge, whether in the form of law or history, is created and recorded by the Empire, thus is the product of power as well. Finally, there is resistance from within the discourse of power, namely, the attempt of the Magistrate to break away from the empire and effect justice for the victims. "I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to live outside the history that the Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I never wished it for the Barbarians that they should have a history of the Empire laid upon them. How can I believe that that is cause for shame?" (167).

By studying the power relations in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, one can unveil some of the masks civilization wears and see how racial and cultural issues are reflected throughout history. In the finale, we see that both the Empire and the Magistrate suffer in powerlessness and the 'wait' for the attack of the Barbarians becomes the sole purpose of the existence for the citizens.

*The Master of Petersburg* was a novel written by Coetzee in 1994. The story shares a similar theme of strained parent-child relationship as *The Life and Times of Michael K* and is based in the year 1869 and follows a fictional account of the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky. As part of the investigations for his son Pavel's mysterious death, Dostoevsky travels back to St. Petersburg from Germany. Russia, at the time, was in a pre-revolutionary stage, and marred by corruption, crime, prostitution, the suffering of the innocent and brutality. The revolutionaries were referred to as the Nechavists, after their young charismatic leader Sergei Gennadevich Nechaev. On his return, Dostoevsky moves into the room Pavel had lived in, dons his clothes and reads the young man's diary, in an attempt to answer the questions surrounding his son's life and death.

In *The Master of Petersburg*, Coetzee offers a complex deliberation on authorship, rivaled in metafictional complexity only by *Foe* from among his earlier novels. While *Foe* locates a precise moment of postcolonial writing, in ambivalent relationship to the Western literary canon, *The*

*Mater of Petersburg* makes a gesture towards raising broader questions about authorship and responsibility, and the directions for the postmodernist novel, questions which here, stem from problems in Dostoevsky's poetics.

In *The Mater of Petersburg*, Coetzee engages in a complex inter-textuality with Dostoevsky and his polyphonic novel relates to the idea of the artist's responsibility in a society where political necessity is heightened. Bakhtin's analysis of discourse in Dostoevsky through *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* talks of metalinguistic discourses (such as stylization, parody, *skaz* and dialogue) having a two-fold direction towards the referential object of speech as in the case of ordinary discourse, and towards someone else's discourse/speech. Dostoevsky's discourse through his narrative voices is a useful index of Coetzee's intertextual engagement with Dostoevsky. Bakhtin has talked of "the active type of discourse" which includes "polemically colored autobiography and confession" and "any discourse with a sideward glance from someone else's word", in which "the other discourse exerts influence from without; diverse forms of interrelationship with another's discourses are possible here, as well as various degrees of deforming influence exerted by one discourse on the other" (52).

*The Mater of Petersburg* elaborates Coetzee's image of parental responsibility and its political implications through the father-son relationship. Coetzee explores this relationship at personal, political and religious levels. There are many instances where the reader notices that the father and stepson were never close. Dostoevsky had lost his wife, Pavel's mother, when the boy was 15 years old, and that must have left him bitter. He is D.W. Winnicott's psychically absent mother figure who deprives Pavel of love and caring very early in his life. He tells Nechaev later on that Pavel grew up in a holding environment in terms of a family since he had been deprived of a family in his earlier formative years. He says, "I was the stranger he and his mother were coming to live with. I was the man who was taking his mother away from him" (143).

The personal and political interact in Coetzee's resonant metaphor of the "child conspirators" who "believe they are immortal" and the interaction is

reflected in the difficulties of being a father when the new generation of Russian anarchists is rebelling against the rule of the father in Mother Russia. In *The Master of Petersburg*, Maximov, the judicial investigator, links the political and the personal through the father/son metaphor when interviewing Dostoevsky.

These child conspirators....believe they are immortal... In that sense, it is indeed like fighting demons....It is in their blood, so to speak, to wish us ill, our generation...Perhaps it is just the old matter of father and sons after all, such as we have always had, only deadlier in this generation, more unforgiving...(45).

The epidemic that is Nechaevism was spreading through the nation like wild fire. While Maximov stated that, "Nechaevism is an idea.... Nechaevism will not be extinguished till the times have changed..." and "...assassinations are meant to precipitate a general uprising and to lead to the overthrow of the state" (36), Dostoevsky felt that "Nechaevism is not an idea... It is a spirit, and Nechaev himself is not its embodiment, but its host; or rather he is under possession by it" (43 - 44). It was in this "bandit's" sway that Pavel was lost. "Nechaev has disciples among the young because a spirit in them answers to the spirit in him. Of course that is not how he explains it. He calls himself a materialist" (112).

In a conversation between Nechaev and Dostoevsky, Nechaev offers the justification that a person who really feels for the hungry soon recognizes the forces that determine the lives to which people are condemned. Dostoevsky however replies in a parable that it is not forces (capital, state, power) that are responsible for injustice; it is people, generic, ordinary, vice-ridden, morally flaccid people. The kiss that closes the debate is Coetzee parodying the famous kiss of Christian forgiveness in *The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor*, and laughing at the idea of humility in either of the participant's hearts signifying their kinship.

In almost every one of Coetzee's narrative works, he writes in the present tense with a third person narrator. This has led many critics to wonder if powerlessness and helplessness are characteristics of most of his protagonists. Most of these characters

like David Lurie in *Disgrace*, Paul Rayment in *Slow Man*, Dostoevsky in *The Master of Petersburg* have appeared to act on conscious choices, but in fact, often stalled into inaction for some reason or driven by external events or internal impulses which seem beyond their control.

According to the Foucauldian concept of power, power relationships are everywhere. They lay in Dostoevsky's ability to write of the situation and to realize for himself what Pavel's death meant. They can be seen at work in Maximov, who was the appointed judicial investigator, placed in authority by the ruling group. They can be felt in Nechaev, the leader of the rebelling group of people who felt that they should aid in overturning the power of the rulers and bringing justice to the suffering masses at any cost. Dostoevsky sums up this force as "A war : the old against the young, the young against the old" ( 247).

Foucault believes that ideology is based on differentiating true or false statements about the world. However, with regard to the political, social and moral aspects of the world, there is rarely a clear distinction and Foucault argued that there is relativity. For instance, Palestinians fighting to take back the West Bank from Israel, could be considered 'freedom fighters' by Palestine, but 'terrorists' by Israel. In both these novels, one can identify the struggle in having to describe appropriately the status of the oppressed (in *Waiting for the Barbarians*) and the rebels (in *The Master of Petersburg*). There is also the other aspect that many a time; we believe "false" statements to be "true". In believing something so strongly and negatively about a group of people, we challenge our thinking and by treating them that way, would it be any wonder that they did not actually turn into what we feared? In both the novels, those in authority knew that things were not going the way they should. The reader is left to decide if the uprising that resulted can be necessarily justified.

To conclude, one can say that discourses are ubiquitous ways of knowing, valuing and experiencing the world. Discourses can be used for an assertion of power and knowledge and they can be used for resistance and critique. Discourses are used in everyday contexts for building power and knowledge, for regulation, normalization, the

development of new knowledge and power relations and for hegemony. One of the central attributes of dominant discourse is its power to interpret conditions, issues and events in favor of the elite. The discourse of the marginalized is seen as threat to the propaganda efforts of the elite. Hence, it is for this reason that we must engage in Critical discourse analysis- to make the voice of the marginalized legitimate and heard above the din and to question the voice of those in power in order to reveal hidden agendas and motives that serve self-interests, maintain superiority and ensure others' subjugation.

An analysis of the theme from this author's works will be ideal, since his writings draw inspiration from life in post-colonial era of South Africa, where lives were lived in fear and rebellion was on the horizon. By determining power relations and discourse in his novels, a deeper understanding of Coetzee's characters and perhaps Coetzee the author and person as well, will surely emerge.

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