



## The Theme of Silence in J. M. Coetzee's Novel *Dusklands*

“I wanted to rise, but the disemboweled silence fell back upon me” (Fanon)

Gamal Abdo Nasser Al-Dhamari,  
Research Scholar (PhD in English),  
Department of English, University of Mysore, Mysore, Karnataka, India

**ABSTRACT**— *J. M. Coetzee is one of the most accomplished writers and novelists of South Africa whose imagination helped him to write his novels to project silence that was present in South Africa. In other words, one of the striking features in most of his novels is the theme of silence which is conveyed in graphic details in many of his books. In this paper, I will discuss the various instances where silence speaks volumes affecting anyone opposing the whites in one of his popular novels Dusklands and how silence has played an important role in the power dichotomy.*

**KEYWORDS:** Silence, Power, Colonialism, Oppression, Dichotomy

### 1, Introduction

Silence can take up different aspects, kinds or forms. It can be forced silence, deliberate silence, or traumatic silence. Silence may differ from one situation to another depending on who use it. It can be used by the oppressor as well as by the oppressed. The oppressor uses it as a tool of oppression where the oppressed uses it as a kind of protest and resistance. In this paper, one kind of silence is going to be discussed. It is a forced silence that was inflicted from the strong element upon the weaker of the entire system of binary opposites. During the colonial territorial conquests, silence has been masterly perpetuated over the weak. The whites have silenced the natives, destroyed the fabric of peace and harmony in the areas they had captured with no concern for the natives who were suppressed by the whites' highhanded behavior.

### 2, Ambivalence of Colonialism

J. M. Coetzee is a unique writer who uses a strategy of silence powerfully to portray the violence happenings shaking his South African immediate surroundings. Silence becomes, thence, a pivotal theme in his works, namely *Dusklands* among others. At the very outset of his novel *Dusklands*, one can note that he deals with silence in the historical platform. Coetzee wrote



his first novel *Dusklands* in 1974. The novel marked the emergence of a new genre in the literary history of South Africa in particular and the whole continent in general. As Tony Morphet, a South African critic, in his essay “Reading Coetzee in South Africa” articulates, “*Dusklands* was a herald. A new form of narration, a new way of imagination—a new prose had entered South African Literature. The novel is recognized as sounding a new post modernist note in the South African novel, a new fictional engagement with the problems of colonialism at the level of discourse” (Morphet 14). Coetzee in this new form of novel highlights the problems of colonialism through the use of silence.

The novel is divided into two novellas well separated in time, though thematically similar and it is debated that, “The two stories are complementary even if separated in time and space, but signify the theme of dominance, hegemony and subjugation” (Wang Jinghui 61). The first is an account of the Vietnam War as seen by Eugene Dawn, the protagonist who has been entrusted with the task of writing a report. Parag has aptly noted that it “is a twentieth century narrative of Eugene Dawn, who is devising a plan for the psychological subjugation of the Vietnamese through the use of radio broadcasts with devastating effect on his mind” (Parag 16). Eugene is asked by his superior who is powerful and has a full control over him, who “fears vision, has no sympathy for passion or despair. Power speaks only to power” (Coetzee 3) to rewrite his report as the truth has to be concealed. So, Eugene Dawn is forced by the power of his master to be silent about the truth. Thence, he is not able to write his report according to the reality rather he has to change it according to his superior’s orders so that the people in the military can entertain it. This pressure of Eugene’s work affects his life to such an extent that it leads him to lose his human sympathy, moral balance and finally stab his son.

### **3, Silence in *Dusklands***

*Dusklands* reveals the deteriorating effect forced silence has on the mind and body. Coetzee means to say that man is not basically made for mind taxing and conflicting work. He needs a peaceful atmosphere to live as well as to express that mode of living and cannot do so with confrontation. Eugene Dawn becomes a victim of the system that he finds himself in. Coetzee puts across the fact that history is being distorted.



Eugene Dawn carries around with him all day a bag contains twenty-four silenced pictures of human bodies. In his wife's view, the pictures are but "a secret, a cancer of shameful knowledge" (Coetzee 10). One of these pictures is openly sexual. It shows:

"a sergeant in the 1st Air cavalry, copulating with a silenced Vietnamese woman. The woman is tiny and slim, possibly even a child... Loman shows off his strength: arching backward with his hands on his buttocks he lifts the woman on his erect penis. Perhaps he even walks with her, for her hands are thrown out as if she is trying to keep her balance. He smiles broadly; she turns a sleepy, foolish face on the unknown photographer" (Coetzee, 13).

This quotation highlights that the woman was not spared from forced silencing process as the women are considered to be 'doubly colonized.' The black woman finds herself in a peculiarly difficult condition than the male as she is seen to be physically weak. The physical weakness therefore, becomes her forced silence as she cannot defend herself or resist the colonial power.

The second picture portrays two Special Forces sergeants smiling out of arrogance, showing their strong young bodies. The names of these two sergeants as they appear in their chests are Berry and Wilson. "Wilson holds the severed head of a man. Berry has two, which he holds by the hair. The heads are Vietnamese, taken from corpses or near-corpse" (Coetzee 15). These photographs indicate the brutality of imperialist violence. The Vietnamese turn to be silent Caricatures who are miserably having no life and voice. The most horrible and ridiculous picture is that:

One's heartstrings may be tugged by photographs of weeping women come to claim the bodies of their slain; a handcart bearing a coffin or even a man-size plastic bag may have its elemental dignity; but can one say the same of a mother with her son's head in a sack, carrying it off like a small purchase from the supermarket? I giggle (Coetzee 15-16).

The third picture is taken from a film of tiger cages on Hon Tre Island a 1965 production of the Ministry of National Information. The picture shows the camp commander jabs the silent prisoner with his cane and calls him "Bad man" (*Dusklands*) over the microphone. The act of



beheading the natives is not only a means of killing them but it highlights the very act of silencing the weak for the benefit and welfare of the powerful as such silencing becomes a part of colonial power play. These photographs obviously expose to us the oppression, the brutality and violence that were imposed upon these people who have no voice or power to encounter the sophisticated weapons. Dawn articulation of the U.S policy exposes farther the forced silence through the reaction of the Vietnamese women who are unresponsive, silent like a stone “We forced ourselves deeper than we had ever gone before into their women; but when we came back we were still alone, and the women like stones” (Coetzee 18).

The second novella is “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee”, the story of an eighteenth century explorer of Africa who has set out into the wilderness. His entry into the land of the native is with the intention of commercial purposes and also to exercise control. Jacobus an elephant hunter comes to the interior for the sake of wealth, haunting, amassing ivory, benefit, income. So, he has to achieve his goal whatever is the price even if it is the life of the natives; “Our commerce with the wild is a tireless enterprise of turning it into orchard and farm” (Coetzee 80). He believes that his encounter with the natives is an encounter with evil. He has total contempt for the natives, the Hottentots and Boshmen. He starts into conflict with the natives. In order to assert his superiority, the white man boards on an establishing order through silencing the natives.

The attitude of a white man towards the natives is apparent. Jacobus sees the Hottentots as inferiors and their women only, “a rag you wipe yourself on and throw away” (Coetzee 61). Furthermore, it exposes the ideology of the Europeans towards the natives, a cliché that repeats itself frequently in the postcolonial context. The native Africans are viewed as uncivilized animals well expressed as “The Bushman is a different creature a wild animal with animal’s soul... and the only way to treat them is like beasts” (Coetzee 58). Throughout the novella, the natives are rendered as mute objects to which action is done-subjugation, humiliation, killing and so on. The natives further, are not able to voice their protest against their oppressor’s inhumanity.



Throughout the narrative Jaccobus gives an inauthentic and prejudicial account of the Hottentots and Bushmen, that prejudicial voice of Jaccobus is further supported by the absence of the native one that may deconstruct and falsify the master's. There is no voice to defend them, so, it becomes much easy for Jaccobus to talk about them as he likes and labels them with any image after he has silenced them by the power of the gun. After silencing them, he gives himself the right to talk on behalf of them and they become the target of his language. He is ignorant of the fact that they do not like him but they are afraid of the guns that he has. They become silent under the threat of his destructive weapon.

Hottentots, according to colonizers, must be grateful to the civilization that ironically afflict death on them and rob them of their natural resources "Hottentot gains much by contact with civilization but one cannot deny that he also loses something" (Coetzee 65). What the Hottentots gain from this civilization is "bullet" (*Dusklands*). They are beaten by the whip and shot by the gun. And what they lost in turn is their voice, culture, and self image; "He becomes a false creature... They have no integrity, they are actors" (Coetzee 65). He even denies them a free will of their own, "They lacked all will, they were born slaves" (Coetzee 73-74). The whites want to make communication with the natives only through or by the guns "The gun is our mediator with the world and therefore our savior" (Coetzee 79). The response to the language of the gun is nothing but silence since only one-way relationship can be made by the power of the gun. There is no balance in it. It is based on the scare but not on harmony, agreement, or acceptance. "The good "natives" become scarce, silence falls when the oppressor approaches" (Fanon 31). This is a kind of relationship between the binaries of assassin and victim, master and slave, one who give orders and one who obey silently without questioning.

#### 4, Conclusion

To conclude, the project about the silenced Vietnamese and the demands upon Eugene Dawn by his supervisor to write only what the colonizer feels satisfied with, cast light on multiple layers of silencing the weak. On the one hand the Vietnamese are not given a voice of their own to tell their own story, on the other, the story describing their situation is subjected the master's will and censorship. In the other novella, Jaccobus intends to probe the heart of



wilderness which he imagines silent and submissive to his exploits. He, however, gets enraged when his supremacy is questioned. He, therefore, turns to silencing, suppressing and killing the natives to give the dramatic monologue where he only speaks and acts violently.

#### REFERENCES

- [1]. Coetzee, J. M. *Dusklands*. London: Vintage Books, 2004. Print.
- [2]. Eckstein, Barbara J. *The Language of Fiction in a World of Pain: Reading Politics as Paradox*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990. Print.
- [3]. Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin White Masks*. England: Pluto Press, 2008. Print.
- [4]. Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1963. Print.
- [5]. Gallagher, Susan Van Zanten. *A Story of South Africa – J. M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991. Print.
- [6]. Head, Dominic. *J. M. Coetzee*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Print.
- [7]. Vetlesen, Arne Johan. *Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Print.