A new decade for social changes
Post-colonial Feminist Representations in Coetzee’s Novels

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Abstract. As a Noble Laureate, John Maxwell Coetzee has been one of the most prominent post-colonial writers in feminist literature. This study reveals significant role of women characters in Coetzee’s novels with much attention to their representation in post-colonial Africa. This article carefully analyzes Coetzee’s selected novels; Waiting for the Barbarians (1980), Foe (1986) Age of Iron (1990) and Disgrace (1999), thus, shedding light on the treatment of African women by the colonizers and how that knowledge will help propagate the message of equality and tolerance by eliminating the evils of injustices and inequality. This study will significantly contribute to a greater awareness of women in post-colonial literature.

Keywords. J. M. Coetzee, Post-colonial Africa, African women, Coetzee’s novels, Inequality

Introduction

In Africa, most women are often characterized as subservient to their fathers and husbands. Representation here is what African women stand for and how they are seen in the post-colonial era. Shedding light on women as valid historical characters in post-colonial Africa, scholars challenge the place and role of Africa in world history. Women in post-colonial Africa demonstrate the ability to mobilize across ethno-linguistic lines to effect change in their various societies.

Nana Wilson-Tagoe (2007:229) points out the ways in which Ama Ata Aidoo (1942) situates the African woman’s struggle within “larger issues of social, cultural, and economic relations”, which in turn provides a “paradigm for exploring natural culture and agency”. Aidoo, according to Wilson Tagoe creates a “differential female history that disrupts the homogeneity of national culture”. It is clear that Aidoo expresses a vision of feminism for Africa that is both pan-African and nationalist. It is a vision that can only be realized, Aidoo suggests by addressing the many struggles and obstacles that continue to engage with African women’s representation through characters that exemplify the struggles and triumphs of Africa and its women.

It is important to move beyond patriarchal perspectives on Africa by highlighting not only on the diverse experiences of women in the post-colonial era, but also to highlight the fundamental roles they continue to play in socio-economic and political development of Africa. Colonialism ruled every aspect of women’s lives from the economic to the political and social. Colonialists tighten control over indigenous people, especially women who were subjected to all forms of violence and corruption as cruelty informed all aspects of colonial rule. Patriarchal
societies exploit, cheat, oppress women in post-colonial Africa. Measures taken to curb women’s liberation as well as changes in practices concerning domestic violence and education have failed to sprout desired results in patriarchal ideologies. This reality for the vast majority of women in Africa was described as the timeless truth of women’s lives.

1.1. The Barbarian Girl in Waiting for the Barbarians

According to Merriam Webster’s Dictionary, a Barbarian is a person from an alien land, culture, or group believed to be inferior, uncivilized or violent used chiefly in historical references. An analysis of the Barbarian Girl is based on a representation provided by a male imperialist - the magistrate. First of all, to associate such a negative adjective to a girl already suggests how inferior girls and women are seen in the post-colonial era.

The nameless Barbarian Girl was captured along with her father and several others during the first days of their military campaign against the nomads. The Barbarian Girl is treated with mischief as she undergoes torture from Colonel Joll’s interrogation. “She runs a finger across the outside of her ankle. That is where it was broken, the other one too.” (Waiting for the Barbarians, 20) Her father is killed while she faces visual impairment. It is evident here that the Barbarian Girl is made inferior and less regarded by those in charge. She is seen begging on the street after her drastic torture. Coetzee creates an effect of what is left off from colonialism, the aftermath of colonial South Africa. The Barbarian Girl is inferior to the soldiers and even to the magistrate who isn’t bothered to the fact that she is a beggar on the streets; she being nameless suggests her inferiority and the inferiority of women at large in the African society.

“I have relieved her of the shame of begging and installed her in the barracks kitchen as a scullery maid.” (Waiting for the Barbarians, 23) “What is a barbarian doing in the tower begging?” (Waiting for the Barbarians, 18)

1.2. The Subordinate Mother in Foe

Susan Barton, a mother and the protagonist of Foe tells the story of her time on the Island where she lives with Cruso and Friday, two men ship wrecked and also stranded on the Island. Coetzee calls attention to the absence of female experience in the iconic castaway tale. Coetzee portrays women in the post-colonial era as subordinate, being inferior and under the control of the male characters. The figure of Susan Barton, Coetzee deliberately creates a character of weakness as a kind of rebuke to the way that male writers then and now have traditionally conceived female characters.

She finds herself as the mere female companion to the king and his manservant, Friday. Barton rationalizes Cruso’s role of king as she sees him “on the Bluff, with the sun behind him all red and purple, staring out to see…I thought: He is a truly kingly figure; he is the true king of the island” (Foe, 37). Coetzee makes Barton the woman behind the man, defining her as a “free and autonomous being like all human creatures that finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other” (Dragunoiu 2001: 15). Barton is quick to assume the submissive role on the island as the assertive character of Robinson Cruso takes the lead on the island and in her story. As a woman, she is used as an instrument to further define the characters and story of Robinson Crusoe.

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1 https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/barbarian
1.3. The Abjected Old Woman in *Age of Iron*

Mother-figures dominate the fictional world of J. M. Coetzee’s novels; *Age of Iron* proves an ambiguous mother-figure represented by Elizabeth Curren, the narrator of the novel, a retired classics professor who narrates her letter to her expatriated daughter. Mrs. Curren suffers an incurable ailment and knows she is going to die soon, however, corresponding to South Africa’s apartheid history of racial hatred, discrimination and violence, the struggling Elizabeth Curren highlights the racially divided nation as socially, culturally, and morally, impeded. Elizabeth Curren aspires to redeem herself through the nurturing symbolism embodied in motherhood. Curren’s letter to her daughter serves as a need for change in values and historical perspective. In *Age of Iron*, Elizabeth Curren finds herself even more helpless than the medical officer who tries to take care of Michael and ‘save’ him. (*Age of Iron*, 151)

1.4. The Immaturity of Lucy Lurie in *Disgrace*

From the moment we are introduced to Lucy Lurie in J. M. Coetzee’s Booker prize novel, *Disgrace* we meet an unassuming white woman, who is particularly independent. Lucy Lurie, the daughter of David Lurie has been a victim of sexual and racial violence and she articulates her protest against such violence through silence. Lucy is not a coward but unlike her father, she shows signs of immaturity. Aside from the occasional assistance from Petrus, her black South African assistant, who helps with the hard labor and dogs; she owns and works in her farm and lives a seemingly quiet and private life in Eastern South Africa after apartheid.

In *Disgrace*, J. M. Coetzee creates a complex character, Lucy Lurie, who faces the shameful and disgraceful acts of her father, the suggestions and assumptions of her homosexuality, and the degrading physical violations committed against her because of her race and sexuality. Lucy is David’s only child, Lucy is an earthy woman who lives out in the country, works the land for a living, and doesn’t pay attention to fashion or body image. We learn that Lucy’s home was once a commune, but now she’s the only person who hasn't moved away, this both strikes us as a little odd and makes us more interested in Lucy; why should she decide to stay on the farm even when her friends and lover Helen leave? Lucy never gives us these answers up front, but she keeps the curiosity of the readers churning every step of the way through the book.

**Conclusion**

Coetzee employs female characters to portray the African society. This article has analyzed what Coetzee’s heroines in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Foe*, *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace* stand for in the African context even after colonialism. The female characters vividly express the ideas of the colonizers, striving to isolate themselves from history. It is seen through this article that even after colonialism; women are still dominated and degraded

**Works Cited**

