

## POST-COLONIAL AFRICAN LITERATURE AND COUNTER-DISOURSE: J.M COETZEE'S FICTION AND REWORKING OF CANONICAL WORKS

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The ugly incident of colonialism in Africa has effects on language, education, religion, artistic sensibilities, popular culture and the like. Post-colonial novels in the continent have therefore become veritable weapons used to dismantle the hegemonic boundaries and the determinants that create unequal relations of power, based on binary oppositions such as "Us" and "them"; "First-world" and "third-world"; "white" and "black", "colonizer" and "colonized", etc. It is therefore true to say that the primary concern of most post-colonial African novelists is to salvage the history of their people that colonialism has taken off or manipulated. The African novel occupies a central position in the criticism of colonial portrayal of the African continent and her people. It grew, in part, from a history of active resistance to the colonial encounter. It has been crossing boundaries and assaulting walls imposed by History upon the horizon of the continent whose aspirations it has been striving to articulate. The average African novelist responds to the urgency and inevitability of this historic mission. What is primary on his mind and central to his work is the urge to put the record straight and illuminate the threshold between past and present, thought and action, self and Other, and Africa and the world.

It is on the basis of the foregoing background that in this paper I propose to examine how post-colonial African novelists use their novels to facilitate the transgression of boundaries and subversion of hegemonic rigidities previously mapped out in precursor literary canonical texts about Africa and her people. Since Defoe is representative enough in the canon of colonialist discourse, I shall focus on his novel *Robinson Crusoe*, and I shall also examine a work of a post-colonial African novelist (Coetzee's *Foe*) as parallel to Defoe's. The critique of canonical works has been a strong current in postcolonial writings. J.M Coetzee's *Foe* is one of such postmodernist attempts to engage in dialectical intertextuality with existing canonical works that present negative stereotypes of Africa and Africans.

Therefore, in this paper an effort will be made to use *Foe* as a launching-pad of my reading of Coetzee's fiction as a parodic inversion of Defoe's canonical text, *Robinson Crusoe*, in which Coetzee still retains some of the Eurocentric ideas about the black world. However, he is still able to create a new kind of novel that implicitly interrogates the form and content of Defoe's classic. *Foe* is thus held in the proposed paper to be a tropological revision of Defoe's canonical work. It is a postmodernist, post-colonial and feminist rewriting of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* with the deliberate aim of rejecting its canonical formulation of colonial encounter. In his text, Defoe portrays the African Other as inherently primitive, irrational and codeless. Like Joyce Cary, Joseph Conrad, Sir H Ryder Haggard, Graham Greene, etc, Defoe in *Robinson Crusoe* reinforces the racist assumption upon which the British Empire was built and consolidated. It belongs to the corpus of works that make up foreign tradition, which has influenced the

growth of African literary creativity in the modern idiom. In *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe leaps into the realm of ignorance about Africa and Africans, conceiving the terrain of the continent as peopled with cannibals, heathenism and rustic specimens in a primordial state of existence, and whose only knowledge of the spoken language is a chain of gibberish utterances. About three centuries after its publication, the work still commands enduring appeal; it remains canonical, always achieving a popularity far beyond Britain, not only for its robust artistic merits or thematic preoccupations but because of the need to interrogate and problematize its belittling of black peoples.

With the kind of impression about Africa that was proselytized through print other media, the African writer was faced with the filial duty to correct those erroneous views. Chinua Achebe was among the first set of African writers to react to this distortion of African history. In fact, it could be said that his first work, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), was a reaction to the image of Africa portrayed in Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Similarly, Coetzee's *Foe* is a fictional riposte to Defoe's classic. It answers back to the imperial and colonial culture, which Defoe celebrates in his work. From whichever perspective it is read, Coetzee's *Foe* is self consciously written against the cultural stereotypes and representations commanding the field of postcolonial African literature. It is a critique of the political structures in Defoe's text, a form of cultural criticism and cultural critique which a view to disidentifying African societies from the sovereign codes of cultural organization which are foregrounded in most existing Euro-American canonical works about Africa and Africans.

Keys to my paper are two theoretical concepts in tense interplay with each other – colonialist discourse and globalization. Colonialist discourse, a concept popularized by Edward Said, in this paper, refers to knowledge of Africa constructed by the West to bolster its colonizing interests. It prioritizes the divide between the West and its others. Globalization, the increasing interconnectedness of different parts of the world seeks to challenge this borders and has consequences for the ways in which peoples see themselves and others. Therefore, this paper purports to dwell on the dialogue between two representative texts, one a colonialist discourse and the other a novel concerned with an elaboration of a new knowledge of Africa, a knowledge that takes a dual path. Coetzee's text is found to return to a consistent repertoire of common postcolonial themes. In particular, it critiques the ubiquity of stereotypes, creates a voice for the powerless and poorest members of the global community. It is apt to state however that since many postcolonial writers have repeatedly explored these fundamental issues, it is difficult to argue that Coetzee's work inaugurates a new approach or theme for African postcolonial fiction. But as soon as one turns away from issues of thematic content and begins looking at issues of literary form, however, one notices that Coetzee's work immediately departs from the ordinary, predictable and routine. Each time he revisits these post-colonial themes, he finds extra-ordinary new ways to explore them with greater insight, imagination and complexity.

In summary, the paper attempts to look at Coetzee, an African novelist who occupies a distinguished place at the very apex of the emerging counter-canon in African fiction and at only one of his books, *Foe*, which has already become something of a classic of this counter-canon. The paper seeks to consider how literature provides an avenue for the Orient/Other to represent itself, instead of the hitherto practice whereby the West would represent the Other. The paper is preoccupied with defining a relation

between Third-World literature, represented by Coetzee's *Foe*, and the global Euro-American jaundiced portrayal of the African Other, represented by Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.