

# Mapping the Boundaries: J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace and Slow Man as Modern Cosmopolitan Fiction

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Volume: 7

Issue: 4

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Month: September

Year: 2019

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

Received: 10.08.2019

Accepted: 17.08.2019

Published: 01.09.2019

## Abstract

*The paper aims to investigate J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace and Slow Man in terms of cosmopolitan concepts of shame, imaginative sympathy and its limits. Coetzee's novels encourage a 'distinctive individualism' which reflects the insufficiency of shame, guilt and sympathy as indicative of cosmopolitan philosophy. In this regard, a selective theoretical approach is adopted, which suggests that Coetzee's fiction is significant and promotes a faith-driven association between the cosmopolitan subject and the 'other'. The presence of others in his novels makes it cosmopolitan, even though the central subject often gets humiliated and excluded by the 'other'. The subject's shame in both the novels makes them experience isolation and their problematic association with the other, which has a flagged presence in Coetzee's prose. The present paper attempts to argue that both the novels end on a different note proving that cosmopolitanism has different facets- positive as well as negative and also challenges Coetzee's readers to identify their cosmopolitan limits.*

**Key Words:** cosmopolitanism, shame, sympathy, other, isolation.

Citation:

Anjum, Sheeba, and Nupur Tandon. "Mapping the Boundaries: J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace and Slow Man as Modern Cosmopolitan Fiction." *Shanlax International Journal of English*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2019, pp. 51-56.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/engish.v7i4.638>



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## Introduction

The term 'cosmopolitan' has attracted the attention of many contemporary scholars, thinkers and writers due to its transcendental nature. It is a multifaceted theory covering questions related to identity, society, boundaries and borders. This is the reason that different forms of contemporary literature are often considered as cosmopolitan. One peculiarity of cosmopolitan literature is that it is a way of expressing the complexity of modern times. The term 'cosmopolitan' is Greek in origin. It is derived from the Greek word 'Cosmos' meaning world and 'polis' which means city. In present times, cosmopolitanism is linked with globalization because the world has become a single place to live in. Nussbaum believes cosmopolitanism is an ideology that says, 'we are all citizens of the world'. Bruce Robbins states cosmopolitanism means knowing no boundaries (Comparative Cosmopolitanism 171). Cosmopolitanism, therefore, is a broad term and is difficult to define, the reason being its interdisciplinary nature and ambiguous traits. Some available definitions of cosmopolitanism also emphasize the fact that it is a vague ideology. David Held defines it as the ability to "mediate traditions and... standing outside a singular location (the location of one's birth, land, upbringing)" the most appropriate definition is given by K.W. Appiah that it is an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend... human lives significance." And for Sheldon Pollock, cosmopolitanism is a "historical category which should be considered entirely open, and pre-given, or foreclosed by the definition of any particular society or discourse".

Considering all these complicated definitions, one can say that Afro-Australian writer J.M. Coetzee may be studied as a cosmopolitan writer because he employs stylistic techniques and literary devices that 'confound straightforward and emphatic engagement on the part of the reader toward the protagonists featured in his works to promote a cosmopolitan way...' (Alan McCluskey). Coetzee makes use of narrative empathy, mental illness, physical disability, psychological trauma and alienation of modern man to depict the cosmopolitan characteristics. His cosmopolitan outlook helped him to shape his fiction both South African as well as Australian. He writes worldly texts without describing much about foreign cultures and countries as other cosmopolitan writers like Le Clezio, another Nobel laureate, do. Besides this, he uses simple style to depict his themes.

David Held and Garrett W. Brown have described five interrelated and relevant issues taken up by contemporary cosmopolitan writers, which can also be referred to as types of cosmopolitanism. These are global cosmopolitan, cultural cosmopolitan, legal cosmopolitan, political cosmopolitan and civic cosmopolitan. It can be said that these five forms are relevant in modern times and J.M. Coetzee's fiction, directly and indirectly, refers to all these types because his novels address a variety of issues such as marginality which can be linked to political and legal cosmopolitanism. Isolation which is a global problem these days has also been dealt with in many of his works, leading to civic cosmopolitanism which is all about having a feeling of togetherness in the society and how it has been affected by isolation. Homi Bhabha's remark is worth quoting here: "Coetzee's writing enjoins the international community to meditate on the unequal, asymmetrical worlds that exist elsewhere" (Location 5)

## **Discussion**

Coetzee is cosmopolitan in taking up innovative and disturbing ideas and the theme of the 'other'. For Emmanuel Levinas, 'the other is a psychological abstraction that the individual creates to distinguish itself from the absolute exteriority of the exterior being'. The other thus takes up the role of a metaphysical, which is at an 'indefinite distance' from the self. It often leads to surpassing

of the subjective or personal element. (Totality and Infinity) What makes Coetzee a cosmopolitan writer is his approach of taking up different and difficult subjects be it apartheid, rape, marginality, animal rights, isolation and the presence of the 'other'. Coetzee, as a cosmopolitan, holds a prestigious place in contemporary literature because of his ways of representing the 'other' or otherness. Coetzee, sometimes refuses to represent others as an integral part of the text. Michael Marais considers this move as a preferred choice probably because that gives a singularity and an identity of its own to the 'other'. Marais believes Coetzee's refusal to represent other, is an ethical choice whereas Attridge sees it as a modernist technique.

This modern technique of depicting the other(which makes his novels fall into the category of cosmopolitan fiction) in his works is widely used by Coetzee, be it the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarian*, Friday in *Foe* or Michael K in *Life and Times of Michael K*. Coetzee thinks to represent the other, it is necessary to think of oneself into the 'other', but it is not easy because it can make oneself very uncomfortable, as he has to talk about the other and not get influenced by it.

The present paper discusses two of Coetzee's novels, namely *Disgrace* (1999) and *Slow Man* (2005). In both these works, cosmopolitanism appears on a broad spectrum, although the setting, theme and conditions are completely different for both the works. The paper argues about what makes these works by Coetzee cosmopolitan, as nobody has argued so far by taking up a South African and Australian novel by the same author. *Disgrace* and *Slow Man* can be put into the category of modern cosmopolitan fiction because the concept of cosmopolitanism has changed from being an intellectual viewpoint to a global one.

*Disgrace* is a piece of world literature and master work. The novel brought second Booker Prize for Coetzee in 1999. Many argue that it is a pessimistic work to deal with, therefore depicts the uncomfortable cosmopolitanism of Coetzee owing to its caustic tone and extreme tension.

The protagonist David Lurie of *Disgrace* is a man of his own beliefs. He is a cosmopolitan who loses himself to such an extent that he is not even

able to recognize himself. The novel's first half is based on Lurie's sexual relationships with Soraya- a prostitute and Melanie Isaacs, a student who is old enough to be his daughter. Melanie's complaint of sexual harassment compels him to appear before the disciplinary committee, which brings shame along with a forceful public confession of being guilty. His confession that "I am guilty" (49) is received by several critics as an acceptance of his shame. Mike Kissack and Michael Titlested have said, "Lurie achieves an "ethical disposition" of secular humility" (137) Marianne DeKoven considers *Disgrace* as a narrative of personal salvation" (871) due to the feeling of shame. He goes through a process of self-exploration to discover the essence of being truly human when he is dismissed from his job and asked to leave.

The second half of *Disgrace* describes Lurie's relationship with his daughter Lucy, which undergoes a drastic change as she gets raped by three black men. In the novel, David and Lucy made uncomfortable choices, which made them loners at many points. One is Lurie's inability to understand Lucy's decision of marrying Petrus and giving birth to her mulatto child can be considered as cosmopolitan because cosmopolitanism does not only mean crossing borders and migrating to other countries but also making choices through which one can identify one. This segment of the novel shows the inexorable and toxic shame of Lucy.

As there is an embedded shame in the novel, the contemporary cosmopolitan theory can be linked to the feeling of shame. H. Katherine remarks, "shame is likewise reified as a distinctly cosmopolitan feeling in contemporary theory, whether it is imagined as a feeling that potentially expands our sense of obligation to distant others in the service of a critical cosmopolitan project, or as a feeling that marks a de facto imbrications in the lives of cultural others". (104) Whereas Linklater concludes that 'shame and guilt along with compassion must become cosmopolitan emotions" (27)

The shame represented in *Disgrace* is argued as cosmopolitan and which is circumscribed by the feeling of sympathy, which is aroused for Lucy as one reads the novel. Coetzee's work shows that a subject becomes cosmopolitan by his feeling

of shame and sympathy. Rei Terada argues in her work 'Feeling in Theory', "the claim that emotions require a subject---thus we can see we are subjects since we have emotions"...(11). As the work is post-apartheid and reflects the change of power and authority from whites to blacks, making it a distinctly cosmopolitan work covering racial, cultural and even political relations. Anderson in this regard says, "Cosmopolitanism is commonly articulated about new geopolitical configurations and within the context of destabilizing experiences of inter cultural contact" (268)

The apparent instability and limited human emotions are pretty much evident in the novel using which an uncertain cosmopolitan subject or agency is bolstered. Hallemeier in her reading and analysis of *Disgrace* finds that: "in its representation of South Africa, Coetzee's *disgrace* imagines cosmopolitan community as that which is provincial in character and centred on the daily task of living with difference". (2013, 109) the novel intentionally depicts the confrontation between a civilized white male subject with an 'other'. This other can be anyone who opposes Lurie's mode of thinking, be it his daughter Lucy or other female figures in the novel or Lucy's black neighbour Petrus. It is a cosmopolitan work simply because of the theme of the 'other' which is very much present in the novel despite the fact that the "failure of mutuality of empathy, of imaginative identification, the refusal to acknowledge the self's necessary passage through the other, seems to lie at the heart of the novel's thematic concern" (Cornwell 315)

There are many changing points in the novel, one of them being the trial of David Lurie and his refusal to apologize, proves him a difficult man to be handled by others. The presence of others in the form of blacks, victim and victimizer, i.e. the black rapist is the victimizer, and the white victim is seen in *Disgrace*. For Lucy, every man becomes an 'other' after her rape and the rapists rape her because she is an 'other' for them. Similarly, David Lurie is unable to express himself fully and becomes lonely because he finds it hard to communicate with others. Shamim Black in her book 'Fiction Across Borders: Imagining the Lives of Others in Late Twentieth-Century Novels' specifies that "In *Disgrace*, imagining the

perspectives of others, or feeling to do, carries real consequences”(2)

After the rape of Lucy, Lurie finds himself isolated and dejected because Lucy refuses to disclose any details of the rape. She begins to treat Lurie as an ‘other’, an outsider in his life, making David Lurie feeling outrageous at being treated like an outsider. Disgrace, therefore, marks that change which is uncomfortable for both Lurie and his daughter Lucy. The unpleasant change is in terms of academia and the shifting power of South Africa after apartheid. Both feel out of place and express anguish on the problem of knowing others.

Florita Almada in ‘2066’ written by Bolano, is a mystic figure, coins a new term ‘cosmopolitanism of fragility’ that is evolved from the brittleness of human existence which is a sad reality and a source of literary debate with the world. This fragile existence is felt by Lurie also at the end of the novel when he says, “I am a mad old man who sits among the dogs singing to himself” (212) the radical transformation of power in new South Africa is hard for him to accept. As Coetzee is a worldly writer, it seems that through *Disgrace*, he wishes to highlight the idea of ‘how to live together in post-apartheid South Africa. Even though it emphasizes the many facets of cosmopolitanism, either global cosmopolitanism or moral cosmopolitanism, it gives the warning that we, in the veil of cosmopolitanism, should not become too attached to the land or the country, because ultimately it belongs to no one. Coetzee quotes Breytenbach’s *Dog Heart* in which Breytenbach warns his French daughter that “we are only visiting here, we are painted in the colours of disappearance here” (*Dog Heart: A Memoir* 145)

The second novel discussed is *Slow Man*, which marks the beginning of Coetzee’s Australian legacy. Published in 2005, it received mixed reviews probably due to its ordinary storyline. The critics thought that it is well written but does not excite passion; it talks about an affective cosmopolitan, one who must feel apart. Remorselessly a human tale, it reveals the cosmopolitan shame of Paul Rayment, which takes the form of imaginative sympathy for him. *Slow Man* is about an enforced cosmopolitan identity, and what it means to live with it in contemporary Australian society. The position of the protagonist

here is of a diaspora who is seen attempting to negotiate between his immigrant status and his tolerance of plural nationalism. The novel takes the readers into the inner world of Paul Rayment, who met with a deadly accident, and his leg is amputated. The accident changed him completely, as he became all the more lonely and frustrated after the accident. A grumpy and ageing Australian, Rayment then hires a Croatian nurse Marijana to look after him and is smitten by her care and concern, hence falls in love with her.

Like *Disgrace*, *Slow Man* too has a changing point in it, which is the arrival of eponymous Elizabeth Costello; she enters the story just at the time Rayment declares his love for Marijana. Costello claims that she has come to teach Rayment how to live a passionate and purposeful life, but she also appears to be an alter ego of Coetzee who is writing the part of Paul Rayment. Paul often discusses his cultural origin and story of uprooted childhood with both Marijana and Costello.

Before his accident and the arrival of Marijana, he was living the life of a complacent French diaspora, living in Australia. An indifferent immigrant, Rayment for the first time, reveals his personal history to Marijana, on learning that she is also not an Australian but a Croatian. He also tells her that he has an impressive collection of photos which he has been preserving and would like to donate them to Adelaide’s state library at the time of his death. Marijana likes this gesture of Rayment and says that it is good that he saved history. As a diaspora, it is a matter of great attention that he has been thinking of doing this kind of thing. But then he is pushed by Costello, whose presence according to Cyril Wong, “urges him into a reluctant state of self-awareness about the multifarious as well as cosmopolitan dimensions of his life” (132)

Costello, in her attempt to make Paul Rayment realize the fact that he is an ‘other’ in Australia by making fun of his name that it sounds like payment. Marijana also previously urges him to think seriously of the fact that he has been living like a ‘cultural outsider’ in Australia like her. It is a kind of cosmopolitan confusion which is felt by him, and he says, “Home is too mystical for me. I am hollow at the core” (199) his diasporic roots and

cosmopolitan tendency causes in him a longing for 'belongingness' and home, he, therefore, wishes to stay connected with the family of Marijana Jokic. Then something happens which is not expected by Rayment, Marijana's son Drago pilfers one of the photographs from his collection, and he gets shattered at this. Costello again reminds him that Drago does it because, for him, Rayment is an outsider, an 'other'. Moreover, Rayment was only guarding the photographs for the sake of nation's history and Drago's attempt to insert his grandfather's face into the photo of an Australian is justified as he is also a diaspora and longing for the same sense of belongingness in a foreign country.

Towards the end of the novel, Rayment experiences a new found cosmopolitanism, when came to know that Jokics have designed a recumbent bicycle especially for him. He feels ashamed of himself and expresses his gratitude for the generous act of the Jokes. His alienation and hollowness as a diaspora come to a halt with his new found cosmopolitanism which allows Rayment to move towards a positive cosmopolitanism. From an unaware cosmopolitan to an optimistic cosmopolitan figure is seen in *Slow Man*, when Rayment depicts a cosmopolitan position that is both "plural and particular" (Robbins 2)

The presence of shame in *Slow Man* is treated as an experience of self-difference, which has two forms, the critical and the affective. One arouses sympathy, and the other constitutes a cosmopolitan practice. Affective cosmopolitan as suggested by Appiah is a "human tendency, of course, to respond with others by using 'similar, mental apparatus which is used by humans to understand the world'" (Cosmopolitan 224) whereas Judith Butler identifies it as a "primary human vulnerability to other humans" (Violence18) Paul Rayment loses himself to the other, his disabled body is an object of shame in the novel due to which the loss of self also happens with him. But he emerges as a positive cosmopolitan by going 'beyond shame'. His shame makes him vulnerable and more open to others, as a result of which he begins to associate himself as an 'other' with a humane feeling which is related to affective cosmopolitan theory.

## Conclusion

His experience of being a lonely immigrant and a disabled estranged man is felt like an 'othered' self, and Coetzee's fiction is dominated by the shame of being 'other and 'othered'. J.M. Coetzee's cosmopolitan fiction, therefore, poses a challenge for his readers also through his novels, to analyze their limits of cosmopolitan feelings in terms of this sense of being an 'other'. Both *Disgrace* and *Slow Man* take the feelings of sympathy, shame and guilt as central to the account of cosmopolitanism because these are not distinguished from each other at the level of effect. (Tomkins133) Coetzee's fiction hence, in some way prepare the readers to be more 'self-conscious, more critical and broad-minded citizens of the world' (Robert Spencer 3)

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