

# Re-reading J.M. Coetzee's *Dusklands*: Dialectics between Knowledge and Power Relations

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## Abstract

J.M. Coetzee's *Dusklands* overtly offers more of a novelistic discourse than a political pontification. It presents two narratives – one about Eugene Dawn, working for the US government agency in Vietnam in the twentieth century and the other moves around Jacobus Coetzee in the eighteenth century, representing a threat to the cultural integrity and undermining true African culture and traditionalism. In the postcolonial and postmodernist contexts, crony capitalism and neocolonial incursions move in the framework set by the power-structure, mostly controlled by the corporate economy. War, not only military but also psychological, even in the postcolonial situations, turns into a power game for the capitalist countries by exercising imperialist hegemony over the economically backward Third World countries while simultaneously maximizing their monetary interest. This potential disposition of the imperial enterprise questions the versions of historical truth, arbitrarily used for silencing and Othering. In *Dusklands*, Coetzee presents a critical assessment of historical truth inherent in power relations. In varied degrees, war affects both the target victims and the ethically lived soldiers who are forcibly appointed to cause physical and mental damage. Through the portrayal of America's war in Vietnam in the first segment of *Dusklands* and Afrikaner's colonial incursions in South Africa in the second segment of the same text, Coetzee questions the versions of historical truth. This paper examines how J.M. Coetzee exhibits the dialectical process of the construction of knowledge which works as a counter discourse to the power relations controlled by the capitalist forces assuming the role of the imperialist hegemony and, under the subterfuge of globalization and modernity, turning Africa into an endless source of raw materials for the manufacturing factories of the First World countries.

**Keywords:** trauma, capitalism, neocolonialism, hegemony, apparatus

Power is often actualized by fictionalizing people. It is hard to see the full manifestation of power. Like an iceberg, only a fragment of it is visible from outside. In a world dominated by artificial intelligence, human beings have turned into a vulnerable entity that can be hacked in many ways by the software of power. It has the capacity to “maintain the stereotype and hide from us the true stature of man” (Gikandi 166). Power constructs subjectivity and credibly shapes knowledge and causes the displacement of the subject. Subject, according to Michel Foucault, is always a target and vehicle of power. Foucault further argues that power does not work directly and immediately. But in whatever form it works, ultimate objective of power is to achieve allegiance and submission. Its dispersal nature forms a network of relations encompassing all the constituents of the society. Even in



postcolonial situations, power dynamics involve the process of annihilation, displacement, and Othering of the individuals through subtle methods, such as convincing, negotiating, and intersecting. War is an exterior manifestation of a fragment of power. But the intangible aspects of a nation that include mythography, narratives, discourses, ways of thinking, aesthetics, and epistemology may be the target of the power dynamics. Exercise of power is no longer one way as it encounters resistance from the agents upon which it is imposed with a view to transforming it into a submissive one. Furthermore, according to Foucault, power relations are compelled to adopt changes in response to the resistance which often takes the form of knowledge as power itself constructs and controls knowledge. He thinks:

power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (465)

The location of power and knowledge is being concurrently challenged by displacement, hybridity, and ambivalence resulting from the crosscurrents of culture, migration, intertextuality of diverse epistemological elements, multiculturalism, and globalism.

Now, having explained the theoretical framework of this paper, we may focus on *Dusklands*. It comprises two novellas, namely *The Vietnam Project* and *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee*. The first one is dedicated to the narrative offered by Eugene Dawn, an agent of the imperial hegemony and, accordingly, he serves as a recruit of a US government agency and is involved in psychological warfare in the Vietnam War, virtually a project of transforming the natives into an Other. Ultimately he collapses in his endeavor of mythographic and psychological operations. At the height of his psychopathy, he attempts to commit infanticide. Again, in *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee*, readers are provided with an insight into the historical realities of a hunting expedition in an unexplored region of 18<sup>th</sup> century South Africa. It also incarnates Jacobus' punitive expedition against the local Namaqua tribe. Jacobus's expedition metaphorically interprets the colonial enterprises of exploitation and annihilation of the cultural and linguistic wealth of the indigenous people, specifically the Hottentots.

In the first part of the novel Eugene Dawn, the protagonist, is depicted with inherent goodness which makes him hate bloodshed. But to become a part of the power structure, he is not disobedient to his superiors. He is also "under the thumb of a manager" (Coetzee 1). He would have evaded embarking on the Vietnam Project but it is because of his obedience to his superiors that he goes to Vietnam with a project of psychological warfare and thus leads himself into a corrosive mental conflict that ultimately brings about his psychological disorder. Eugene personally does not like conflict because, in his opinion, "conflict brings unhappiness, unhappiness poisons existence" (1). But he experiences a displacement or decentering of his own desire on the face of his involvement in the power structure. Power structure is a network constituted by micro as well as macro ingredients of the society. According to Foucault:

[constituents] are attributed to “appropriation”, but to dispositions, maneuvers, tactics, constantly in tension, in actively rather than a privilege that one might possess; that one should take as its model a perpetual battle rather than a contract regulating a transaction or the conquest of a territory. (465)

Such displacement or decentering usually causes trauma that contributes to stress, anxiety, and depression, and the intensification of all these conditions brings about a fatal collapse of human sanity that Eugene Dawn goes through.

Again, Coetzee's *Dusklands* examines the ways power operates: “discursively, textually, politically, and personally” (Kossew 169). Coetzee believes that “everything is capable of being questioned” and nothing can be taken for granted (Kossew 168). As a result, it is difficult for the readers to conclude that Coetzee has left a conspicuous message in any of his novels. *Dusklands* is no exception. A close look at the text shows that the theoretical and referential framework that Coetzee has employed complicates his search for the causes of human insanity. For example, Eugene belongs to the side that is capable of being a superpower in the world regarding its ability in possessing firearms, air force, and even thriving economy. Epistemology is also used in this party's hand as an apparatus that can be operated to cause mental displacement of the target victims of the Vietnam War. The power that binds Eugene Dawn to play the role of its apparatus generates knowledge which involves itself in a conflict with power. Falling into the juncture, Eugene loses his mental sanity. His gradual transformation is delineated by his wife Marilyn and Eugene aptly assesses her views about him in the following words:

My human sympathies have been coarsened, she thinks, and I have become addicted to violent and perverse fantasies. So much have I learned on those sentimental nights when she weeps on my shoulder and bares her heart. I kiss her brow and croon comfort. I urge her to cheer up. I am my old self, I tell her, my same old loving self, she must only trust me. (14)

Falling into the juncture of power and human sympathies which aptly constitute a counter discourse, Eugene loses his own self, that is, he turns into an entity devoid of “conscious” or “individual cogito” (Hawthorn 346). In fact, the conception of self is a construction attributed to a “process of autobiographical reasoning, or how people reflect on and make sense of their posts” (Syed 7). In this connection, it may be said that the autobiographical process of reasoning contradicts the categorization of an individual or a community as Bangladeshi or Indian or Nepalese or so and so, because the present world experiences the ever-expanding connectivity network which stretches out the chance of hybridity and the fluidity of identity. Borders are now melting down due to continuous and ever-increasing migration and consequential hybridization. Due to continuous communications, negotiations, and translations, there emerges a new space that belongs to neither the host country nor the homeland. This new space challenges the concepts of cosmopolitanism and universalism. In such a crucial situation, identity turns into a paradox which cannot be satisfactorily defined. In this connection, Phillip L. Hammack is relevant when he asserts:

We inhabit a world of meaning in which people are in constant states of identification, or naming and categorizing, what or who one is and to which larger categories he or she may belong, categories like gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual identity, occupation, and the like. (11)

Living in such a diverse world, it is hard to develop an integrated self as it is usually being constructed through psychological process aided by the micro ingredients of power relations and it is very often compared to the identity which is mostly related to the outer world and linguistic categorization. External agents impact and reshape identity as well as the self of an individual. Hence, culture, which is generally considered a software, “gets hybridized and the absoluteness of the self turns into a matter of utopia, realistically not possible” (Smith 10). It is true in the case of Eugene Dawn too. His wife Marilyn keeps faith in her friends who tell her that his “psychic brutalization” will end with the end of the Vietnam War. It will also humanize Eugene. Thus, the binary opposition of humanization is dehumanization and this binary tends to be settled with a deliberate intention of making the conflicting location chronic by a war. The dehumanization process also challenges the philosophic definition of self of Rene Descartes who claims that he believes only himself and then nobody else. Descartes’ dictum, “I think, therefore I am,” means he believes in his own self only. But with respect to the present realities, Descartes’ maxim encounters a lot of challenges. The nightmarish situations caused by the Vietnam War act as a block to Eugene’s development of his own self. He loses balance in the face of diverse issues emerging from the situations related to the Vietnam War. While constructing his own identity he borrows materials from the local myths, history, culture, and social phenomena. Due to the diverse materials in varying degrees, identity turns into an arbitrary paradox as its ingredients assume varied dispositions in different locations. Social and political status with national potential similarly determines a person’s colonial temperament towards the natives. Eugene believes if the colonial forces intend to exercise hegemony upon the natives, then they must eradicate their culture and impose new frameworks of thought process upon them. This imposition can be done both by weapons and negotiation ranging from psychological realities to social microcosms, engaged in a war.

Further, Coetzee’s attitude towards war appears to be particularly critical. War brings about destruction not only to the somatic entity but also the psychic condition. Eugene, who is appointed an agent in the US army to create confusion among the Vietnamese soldiers, refers to psychological warfare as a project “to destroy the morale of the enemy” (30). It is a colonial policy to demoralize the natives and create a void into which the colonizers penetrate their own culture and thought-system. Recreating myths and constructing a new version of history with a view to “ascending meta-historical consciousness” and shopping their own myths the colonizers used to make the natives kneel before their “Wand” (42). In this way, reconstruction of the identity of the colonized or the natives is accomplished in parallel with that of myths and narrative. In the novel, the narrator Eugene possesses a conviction that the problem is not the reconstruction of Vietnam. Rather, as an agent of the imperialist hegemony, he wants to fortify his hold upon the Vietnamese and thus it will open up all means of exploitation. Eugene also claims that victory depends on having

sufficient force or coercion. However, coercion, in the form of military enterprises, does not always guarantee victory. It requires deliberate penetration of the imported myths and narratives that will psychologically weaken the natives and fortifies the strength of the colonizers or the invaders. This is done deliberately by the colonial power and as Wole Soyinka assumes, it is done “to actualize power and fictionalize people” (52).

The Vietnam War is an important historical phenomenon that Coetzee uses as an open ended metaphor which interprets even the modern globalized world dominated by the imperialistic countries in the name of globalization and multiculturalism. Coetzee's handling of the historical subject matter is not confined to a particular place or time. A critical analysis of the time and contexts surrounding the publication of *Dusklands* shows how the narrative of this text is influenced by Coetzee's trans-Atlantic travels. He conceived of the first part of this novel in South Africa. Then, the second part was conceived in New York and ultimately the whole book was completed back in South Africa. Thus the trans-national genesis of the *Dusklands* and its spatiality interpret Coetzee's “reluctance to be included in a narrow, nationally defined category of South African writing or a geographically constrained provincialism” (Wittenberg 75). Coetzee's deep connection to South Africa fuels his curiosity about the colonial subject matter. Actually, “Eugene Dawn's narrative in *Dusklands* (1974) has its backdrop that attempted American colonization of Vietnam; Jacobus Coetzee, in some respects, a forerunner is both a product of colonialism and, like Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, one of its most avid, twisted servants,” he does not work; he is rather made to work as an apparatus of colonial hegemony (Watson 370).

After the Second World War, when colonialism officially and conspicuously ended, it resorted to corporate economy and started functioning in the form of imperialism, an inevitable outcome of a nexus between capitalism and political idealism. Then it economically started exploiting people and stereotyping them. Consequently, the victims of it suffer from existential crisis and its impact can bring about psychological breakdown. Eugene Dawn serves as a detached self, segregated from the world around him. Actually, his mission of alienating the natives by making them confused with manipulation of myths metaphorically interprets how war in the modern period mostly controlled by the capitalism compartmentalizes a society and challenges its solidarity and friendship. Eugene's mental breakdown metaphorically offers an anatomy of colonialism which is a projection of mental aberration “located exclusively in the divided consciousness that is a special feature of Western humanity” (Watson 375). In this connection, Descartes' interpretation of humans contributes to the interpretation of colonialism. According to him, ego poses as the subject and the nature is the object. Ego possesses “will to power” which voraciously desires to conquer nature or object. In the colonial situation the colonizers look upon themselves as subject and the natives assume the status of “other” or “aliens” and work as object. This object also confronts the subject. To resist this object, the subject usually adopts various strategies one of which is psychological war in which Eugene Dawn is engaged and used as pawns by the power dynamics. But Eugene's activities turn him into an alienated self, incapable of developing a dialectic relationship with the diachronic and synchronic journey

of the time. It makes him an entity characterized by divided consciousness and leads him to a juncture where he fails to connect himself even with his wife and child, and his own self. He turns into a segregated self, failing to negotiate with the surrounding environment.

Similarly, in the second part, Jacobus also desires to be alone. He enunciates:

I love you, too, God. I love everything. I love the stones and sand and the bushes and the sky and Klawer and those others and every worm, every fly in the world. But God, don't let them love me. I don't like accomplices, God, I want to be alone. (148)

This segregation emanates out of the consciousness of white supremacy that instigates Jacobus to brand the Hottentots as savage, devoid of culture and civilization. Branding is done by the colonizers deliberately to create a congenial environment of exploitation without any resistance. Imperialism is just like a snake which was not killed, but scotched. Hence, it is still a threat for liberation and, according to Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "If economic and political liberation are essential for our liberation, equally the liberation of our cultures, our values, outlook are a necessary measure of the true extent of the economic and political liberation" (75). For establishing supremacy the imperial forces create binaries and establish the master/servant discourse.

Further, divided consciousness tells upon a man's capability to exercise empathy, and it is found in the character of Eugene. In course of his enterprises in Vietnam as a soldier dedicated to creating chaos and confusion among the people and making them psychologically vulnerable, Eugene gradually turns into a psycho, devoid of human sensibility. Three photos delineated in detail by Eugene interpret how he is losing his sanity by degrees. The title of the first photo, "Father makes merry with children," exposes how horribly Eugene loses the sanity of his mind, the photo showing an American soldier called Chifford Loman raping a Vietnamese woman (20). The woman is tiny, "possibly even a child" (20). Two American soldiers are standing with severed human heads in the second photo. It seems they are celebrating their victory over the Vietnamese and the severed heads are to them trophies. A soldier is seen in the cage of a tiger in the third photo. This photo is derived from a film. It is noticeable that the photos that Eugene presents are a manifestation of his mental disorder. They also interpret how he has lost his human feelings, such as love and compassion for fellow human beings.

In this connection, *Dusklands* focuses on a paradigm shift from sanity to insanity caused by power dynamics, an outcome of colonial hegemony and it offers "a critique of Western civilization" (Castillo 1118). Eugene Dawn, in the first book, and Jacobus Coetzee, in the second book, serve as agents of the Western imperial hegemony respectively. Eugene is a mythographer whose responsibility is to make the Vietnamese psychologically disordered and lead them to the political and economic impasse from where they will not be able to come back to the state of stability, liberty, and democracy. Imperialism, thus, carries on the legacy of colonialism and enslaves the people of especially the Third World countries like Vietnam politically, culturally, and economically. Eugene uses his pen which can be

interpreted as a metaphor of a gun, a colonial hardware. The photographs that he refers to may be taken up as an interpretation of the stillness and stagnancy of life. Usually, as soon as a scene is captured by a camera the people in it are caught up in the canvas and confined to the stillness. The flash of light coming out of the glint of the eyes of the prisoner in the cage does not find any way out. The Vietnamese woman raped by Loman represents the archetypal horror associated with imperial hegemony. In the second book Jacobus Coetzee, the hunter, who explores the unexplored interior of South Africa with a view to making money through trafficking the tusks of elephants and hides of other animals, behaves as a corporate capitalist whose concentration lies in the motto of maximizing profit. He is also trapped inside the biases of the white supremacy. The people of the Namaqua community who nurse him back to health from his illness are astonished to see his brutality towards the local children. In addition, he goes on with a corrosive fight against this community and kills his slaves with a view to gaining financial profit, derailing humility and gratitude. With all these brutal practices, Jacobus Coetzee serves thoroughly as a representative of the typical colonizers whose intractable objective is to benefit themselves, explore power, exercise hegemony, and uphold the self as superior over the natives who are, in their eyes, sub-human beings. In this connection, it is relevant to mention Albert Memmi who thinks that it is a typical disposition of the colonizers to whom the colony is nothing but a profit generating field. He defines colony as:

a place where one earns more and spends less. You can go to a colony because jobs are guaranteed, wages high, careers more rapid and business more profitable. The young graduate is offered a position, the public servant a higher rank the businessman substantially lower taxes, the industrialist raw materials and labour at attractive prices. (Memmi 4)

Whatever place Jacobus Coetzee visits is to him a marketplace. Hence, even the natives of the place which he visits are to him only a factory of labor. The Hottentots are to him savages, devoid of civilization. According to him, only the gun as the controlling apparatus can be used against them. The gun represents the hardware of colonial hegemony. Among the Namaqua tribe, even if contained by his physical limitations and trouble, Jacobus is confident about his dominance over the natives because he has a gun with him and he glorifies in its strength and control over the local people. It is so powerful that it can even set a demarcation between the self and the other. He asserts:

The gun stands for the hope that there exists that which is other than oneself. The gun is our last defense against isolation within the travelling sphere. The gun is our mediator with the world and therefore our saviour. The tidings of the gun: such-and-such is outside, have no fear. The gun saves us from the fear that all life is within us. (Coetzee 122)

Coetzee also affirms, "The instrument of survival in the wild is the gun, but the need for it is metaphysical rather than physical" (124). The gun is the symbol of not only power but also self. Jacobus shoots elephants, hippopotami, and rhinoceros to make a mountain of all these killed animals for trafficking and it will bring him wealth and distinguish him from

the natives regarding his social and economic status decided by his pecuniary condition. But the irony is that the local Hottentots whom he calls savage do not need to use guns. They are the construction of the colonizers' narratives which define the natives 'as enslavement to space' (124). This space exists between two opposing perspectives. It never wants to bring these two together and defines the colonizers as self and the natives as Others. Hence, colonial discourse dehumanizes the natives with all crudeness and limitations of nature. It emerges out of the power dynamics existing in the negotiation between the colonizers and the natives. The actions of the natives towards the colonizers are driven by compulsion, rather than genuine humanity, as the colonizers do not view natives as human beings.

J.M. Coetzee's portrayal of colonialism in dialectical relationship between history and myth suggests that he seeks to establish a connection between Europe and Africa, but not through the old colonial relationship of dominance and subjugation. In this connection, Watson asserts:

[Coetzee] wants to join Europe to Africa but not in the old colonial relationship of dominance and subjugation. He wants to preserve the contemplative, myth-making, sacralizing impulse at the heart of modernism and nevertheless respond to an actual historical moment in which such an impulse could not seem more of an irrelevancy. (388)

In the first segment of this novel, Coetzee critiques the American policy of global defense of democracy through the use of parody. Eugene Dawn, working with Mythography, is preparing "a report on propaganda methods, whose ultimate readership is the department of Defense" (Attwell 8). In the second segment, Jacobus Coetzee, an elephant hunter and adventurer, acts as a representative of postmodern imperialism, a legacy of European colonialism. Both the parts criticize the so-called American self-confidence in maintaining global democracy which is nothing but a neo-colonizing process of sustaining dominance and hegemony upon the third world countries. The novel depicts that resistance does not essentially and normatively emanate from human consciousness; it is rather a construction of the power-relations. The disconnection between ideological facade and reality, characterized by hypocrisy and falsification of history and myth, creates a traumatic experience for the individuals who see through this facade. The fortification of hegemony and dominance of the power relations (especially its center, not periphery) is articulated through myth instead of history. Thus, the amalgamation of these two produces a version of history that works as a weapon to control the subjects and challenge positivism and humanism, two illustrious terms of Western propaganda. In the name of liberalism, the corporate economy of the first world countries is creating an unequal ground of economic interaction between the First World countries and the Third World countries. In this interaction the liberal aesthetics, positivism and humanism are acting as an oppressive force upon the Third World countries as it is working as an annihilating phenomenon, not as an accommodative force. Intersection of cultural and political realities inherent in these binaries often inhibits the spirit of self-expression among the natives of Third World countries, such as South Africa. Under the pressure of this confluence, the natives



are losing their own narratives. When they realize that their self is being shaped by the previous colonizing forces, they tend to respond with a counter discourse that manifests as resistance, unrest, and suspicion.

J.M. Coetzee's *Dusklands* does not directly specify any political orientation, but presents a mythopoesis of power relations that construct the discourses of multidimensional identity of both the forces – imperialist hegemony and the resistance of the natives. The Vietnamese and the Namaquas are the constructions of the hegemonic power relations that tend to transform the natives into a discursive and “stereotypical construction of ‘alterity’ (‘OTHERNESS’)” (Thiem 55). Coetzee also exhibits how hegemonic power relations inevitably generate counter discourse that challenges the autonomy of the oppressive discourses. In the same vein, *Dusklands* offers a heterogeneous narrative remarkable for the intertextuality of social, cultural, economic, and psychological realities.

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