



An Unusual and Bizarre Fiction: A Reading of J.M. Coetzee's *The Childhood and The Schooldays of Jesus*

Dr. Sheeba Anjum

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Swami Keshvanand Institute of Technology, Management, and Gramothan, Jaipur.

ABSTRACT:

Feeling 'out of place' and an outsider in a no man's land may well be an accurate assessment of the feelings of Simon and David from the trilogy of Coetzee which are also known as Jesus novels. The present paper investigates the strange elements in J.M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The School Days of Jesus*. These novels written in sequence over a gap of two years are isolated novels because everything, right from the places, characters, and relationships is a symbol of abject isolation. The novelistic spaces of both places are imaginary and expose the difficulty of distinguishing between 'real' and 'invented'. A very obvious question therefore arises as to whether the setting in the novels is utopian or dystopian. The interrelation between the ideal and the real is one of the most obvious themes of the two novels. The paper will take into purview different aspects of the novels such as memory loss, migration, conflict between real and ideal, and unreal parent-child relationship to highlight the elements that make the novels work of fantasy.

Key Words: novelistic spaces, isolation, real and unreal, isolation, absurd

Coetzee probably for the first time has written a piece of fiction that is so strange and distinctive that ends in a unique way (not ended actually) that could pave the way for a sequel. *The Childhood of Jesus* begins with Simon arriving in the Spanish-speaking city of Novilla with five-year-old David, whom he has decided to look after till he finds his mother. Everyone in Novilla is washed clean of his past life and living a life of isolation and illusion. One day, Simon sees Ines and nominates her as David's mother, thereby building a holy family like Christian gospels. David is a child with special habits and abilities. At school, David challenges the authorities and is sent to a special school from where he escapes with his newly created family to a new place named Estrella. This is the beginning of the second novel titled *The Schooldays of Jesus*-here Simon finds a new school for David and a job for himself. David is admitted to Dance Academy where he learns to dance by calling the numbers of the stars. It remains a mystery how the calling of the stars through dance can be taught and learned. However, in the end, Simon also joins the academy, embraces dancing with David, and finally explores his true self. The opening of *The Childhood of Jesus* is serious and unusual, where an imaginary place Novilla is introduced and an isolated and lost man with a five-year-old boy with their assigned ages arrive and find a barren, boring, and dejected place where nobody remembers anything. It has been noted that Coetzee's recent works are isolated and absurd, making them difficult to understand for readers unfamiliar with his writing style. This can further alienate both the characters in the story and the readers themselves. Therefore, it is suggested that those who are not familiar with his style should refrain from reading his recent works, even though they may have a straightforward storyline.

There is an air of emptiness in both works, in which Coetzee applies his power of fascination, and the characters live within the gaze of this fascination. Fascination as defined by Blanchot is "solitude's gaze. It is the gaze of the incessant and interminable". (Space 23, 32) Everything about the novels is fascinating, whether it is the characters, setting, title, theme, or ending. Coetzee has always been very particular about the geographical setting of his novels, as he is a migrant and knows well the value of a native place; but Novilla and Estrella are completely alien places with no location and historical reference. Simon expresses his concern whether 'places like Estrella had a history or only shadows of memories' (*Schooldays* p24, 67) Novilla and Estrella are isolated places, having no framework and very limited access to everything which again according to Julika Griem, "denies its readers any experience of totalizing abundance". (77)

Jean-Michel Rubate in '*The Pathos of Distance: Affects of the Moderns*' gives an apt answer to this question. According to him, "If it is a utopia, it is mostly because peace and goodwill are offered to all newcomers, there is work to be found, however badly paid and exhausting, and enough to eat in times of scarcity. The side of dystopia comes to the fore once we understand that this world is deprived of pathos, emotions and sexual desire" (164) whereas Yoshiki Tajiri believes that the novels present a "kind of hollowed out utopian or dystopian narrative because there is no criticism of real-world as found in other narratives". (191)

As it has both interpretations of a utopian and dystopian world, critics are of different opinions; some argue that Novilla is an imaginary place, a sort of island where everyone is an immigrant. It is actually 'No-villa' meaning no place, an isolated spot outside the 'oikumene', similar to Thomas Moore's utopia (55) but at the same time, the word can also mean "new" thereby indicating the new life that people are to live here. The place is new because it has a different time and order and monotonous life, people here lack passion and "benevolence". (*Intellectual Landscapes of Coetzee* 207) Devoid of memories, people live in a state of oblivion, without any expectations and desires. Simon feels alienated here because, in Novilla, nobody desires anything, he, therefore, feels frustrated at the thought of this hollowness.

The description of unspecified and undefined places shows Coetzee's brilliance in depicting the effect of isolation not only on human beings but also on locations and places. These empty novelistic worlds of Novilla and Estrella manifest Coetzee's construction of a sealed-off enclosure which seems to

be turning in on oneself. (76) Everything in these two places is minimal and wears an empty look be it streets, or parks, ‘The apartment of Simon in Estrella is simply furnished ‘they get two beds, a table and chairs, a chest of drawers, an electric cooker, a basin’. All these details are a clear indication that Coetzee again is trying to focus on the minute objects which are symbols of isolation or can aggravate the feeling of loneliness due to their limited number in the novels.

The deliberate empty look of Novilla and Estrella- confirms a kind of narrative world that is devoid of any fun and pleasure and even at the end of *The Schooldays of Jesus*; almost nothing seems to go beyond the deserted and lonely Novilla and Estrella. The biblical references(discussed later) in both texts also support the viewpoint that these diegetic worlds of Novilla and Estrella have ‘apocalyptic resonance’ and are exposed to a strange evacuation that has already been dominant in earlier works of Coetzee.

In Coetzee’s fiction, traces of absurdity can often be seen (showing the influence of his literary precursor and absurdist master- Samuel Beckett). Coetzee has always acknowledged the contribution of Samuel Beckett in his literary career as he wrote his doctoral thesis on the stylistic analysis of Beckett’s works. It has been observed by Susan Balee in her review of the novels that Beckett and Ionesco might love *The Childhood and Schooldays of Jesus* for its absurdity. The first absurd thing is of course the title of these works, which is ironic and speculative. Coetzee himself has said that ‘he wanted to publish the book without any title- with the title revealed at the end’. There is no character in the novels that is named Jesus; it has nothing to do with biblical Jesus or his childhood. This is one of the reasons that the novels received confounded reviews because the title is unusual and absurd. Robert B. Pippin asks the question: what does J.M. Coetzee’s novel have to do with the childhood of Jesus? Tim Meighn tries to answer by saying that the child in the novel named David might be destined to become Jesus. As there is no historical Jesus, the title compels the readers to find some sort of meaning in it and makes the readers hopeful that some savior like Jesus will come to Novilla, who will set everything right.

Not only the title, but the story, its setting, characters, and various episodes in both works have absurdist overtones. From the opening, till the end, everything seems absurd. Freeman has given his opinion on both the works and tries to answer why the whole story looks so strange. According to him, this is so because nothing is clear in the novels: “the language spoken is Spanish, the currency sounds Brazilian, town names feel Iberian, the state seems secular socialist, and literary allusions point towards Don Quixote, but do not map directly onto the text”. This quality of elusiveness and unresolved contradiction contributes to absurdity in the works.

Chapter sixteen of *The Childhood of Jesus* which can be considered as an example of Scatology is an absurd episode and it is hard to guess why it has been used by Coetzee. Scatology is a treatment of vulgar and obscene matters in literature, thus using it as a form of representing awkward topics in such a humorous and simple manner can only be done by an author like Coetzee. It might therefore be, as argued by Tajiri, intentionally inserted by Coetzee to state that scatology as a literary form is very common and it was used with full vigor in the twentieth century by Beckett, Joyce, and others. The chapter is shocking and disgusting; in it, Simon is called by Ines to unblock her toilet with her floating shit. What is embarrassing is that David offers his help arguing that it is his ‘Poo’. Toilets, images of urine, and excreta are private and shameful matters but for David, Poo is only Poo!

Simon finds it very strange and awkward that Ines doesn’t find it embarrassing by making him do such a work, her dialogue looks senseless and obscene. After doing this dirty and unhygienic job, Simon ponders:

‘What strikes him about the visit to Ines, when he reflects afterward, is how strange it was as an episode in his life, how unpredictable. Who would have thought, at the moment when he first beheld this young woman on the tennis court, so cool, so serene, that a day would come when he would have to wash her shit off his body!’ (135)

Another example of absurdity is when Simon longing for happiness and some sort of recreation visits a brothel in Novilla but there he gets irritated and annoyed with the unnecessary paperwork that he is asked to do to be its member he gets discouraged and gives it up. The pointless paperwork and dialogues strengthen the notion that absurdity is not only about pointless things but also depicts the alienation of modern man. Albert Camus has mentioned in his discussion: “In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting is properly the feeling of absurdity” (*The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* 6)

These lines truly explain the mental state of Simon. For him, the feeling of being absurd comes out of the human longing for a sense of belongingness, happiness, and reason in this brutish silence of the world. Simon in Novilla and Estrella is always stumbling over the absence of logic and reason and therefore feels out of place and estranged. Coetzee seems to be telling his readers that man should seek to understand the meaning of life and existence. He has experienced isolation and encountered difficulties in relations (like Simon) and therefore recognizes that an individual cannot exist as a self-sufficient man as he is suppressed under his societal role. Cara Boag Ingrid asserts that ‘creative personalities such as Coetzee and others have experienced great difficulties in their relations with the commonplace everyday world; they may be antagonistic to this world while at the same time, through their creative transcendence, they apprehend the universe through it’. (15) Simon as a stevedore tries many times to persuade other stevedores on the dock that it is impossible to be washed clean of one’s past life and to forget everything but nobody believes him and his words.

So can it be said that the character of Simon in *The Childhood and Schooldays of Jesus* has absurdist overtones? To a certain extent, yes, because he always finds himself in absurd and baffling conditions. Although an alienated figure, he always tries to step out of the bewilderment of the unusual and unsystematic conditions. The absurdist connotations in the Jesus novels imply that the universe is meaningless and it is totally up to an individual to create his sense of it. This is the idea of the absurd for Coetzee. He questions how authentic living is to be acquired when one feels alienated and lives a life of illusions. For him, it can be acquired through the formulation of consciousness which gives the freedom from isolation and all sorts of illusions.

Conclusion :

Both novels present a network of arguments through the two characters. One is an adult and the other is a child but a source of inspiration for each other. Considering themes of fantasy, imagination, absurdity, desire, impulsiveness, quest for meaning, and identity; the novels ultimately depict isolation and emptiness. Coetzee intentionally creates a dilemma and tries to end it in the final part ‘*The Death of Jesus*’ (2020) Dr. Fabricante, one of the main characters in the third part tells Simon that “we are all, at the deepest level, alone in the world”. These words reinforce the idea of a dystopian setting.

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