



Research Paper

The Writer's Self in Conflict with the Historical Self: An Analysis of Coetzee's Fictionalized Autobiographies

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ABSTRACT: To conjure a hero in her or his own story telling or narrative is what an author's prime task is. He tries to make it so, so that the whole narrative revolves around the hero's life. While the creation of a hero in fiction is highly challenging, the portraiture of the self as a hero is a task of humongous nature. To the readers of narrative a Hero is one who stands out as one of the primary characters in a narrative. The portraiture of self as and when done forgoes all the standards of glorifying a character, which is created in a fiction. In an autobiography, the author hardly tries to glorify himself but states the blatant truth of the life that he has led from the perspective of the person he is now. At the core of autobiography or the autobiographical mode in story telling the question of the subject and the first person speaking position occurs. An exclusion from this theory is found in J. M Coetzee's autobiographical ventures where although the hero's creation is done in his own mirror image but he uses third person and present tense to talk about his past self. At the backdrop of a troubled motherland i.e South Africa Coetzee creates his own image in three different selves in *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*. In one of his other book, named *Elizabeth Costello* Coetzee again uses autobiographical mode but chooses a female protagonist to portray his own consciousness. For Coetzee it has never been the case to glorify the hero in his art, it was all about the act of putting forth the truth about the life of a writer be it through a male protagonist or a female one, and his relation to the present hero of the book and his past self. The other important focus of his works was also the relationship of the hero with his motherland, which was again in the womb of a moment called Apartheid. This paper aims to focus on the autobiographical ventures of Coetzee as the portraiture of self as a Hero.

KEYWORDS: Autobiography, Fictionalized Autobiography, Representation, Self, Historical Self.

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No other kind of genres in literature allows a relation between the self as author and the self as subject – as an autobiography. This is possible because in autobiography the subject is always in search of an identity as is the writer. The subject in the autobiography is not someone who is present at the time of writing but is someone who is discovered in the due course of time. The question here is whether autobiographies are at strict adherence to historical and factual truth as they claim to be or is it a discovery and a creation of a deeper design of truth. The politics inevitably present at the making of an autobiography is the representation of the present writerly self and at the same time, of the past writerly self.

The subject then born out of these selves' takes up a life of its own. The self thereby created is too close to the author in the form of differences rather than in the form of similarities. The self-born here is mostly the moments located in a history – the writer's history. The evolution of the textual self if brings about a huge amount of differences with the writerly self than as readers where should we fix the autobiographical events – in the moment of the writing or in the history of the writer and his time. It cannot be denied that even during the construction of an autobiography too narrativization occurs, and as soon as it occurs there are so many possibilities.

Any bit of literary text is an act of communication with the mass. But in case of autobiography the first form of communication takes place with the past self. In order to begin the act of writing, at first the author's self, amalgamates experience and perspectives – both of them his own. When he chooses the material of his past, a recollection of his own being, he is not confronted with one life, which he observes as an observer, but by two. One of these lives is the historical self and the other is the author's self.

When an attempt at self narrativization is done, the writer takes up the dimensions of an allegorist. An allegory of self-revelation. A revelation of the experiences of the self, where the observer becomes self-observed. He then articulated his own self in different ways and means. His creation is enigmatic since textualizing a self is not an easy task because the past- self is never unitary but highly fragmented. To pick up the fragmented self as one poses a challenge thereby making the genre of autobiography limited in time and space.

One of the imminent practitioner of representations of the self in his works is J M Coetzee. An attempt to represent the self or the historical self was taken up by him in his autobiographical ventures: *Boyhood*(1997), *Youth*(2002), and *Summertime*(2009). The case of representation for him is a case of crisis in a sense that it involves the question of identity and as discussed earlier it is a crisis because the identities are always fragmented and not unitary. He acknowledges the fact that out of all genres, in novel, the attempt to write an autobiography is the trickiest since there is a great chance that the topic might totally slip away from the narration of the self. It is so because the historical self is totally different from the writing self. It is a gap between the present and the historical self that needs to be bridged and not a farrago is born while justifying the politics of representation.

In the backdrop of apartheid Coetzee weaved the plot of *Boyhood*: Scenes from Provincial life which recounts a compelling story of a South African childhood. Coetzee at once never goes ranting and raving about the effects of apartheid but allows the readers to see how it affected his relationships through events in his own life. In the narrative Coetzee is a simple boy who has a problematic relationship with his family and a symbol of the influence of repression in racist regimes and the system that condones it. The narrator grew up in a small town of Worcester in South Africa driven by Apartheid where he had to be in conformity with the rules laid by the world even though it was not explained. The life of young Coetzee was driven amidst contradictions in familial life and at his school. At home he had a love hate relationship with his mother where he adored and at the same time resented her. He even tried to imitate his father but never really respected him. At the school as a minority he experiences discrimination at the hands of Afrikaner classmates. He lived in his own imagined world, reclusive and lonely from everyone, even his mothers. Young Coetzee describes childhood as a “time of gritting teeth and enduring”. The endurance factor is present both in the school and at his home. His parents cause him the greatest of emotional and psychological turmoil. He feels that his home is a “box” where he is trapped in between an inefficient father and a self- sacrificing mother. At the very beginning of the novel we see him taking sides with his father in criticizing his mother when she tries to learn how to ride a bicycle. Then his allegiance waver and he ends up rejecting his father once and for all so much so that he hated his habits and personal tastes ultimately feeling that he is an “appendage” outside the family's core. If his relationship with his father was more of a disrespect his relationship with his mother was more psychological in nature. He was hell-bent on moving away from her and promises to share nothing with her. He sees her exhibiting a “blinding, overwhelming, self-sacrificial love” that demands “a debt of love” which he himself is unwilling to pay.

In the novel we also find an intriguing relationship between Coetzee and his land. The young John is seen to be in love with the bird fountain or the Voelfontien. He was attached to each and every stone of it, every bird, and every bush that the farm had to offer. He had a feeling that farms are places of freedom. On the contrary the writer's self argues that a land cannot be loved if the love is not reciprocated as the land itself was in the womb of a movement called apartheid. He says that there wasn't any aesthetic appeal in the land of South Africa as the land itself was emblematic of inhumanity.

Boyhood as an autobiographical venture follows the life of Coetzee from childhood in Worcester and Johannesburg to the second venture *Youth* into a prolonged adolescence in London and Berkshire, England. In spite of having an autobiographical plot, the narrative is written in third person, present tense and with an absence of self-analysis. Coetzee's style of narrative hovers between autobiography and autobiographical mode.

In *Youth* we see Coetzee planning to move to London. It stands to be a figure of rejection and escape from his family and all that South Africa stood for. However, after arriving at London he finds himself not being able to fit to the English life than he did at South Africa. He then intended to write a thesis on the works of Ford Maddox Ford, but ends up working for IBM. The book again as its predecessor takes up a third person narrative. He finds himself in vain and also on the other hand considers himself as intellectually superior to all those around him and again considers himself as pathetic. He is unable to overcome his isolation. He writes “if he were a warmer person he would no doubt find it all easier: life, love, poetry. But warmth is not in his nature”. His lack of warmth goes back to his previous self in *Boyhood* where he tried even to get out of the relationship he had with his mother.

By the use of third person narration Coetzee becomes a character in his own drama. He pursues his historical self in thought rather than in writing. The consciousness of the character and the writer is all throughout present by usage of rhetorical questions like "Why is life so cruel?" "Why must I suffer?" "Why am I so unhappy?" The writer's self in here is exactly the kind of person who would never miss an opportunity to steal a glance at himself as he passes a short window. He is purposefully an obsessive self-watcher.

Youth can be called as a calculated memoir where Coetzee revisits his struggling years as a restless fellow. In intellectual introspection when we read Youth it is torturous to see the failures of a person who has such matured achievements.

The third venture *Summertime* stands out as a novel in the category of fictional autobiography. It begins in the narrative pattern as the first two having a first person narrative and the use of present tense. Soon the mode of narration changes to a form of interview taken by Mr. Vincent to write a biography on the late writer J. M Coetzee, whose notebooks Mr. Vincent already acquired. Mr. Vincent planned to focus on Coetzee during a period when Coetzee was "finding his feet as a writer". The series of interviews he took with people were of utmost importance to Coetzee – A married woman with whom he had an affair, his favorite cousin Margot (who was Coetzee's cousin Agnes in *Boyhood*), A Brazilian dancer whose daughter was taught English by Coetzee. The novel focuses on Coetzee's life after he returned from United States to Cape Town. He lived with his elderly father while trying to make a career as a writer. There is a parallelism in Coetzee taking up the task of building a concrete support slab for the house which was about to dissolve through neglect and him trying to set his feet as a writer in a place which he had already abandoned years ago. He begins an affair with a married woman without any emotions. The researcher here learns that Coetzee in fact was a very difficult person to love and occasionally weirdly romantic which was proved when Julia, the married woman, comments that Coetzee was a "Coldfish" with "no sexual presence whatever."

The inappropriate relationship he had with his land had also found a place in the novel where he had no desire to take part in any overt political opposition. He feels "So this is what he has come back to! Yet where in the world can he hide where one would not feel soiled?" As its predecessor Youth through the eyes of others even in *Summertime* we get to see the shortcomings of Coetzee as a human being. He feels "he is trapped in his own personality, so that he is incapable of writing worm, human novels." It takes immense courage for someone to be so truthful to say these about his own work.

It is difficult to find a writer who ponders about his celebrity status as an author when a gang of robbers killed Mario Nascimento, Adriana's husband (One of the interviewees), a refugee from Brazil, working as a security guard in Cape Town. As a person Coetzee has never been amused the status that he carries. He never turned up to collect the awards either time he won the Booker Prize. When he won the Nobel Prize in 2003, he showed up to the ceremony but instead giving a lecture, he read a story about Robinson Crusoe. This fact might be a bit of a digression from the topic but it shows the very nature of Coetzee that he deals with a realm of consciousness rather than people and characters.

The basic characteristic of Coetzee's self-declared fictionalized autobiography is that he has a complex intimacy and at the same time complete detachment with his own representation. When we read the memoirs, we for once do not consider them as characters rather it seems that we are delving into the consciousness of the represented protagonist. Coetzee considers the act of writing an autobiography "springs from a habitual mistrust of motives behind even the most single minded heartfelt passions- including his own". He fears that the idea might totally slip because in autobiography there are no rules to be followed. Therefore, he structured his works in such a manner that the fictions take up a personal and self-questioning dimension.

We can choose to call autobiography as an indeterminate mixture of truth and fiction. It is only through the act of writing either be it autobiography, fiction or fictionalized autobiography that one discovers himself or herself. The writer's self resides in the historical self and vice versa through the act of writing. It is because of the writer's self that the historical self is voiced to the society in the form of writing and by saying that we can easily conclude that one cannot survive without the other. Here I would like to quote Michel Foucault from his recent essay "What is an Author?" "Finally, one can come to the conclusion that the author's name does not refer to a real person but that it exceeds the limits of the texts, that it organizes them. Though it clearly points to the existence of certain texts, it also refers to their status within a society and within a culture..... The function of the author is thus characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society."

As a white Afrikaner writing in English Coetzee's writing definitely brushes against an Afrikaner past and present. As him all his characters thrive to find an identity in a place brimming with imperialism, colonialism and Apartheid. His works pose as powerful representations of fragmented selves. The very fact that he chose to finish his autobiographical ventures in three different books speaks highly about his own fragmented self. Coetzee's entire oeuvre, transmutes personal dilemmas and concerns into fiction. Not just characters voice these dilemmas and concerns but also by consciousness of the characters, we find Coetzee voicing these

concerns. This consciousness then becomes the birthplace of truth. As in fiction, in autobiography too Coetzee always let the readers have full discretion on the truth that has been discovered.

By situating Coetzee's historical self in his works we come very far away from his writer's self. We take a step closer to the truth of life when he read these ventures. The way boyhood or childhood is perceived is different from what Coetzee paints in *Boyhood*. He calls it a "time of gritting teeth and enduring" which depicts the reality of childhood. It makes us aware with the truth that childhood is not a time where someone is painstakingly innocent. It is rather a time of utmost curiosity and turmoil. He depicts the struggles of youth and an equally troubled relationship with land and country. His course of representation makes it hard for the readers to relate his historical self to his writer's self. But in doing so we discover the truth. But never at once does Coetzee make his autobiography confessions. Here he just blatantly states the truth about his life. In fact he puts these ventures into altogether a different category called *Autrebiography* or fictionalized autobiography where what values more is truth rather than autobiography.

"Let me treat this as a question about telling the truth rather than as a question about autobiography. Because in a larger sense, all writing is autobiographical: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it. The real question is: This massive autobiographical writing-enterprise that fills a life, this enterprise of self-construction... does it yield only fictions? Or rather, among the fictions of the self, the versions of the self, that it yields, are there any that are truer than others? How do I know when I have the truth about the self?" (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 17)

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