Silence in the Novels of J. M. Coetzee

In speech, we use silence as a buffer between words, a gathering of thoughts, or a rebuke to the words of another. This silence is sometimes awkward, sometimes calming, and sometimes pregnant with foreboding menace, quiet triumph, or insubordination and deceit. In writing, silence exists between the words, lines and chapters and in the reader’s subconscious. No matter its form, silence carries with it a power capable of oppressing masses, uniting peoples, and hiding the inner workings of the mind. In this way, silence exists as a flexible political, personal, and global force. Silence in its sacral form allows the purveyor to achieve a state of unsurpassed tranquillity. However, more often than not, silence is used as a weapon by oppressors to quiet the “other” in the society. Though the discussion, focussing on the prevalence of silence and the redefining of the roles of oppressor and oppressed in the famous works especially Life and Times of Michael K, Disgrace, and Foe of South African novelist J. M. Coetzee.

Key Words
Violence, discrimination, South Africa, apartheid, colonization, oppression, allegorical

The introduction of the article focuses on the literary and political involvement of South Africa, the term allegory and a brief description of allegory with examples. Then a short analysis of the history of South African literature in English. The South African
apartheid, perhaps one of the least publicized atrocities of the past hundred years, weighed heavily on the minds of the entire population. However, the lines of the demarcation between what differentiated races from one another became skewed and the lands each group was entitled were marked with ambiguity, resulting in violence and oppression that ended the idea of ‘cooperative co-existence.’ The makers of this rules inevitably used their lucrative positions to raise one race up above the others, breeding hostility and hate. As tension grew between the races feelings of guilt and helplessness began to plague liberal members of the ruling class whites, evidenced by progressive white literature at the time. For the years leading up to and during the apartheid regime, top literary minds expressed their disgust, sense of hopelessness, and desires for a resolution through their writing White authors such as Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer, Troy Blacklaws and Andre Brink struggled, through their prose, with the ever-present emotion of white guilt. Also prevalent in their novels is a sense of entrapment for liberal whites who find themselves caught between the urge to fight for equality with blacks and yet a fear of the perceived violence those blacks represent. Writing anti—apartheid material during this time brought scorn, persecution and danger to those authors whose government wanted to silence these voices and prevent them from telling their stories, but also world recognition to their work and the situation of South Africa.

Perhaps no other white South African writer has written more extensively on liberal white ideological oppression than Nobel Prize winner, J. M. Coetzee. Almost all his novels wholly allegorize or explicitly symbolize the various oppressions of the apartheid. Early in his career, Coetzee’s work came under criticism for not only directly addressing the apartheid, electing instead to allegorize the conflict though fictional, vague location, such as in Life and Times of Michael K, Disgrace, and Foe firmly places the reader into the confusion, anxiety, and oppression of South Africa during the apartheid.
While the early fiction of Coetzee marks a departure from the liberal hegemony of the dominant fictional form. In subject matter, he begins to deal with the abstract essences of various hegemonies that structures life in South Africa and elsewhere. To understand the dynamics, it is necessary to survey the diverse ways in which hegemony works. Naturally this will involve the examination of the effects of hegemonic control, and the nature of that control. One obvious problem of the victim of hegemonic control is subjectivity. The fictional depiction of this relation between hegemony and subjectivity often moves away from realistic historical narration to the mode of allegory. This offers a strategy to examine subtler aspects of colonial victimization. *Life and Times of Michael K, Disgrace, and Foe* provides for a fictional engagement with hegemony, subjectivity, and displacement with the allegorical mode.

Now we can turn to another novel *Life and Times of Michael K*, and how the allegory affected on the work. The novel *Life and Times of Michael K* was published in 1983. The book itself won the Booker Prize for 1983. The novel is a story of hare lipped, gardener Michael K, who makes an arduous journey from civil war-ridden urban South Africa to his mother’s rural birthplace, during apartheid era, in the 1970-80s. The novel is split into three parts. It begins with Michael K, an institutionalized simpleton who works as a gardener in Cape Town, South Africa. Michal K tends to his mother who works as a maid to a wealthy family. Eventually, the city breaks out in a massive warlike riot, and Michael K’s mother becomes very sick. Michael K decides to quit his job and escape the city to return his mother to her birthplace of Prince Albert.

A simple man born in South Africa, Michael K bears the deformity of a hare lip. K’s central role is underscored by his appearance—he is deformed and because of this, people look down upon him. His mother, the police, and Visagie’s grandson all treat him with respect of a lesser human on the basis that he looks and acts slow. This is shown by the fact
that K’s mother institutionalizes him until she needs him, the police let him wander around unnoticed because he has a childish innocence, and Visagie’s grandson treats him as a common servant.

But Michael K is institutionalised he becomes a gardener, where he learns to enjoy isolation and the freedom it grants him. We see K’s isolation and freedom continue throughout the book, starting at the Visagie’s house where he first begins to learn to live off the land. But when his freedom is encroached on, this makes K flee even further from society towards the freewill and seclusion he seeks. In the mountains he is able to understand how he wants to live his life, which involves only eating food he has grown from the earth. With K’s return to Cape Town, he returns to his mother’s old apartment and ends with his thoughts of farming and longing for freedom.

Michael K’s mother has disliked him since she saw his disfigurement. Anna put Michael K into a government institution and ignored him until she had no one else to turn to because of her health. She is a very cruel mother, but K shows his unconditional love for her by taking care of her until her death. Anna lived her life in fear: fear of losing her job, getting sick, or being put out on the street. Her uncaring nature toward a son she does not love blinds her to the sacrifice K makes to accomplish her dream of returning to Prince Albert.

The infirmary doctor at the rehabilitation camp is responsible for taking care of K when he is brought in. The doctor was the only one of the staff at the hospital to realize K is an innocent civilian, being unfairly treated for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The doctor becomes infatuated with K and his childish nature and his reasons for not eating.

In the conclusion, Michael K states that the moral of his story is “that there is enough time for everything.” The concept of time is present throughout the whole novel. Michael K goes on his life journey being grateful for each day. This idea is represented in the metaphor
used in the last paragraph of the book. He seems to have time for everything, through
ironically, he doesn’t take the time to do much other than garden or help his mother. This ties
into the idea that everyone has choices in life, and if they were to choose to, they would have
time for everything.

This novel takes place in South Africa during a civil war in the 1970-80s. Oftentimes
throughout K’s journey, he is stopped by officers who threaten to shoot him or who take his
belongings. Also, more than once he is taken into a “camp” that vaguely resembles a
concentration camp. There, they are given food but K denies. He grows weaker and weaker
until he finally escapes. Later on he is taken to a hospital instead because he is too weak to
work. There he refuses food as well. This refusal represents K’s opposition to the war and to
higher order. He doesn’t like taking direction from anyone and feels that the war doesn’t have
much effect on his life, just an event that is getting in the way of how he wants to live.

Let us focus on the novel Disgrace, and how silence allegorically affected on the
novel. Disgrace (1999) is an uncomfortable novel. It depicts rape and racial tensions, and it is
focalized through a rather unsympathetic protagonist, David Lurie. The novel is unsettling,
and it does not present enough clues about characters and events for the reader to draw
indisputable conclusions about what happens. On many levels, there is a lack of narrative
closure. The reader has to consider not only what can be found in the text, and between the
lines of the text, but also what is left unsaid. In analysing Disgrace, there are times when a
suspicion arises that the novel is a philosophical project disguised as a novel.

Following the rape of his only daughter, the protagonist of Disgrace considers how
“over the body of the woman silence is being drawn like a blanket,” and this essay’s research
questions focus on how and why the characters Melanie and Lucy are silenced after being
raped. Additionally, by paying special attention to gender and race, an attempt is made to
consider how rape is represented in *Disgrace*, and how this representation is related to the silence of the victims.

The main discussion begin with the focus on Melanie and Lucy. The rape of Lucy has received the most attention from critics, presumably because of its racial aspects. The chapter discusses sexual violence in general, and rape in particular, in abstract terms from a theoretical perspective. While this could possibly appear callous, it is not intended to deny the trauma suffered by victims of sexual violence; it is rather the result of the formality required of an academic text. Acknowledged is also that men can be victims of sexual violence, and women can likewise be the perpetrators. Nevertheless, because the rapes in *Disgrace* are committed by men, and the victims are women, the discussion in this chapter centres primarily on allegory of silence of women on male sexual violence. The main body of the chapter focuses on Melanie and Lucy respectively and then considers them together. The chapter finds that the rapes in J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* are representations of South Africa’s inverted racial power structures, and its traditional gender structures; structures that silenced Melanie and Lucy. This chapter argues that Coetzee has deliberately activated South African cultural scripts in the texts in an attempt to expose problematic viewpoints regarding gender and race in society, as well as in the reader.

Another novel *Foe* (1986) tells the story from the perspective of Susan Barton, a woman that has been washed ashore at an island where two men have been living; a white man named Cruso and a black man named Friday. They take care of her and she lives with them for about a year. The character Friday does not speak at all. Cruso tells Susan that Friday has lost his tongue: slave traders have cut out his tongue. After having lived on the island for about a year, the three of them get slaved by a ship that passes by. On the trip from the island to England, Cruso dies. Back in England, Susan and Friday are together alone. After Susan and Friday have arrived in England, Susan get in touch with a writer named Foe.
She asks him to write down their story, for she desires to become rich and famous. She addresses him by writing letters, for Foe has disappeared in the meantime; he left his house and no one knows where to find him. After a while, Susan and Friday go and live in Foe’s empty house.

In the last chapter, the narrator enters a house that seems to be Foe’s. The narrator finds the body of a woman or a girl, lying on the floor on his back. Also finds a couple lying in bed. The narrator discovers a scar around Friday’s neck. He discovers a box with a script in it and reads the first words, which say “Dear Mr Foe, at last I could row no further,” is the first sentence of the novel Foe.

Conclusion

Gaining a voice has been an important issue on the postcolonial agenda. Many postcolonial works, literary as well as theoretically, have had their focus on the subaltern speaking up: speaking up is presented as the way to gain control over one’s own life again and escape colonial oppression. Gayathri Chakravorty Spivak in her article “Can the Subaltern Speak?” stresses the difficulty for the subaltern to speak up and gain a subject position, because of the impossibility to categorize the subaltern as one coherent group with a collective consciousness. Foe is a testament both to the potency and limitations of language as an expression of truth and as the antithesis of silence. The story behind it is derived not only from what is not uttered through the medium of language, but what is conveyed through non-verbal communication—through Susan Barton’s storytelling leverage and through Friday’s dancing and music-making.
Works Cited


