

Epresentation Of Survival And Women Identity In The Novels Of Coetzee

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Abstract:

Survival and Identity are intertwined gestures of human existence. Being the most existing and important stratum of any level of conscious or existential struggle, survival and identity crisis, delves within the structures of a constructed human being. A human being is very much constructed through the realms of the societal and the cultural standards and the consciousness of a human being is decided by the way the being reacts to certain situations in life. Through the characters of Coetzee, the survival and identity of the human beings with reference to post feminism and existential feminism, is dealt with precision, as to bring in the ideologies of balance in absurdity, existence in wilderness and intelligence through power, eliminating the power struggle.

Keywords: Existential feminism, Post -feminism, Absurdity, Feminism, Existentialism.

John Maxwell Coetzee is one of the most accomplished writers of the twenty first century. His works revolve around the true colour of the human being with the imperial background. As a writer; he has presented the ideas without much artificiality and had taken the readers to the realms of realism. The characters in his novels face profound personal, psychological, emotional, societal and social issues and above all, the characters manage to go with the grey line, that which makes the writer universal. In his works, he depicts the real world and the real problem that human beings undergo in order to overcome suffering in life. The pain underwent by the human beings teach them the grit to face traumatic situations and it shows how human beings' temperament is changed according to the situation. J M Coetzee was born in South Africa and he was able to reciprocate to the feeling of the people in the colonial countries and he did not take any stand while exposing the victimised (Orient) as well as the victimizer (Occident) in the colonial arena. The colonial situation is presented in his novels in the form of a broken family especially of the relationship between parents, children and the genders of opposite sexuality. There are many pessimistic criticisms against Coetzee for his forthrightness about the imperialistic modules, which is turned topsy turvy here as it involves the combination of existentialism and feminism, a modern topic that pursues no particular structure. His style of writing naturally comprises of the structure of the language and generally Coetzee's use of vocabulary kindles the emotions and the psyche of the human beings. This is one of the reasons for his success as a Nobel Prize winner and he completed his novels with open endings, to kindle the thinking population.

Existentialism focuses on the concept of mere existence of the being as to how an individual tries to create a structure in and for life. Human beings try to figure out whom and what they are throughout their lifetime as they make their opinions based on the society, culture, religion, ethics and moralities, that they are raised along with. Choices are made based on the mood swings of the individuals and things are changed according to the weird situations faced by an individual. Existentialism aims to represent the reality, of how a man reacts when he is experiencing the worst days in life and the techniques he uses to handle in order to overcome the pain in life and similarly when it comes to the happy connotation, the inferences made are all the more ideal with regard to their experiences of that moment. There is always an oscillation in a being, when there are ups and downs in life and the being is left with no choice in the breaking period as there is no philosophy to support their grief stricken sustainability.

There are many precursors for Existentialism, like Socrates, Plato, Paul Tillich, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Buber, Albert Camus and so on. Among them, Jean Paul Sartre is a quite famous French existentialist. Sartre, not only introduced the theory, but he followed it in his personal life, unlike others, he personally underwent a life of existentialist. In his personal life, when it comes to the marriage he had broken the structure of the society and had an open relationship with Simone De Beauvoir along with that relationship he had affair with many young girls. Breaking the structure in

the society in order to remain an existentialist is not an easy thing it involves a deep pain or a great trauma and this paper deals with the trauma underwent by the characters in order to remain an existentialist. "Existentialism is a doctrine that makes human life possible and also affirms that every truth and every action imply an environment and a human subjectivity. It is public knowledge that the fundamental reproach brought against us is that we stress the dark side of human life" (18 Sartre).

Elizabeth Costello, a distinguishing work of Coetzee, is divided into eight parts, is taken for analysis for this paper. Here in this novel, Elizabeth Costello, a very famous writer visits her son's place in order to receive the prize and to deliver a lecture in a college. She has her own constraints in life and she modifies it according to her wish. The act of breaking the constraints sometimes imposes an act of rage for others around her. J M Coetzee had not taken a step to explain their behaviour; the writer leaves an open space. Therefore, this paper views the open space, that which is not examined by the writer and the critics.

Existential Feminism is a modern topic where feminism is a beaten about theory, that shapes the very idea of existentialism in the novels of Coetzee, by incorporating the idea of identity. Women try to represent their identity in various occasions but the patriarchal society and the family abandons them. Many precursors of this theory fought for the freedom movement of women but women in few parts have created their own constraints in their life. Even though they wish to break the constraints, there is a fright that doesn't let them go off the fight.

In J M Coetzee's novel, the women characters try to represent their identity in many situations and they try to hide themselves and reject the idea of identity. They try to cover themselves with a veil of uncertainty in order to hide their identity. Existentialism gives importance to the survival of the individual. Existentialism neglects the idea of identity; it is more about how an individual survives in the world and it discusses the traumatic situations an individual undergoes in order to create a purpose in life. The combination of existential ideology and feminism works well with Coetzee and his novel where the women characters try to correspond to the situation just to seek their identity but in many situations they deny their identity as a whole lot of contradiction, all by itself. They try to survive in many situations than to seek their identity. There is an unmarked silence in their behaviour when it comes to women than men in Coetzee's novel. This intact behaviour of the women characters in the novel shake the life of themselves as well as of men.

Here in this novel, Elizabeth Costello, a well popular writer, who had written nearly nine novels and two books of poems, had her writing appreciated. However, in her personal life, she is seen to be failed, as she got married twice and had two children each, who never deny putting her apart. As a writer, she discusses the suffering of the animals and she protests against the cruelties of animals through words but fails to understand the feelings of her children, with regard to non vegetarianism. Costello, a well-acclaimed writer who had given lectures on various ideas like Realism by comparing it with Franz Kafka's ape and the concepts of nihilism, also made a notable comment on the Africans and their opinions on reading and writing English novels. She fights for animal freedom and she is against the consummation of animals. When the whole world praises her for her writing her son, John didn't turn up a factor for appreciation. There is a dispute of varied opinions between Elizabeth Costello and her son, John. Even though John tries to support and protect her, there is a deep wound, which kept haunting him since childhood that led him to be far away from his mother. "What is the truth of his mother? He does not know, and at the deepest level does not want to know. He is here simply to protect her, to bar the way against the relic-hunters and the contumelists and the sentimental pilgrims. He has opinions of his own, but he will not speak them. This woman, he would say if he were to speak" (Coetzee 30). As a son, he expects his mother to take care of him but Costello failed to sort this out, as she was busy with writing, which irritated him to an extent that he grew hatred for his mother. "The great advantage enjoyed by the boy is that his mode of existence in relation to others leads him to assert his subjective freedom" (Beauvoir 307). As a man, John expects his mother to be with him but when Costello neglects his wish, this leads to an ego clash between them. In addition to this, Costello breaks the constraint of a mother and she gains the family members' enmity. She fights her battles as hard as possible in order to gain the popularity as a writer. Costello is criticized both by the family members as well as by the intellectuals and she manages them well by not letting her break with their ideas. None of the characters try to understand the stand of Costello, as why she behaves differently and there is no explanation given by the writer as well. Every other character finds that Costello is strange and her intelligence is tough to be handled. "In woman, on the

contrary, there is from the beginning a conflict between her autonomous existence and her objective self, her 'being the other' she is taught that to please she must try to please, she must make herself object" (Beauvoir 308).

When Elizabeth was questioned on marriage and domesticity related to Joyce's work *Molly*, Costello gave away her answer, "You can't mean woman today. But yes, to an extent Molly is a prisoner of marriage, the kind of marriage that was on offer in Ireland in 1904. Her husband Leopold is a prisoner too. If she is shut into the conjugal home, he is shut out" (Coetzee 13). This very answer explains her freedom of thought and individuality. "Freedom as the requisite condition for the nihilation of nothingness is not a property which belongs among others to the essence of the human being" (Sartre 49). Costello had trailed her path as a writer without any support from her family; even at the age of sixty-six she participates in conferences and press meets. Everyone tries to exist in some way or the other, which differs from person to person. Costello tries to exist as a writer through her words even though she contradicts her writing, but still exists according to her whims. She fails to understand that every other character has his/her own reason to survive. As a writer who had written on consciousness of animals and human beings fails to understand the lives and modules of the fellow human beings. Especially she fails to understand her daughter in law, Norma, when she feeds Non-vegetarian food to her kids, Costello interrupts and comments about the cruelties of animals. Costello, as an existential writer, fails to understand that even Norma has her own constraints in life and she has every right to live by her heart. There is an argument between Norma and Costello, which is not about what one should eat, but the substantiation each tries to put forward in the argument. The right and wrong, taken as a stand, could never be validated, as the perspectives of different persona differs, which in spite of being a post modernist writer, Costello fails to understand.

Mr. Phillip, a friend of Costello's mother was operated for laryngectomy. Costello acts as a model as he had drawn a picture of her mother and now he wants to draw the picture of her. Phillip slowly expresses his urge in order to have sex with her. "I would have loved to have painted you when you were still young, but I don't think so. I would have loved to have painted you when I was still a man" (Costello 147). Costello did not give him space for the act, as there is age difference and the relationship is against the constraints of the society. Costello did not meet him after that incident. After a long gap when Costello came to know that, he was admitted in hospital, she visits him. On seeing his condition, she takes a big step by showing herself up, naked, even though he remains numb, she fulfils his wish. "In the little alcove where he hangs his clothes she removes her dress, her brassiere. Then she crosses back to the bed, sits down side-on where he can get a good eyeful, and resumes the pose of the painting. *A treat*, she thinks: let's give the old boy a treat, let's brighten up his Saturday" (Costello 153). Her idea to suddenly show up to him as explicit as possible is not known and it is not explained and the justification could be gained by stating the death alarm of the man. "In girls as in boys the body is first of all the radiation of a subjectivity" (Beauvoir 295).

There are a lot of questions that hitches the regular flow of the novel, as in, she doesn't showcase her act blatantly, but tries to conceive the very idea within. Later, she writes a letter about all these to her sister, which is again put into a query. The absurd swings of the women characters bring in the nudity in expression and nudity in the approach to life as life itself. Existential feminism, sways between identity and survival, Portrayal and secrecy, Popularity and subtlety, as a whole lot of contradictions all by itself, as portrayed in this novel.

Virginia Woolf and J M Coetzee, world apart, centuries apart, fall under the post modern philosophies. They had one thing in common, which is their ability to make the thinking population think on their own, about the standards of post modernism. This paper brings in a concoction of the ideas of the two writers based on Existentialism, where the oscillation in the characters, especially women, are harnessed between socio cultural aspects and existentialism, with respect to J M Coetzee. Post feminism that explores new facets and dimensions to feminism and explores the concepts of victim and power feminism using the works of Virginia Woolf.

Virginia Woolf, as a writer of the nineteenth century Britain, had many a time proved to be a post modernist and a feminist writer. Critics critiqued through most of her veils and her characters seek a different and modern ideal, unlike that current societal substandard. Virginia Woolf marked the beginnings of Post modernism and the impact of industrialisation marked the beginnings during the nineteenth century. Due to the advent of feminism, during the 1980s, many women writers came up to writing with their original name on, without depending on a pseudonym. But Woolf created a parallel

in thinking for the thinking population and started developing intellectual integrity for women. She opened up rooms for women and her ideologies were put under second wave feminism.

As time passed, Woolf became a feminist writer, plunging into stream of consciousness, as a style all by itself. Woolf's blatancy in tone and ideas of the nineteenth century England created an impact in the modern writers and her treatment of characters made all the difference. In her novel *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf explores the occurrences of a particular day, a day where she arranges for a party and invites her kith and kin. She reminisces her past, and the past of each and every character she had come across and relates their life then and now. As many feminist critics critique, Woolf doesn't eulogise women characters and set high standards for them, she gives the character sketches as they are supposed to be. Men are also given a stand and are also seen to be having emotions like women. The stereotyping aspects have been clearly legitimised and her novel contains not just the stereotypical imprints of women, but men as well.

Mrs Dalloway, the wife of Richard Dalloway, had her all set for the party and had invited almost everyone in the town. She narrates Mrs Dalloway's life with Richard Dalloway and her failing love for Peter Walsh, who was her childhood friend. She chose Richard over Peter, for she thought Peter Walsh was a failure. Peter Walsh's attachment for her made her feel struck in depth with him and she felt she did not get the space with him. According to her, "For in marriage a little licence, a little independence there must be between people living together day in day out in the same house; which Richard gave her, and she him... But with Peter everything had to be shared; everything gone into. And it was intolerable" (10 Woolf).

The idea of choosing the better options for life sickened Peter Walsh, because Peter Walsh was for soul connection. His idea about life was happiness and not success, unlike the idea of Mrs Dalloway. She always saw success rooted to men, which is again a stereotypical imprint on men. "Richard..., for Peter Walsh, he had never to this day forgiven her for liking him" (8 Woolf). Feminism, as a protest started in the early 1970s to put down the atrocities of patriarchy that was at its peak then. Slowly, with the rise of feminism, the stereotypes with respect to women had been continuously put to interrogation, as to why these stereotypes should be followed. But the cultural imprints in both men and women had never left them, as the civilization had its unique mark on people. People are grown and raised along with ideologies that fit the society they live in.

As women protest for equality and rights, shunning away from the dwarf standards of the society, they, as well put along way, stereotypes for men that are still not erased. These stereotypes are put by women in majority, as to set a person for themselves and the society, sufficing the standards set for men. This is explained by Naomi Wolf in her *Fire with Fire*, as a definition and distinction between victim feminism and power feminism. Women, shying away from the so called stereotypical substandard, knowingly or unknowingly derail out of the track of feminism itself. Though feminism started on an account to free women from the hitches of domestication and domestic slavery, it evolved to power struggle. The current feminism had caused a quake, shaking the very foundation and the purpose of feminism.

"The gender quake required women to do three things that had long been alien to female consciousness: to fantasize political retribution for an insult to the sex, to claim and to use money, and to imagine and enjoy winning." (36 Wolf)

The next important character in the novel is Septimus, who is seen to be having affected by mental trauma. Unlike the usual novels, a man is seen to be facing mental trauma in this novel. Death, as a recurring motif bridges the mindscape of Woolf and Septimus. "As if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him. The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames... I will kill myself" (18 Woolf). Septimus's wife had been holding on with all these and the idea of eternal love and infinite love for her husband had been portrayed. This could be seen in the real life of Woolf, as a couple. Holding on to the mental trauma of Virginia Woolf by Leonard Woolf, had been reversed in here. Men being cowards and indecisive, had been stereotyped in here and men are made to accept that they had to be hard working and had to keep developing themselves.

"And he would not kill himself; and she could tell no one. 'Septimus has been working too hard'- that was all she could say to her own mother. To love makes one solitary, she thought. She could tell nobody, not even Septimus now,...

And it was cowardly for a man to say he would kill

himself, but Septimus had fought; he was brave; he was not Septimus now.” (27 Woolf)

According to Naomi Wolf, feminism had been extremely painful in one way that, women started degenerating themselves by playing the victim game. Victimisation had been the trump card for feminism and women played it excellently well in a way that, everything women did was slowly eulogised and their victimisation helped that way. “The archetypes for feminism are always negative and lack appearance. They seek sympathy” (37 Wolf). Septimus, being under mental agony and instability, had his own standards of living. Even though, his wife was the most understanding of all, she uses the victimisation trump card sometimes.

“How he had married his wife without loving her, had lied to her, had seduced her; outraged Miss Isabel Pole, and was so poked and marked with vice that women shuddered when they saw him in the street.” (102 Woolf)

Feminism had to now shift into power feminism, to prove the original power of women that transforms a being into eternal bliss. According to Naomi Wolf, playing victim games throughout would never help the accomplishment of true feminism. Feminism should play safe and at the same time should make itself glorify through power and not power struggle. As the power reaches its peak, “Women have to establish a safety to men” (24 Wolf)! Men started fearing feminism, not because of the power that women possess, but for the power struggle women carry out using victimisation. “Men fear feminism because they fear the loss of the breadwinner role” (16 Wolf).

Woolf, made the characters play their roles as they please, to make the thinking population understand the real idea behind feminism. Women weren't just eulogised or victimised they were made to showcase their stand according to their way of brought up. This idea is inherited through Naomi Wolf, who had used the two terms, victim feminism and power feminism to build a future for feminism. This could be called, post feminism and Virginia Woolf and her characters from *Mrs Dalloway*, delve into the idea to bring in new dimensions to feminism.

As we have come, all the way across centuries, Woolf, Golding and Coetzee, have been through a lot of constraints and exasperation to their very approach to life itself. Though, centuries apart, their fight for survival, as writers, as women, as characters, as every form, life had put them across, is very well expressed and portrayed as to live a life of struggle alongside survival. The absurdity, struggle for survival, identity, as in feminism and a different dimension to it, through post feminism and acceptance of the power within the thinking lot, pullulates the shaking substance beneath the strata of Existentialism, consciousness and the struggle to delve within the post modern deconstructive discourses.

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