



**DEHUMANIZING OTHER:
A CRITICAL READING OF J.M. COETZEE'S DUSKLANDS
FROM SUBALTERN PERSPECTIVE**

Dr. Ajay Sahebrao Deshmukh

Assistant Professor in English

Shri. Muktanand College, Gangapur

Dist. Aurangabad (MS)

ABSTRACT

Subaltern studies have explored the dynamics of relationships between various binary oppositions i.e. master-slave, white-black and man-woman etc. **J.M. Coetzee** has revealed the dubious relationship of such binaries. His fictional world is full of characters and places witnessing the othering and dehumanizing processes and impacts of such dehumanizing others. Present paper is an attempt to explore the dehumanizing other in J.M. Coetzee's *Dusklands*.

Keywords: *Subaltern Studies, Other, Othering, Dehumanizing Process.*

He fears vision, has no sympathy for passion or despair.

Power speaks only to power.

(Dusklands, 03)

Being Human means believing in the universal values of love, brotherhood, compassion, equality, dignity and self-respect. It brings two different types of people on the

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same platform. But agendas of self-glorification and sense of superiority cracks the fabric of humanity. In the process of proving oneself powerful, superior to others, there begins the process of 'dehumanizing' other. The belief in absolute power as a means to communicate results into deterioration of both, the one who is in position of *power* and another who is *being controlled* by the powerful.

Colonial discourse highlights binary opposites of master-slave relationship. This relation inherently carries the process of dehumanization of slave as other, as a pet animal. This *othering* of the *other* contains dehumanizing aspects of colonial strategy. This is the result of the status of slave as a subaltern, inferior in rank to his master. Here, by dehumanizing slaves as other, it provides independence to master to deny human qualities to them. By doing so masters can exploit, utilize these slaves for their selfish motives. They can assert their hierarchy over slaves.

Dehumanization brings alienation of human element from the divine existence in an individual. It is a process of othering an individual from the species he or she belongs to. It involves the selfish motives of self-interests, degrading others at the cost of humanity. Alienation from inner conscience too ends in the fall from the grace. Grace of divine existence enriches the inner hollow space and fills it with a purpose to live and let others live with love and kindness. It offers freedom of being a human and bestows completeness with peace from within the conscience. But when the emptiness overtakes, all graceful resources are exhausted. It causes great damage to the psyche as well as physiology of an individual. As the phenomena of *cause and effect* works on different levels, revenging attitude waters the process of dehumanizing of other. This process of dehumanizing of others on the basis of race, culture religion is evident in the World Literature.

J.M. Coetzee has revealed the process of *dehumanization of other* in his literary works. In his literary discourse he attempted to demystify the objectification of subaltern negating emotional as well as intellectual qualities and individuality and identity.

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Present Paper is an attempt to study the process of dehumanization of *other* in **J.M. Coetzee's** debutant novel *Dusklands* from *subaltern perspective*. Paper limits only to the critical analysis of “**Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee**”.

The novel is divided into two parts. First part, “The Vietnam Project” deals with a project that peeps into the psychological warfare and dehumanization of Vietnamese in Vietnamese War against USA.

Second part, “Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee” deals with Journey of Jacobus Coetzee who explored the Lands of Namaqua and Great River (Orange). His journey into the interiors of South Africa opened the doors of new lands to Europeans for their colonial expansion.

Dehumanization can be conceived in two modes first, animalistic dehumanization and second, mechanistic dehumanization. *Animalistic dehumanization* is used majorly in intergroup basis and *Mechanistic dehumanization* in interpersonal basis.

J.M. Coetzee has focused the processes of both kinds of dehumanization in *Dusklands*. He gives the factors responsible for it such as religion, race, and power, personal hatred, to assert superiority or to settle the previous scores by avenging Hottentots slave and their tribe.

Dehumanization on the basis of religion is evident in *Dusklands*. Jacobus Coetzee is in powerful position due to his religion. He expresses the benevolent act of West who gave Christianity to the heathens of the Dark Continent. Simultaneously, he affirms their inferiority as they are not original Christians. His perception of their being converted to Christianity questions the Missionary motives of white clergy. It underscores the fact that conversion is not a final solution to bridge the gap between forward Christian West and backward heathen converted Afrikaans. For him, there is fundamental difference between the Christianity of Whites and Christianity of Blacks. He conducts the process of *othering* of *Hottentots* as he asserts:

The one gulf that divides us from the Hottentots is our Christianity. We are Christians, a folk with a destiny. They become Christians too, but their

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Christianity is an empty word... They know that being baptized is a way of protecting yourself, they are not stupid, they know it wins sympathy when they accuse you of mistreating a Christian... Sunday stuffing themselves on your food... the stars has more religion. (57)

He also portrays the hidden agendas of blacks in accepting Christianity. For his strategies of self-defence and sympathy are involved apart from Sunday meals.

Coetzee also highlights the dehumanization of Hottentots tribes on the basis of physical entities of human beings. Jacobus creates the myths of physical imperfection and crudities to underscore the inferior status of the blacks as he narrates, “...*Both men and women are sexually misformed. The men go into death with erections.*” (61)

Colonial tendency of appropriating everything for the pleasures sake is also inherent in master-slave relationship. Master is given freedom to abuse, exploit the womenfolk of the slave community without any guilt for asserting their power not only on women but also on their men. This double alienation and othering is colonial strategy to highlight the dehumanized avatar of slaves. Jacobus imposes his will on the tribal girl by wiping out her individuality. He considers it as merging the other into master his will and his existence. In his opinion, the girl has neither an individual identity nor her own body. He objectifies the girl whose ultimate purpose in her life is to provide pleasure to her master:

...a wild Bushman girl is tied into nothing... you have become power itself now and she nothing, a rag you wipe yourself on and throw away... Her response to you is absolutely congruent with your will. She is the ultimate love you have borne your own desires alienated in a foreign body and pegged out waiting for your pleasure. (61)

He also feels the pleasure in his Western Male Gaze where he enjoys the scenes of common coitus of black Hottentots. For him there is no difference between animal and

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slaves. He enjoys the sight and takes voyeuristic pleasure in sexual activities of the slaves by making them the object of pleasure:

Nothing would have relieved me more than for the rhythms to simplify themselves and the dancers to drop their pantomime and cavort in an honest sexual frenzy culminating in mass coitus. I have always enjoyed watching coitus, whether of animals or slaves. (86)

Jacobus creates the legend of divine existence of master race where whites are shouldered with the responsibility to show the right path to pagan tribes. He imagines himself as: *“Perhaps on my horse and with the Sun over my right shoulder I looked like a god, a god of the kind they did not yet have. The Hottentots are a primitive people.”* (70). He also highlights the inability of the Hottentots in appropriating the essence of Christian belief and rituals. They are unable to experience the bliss of ceremonies. It hints at the incapacity of tribe in adapting the religious piety and spiritual grace as *“the Hottentots have no feeling for ceremony and show only the most perfunctory reverence for authority.”* (72)

Jacobus Coetzee aligns slaves away from masters in terms of their relationship with the *Space* they live. For him possessing modern equipments like guns is indicator of advanced civilization. It suggests the biased mindset of modern human beings that rely excessively on the accessories and gadgets to prove their superiority rather than natural inborn physical or mental capabilities of the human beings. He in pseudo scholastic manner propagates his philosophy: *“Savages do not have guns. This is the effective meaning of savagery, which we may define as enslavement to space, as one speaks obversely of the explorer’s mastery of space.”* (80)

J.M. Coetzee also portrays the demoralizing impact of hostile environment on Jacobus Coetzee. On the one hand, his physical health is deteriorated and on the other, his status as a master is over thrown by his own slaves. They ridicule him for being in declined

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status. He contemplates, “... [He] threatens to have a history in which I shall be a term. Such is the material basis of the malady of master’s soul.” (81) He witnesses his self dehumanization at the hands of his slaves and heathen, pagan tribal community. He was subjected to humiliation, “*dragged to my feet and thrown down, buffeted from hand to hand, showered with dust and grit... They were determined on a final degradation. I was determined on preserving myself.* (90)”

It can be understood that the process of dehumanizing works on two levels on the one level degradation of the object and on other efforts to preserve one’s own dignity. The game ends in a pathetic way when object completely lost and submits to the process and undergoes humiliation and indignities at the hands of dehumanizer:

Naked and filthy I knelt in the middle of the ring with my face in my hands, stifling my sobs in the memory of who I was ... Bodies fell upon me, I was suffocated and pinned to the ground. Ants, ants raped from their nest, enraged and bewildered their little pincers scything and their bodies bulging with acid, descended between my spread buttocks, on to my tender anus, on to my weeping rose, my nobly laden testicles. I screamed with pain and shame. “Let me go home!” I screamed. (90-91)

For Hottentots, this was just a game. They did not have any evil desires, bias or prejudices against Jacobus. In the frenzy of game, they involved into a severe process that germinated the seeds of revenge in Jacobus. He was just “*an occasion*” (91) for them. Ultimately, he havocked the worst fate on them and equalled the score. He consoles himself by saying, “*They are bored... It is because their lives are so desolately empty.*” (91) This emptiness resembles to the game of Lord of Flies. They tortured him for fulfilling their emptiness.

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Jacobus tried to preserve himself under such brutal circumstances. He felt the intensity of their crime and his suffering. His only way was to sustain himself: “*Beyond rage, beyond pain, beyond fear I withdrew inside myself and in my womb of ice up the profit and the loss.*” (91)

He feels the shame, guilt and pathos of being ‘other’ and undergoes the process of ‘othering himself’ like Magistrate in J.M. Coetzee’s celebrated novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*. But here, Jacobus suffers at the hand of Hottentots who are unaware of their dark future. They have attacked the western civilization. Whereas Magistrate is punished by being humiliated in the public at the hands of his own people for nurturing and helping barbarian girl to reach her home safely. Colonel represents the power that is ultimately punished by barbarians for dehumanizing Magistrate. So revenge becomes the inherent aspect of the dehumanization process.

Jacobus was reduced to useless beggar whose self respect, dignity and integrity are destroyed. He feels powerless completely without any resources to cherish his previous status. He lost all his wagons, oxen, horses, guns to tribes. His slaves have turned into foes. His effort to find a way back to civilization is rather difficult journey in such hostile surroundings. His men Plaatje, Adonis, the Tamboer brothers were alienated from him. He witnessed shocking behaviour of his slaves. They openly rebelled against him by not obeying his orders. Rather they humiliated him:

Adonis swore obscenely. Plaatje repeated the obscenity... “Master can go, ... master and master’s tame hotnot. We say goodbye, master, goodbye, good luck. Only master, watch out who you hit next time.” With an index finger he chucked me lightly under the chin. “Watch out, master, see?” (92)

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Jacobus promised them to punish them for their behaviour. He assured them that they will be punished, “*Next time hotnot. Next time.*” (92) He together with Klauer travelled back to the civilization. Klauer was severely ill. Colonial or Eurocentric idea of space and faith can be seen in different manner. The space, place where Hottentots are living is not *civilization*. Klauer was on deathbed because of suffering and hardship he went through while finding on their way to home. In Jacobus’ opinion, he lost faith in everything being a mindset of slave:

“I was disappointed to see no faith in his eyes. If he had believed in me, or indeed in anything, he would have recovered. But he had the constitution of a slave, resilient under the everyday blows of life, frail under disaster.”
(94)

This lack of faith in master, his incapacity to digest the blows of hostile nature caused Klauer to take decision in favour of his master i.e. to abandon him and save the life of his master. It suggests the narcissist attitude of colonial masters to sacrifice their colonized slaves for their own welfare.

Jacobus has Eurocentric idea of masculinity. He feels himself capable to undergo any kind of physical torture as he is man with blue eyes. For him Hottentots are unaware of male body or masculine nature of whites, “...*The Hottentot assault had been disappointing... the male body has no inner space. The Hottentots knew nothing of penetration. For penetration you need blue eyes.*” (96-97) The word ‘*penetration*’ hints at the male phallus and masculinity. It is symptomatic of brutalities and atrocities against blacks by whites. It agrees that blacks cannot match the brutalities of whites. It underlines the statement that to be cruel, cunning and brutal one needs to be with ‘*blue eyes*’. It ambiguously highlights the fact that Blacks have no penetration. He feminizes his black slaves. ‘Inner Space’ symbolizes vaginal passage where male phallus explores the purpose of its existence. Ironically, Jacobus underscores the significance of existence of blacks. It highlights that his survival depends on

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them. Simultaneously, he asserts the 'inner space' in him. Symbolically, he explores this inner space in him.

He is deeply in love with the white skin and blue eyes of white race. His narcissist approach can be seen as he narrates the event, "... *I hugged my white shoulders I stroked my white buttocks, I longed for a mirror.*" (97) Mirror image is kind of self obsession that Jacobus and all the white master race suffers from. This self love becomes obscene when other races are excluded from the sphere of existence. It is an attempt to write the history with derogatory and inferior status of others in their history as Jacobus expresses, "*I continued with my exploration of the Hottentots, trying to find a place for them in my history.*" (97) He contemplates on Namaqua Hottentots and his safe exit from their tribe.

He defines true savagery as "...a way of life based on disdain for the value of human life and sensual delight in the pain of others." (97) But Namqua Hottentots were very simple people who never took pleasure in others pain without any purpose. For him they were "*not true savages*" (98). This identification or labelling is a colonial strategy of colonizers who sanctify the existence by defining each and every object under their control to establish hegemony and rightful appropriation of such object to be controlled for the sake of humanity.

Coetzee gives the picturesque narration of revenge havoiced on the Hottentots and ultimate stage of dehumanization. Jacobus embarked on second journey to the land of Great Namaqua. He ruthlessly havoiced his anger on the village and his slaves who deserted and expelled him. Coetzee gives brief description of othering of these people:

We emptied the village, the huts across the stream as well as the main camp, and assembled everyone, men, women, and children, the halt, the blind, the bedridden. The four deserters were still among them: Plaatje, Adonis, the Tamboer brothers. I nodded to them. They bowed. Adonis said, "Master". [100]

Jacobus preaches them a small sermon. This is a part of process where culprits, criminals are preached with the grace and divine plan of punishment. His evangelist approach is clearly seen in his sermon. He envelopes his revenge neatly into the apparel of divine plan which will be executed so divinely. This religious sanctity to his revenging act purports the theory of self righteousness:

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...Our Lord's observation on the fall of the sparrow: the sparrow is cheap but he is not forgotten. As explorer of the wilderness I have always thought myself an evangelist and endeavoured to bring to the heathen gospel of the sparrow, which falls but falls with design. There are acts of justice... and acts of injustices, and all bear their place in the economy of the whole. *Have faith, be comforted, like the sparrow you are not forgotten. ...over them I then pronounced sentence of death.* (101)
(emphasis added)

The Tamboer accepted his fate without any protest. Jacobus describes his death as “*nonentities swept away on the tide of history.*” (101) He enjoyed the real pleasure in pathetic conditions of Adonis and others. They tried to seek apology for their previous acts. But Jacobus had lived for this day as “*...Dejection and enervation settled over me and I moved away from him. For months I had nourished myself on this day, which I had populated with retribution and death.*”(101)

He becomes sadist who takes pleasure in wiping out the enemies from the face of earth so mercilessly and mechanically. His assertion of his limitless power over tribes emerges out of his revenging thoughts. Adonis tried to save his life by accepting Jacobus' power without any grief. This pathetic condition of his slaves who once humiliated him brings the sense of satisfaction and accomplishment of a mission for Jacobus: “*... here and everywhere else on this continent there would be no resistance to my power and no limit to its projection.*” (101)

Tarnishing the honour of women is another strategy of dehumanizing the other. Rape as a strategy to objectify the other is often used as an answer to ethnic hatred. In the ritualistic frenzy, oppressor stoops too low to be a human in society. Jacobus narrates the molestation of a child by one of his men: “*Griqua was doing things to the child on the ground... one could always stroke oneself with an irony like that.*” (102)

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The actual confrontation is zenith of the crisis. Jacobus observes *Plaatje* who publicly humiliated him. He senses the fear, agony and degradation of *Plaatje*:

We feasted on each other's face. The wind, so slight I had not noticed it, wafted his fear-smell to me, fear perhaps a little urine... I stepped nearer and pressed the meat to his lips. They were dry, they did not open. I was patient. Time was on my side. I held the meat there, and in the end the lips cracked, a dry tongue came out, the meat stuck to it and was withdrawn. ... His eyes apologized like a dog's. I was not upset. He was coming along. (103)

J.M. Coetzee meticulously describes the process of dehumanization and psychological and physiological transactions between master and slaves. Violence and destruction of the tribe causes chaos and disorder. Jacobus is not deterred by this. It was '*boring*' (103) for him. It can be compared with his analysis of Hottentots' psyche behind 'being bored'. They humiliated Jacobus to find interest. But for Jacobus, this revenge, humiliation, dehumanization is not interesting. This pattern of screams is compared with "*bellling of frogs.*" (103) Hottentots were reduced to the frogs' belling.

J.M. Coetzee highlights the post-revenge condition of Jacobus Coetzee. It is an analysis of his revengeful behaviour. It gives glimpses into the inner anxiety of Jacobus. It reflects that while dehumanizing other, a person needs to dehumanize himself first. This self degradation can be seen in his thoughts, "*With regard to these four deaths... the Hottentot dead, was not an immense world of delight closed off to my sense? May I not have killed something of inestimable value?*" (106)

Jacobus ruminates on the purpose achieved from the deaths of his slaves. It mirrors the fabric of emotions attached with his own othering, his own humiliation. Need to assert his place in their relationship. Need to let them know the severity of their crime. By disobeying him, his slaves have indulged in the primary sin of disobedience to the God's will. They were party to the blasphemy of his dehumanization. He wanted to heal his inner wound. The sense

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of being *othered* has shocked his self esteem. It was necessity to regain that self respect. He was unable to forgive himself on his own weakness. He wanted to assert himself powerful. He wanted to protect his mirror image of master, powerful controller of everything. His thoughts are aptly reflection of his psychic state:

Through their deaths I, who after they had expelled me had wandered the desert like a pallid symbol, again asserted my reality. No more than any other man do I enjoy killing; but I have taken it upon myself to be the one to pull the trigger, performing this sacrifice for myself and my country men, who exist, ***and committing upon the dark folk the murders we have all wished. All are guilty, without exception.*** I include the Hottentots. Who knows for what unimaginable crimes of the spirit they died, through me? ***God's judgement is just, irreprehensible and incomprehensible. His mercy pays no heed to merit. I am a tool in the hands of history.*** (106)
(emphasis added)

Under the garb of divine plan, he justifies the violence. He also contests the inherent evil in the '*dark folks*' who must be wiped for the sake of his white race, his nation. For him it is an act of sacrifice to please the gods of heaven.

He also focused the strategy of colonial expansion for the economic gains. His thought of his own nemesis, "*projecting myself into the day after my decease when the undertaker's understudy will slit me open and pluck from their tidy bed the organs of my inner self I have so long cherished. (Where do they go, I wonder does he throw them to economic pigs?)*" (106)

His Eurocentric ideas of centrality allow him to imagine himself at the centre of the universe. His mind is universe, his actions are divine will. His world is full of motives. His life is with purpose. On the other hand, the world of Hottentots lacks these all qualities. He delights himself with the thoughts as:

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I am an explorer. My essence is to open what is closed, to bring light to what is dark. If the Hottentots comprise an immense world of delight, it is an impenetrable world, impenetrable to men like me, who must either skirt it, which is to evade our mission, or clear to out of the way. As for my servants, rootless people lost forever to their own culture and dressed now in nothing but the rags of their masters. I know with certainty that their life held nothing but anxiety, resentment, and debauch. They died in a storm of terror, understanding nothing. They were people of limited intellect and people of limited being. They died the day I cast them out of my head. (106)

It is evident from his thinking that how binary ideas are implemented in colonial discourse.

To sum up, it can be said that the process of dehumanization brings out various dimensions of psyche of the subject and object involved in othering and dehumanization. It also brings religious, cultural, racial implications in the subaltern discourse. J.M. Coetzee dexterously portrayed these dimensions in *Dusklands*. Jacobus Coetzee becomes practical guide and demonstrator who explores the Subaltern Discourse while exploring the land of Great Namaqua.

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