

The Discourse of Power and Ethics in a Troubled Society: Coetzee's Disgrace

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explain the various elements of troubled society and discourse of power and ethics impact a society. It also explores the fictional works of J.M. Coetzee and how it represents the issues prevalent in the society and how does the main character deal with it. The versatility of Coetzee is also explored in the paper as he addresses issues of war and military in one book and discusses individual and personal problems in other books. This paper also elaborates on the importance of values as it is the only way that can save a troubled society. The identity of a troubled society is when any person of authority uses unethical measures to accomplish selfish goals and fulfill its own motives, the society is said to be troubled and there has been an erosion of ethics.

Article Received: 10 August 2020, Revised: 25 October 2020, Accepted: 18 November 2020

INTRODUCTION

Discourse is how conversations affect people and how people are affected by certain conversations. There are scholars who are debating about the impact of discourse on the modern society and how it has increased over time. This paper is about how discourse is related to ethics and its importance. Ethics makes up for another important element of the society and it becomes imperative that the people

know how to behave and the acceptable terms of living with a community so that people can reside peacefully. The big questions that are sought answers to in this paper are if discourse affects the society enough to change the ethical terms or question them and if so, the factors that influence such a change are also discussed for gaining a broader perspective regarding the subject matters. Author J.M. Coetzee is famous for challenging the society with his

work and this is exactly what is explored in the paper (Hayes et al., 2017).

This paper highlights the discourse of power and ethics in a troubled society while considering the fictional literature written by J.M. Coetzee named *Disgrace*. This paper talks about the author and why he writes in the way that he does and what were the circumstances that motivated and pushed him towards writing bold and challenging literary pieces. This essay further throws light upon the connection between Michel Foucault's theories of discourse and how ethics and power make up for crucial elements of the theory. I have also elaborated upon the importance of ethics on a troubled society, keeping *Disgrace*, *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Time of Michael K* as a reference point.

About the Author

Knowing about the past is the only way to understand the present and to predict the future. Understanding the author's upbringing and the different situations that were faced by him can help in understanding the nature of his writing and the critique of the society that he grew up in along with facing the many evils presents in it. J.M. Coetzee was born and brought up in South Africa and he completed his education partly from Cape

Town where he pursued B.A. and M.A. and partly from Texas where he completed his PhD from. After his doctorate, he returned back to South Africa to teach as a professor. He taught in many different universities and during that time, he also translated some of the works from other languages.

John Maxwell Coetzee is critically acclaimed for his work and he is the first author who has been awarded the honor of winning the Booker Prize twice and then he went on to achieve the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003 for his work. Coetzee has always made very bold statements about the society and its status. He has presented the ground and harsh realities of the life about living in a society that does not meet the conventional standards of being the perfect society. John portrays the effect of colonization on the places that have been colonized and the long term ill effects of it. He poses questions regarding the ethics that a colonized society follows and the problems with that. Coetzee explains the different aspects of a troubled society and how the characters in his books deal with them and the various adverse situations.

Coetzee was anti-apartheid and he openly spoke about the different problems that the society faced after being colonized such as the deconstructing of the art, students

remaining uneducated, and no philosophical and moral development of the society in general especially because of the oppression that was done by the colonial societies. The African society was much oppressed and Coetzee was labeled as one of the most distinguished writers who addressed this issue. Personally, he also felt the need to write about the political issues going on globally however he did not seem interested in joining politics for pursuing a career further in the field. He was also against animal abuse and the contemporary anti-terrorism laws that favored apartheid in Africa. He later moved to Australia and upon asking he mentioned that he had emotional ties to Africa however he was put towards the lifestyle of Australia. The author faced a lot of Criticism after his books were published in South Africa and many people believe that this was one of the reasons behind his decision to move to a place with a more liberal society. There are many great works that were delivered by this author and the most popular ones were *Disgrace*, *The time of Michel K*, *Waiting for The Barbarians*, *Foe*, *Dusklands* and others.

Discourse of Power and Ethics in Troubled Society

Discourse ethics refers to a kind of argument that seeks to define normative or ethical truths by questioning the discourse assumptions. To gain a better understanding of the entire subject, it is essential that discourse is understood at its core level. Discourse essentially means any conversation that attempts to redefine the truth of society by questioning the nature of the activity that is being conducted in the society (Leitchet.al., 2018). There are many truths in society that have been unquestioned but should be normalized and this can only be done by questioning the structure of the way that things are. Power is an element in the theory of discourse that was given by Michael Foucault. In the theory, it is also referred to as 'knowledge' and it refers to the systematic way for the structure of any concept that questions and explains its objectivity. Michael Foucault was a French philosopher who questioned how society is influenced by the people and then how the people are influenced by whatever is being conducted in the society. In his opinion, the theory of discourse is concerned with power questions, and also with organizational hierarchy questions. Such power structures lead to dominance and opposition in debate theory, for

instance when various individuals attempt to assert who can talk with authority. In his later life, the focus of Michael shifted from questioning the structures to questioning the agency. However, a lot of controversies still revolve around the subject as people cannot figure out how the entire structure works out because it seems like a paradox. Scholars still debate about the extent of the impact that discourse has on society and the people who reside in it (Lewis et al., 2017).

The principles that govern a person's behavior of morally are called ethics. Ethics is an important part of society even though any law does not describe it and is presumed to be followed by every individual in the society and people are frowned upon if they do not abide by ethics. Every professional body has a code of conduct that is prepared and these professional bodies are governed under the same. These communities operate in the society; it becomes imperative that people know the ethical way of conducting business in order to avoid any grievances on the part of the other person. A troubled society can be defined as a dysfunctional society where people, as individuals and as groups, do not follow any ethical norms, rules, and regulations, which gradually leads to the downfall of the society. This ultimately leads to the failure of the basic

societal structure and that fails its residents.

Ethics serves an important role in both business and trendy relations as society relies upon Mutual trust and respect among the residents of the society. Ethics also serves as the backbone of any functional community because it shapes how individuals behave in a group. The philosophical requirement of ethics is so great that Scholars have spent a lot of time researching and understanding the appropriate discourse that could influence society in a positive manner in terms of ethics and good morals. The ethical norms and morals of any society are difficult to change as it is present inside every individual and have very deep roots. But as a society is changing, there is an imminent need to question the methods by which society has been functioning for a long period of time.

Rapid changes have been identified in the areas of Technology culture and religion which calls for a need to question all the previous known ethical codes of conduct. Only when they are questioned by a person of authority for someone who speaks with authority on the subject, can the world know that there is a need for change. After addressing the issues and their existence, people will attempt to change and mend

their ways. Troubled society comes into existence when there is a need to change but people are sticking to conventional methods only because they are afraid of change. There is a huge requirement of this course in troubled society because powerful conversations which influence society can help in ensuring that people take notice of the change that is required.

In a troubled society, erosion of ethics is a major problem and it can be identified when the officials opt for corrupt methods and questionable practices for selfish reasons. When people who have authority to make changes in society do not attempt to do so, people who regard them as role models also begin to follow the same path and that is exactly what leads to any society or community's downfall. According to Coetzee, Colonization has played a vital role in disrupting and troubling the society because they oppressed the society for so long that people started resorting to unfair means to accomplish their own goals that were individualistic and self-centered. In such situations, people often lose compassion for one other and this does not lead to any good consequence for anyone in that society (Ofer et.al., 2018).

When powerful leaders pose questions in an authoritative debate, the values of the

people are questioned and values serve as the core fundamental of setting right the ethical dilemma that is being faced by the people. After questioning the values, people can be guided about the correct and appropriate way of approaching any situation which does not only benefit them but also does not cause any harm to the people living with them, rather their actions and its consequences should benefit the society. Therefore, the only way of fixing a troubled society is to step back and evaluate the core values and believes of the people that were followed before the erosion of ethics took place within their society.

Fictional Work of J.M. Coetzee

In the novel *disgrace*, Coetzee has written about a professor, David, who loses his job as a Professor at a University in Cape Town. As a result, he loses his ability to function properly, his mental peace, and even the ability to protect his own daughter against dangers and perils. His disgrace is described in the novels when his sexual activities result in taking advantage of a girl that it leads to rape. His sexual activities are controversial nature as he gets attracted to a sex worker and there is also a mention about him seducing a secretary. However, he starts ignoring the secretary later on. David then moves on to

live with his daughter that follows the storyline of the novel further and the series of events leads to a climax where David ultimately faces the consequences of his actions and learns his life lessons. Towards the end, he apologizes to the girl and her family.

In the entire novel, bold comments about the nature of sexual predators can be seen. There is also a political stance that the author has seen to be making along with strong comments on the nature of society. This book did not only have a regional significance but it also had a universal impact. Since it is set in Cape Town, the place of original birth of the author, it becomes easier and more accurate for Coetzee to comment on the kind of society that it is and what thenorms of the place are. Coetzee is very famous for putting his characters through extreme situations where they are forced to face the ground realities. The society portrayed in the book is troubled as the Professor himself is corrupt and does not abide by the ethics and is met with difficulties because someone else did not abide by the ethical code of conduct. Therefore, Coetzee has beautifully brought out the need for discourse in the entire book.

The book *Waiting for The Barbarians* is written in first person and our protagonist

is a magistrate who is unnamed and he lives a peaceful and a rather quiet life. However, there is a disruption among the people when the Third Bureau applies a state of emergency because they have information that the indigenous people called 'The Barbarians' were getting ready to attack the main city. These Barbarians lived on the outskirts of the town. As retaliation, the Bureau organizes an army led by a cruel Colonel Joll and under his jurisdiction; they capture, kill and torture the Barbarians. The Magistrate helps a crippled girl from the Barbarian's society and returns her to them. Meanwhile the Colonel prepares for further destruction of the barbarians and when the torture is taken public, the magistrate protests and as result he is subdued. The solders leave the town in haste because of they have the notion that the barbarians would attack and invade their town but the magistrates convince the people who have left behind to stay for the winters and prepare for it. At the end, there is no invasion.

This is a straight comment on troubled society as only a person who wants to cause destruction would think that the other society also wants to cause problems and thereby becomes the first one to attack. This only causes pain to the people who are on the other side. Coetzee had strong views about anti-terrorism laws that

gave authorities the power to question and torture any person that was a potential threat despite being innocent, only on the grounds of belonging to a particular community. He has strongly questioned the race issues and the problems that are faced because of the inhumane treatment of the people who are questioned and tortured without any evidence. This book was published under the genre of a political thriller.

The *Life & Times of Michael K* follows the life of a simple man who is born with a disability and his mother was a help to a wealthy family. After the civil war breaks out and martial law is imposed, Michael and his mother escape town where they face difficulties in travelling. His mother falls sick and dies which pushes him to visit a farm. It is at this place where he learns to live off land but when the real owners of the land arrive, they treat him as a servant and disliking this, he escapes to the mountains where he starves and is found by the authorities and is sent to a work camp. After the camp is attacked, he finds his way back to the farm and builds a shelter to avoid feeling claustrophobic but soon that place is overtaken by the rebels which lead him to go into hiding, leading him to starve again. Ultimately, he is found by someone and taken to rehabilitation camp where he refuses to eat

and later escapes. He finds a nomadic group and after his time with them, he returns to the apartment that was shared by him and his mother. The novel ends by him reflecting upon the gardens that were made by him during his time in Prince Albert.

This novel is of great significance because it questions the very nature of individuals. It portrays that even a simple individual can be complex and have stubborn values and believes that he would abide by even during times of great perils. It is this quality that the author aims to bring to question as previously mentioned, values are the only way to ensure that a troubled society is healed and it helps every individual residing in it. This novel is more of a literary significance as it was a tribute to Kafka and many scholars believed that K stands for Kafka as the timeline matches. This book comments on the value of human life and there are many other important themes that are found in the book. The mother and son relationship is explored beautifully that discourses the relationships in society, the element of time is also used as a philosophy to provoke the thoughts of the readers to make them question if there is enough time for everything or not. Other themes are that of War, Military and the authority that

is being imposed on people (Effeet.al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

In this paper, many themes and issues were elaborated upon but one of the most important topics that were the focus of discussion was the use of values to solve the problems that are usually witnessed in a troubled society. I deeply analyzed the fictional works of J.M. Coetzee for gaining a broader perspective regarding the same and how the characters dealt with the adverse situations that were facing. The character development arch of all the people represented the individual problems and their solutions while addressing bigger and broader concerns on global and political level. Major issues such as that of race and religion were noticed.

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