

## **A TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE MULTIFACETED RAVAGES OF COLONIALISM IN DUSKLANDS AND FOE BY J.M.COETZEE: PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper sets out to delve into the ravages of colonialism based on two novels of J.M. Coetzee's multifarious fictional opus, namely *Dusklands* and *Foe*. Through a jaw-droppingly crafty characterization, the 2003 Nobel Prize awardee highlights the heavy psychological and human toll of a gruesome chapter in the history of African people and, by extension, of humanity-colonialism. Oftentimes touted as the primary driver of colonization, the economic motive takes a back seat to its racist incentives in Coetzee's fiction, though. To be sure, the narrative of colonialism feeds on myth and agitprop whose malign effect is to cause the native to develop low self-regard and then subsume his own identity into the colonizer's. Susan Barton's "loving-kindness" (to borrow a Schopenhauerian phrase) is a foil to Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee's stubborn but nefarious quest to both subdue and reify the 'other'. Also, our analysis of *Dusklands* and *Foe* reveals the paramountcy of language in the process of subjugating the 'other'.

**KEYWORDS:** Colonialism Language Myth Lie Compassion Suffering

### **INTRODUCTION**

John Maxwell Coetzee (1940-) is a leading South African writer. A literature professor, literary critic, linguist, novelist all rolled into one, J.M. Coetzee had several literary awards conferred upon him, not least the Booker Prize. He is part of a tiny number of leading novelists to have won twice the aforementioned prize. Much as he grew up under the jackboot of apartheid, Coetzee, unlike the recently deceased Nadine Gordimer and André Brink who were his opposite numbers in white South African literature, shies away from depicting in his fiction the materiality of racial oppression in his country. Rather, he elects to highlight themes tinged with a universal dimension: alienation, violence, disdain for otherness, persecution, you name it. Nevertheless, J.M. Coetzee cannot reasonably be faulted for papering over the strictures of racial segregation in his apartheid-era writing. Through a well-meaning and crafty resort to allegory he, indeed, manages to bring to light both the immorality and inhumanity of institutionalized racism. A bestselling author of imaginative writing in English, J.M. Coetzee, who was granted Australian citizenship back in 2006, has written fifteen novels since the inception of his literary career in 1977. The South African novelist reached the acme of his literary career in 2003 when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

By all accounts, colonization is a gruesome chapter in the history of humanity. A harsh, stultifying policy of domination based both on the concept of racial superiority and economic incentives, it spanned five centuries, no less. The colonial era, because of its paramountcy, has given rise to lots of impassioned debates and spawned a thick body of literature. However, it is not our attempt in this paper to go through all the works related to the subject as it would not only

be arduous but, more importantly, irrelevant to the topic at hand. Instead, with a view to putting things into perspective, we'll sort of comb through some of the scholarly theories churned out about colonialism. The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines colonialism as follows: "*The practice by which a powerful country controls another country or other countries.*" In *Culture and Imperialism* Edward Said states: "*Colonialism, which is almost a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory.*"<sup>1</sup> What these two definitions have in common is the wanton aggressiveness and violence attendant upon colonialism. It's worth while to note that Said, in his analysis, differentiates between colonialism and imperialism. Still, come to think of it, they are two sides of the same coin. He describes imperialism as "*the practice, theory and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory.*"<sup>2</sup>

A leading Tunisian philosopher of Jewish stock who lived through the yoke of colonial oppression, Albert Memmi makes no bones about the economic underpinnings of colonialism in his seminal work, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*: "...the idea of privilege is at the heart of the colonial relationship-and that privilege is undoubtedly economic."<sup>3</sup> Still he takes issue with those who believe the profit motive to be the sole driver of the colonial enterprise: "*To observe the daily life of the colonizer and the colonized is to discover rapidly that the daily humiliation of the colonized, his objective subjugation are not merely economic.*"<sup>4</sup> There is more to colonial oppression than meets the economic eye, so to speak. Superciliousness is, indeed, "*part of the colonial privilege*". Memmi writes to ram his point home: "*Even the poorest colonizer thought himself to be-and actually was-superior to the colonized.*"<sup>5</sup> Frantz Fanon, a high-profile Martinique-born thinker who dedicated all his writings to the subject of colonization, sees eye to eye with Albert Memmi as to the psychological toll induced by the colonial experience. In Fanon's estimation, the colonial society is "*A world compartmentalized, Manichean and petrified, a world of statues...*"<sup>6</sup> That dichotomy leads to a crisis of identity: "*Because it is a systematic negation of the other, a frenzied determination to deny the other any attribute of humanity, colonialism forces the colonized to constantly ask the question, 'Who am I in reality?'*"<sup>7</sup> As a result of this loss of identity and self-regard, the colonized becomes in thrall to the colonizer. The momentous change from being a normal person with a true identity as well as a set of values to live by to one devoid of respect and robbed of his dignity brings about a traumatic disorder from which the colonized finds it tremendously difficult to extricate himself. In *Discourse on Colonialism* Aimé Césaire explains the lengths to which the colonizer goes in his drive to dismantle the colonized's psyche for his own self-serving ends:

*Between colonizer and colonized, there is room for only forced labor, intimidation, pressure, the police, taxation, theft, rape, compulsory crops, contempt, mistrust, arrogance, self-complacency, swinishness, brainless elites, degraded masses.*

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<sup>1</sup>Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994, p.9.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.9.

<sup>3</sup>Memmi, Albert. *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. Translated by Howard Greenfield from *Portrait du Colonisateur précédé du Portrait du Colonisé* [1957]. London: Earthscan Publications Ltd, 2003, p.8.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p.8.

<sup>5</sup>Memmi, Albert, op.cit., p.8.

<sup>6</sup>Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth* [Originally published in 1961 as *Les damnés de la terre* by Maspéro], trans. from the French by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), p.15.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p.182.

*No human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom, monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production.*<sup>8</sup>

Owing to this unwarranted disdain for human dignity, Césaire equates colonization with “thingification”. A human being that stoops so low as to reify another human being on such nefarious grounds as racial hatred or economic advantage is an insult to Man. It is a practice that flies in the face of the concept of Ubuntu defined in Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary as “*the idea that people are not only individuals but live and must share things and care for each other.*”<sup>9</sup> Actually, colonialism is not-unlike what its exponents put forward by way of justification—a noble civilizing mission, but an encapsulation of an ideology anchored in the existence of a doctrine of cultural and racial hierarchy.

Arguably, J.M. Coetzee is on the same wavelength as the likes of Fanon as to the inhumanity of colonization. *Dusklands* (his debut novel) and *Foe*, indeed, scathing assaults on the colonial enterprise and its attendant human ravages. In the first text, Eugene Dawn, one of the main protagonists besides being a war psychology analyst, is asked by Coetzee (his superior from the State Department) to produce a report on the agit-prop techniques used by the American military in Vietnam. In his analysis, Dawn explains that the endgame of propaganda warfare is the destruction of the morale of the enemy. Although a well-meaning and level headed guy who goes by the book, he soon finds himself in a tight corner as Coetzee, after commending him hypocritically for the cogency of his work, demands that he water it down in order not to rub the army up the wrong way. The latter, Coetzee argues, “*are, as a class—to put it frankly—slow-thinking, suspicious and conservative.*” (D, 3). His inability to put up with the strain of working under military censorship, coupled the antics of so overbearing an authority as Coetzee, lands Eugene Dawn in a mental asylum. As for the second text, it tells the story of Jacobus Coetzee, a hard charging, bigoted colonizer who revels in making jibes at the local horse-riding natives, aka the Namaqua, who end up being his quarry. Under the veneer of a civilizing mission, Jacobus leads a daring expedition flanked by a few retainers of his to the land of Hottentots. Against all expectations, this expedition turns out to be a damp squib as they get a raw deal from a local tribe who takes them captive. To cap it all, his servants sell him down the river and defect to the natives. Hell-bent on avenging this humiliation, Jacobus Coetzee goes on a killing spree through a Namaqua village.

As regards *Foe*, it recounts the story of an English woman, gone by the name of Susan Barton, who is in quest of her abducted daughter. In her drive to find and return her pride and joy home, she travels to Brazil. This move turns out to be a dead end as she is met with “*denials and...with rudeness and threats.*” (F, 10). Feeling no longer safe in a hostile environment, Susan Barton decides, grieving inwardly, to draw a line under her search and boards a merchantman bound for Lisbon. In the midst of the voyage, a mutineer breaks out, and the captain is slain. The rebellious soldiers shackle those of their party who disapprove of their action. Surprisingly enough, they put Susan “*in a boat with the captain’s corpse beside me, and set us adrift.*” (10). After days of drifting in the middle of nowhere and rowing with the captain’s corpse at her feet, she tires. Determined to escape from the jaws of death, Susan Barton boldly slips overboard and starts to swim to a desert island. There, she encounters two men who get by in the face of overwhelming odds: Crusoe and his slave Friday.

*Duskland* and *Foe* are doubtless a monument to J.M. Coetzee’s animus against the ideology of racism and exclusion which was the hallmark of colonialism. Jacobus Coetzee epitomizes the colonizer in *Dusklands* while in *Foe* the

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<sup>8</sup>Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. John Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000 [1955]), p.42.

<sup>9</sup>Definition drawn from Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (London: Oxford University Press)

woman-narrator acts as J.M. Coetzee's sounding board. The author is at pains to debunk the sanctimoniousness of colonization and flags up its human ravages. By the same token, he uses the plight of the Hottentots and that of Friday to bring home the point that the profit incentive, important though it is, is but a stalking horse for a far more dismal motive, i.e. the dehumanization of entire communities on the basis of a benighted ideology. Claiming the moral and religious high ground, colonialists leave no stone unturned in their frenzied effort to psychologically break the natives before subduing them militarily. Tasked with writing up a report on the significance of propaganda against a backdrop of colonial war, Eugene Dawn is baffled as to why powers that be in his country are chary of resorting to hard-nosed psychic tactics as a way of bring the Vietnamese to heel:

*In limited warfare, defeat is not a military but a psychic concept. To the ideal of demoralization, and insofar as we wage terroristic war we strive to realize it. But in practice our most effective acts of demoralization are justified in military terms, as though the use of force for psychological ends were shameful. (D, 22)*

This attitude, in Dawn's book, amounts to a lie: "Thus, for example, we have justified the elimination of entire villages by calling them armed strongholds, when the true value of the operations lay in demonstrating to the absent VC menfolk just how vulnerable their homes and families are." (D, 22). Eugene Dawn's cut-throat tactics stemming from his lack of moral compass are in synch with the colonialist's mindset for whom all's fair in love and war. Actually, he is of the opinion that as long as the military are not required to provide proof of their allegations whatever they do in line of duty, no matter how immoral and horrendous it may be, goes: "Atrocity charges are empty when they cannot be proved. 95% of the villages we wiped off the map were never on it." (D, 22). The military's move to slant what Hannah Arendt in the "Truth and Politics" the "factual truth"<sup>10</sup> is par for the course in their frantic effort to have the Vietnamese eating out of their hands. From Arendt's perspective lying carries within it an element of violence and is meant, accordingly, to serve an appalling purpose: "...organized lying always tends to destroy whatever it has decided to negate, although only totalitarian governments have consciously adopted lying as the first step to murder."<sup>11</sup> The deliberate falsehood, Hannah Arendt argues, is an "alternative to facts" but "does not belong to the same species as propositions that, whether right or mistaken, intend no more harm than to say what is or how something that is appears to me."<sup>12</sup> Its poisonous effect lies in the fact that "It is clearly an attempt to change the record of history."<sup>13</sup> A brilliant eighteenth-century German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer makes no bones about the self-serving and nefarious endgame of lying:

*...lies are unjustifiable solely in so far as they are instruments of cunning, in other words, of compulsion, by means of motivation...I cannot tell a falsehood without a motive, and this move will certainly be, with the rarest exceptions, an unjust one; namely, the intention of holding others, over whom I have no power, under my will,*

<sup>10</sup> Arendt, Hannah, "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), p.234. The twentieth-century German thinker is astounded by the extent to which lying is tied to politics in the modern world. In Arendt's estimation, deception, the compulsive urge not to tell the truth percolate the public sphere, which is a place where "the clash of factual truth and politics, which we witness today on such a large scale" is at centre stage. p.236.

<sup>11</sup> Arendt, Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1976), p. 262.

<sup>12</sup> Arendt, Hannah, "Truth and Politics," Op.Cit., p.249.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.249.

*that is of coercing them through the agency of motivation*<sup>14</sup>.

In light of the foregoing, it is safe to assume that Eugene Dawn's reading of the military's strategy is misguided as there is a method to their madness. What sets, in fact, Dawn apart from the rest of the number is that he goes by the book, and that facet of his character does him a disservice: "*I am not rebellious. I am want to be good....I have a great talent for discipline, I feel. I am certainly a faithful person.*" (D, 31). Little wonder his bossy superior, named Jacobus Coetzee, gives him the cold shoulder, "*...his present behavior disappoints me. He avoids me. He no longer smiles as he used to or asks kindly how I am getting on.*" (D, 33). The crux of the matter is that Jacobus Coetzee and Eugene Dawn cannot understandably hit it off for long because they are not cast in the same mould. Even though they have a commonality, i.e., their unsavory passion for colonization, their world perceptions are poles apart. While Coetzee, as a subservient to the military, "*has no natural sympathy with a mythographic approach to the problem of control*" (D, 31), Dawn, owing to the rigours of his line of work and to the fact that he has "*a duty towards history that cannot wait*" (D, 30), shies away from toeing the military's line unquestioningly. Eugene Dawn's specialism is mythography— one of the mainstays of the colonial apparatus— about which he says: "*Mythography...is an open field like philosophy or criticism because it has not yet found a methodology to lose forever itself in the mazes of* When McGraw-Hill brings out the first textbook of mythography, *I will move on. I have an exploring temperament.*" (D, 31). To be sure, the mythical constructions go a long way towards making the colonial enterprise a success. The idea that the natives are a bunch of savages that live in a cultural and economic backwater and, therefore, request to be brought into mainstream civilization, fits into the ideological tools of colonialism. It is a mental construct built on pure myth with a view to bolstering up the narrative of colonialism. Colonial discourse feeds on a system of beliefs that paint a bleak picture of Africa and its denizens, whose endgame is to brainwash the natives into developing low self-regard, and doubting themselves. Witness the superciliousness with which Jacobus Coetzee, in the second section of *Dusklands*, talks about the Hottentots:

*A Hottentot gains much by contact with civilization but one cannot deny that he also loses something. He is short and yellow, he wrinkles early, his face has little animation, his belly is slack. Put him in Christian clothes and he begins to cringe, his shoulders blend, his eyes shift, he cannot keep still in your presence but incessantly twitch.* (D, 65)

Jacobus Coetzee's paternalistic demeanour is anchored in a deep-dyed stereotypical image of the natives that reeks of racism. He is uncharitable in his opinion of the Africans throughout the expedition. His haughtiness means that he cannot find it in his heart to render thanks to them even when they tide him over hash odds. Nonetheless, Jacobus grudgingly acknowledges at times his underlings' worth, who happen to be natives:

*My Hottentots and my oxen had given me faithful service; but the success of the expedition had flown from my enterprise and exertions. It was I who planned each day's march and scouted out the road. It was I who conserved the strength of the oxen so that they should give of their best when the going was hard. It was I who saw that every man had food. It was I who, when the men began to murmur on those last*

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<sup>14</sup>Schopenhauer, Arthur, *The Basis of Morality*, trans. with Introduction and Notes by Arthur Brodrick Bullock (London: SONNENCHEIN & CO, 1903), p.191.

*terrible days before we reached the Great River, with a firm but fair hand. They saw me as their father. They would have died without me. (D, 64).*

Egocentric posturing is sort of a fillip to the colonizer as it makes him seem like a father-figure to the colonized. It is worthwhile to underscore, though, that Jacobus Coetzee's derogatory remarks about the Hottentots is in line with what J.M. Coetzee calls the Discourse of the Cape. This is an umbrella phrase referring to the set of disparaging shibboleths that white settlers reserved for Hottentots in ante-bellum South Africa. In his essay *White Writing*, the South African novelist posits that the label of laziness stuck on the Hottentots by travel writers is but "a reaction to a challenge, a scandal, that strikes particularly near to them as writers."<sup>15</sup> By several accounts, Hottentots were not, indeed, an easy people to bring to heel. According to J.M. Coetzee, the laziness charge is not a novelty as they have always been on the receiving end of categorization from the British and Dutch settlers alike:

*The charge of idleness often comes together with, and sometimes as the climax of, a set of other characterizations: that the Hottentots are ugly, that they never wash but on the contrary smear themselves with animal fat, that their food is unclean, that their meat is barely cooked, that they wear skins, that they live in the meanest of huts, that male and female mix indiscriminately<sup>16</sup>.*

This mythical speech goes to justify Roland Barthes making the point that it is at the level of language that myth operates first and foremost: "...myth is a system of communication, that it is a message."<sup>17</sup> Linguistic domination lays the spadework for colonization proper. Kenyan sophisticated scholar, Ngũgĩwa Thiong'o grapples among other things with the question of language in *Something Torn and New*, and examines its symmetrical relationship with memory. He writes:

*Language is a clarifying medium of memory or rather the two are intertwined. To starve or kill a language is to starve and kill a people's memory bank. And it is equally true that to impose a language is to impose the weight of experience that it carries and its conception of self and otherness—indeed, the weight of its memory, which included religion and education.<sup>18</sup>*

A language is key to a people's cultural and religious identity. Those who are forced to relinquish their mother

<sup>15</sup>Coetzee, J.M., *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), p.23.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p.22.

<sup>17</sup>Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York : The Noonday Press, 1991 [1957]), p. 107. Myth, as it turns out, is a useful tool when it comes to subjugating a people. However, it needs stressing that, in Roland Barthes's estimation, myth is neither a concept nor an idea but simply "a mode of signification, a form." (p.107). No myth, Barthes argues, is eternal since "it is human history which converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and death of the mythical language." (p.108). Needless to say that Roland Barthes is vindicated by the crumble of the myth of colonial discourse with the demise of colonialism. A wholesome study of the working of myth brings out into sharp relief this contrast: "The oppressed is nothing, he has only one language, that of his emancipation; the oppressor is everything, his language is rich, multiform, supple, with all the possible degrees of dignity at its disposal: he has an exclusive right to meta-language. The oppressed makes the world, he has only an active, transitive (political language); the oppressor conserves it, his language is plenary, intransitive, gestural, theatrical: it is Myth. The language of the former aims at transforming, of the latter at eternalizing." (p. 150).

<sup>18</sup>Thiong'owa, Ngũgĩ, *Something Torn and New: An African renaissance* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2009), p.20.

tongue in favour of an alien one look as if they underwent ersatz death. When we speak a language we display consciously or unconsciously a way of life, a manner of being. A great thinker of the colonial phenomenon, Frantz Fanon, underscores the paramountcy of language: “*To speak means to be in a position to use a syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.*”<sup>19</sup> Understandably, colonialists strain every sinew to trample under foot indigenous languages and either coerce or inveigle the natives into adopting European ones.

*Foe* is a novel that serves as a gruesome reminder of the horrors of colonization. Also, it highlights the significance of language as the only trustworthy vehicle for narrating personal experience. Being stripped of the ability to speak (above all by forces of evil) is a fate worse than death; in fact, it reduces the victim to a nonentity status: this is what J.M.Coetzee seeks to encapsulates in the plight of Friday, i.e., the native whose tongue is cut off against a backdrop of colonial oppression. The origin of his irreversible silence is a conundrum to Susan Barton, a liberal conscience who happens to be J.M. Coetzee’s alter ego. Her whole existence in the world of the novel revolves round ways and means of fathoming out the rationale behind Friday’s silence, and giving him back, as it were, the ability to speak. It is in the first chapter of the novel that Susan learns about what has happened to Friday. When she discovers the interior of his mouth she cringes back straightaway and tackles Crusoe the origin of this awful misdeed:

*I drew away, and Crusoe released Friday’s hair. “He has no tongue,” he said. “That is why he does not speak. They cut out his tongue.”*

*I stared in amazement. “Who cut out his tongue?”*

*“The slavers.”*

*“The slavers cut out his tongue and sold him into slavery? The slave-hunters of Africa? But surely he was a mere child when they took him. Why would they cut out a mere child’s tongue?”(F, 23)*

Nevertheless, Crusoe is not overly concerned about Friday’s weird predicament. Witness the laidback way in which he answers Susan’s question:

*‘Crusoe gazed steadily back at me. Though I cannot swear to it, I believe he was smiling. “Perhaps the slavers, who are moors, hold the tongue to be a delicacy,” he said. “Or perhaps they grew weary of listening to Friday’s wails of grief, that went on days and night. Perhaps they wanted to prevent him from ever telling his story; who he was, where his home lay, how it came about that he was taken. (F, 23)*

Indeed, by reducing Friday to utter silence, the slavers mean to keep a tight lid on their inhumanity. Friday’s ability to recount his ordeals would be something of a smoking gun as to the horrors of the colonial enterprise. According to Susan her silence and that of Friday do not come to the same thing. Substantiating away why she does not have it in her to act on Foe’s advice to keep life on the island out of the book that she tasks him with, Susan contends:

*“You err in failing to distinguish between my silences and that of a being such as Friday. Friday has no command*

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<sup>19</sup>Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin, White Masks* trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008 [1952]), p.8.

of words and therefore no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others. I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal; I say he is a laundryman and he becomes a laundryman....Therefore the silence of Friday is a helpless silence." (F, 121-2)

Here Susan emphasizes Friday's deprivation of freedom against his will. He is not at liberty to act as he wishes because of the backwash effects of the weight of history. Arguably, he suffers a twin pain. Firstly, he is dehumanized through subjugation. Secondly, he is robbed of the ability to speak, thereby making him unable to come clean about his gruesome experience. This glaring injustice baffles Susan Barton:

*"It is a terrible story," I said. A silence fell. Friday took up our utensils and retired into the darkness. "Where is justice in it? First a slave and a castaway. Robbed of his childhood and consigned to a life of silence. Was Providence sleeping."* (F, 23)

Susan Barton discovers human misery through Friday. The "effective benevolence"<sup>20</sup> that she exercises towards the latter is an offshoot from a comparison she draws between her situation and that of the slave<sup>21</sup>. From a Schopenhauerian perspective, she can be said to act out of one the "three fundamental springs of human conduct": Compassion<sup>22</sup>. In one of the numerous letters she writes to *Foe*, Susan underscores the significance of this concept of sympathy or compassion in human relations: "We cannot shrink in disgust from our neighbour's touch because his hands, that are clean now, were once dirty. We must cultivate, all of us, a certain ignorance, a certain blindness, or society will not be tolerated." (F, 106). Susan hints here at Friday's wholeness as a human being prior to his encounter with colonialists. Her clarion call for the cultivation of sympathy in human relations bears underlining. More importantly, it brings out in bold in relief her determination to extricate herself from the quagmire of the desert island with Friday in tow. The woman-narrator in *Foe* cannot, indeed, leave the 'negro' to his own devices thanks to his utter vulnerability. When a merchant ship named the *John Hobart* "with a cargo of cotton and indigo" (F, 38) docks off the island out of the blue, Susan breathes a sigh of relief

<sup>20</sup>Bentham, Jeremy, *Deontology or the Science of Morality: In Which the Harmony and Coincidence of Duty and Self-Interest, Virtue and Felicity, Prudence and Benevolence, Are Explained and Exemplified* (London: Longman, 1864). The cornerstone of Bentham's morality is human happiness which is, according to him, "the happiness of every man." (p.13) Virtue, he says, "divides itself into two branches-prudence and effective benevolence." (p.15) One of the particularities of "effective benevolence" is that it "is either positive or negative", for its "operation is by action, or by abstaining from action." (p.17)

<sup>21</sup>Schopenhauer, Arthur, *On Human Nature: Essays on Ethics and Politics*, Sel. and trans. T Bailey Saunders (London: SWAN SONNENSCEIN & CO., Lim, 1902 [1897]). According to this sophisticated nineteenth-century German thinker, Envy or Sympathy are the dividing line between "the moral virtues and the vices of Mankind". Although they are "diametrically opposite qualities", argues Schopenhauer, yet they "exist in every man". They have this much in common: "they spring from the inevitable comparison which [man] draws between his own lot and that of others." Nonetheless, the philosopher is heavily weighted in favour of Sympathy in the sense that it "makes it [the wall between human beings] slight and transparent" while Envy "builds the wall thicker and stronger." Over and above this, Sympathy "sometimes pulls down the wall altogether; and then the distinction between self and not-self vanishes." (p.7). In light of this, it's safe to contend that Susan has subsumed her own self in Friday.

<sup>22</sup>Schopenhauer, Arthur, *The Basis of Morality*, Op.Cit. Egoism, Malice, Compassion are said to the main drivers of human conduct according to eighteenth-century sophisticated German scholar, Schopenhauer. He believes Compassion to the bedrock of voluntary justice in that it "desires the weal of others, and rise to nobleness and magnanimity." Conversely, he is scornful of Malice since it "desires the woe of others, and may develop to the utmost cruelty" As a result, Schopenhauer argues, "all conduct springing from [it] is morally worthless." (p.172) As for Egoism, the German thinker says that it "is the chief and fundamental motive in man, as in animals, that is the urgent impulse to exist, and to exist under the best circumstances." (p.150) Due to the fact that it "desires the weal of the self, and is limitless", all conduct tinged with egoistic motive cannot have moral value.

as she sees it as a chance to go back home to England. Three seamen lift Cruso “from his bed into a litter” and carries him “down the path to the shore” (F, 39) with a view to getting him aboard the ship. Susan is happy about the move as Cruso is sinking apace owing to indifferent health. Meanwhile, her considerate attitude towards Friday never flags. Deep down she knows that a return to England without Friday is tantamount to a betrayal of the values of “loving-kindness” and solidarity that she holds fast to so much. She warns the seamen: “There is another person on the island...He is a Negro slave, his name is Friday, and he is fled among the crags above the north shore.” (F, 39). Although she confesses that persuading Friday “to yield himself up” is a tall order since “he has no understanding of words or power of speech”, she pleads with the ship’s master “to send [his] men ashore again.” (F, 39). She manages to win over the captain by making the point that “as a slave and a child” Friday should not be left in the lurch, and that the onus lies on them “to care for him in all things, and not abandon him to a solitude worse than death.” (F, 39). She expresses her relief about being obliged:

*My plea for Friday was heeded. A new party was sent ashore under the command of the third mate, with orders by no means to harm Friday, since he was a poor simpleton, but to effect what was needed to bring aboard.’ (F, 39)*

Throughout the voyage to England Susan never wavers in her solicitude for both Cruso and Friday. At the suggestion of the ship’s captain, she accepts readily to pass off as the former’s wife in order to “make my path easier, both on board and when we should come ashore on England.” (F, 42). Aboard the ship, she shares the same cabin and the same bunk as the ailing Cruso, waking up several times during the night to keep abreast of Cruso’s health. The master-slave, unfortunately, dies three days before their arrival in England. She sees to it that the deceased is attended to in a dignified way before being overthrown overboard (F, 45). Susan does not discriminate between Cruso and Friday. It might be baffling as to why she is that caring vis-à-vis Cruso who, by virtue of being a slaver, flouts the human values that she lives and breathes. The crux of the matter is that there is a universal dimension to Susan’s attitude to both men. From a Kantian reading, Cruso and Friday are “objective ends” rather than “subjective”<sup>23</sup> ones.

Harking back to the trope of myth, its “message” in the context of colonialism is directed at the colonized, with the spiteful intent to keep him in bondage forever. However, the point is worth making that the colonizer has more than one string to his bow in the process of having the native eating out of his hand. Besides the belittling or dismantling of anything

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<sup>23</sup>Kant, Immanuel, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. and Trans. Allen W. Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002 [1785]). In this seminal work, Immanuel Kant propounds his outlook on morality. The backbone of it is that the famous universal law of nature or the universal imperative of duty which he states as follows: “So act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature.” (p.38). A maxim, in Kant’s estimation, is “the subjective principle for action, and must be distinguished from the objective principle for action, namely the practical law.” (p.37) The objective principle refers to “the law, valid for every rational being, and the principle in accordance of which it ought to act, i.e., an imperative.” (Italicized in the book; so, it is I who underline). As regards the subjective principle, it is that one ‘in accordance with which’ the rational being “should act.” The philosopher goes on to stress that rational beings are *objective ends* (italicized in the book, so it is I who underline) in other words “things whose existence in itself is an end, and specifically an end such that no other end can be set in place of it...” (p.46). By contrast, subjective ends refer to “the beings whose existence rests not on our will but on nature...” They “are called things” in the sense that “they are beings without reason.” (p.46). In light of the foregoing, anyone who treats another rational being like dirt goes against this Kantian moral imperative: “...the human being, and in general rational being, exists as end in itself, not merely as means to the discretionary use of this or that will, but in all its actions, those directed toward itself as well as those directed toward other rational beings, it must always at the same time be considered as an end.” (Italicized in the book; so, it is I who underline.) (p.45). Friday is used as a means by his masters who have no qualms about cutting out his tongue. As a result, Susan Barton, whose moral compass is human dignity, is appalled and goes the extra mile to reinstate him as sort of a full-blown human being.

pertaining to the cultural identity of the indigenous, the colonizer also indulges in cupboard love through present giving, soft-soaping. Jacobus Coetzee exemplifies this theory in *Dusklands*. In his expedition to the land of the Great Namaqua," he comes face to face with a party of mounted Hottentots. To nip in the bud any attempt at revolt from the Hottentots, he shrewdly explains the reasons for his mission:

*We came in peace. We brought gifts and promises of friendship. We were simple hunters. We sought permission to hunt the elephant in the land of the Namaqua. Travellers had spoken of the hospitality and generosity of the great Namaqua people, and we had come to pay our respects and offer our friendship.*(F, 66).

This strategy of gentle persuasion allows Jacobus to loosen his encirclement by the Hottentots, and carry favour with them:

*"I am grateful for your welcome", I replied. "But your Followers are making my men nervous. Can they not be restrained?"*

*"We will do you no harm", he said. "Will you give us our presents?"*(F, 68)

There is arguably a method in Jacobus Coetzee's madness. As Terry Eagleton clearly states: "*The most efficient oppressor sometimes brings with it is the one who persuades his underlings to love, desire, and identify with his power.*"<sup>24</sup>Not until the gentle persuasion fails to yield its expected results does the colonizer resort to cowering, bullying, nay full-scale violence. Mythical narrative in the colonial world is a sacred cow. Any challenge or breach of it sort of qualifies as a brazen affront to colonial authority, and, consequently, spells the ultimate price for the "outlaws". Plaatje, Adonis, the Tamboer brothers know what it means to flout colonial rules. When Jacobus Coetzee is taken prisoner by Hottentots, his underlings see the writing on the wall for their master and betray him by going "native". Hell-bent upon eschewing a rerun of this scorn for colonial order, he decides to draw the fangs of the deserters in the most gruesome of manners by way of a deterrent to others:

*I ordered my four men to step forward. They stood before my horse, cringing somewhat, and I delivered them a brief sermon, speaking in Dutch to indicate to the Hottentots that my servants were set apart from them and relying on one of the Griqua soldiers to translate...*

*Over them I then pronounce the sentence of death. In an ideal world I would have waited the executions for the next morning, midday executions lacking the poignancy of a firing squad in a rosy dawn. But I did not indulge myself.* (D, 101-2)

If Eugene Dawn touts myth every step of the way, it is because of its effectiveness: "*A myth is true—that is to say, operationally true—insofar as it has predictive force. The more deeply rooted and universal a myth, the more difficult it is to combat.*" (D, 24).The process of subjugating a people feeds on myth, which causes the likes of Jacobus to take their mission at heart: "*I am a tool in the hands of history.*" (F, 106). He has a Manichean mindset in the colonizer-colonized relationship. Actually, jingoism, racism, disdain for otherness factor into his rationale for being that merciless to the

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<sup>24</sup>Eagleton, Terry, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991). The quotation is drawn from the introduction to the book, which is not paginated.

Hottentots. Jacobus is of the mind that forbearance towards the natives flies in the face of the interests of his country, nay bespeaks betrayal. Little wonder he has no guilty conscience about the fate meted out to the Hottentots and the quislings alike:

*I am an explorer. My essence is to open what is closed, to bring light to what is dark...*

*Through their deaths I, who after they had expelled me had wondered the desert like a pallid symbol, again asserted my reality. No more than any other man do I enjoy killing; I have taken it upon myself to pull the trigger, performing this sacrifice for myself and my countrymen, who exist, and committing upon the dark folk the murders we have all wished. (F, 106)*

Here Jacobus Coetzee prides himself on reinstating colonial authority which is badly dented in the wake of his manhandling and captivity at the hands of the Hottentots. Come to think of it, he, in his heart of hearts, can ill-afford to shrug off any questioning of the soundness of colonial narrative, for what is at stake is the continuance of Western sway over folks of indigenous extraction.

J.M. Coetzee is scathing about the colonial experience. The wisdom encapsulated in Eugene Dawn's admission to a mental institution and Jacobus Coetzee's raw deal at the hands of the Hottentots is a decided indictment of the ideology of colonialism, and its attendant human ravages. To subjugate a people is an insult to human dignity as it implies wanton infliction of suffering to another person in addition to being a negation of freedom. The more so since suffering is, from a Levinasian perspective, an embodiment of evil:

*All evil relates back to suffering. It is the impasse [Italicized in the book; so, It is I who underline.] of life and being-their absurdity-in which pain does not just somehow innocently happen to 'color' consciousness with affectivity. The evil of pain, the deleterious per se, is the outburst and deepest expression, so to speak, of absurdity<sup>25</sup>.*

Arguably, J.M. Coetzee sees eye to eye the nineteenth-century German scholar on the preposterousness of suffering. In *Doubling the Point*, a collection of essays and interviews, he confesses his perplexity and powerlessness as to the reality of suffering across the globe:

*Let me add, entirely parenthetically, that I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering.<sup>26</sup>*

Speaking with David Attwell about his novel *Foe*, J.M. Coetzee says that it is the 'body' that epitomizes suffering. The body in the aforementioned novel is represented by Friday. The author's rejection of colonialism finds expression in Eugene Dawn's admission to a mental institution and Jacobus Coetzee's short-lived fall from grace with his capture by the Hottentots. Their reversals of fortunes buttress up Aimé Césaire's spot-on assertion that "no one colonizes

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<sup>25</sup>Levinas, Emmanuel, *Entre nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshow (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998 [1982]), pp:92-3.

<sup>26</sup>Coetzee, J.M., *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (London: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 248.

innocently, that no one colonizes with impunity either.<sup>27</sup>”By dint of treating the colonized like dirt, the colonizer turns a beast. In other words, his “thingification” is embedded in his reification of the native. Dawn, to all intents and purposes, evidences this point when he says:

*There is no doubt that I am a sick man. Vietnam has cost me too much. I use the metaphor of the dolorous wound. Something is wrong in my kingdom. Inside my body, beneath the skin and muscle and flesh that drape me, I am bleeding. (D, 32)*

The metaphor of the wound serves the purpose of pillorying the ideology of colonization. Indeed, the wound can be a physical affliction but it can also work at the level of the psyche. What Eugene Dawn goes through is mental wound resulting from the trauma of meting out wanton and senseless suffering to other human beings. As a result, he suffers from a nervous breakdown. According to French philosopher, Julia Kristeva, “*depressed persons*” are “*atheistic*”, namely that they are “*deprived of meaning, deprived of values.*”<sup>28</sup> Eugene Dawn’s psychological demise bespeaks the nefariousness of colonial discourse and its attendant multifaceted ravages. Colonialism is unjustifiable.

In the final analysis, suffice to say that as a white South African writer and novelist imbued with liberal values, the motif of colonialism cannot leave J.M. Coetzee cold. South Africa lived through the yoke of British imperial rule for several decades. More importantly, institutionalized racism also known apartheid, which had unfolded in the country since 1948 with the accession to power of the National Party, was an excruciatingly gruesome offshoot of colonization. *Dusklands* and *Foe* are a scathing indictment of this painful chapter in the history of humanity. The orgy of wanton suffering that Jacobus Coetzee metes out to the Hottentots as he seeks to subdue them, and Friday’s gut-wrenching experience at the hands of slavers bespeak the human ravages of colonialism. It flies in the face of the human values of dignity, respect, sympathy. On the other hand, the sticky end that Eugene Dawn comes to as well as the ordeals (both physical and mental) that Jacobus goes through go to show that colonization carries within it the germs of its own defeat. Colonial narrative, the author argues, feeds on self-defeating myth.

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<sup>27</sup>*Discourse on Colonialism*, Op.Cit., p.39.

<sup>28</sup>Kristeva, Julia, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p.15.

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