

## PROMOTING LITERARY THEORY AS A PARTNER TO LITERATURE TO DECIPHER A NOVEL USING J. M. COETZEE'S *DIARY OF A BAD YEAR*

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### Abstract

*John Maxwell Coetzee's Diary of a Bad Year (2007) is an excellent postmodern novel that celebrates multiple themes with its unique structure. Novel does not have an appropriate sub-genre to appreciate this novel and so claims it as a diary with two diarists. Hailing uniformity over diversity demands the aid of a literary theory to decode these various meanings and themes that the novel offers. Besides, the novel does not sound like a stereotypical diary as the most part of the novel is compiled with essays. To avoid misreading this postmodern novel, the researcher suggests Stanley Fish's concept of "Interpretive Communities" to read and reap layers of interpretations that the novel is endorsed with. This attempt reveals the inevitability of theories to literature at times, when uniformity is thrust over diversity to establish a simple, single, and surface level meaning of a novel.*

**Keywords:** *Diary, postmodernism, textual analysis, uniformity, diversity, interpretive communities.*

The twenty-first century has created a craze for uniformity in every possible field and even the education department is spell bound by this. The concept of diversity is ignored over uniformity bidding farewell to individuality. Considering education and the exercise of reading, the curriculum is designed in a way to promote uniformity. The introduction of study guides and the teacher's approval of same answer from the majority of students from a class institute the idea of uniformity over the possibility of diversity. Nowadays, entrance exams and eligibility exams are conducted in Multiple Choice modes, which once again propagate and acknowledge uniformity over diversity. This obsession of the era destroys multiplicity and fails to see variety where it is easily available. So, a text is discussed in a class with one point of view and that perspective prevails giving no space for the opinions of others to surface. To address this critical state of affair among the student community, a literary theory is picked out and its immense use proves the worth of this postmodern novel that is taken for analysis.

In today's reading world, literary criticism and theories are challenged and criticized because of their pedantic nature. Not only critics and theorists, but writers also get themselves involved in their earnest attempts to clarify the

doubts regarding the composition of a literary text. The discourse regarding theories in literature is a never ending endeavour. These theories have reaped criticism, both for and against its usage in the literary world. E. M. Forster, Edward Muir, D. H. Lawrence, Henry James, and a few other notable writers have produced various books like *Aspects of the Novel*, *The Structure of the Novel*, "Why the Novel Matters", "The Art of Fiction", etc. to unravel the art of composing a novel. The purpose of theories helps to answer a few questions that arise from within and out of the text. As postmodern writers come up with ambiguous texts, readers require some aid in grasping the intended meaning of the author to shun misreading and misinterpreting the text. It is here theories help the readers to keep close to the trail of the story. In doing so, the text's ability to offer multiple layers of meaning is grappled with a nod of agreement and demystifies the fog of obscurity while approaching the text. In appreciating literary theories, Joseph Chandra and K. S. Antony Samy in their book, *Classical to Contemporary Theory: A Demystified Approach* brief it as, "There is a symbiotic relationship between literature and literary theory" (1) and so, "Literary theory should be used as a frame of reference for us to

teach and study literature." (4). Considering this, one theory that welcomes myriads of interpretations from a single text is Stanley Fish's "Interpretive Communities". This research article uses John Maxwell Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) as an example to apply theory to a text to appreciate literary criticism over mere storylines.

The postmodern era celebrates the South African born Australian citizen John Maxwell Coetzee for his innovative experimentation of his writing style, characterization, discussions on social issues, themes, and narrative devices. It is in this context that Coetzee's usage of fragmentation is much appreciated. Focusing on the author's influence helps in defining his craftsmanship. The ability of creating a lasting impression in the reader sufficing his or her expectation declares the success of the literary piece. Considering the valuable feedbacks of the readers, the researcher chooses Stanley Fish's concept of "interpretive communities" from "Is There a Text in This Class?" to analyse the selected novel. The idea of an interpretative community, as per Fish, refers to a group of readers who interpret the given text in the same line of thought agreeing upon something that they identify first, perhaps depending on the knowledge they already have before encountering the text.

*Diary of a Bad Year* is a curious prose fiction of Coetzee and the year that is mentioned in the title is 2005. It holds two narrators, three characters, among which, two are male and the remaining one is female. They share their opinions of each other simultaneously in an unorganised manner. They are established in a triangular relationship with one another. One of the narrators is Señor C, who is on a process of compiling a series of his random essays into a book, which the female narrator, Anya, is to type for him. The essay collection is published at the end in the form of a book successfully. As the typist begins to influence him on his opinions, he distinguishes his opinions into strong and light and publishes them likewise. Anya lives with Alan in the same apartment and he, being a business minded man, plans to loot Señor C's money but is stopped by Anya's moral conviction. All through the narration, every page is divided into three parts where the first and major space belongs to Señor C's essays, his Diary entry holds the second space, and the third segment is given to Anya's musings in her Diary. This novel has a tricky narration that needs close reading to decipher the

story because of this three tiered narrative structure. A page from the novel is given for better clarification.

## 06. On guidance systems

There were times during the Cold War when the Russians fell so far behind the Americans in weapons technology that, if it had come to all-out nuclear warfare, they would have been annihilated without achieving much in the way of retaliation. During such periods, the *mutual* in Mutual Assured Destruction was in effect a fiction.

These interruptions in equilibrium came about because the Americans from time to time made leaps ahead in telemetry, navigation, and guidance systems. The Russians might possess powerful rockets and numerous warheads, but their capacity to deliver them accurately to their targets was always much inferior to that of the Americans.

As a typist pure and simple, Anya from upstairs is a bit of a disappointment. She meets her daily quota, no problem about that, but the rapport I had hoped for, the feel for the sort of thing I write, is hardly there. There are times when stare in dismay at the text she turns in. According to Daniel Defoe, I read, the true-born Englishman hates "papers and papery." Brezhnev's generals sit "somewhere in the urinals."

As I pass him, carrying the laundry basket, I make sure I waggle my behind, my delicious behind, sheathed in tight denim. If I were a man I would not be able to keep my eyes off me. Alan says there are as many different bums in the world as there are faces. Mirror, mirror on the wall, I say to Alan, whose is the fairest of them all? Yours, my princess, my queen, yours without a doubt. (*Diary*25)

An interpretive community i.e. every reading community that agrees on one singular aspect of a novel becomes a reading or an interpretive community. Assuming this categorization, a group of readers who prefer to read this Diary as a matter of fact an essay collection would find it as a somber prose piece and these essays are sure to fulfil the characteristics of non-fiction. These essays come from an old man of seventy two, who suffers from Parkinson's disease, who is asked to record his opinions for the purpose of publishing them along with his teammates. These essays differ in their themes such as the origins of the state, politics, terrorism, body politics, vegetarianism, animal rights, pollution, child rights, aging, language and literature, and so on. Señor C segregates his essays into

Strong Opinions and Small Opinions. The Strong ones are fashioned in a way to deal with the fictional author's point of view of several random areas of life while the Light ones are to break the monotony of the Strong ones.

Structurally, these essays occupy the major part of the novel and act as the silent frame narrative that holds tight the main narrative and knits the plots by the end by compiling all the simultaneous essays into a book. Thematically, the essays might sound uninteresting to a reader who looks for a story, but it will hook the reader who expects ideologies of myriad topics. Thus, this group of readers would wind up lauding and acknowledging Coetzee as a worthy essay writer ignoring the ramblings of two diarists who smear the scant space left by the essays.

The second reading community might magnify Señor C's semblance with Coetzee. Christopher Tayler evaluates this notion by employing a keen eye for details. His assuring judgment that Coetzee and Señor C share a complex connectivity, which after a series of comparisons informs that, "These, we have every reason to imagine, are probably Coetzee's views too" (2). Along with that confirmation, Coetzee's fashion of designing similar protagonists in his novels, by brushing them with his strokes of experience and influence kindles another curious research. This reading community after reading a couple of Coetzee's pieces like *Elizabeth Costello* and *The Lives of Animals* and *Disgrace*, to count a few for the sake of the argument, would cite the autobiographical influences and recurring pattern of similarity in disguise in all these works. Even Benjamin Hedin observes the same in his article, "J. M. Coetzee's 'Confessions'" regarding the close similarity between the author and the main characters, especially with *Elizabeth Costello*, "Many of the book's readers wondered if Costello was simply a mouthpiece, and her speeches a clever device allowing Coetzee to express some unfashionable thoughts—such as likening the slaughters of the meat industry to the Holocaust—without having to answer for them." (121).

Primarily, Coetzee makes his lead characters share his profession as a writer and a professor be it David Lurie, Señor Cor Elizabeth Costello for that matter – all of them running their last lap in life. Both the male protagonists, David Lurie and Señor C find themselves entrapped by young women. This sort of characterization

because of its redundancies is seen as his narrative pattern.

The same remains so with Señor C and Elizabeth Costello as they sign with 'C' and 'JC' respectively in the stories creating another spark of criticism over the common factors that surface igniting controversy. Coetzee seems to do this on purpose to kindle criticism in this line. Even in *Elizabeth Costello* he has attempted to design the novel as a cross gender narrative burdening Costello with his traits and the intriguing postscript which is signed as "Elizabeth C." (*Elizabeth Costello* 230). further adds suspicion on whether it is from Elizabeth Costello, the lead character or from J. M. Coetzee, the actual author of the novel. Again, the opinions of Señor C closely resembles that of Coetzee which has incited criticism arguing over the thin line of difference between the real author and the fictional author. This play with characters has made Coetzee iconic in crafting ambiguous literary pieces.

In reference to *Diary of a Bad Year*, Tayler further specifies Señor C's likeness with Coetzee in the following lines.

C, the central figure in *Diary of a Bad Year*, is depicted even more surprisingly. A distinguished writer, newly resident in Australia (where Coetzee has lived since 2002), he is, we learn eventually, a white South African emigrant, a former academic, a vegetarian, and an isolated, tirelessly self-critical man. His initials "JC", his first name seems to be John, and his publications and frame of reference are very similar to Coetzee's; he even mentions "my novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*". C, in other words, is a version of his creator, and the outlook, for his version, is good. (Tayler 2)

Moreover, his protagonists seem to be vegetarians despite being surrounded by meat eaters. Their preference varies but their characterisation is identical to one another. "As for eating steak daily, he's well known to be an ethical vegetarian." (1) is what Tayler adds regarding Coetzee. The same resounds in Señor C, Elizabeth Costello and his extended prose pieces like *The Life of Animals*. A number of articles exist on Coetzee's view on vegetarianism, including inter-disciplinary ones. His opinion on this follows:

To most of us, what we see when we watch cooking programmes on television looks perfectly normal: kitchen utensils on the one hand, items of raw food on

the other, on their way to being transformed into cooked food. But to someone unused to eating meat, the spectacle must be highly unnatural. For among the fruit and vegetables and oils and herbs and spices lie chunks of flesh hacked mere days ago from the body of some creature killed purposely and with violence. Animal flesh looks much the same as human flesh (why should it not?). So, to the eye unused to carnivore cuisine, the inference does not come automatically ("naturally") that the flesh on display is cut from a carcass (animal) rather than from a corpse (human). (*Diary* 63)

In addition to the other interpretive communities, there's one more group of readers that would love to view Anya as a radical feminist. A radical feminist is someone who rebels against the patriarchal structures of the society that try to subjugate rights of women for unfair gains. They consider equality with the other sex as overthrowing the societal standards that shackles them. In this novel, Anya is not the wife but the girlfriend of Alan. She has no idea of marrying him and having children with him. They practically live together under the same roof without acknowledging the institution of marriage and family. Her diary reports a few intimate affairs between them but her view on children and getting pregnant is startling.

Her strong opinions on body politics define her as a radical feminist. Moreover, her frank confession on being an object of attraction to the men around her is striking as well. Despite all that, she influences Señor C to pen light opinions by convincing him with her own suggestions. She is highly independent in taking the decisions of her life and so, leaves Alan in the end when he crosses the line. The narrative is embellished with symbolism. Her pleasure loving lifestyle is painted red by representations of her clothes and her lip stick. Besides, she registers her thoughts and feelings in a diary for the reader thus voicing out her rights sharing the page's space with Señor C and positions herself as his equal.

Do I believe Alan? Of course I don't believe him, and he doesn't for a moment think I believe him. There is the individual dimension, and then there is the bigger picture. A lie in the individual dimension does not necessarily count as a lie in the bigger picture. It can transcend its origins. I don't need Alan to teach me that. It's like makeup. Makeup may be a lie, but not if

everyone wears it. If everyone wears makeup, makeup becomes the way things are, and what is the truth but the way things are? (*Diary* 86)

Anya is also an influential person in the text. She holds back Alan when he confesses his wicked plan of using Señor C's money and she also successfully manipulates Señor C's opinions that appear in the form of the essays. Benjamin H. Ogden identifies this in his article "The Coming into Being of Literature: How J. M. Coetzee's 'Diary of a Bad Year' Thinks through the Novel." His remark follows: "Certainly John C suspects that Anya has altered his own opinions, despite the fact they preceded his first glimpse of her and therefore preceded the novel itself" (477).

With the three interpretations that are given as examples, the readers from the three different reading groups record three specific things that they agree upon. Sometimes, when a book is read having a particular theory fixed in mind and the text deals with many things except that particular theory that is chosen by the reader, it proves to be a futile reading attempt to sincerely interpret and analyse the book. With this example, Stanley Fish's "Interpretive Communities" is proved with effort and evidence that a text serve as a treasure trove of interpretation. As a postmodern narrative, the novel offers a complex scope for structural, thematic, and character based or oriented analyses. Thus, insisting on the point of the argument of the article, texts naturally offer umpteen meaning and it is partly the reader who deciphers it producing interpretations out of it, despite the author's encoded meaning. Besides, theories do not dictate texts rather paves way for multiple interpretations from various angles and help the readers appreciate even ambiguous texts. In addition to that, Stanley Fish writes, "Indeed it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or reader, that produces meanings" (blurb).

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