

## **Trauma and Transnationalism in J.M. Coetzee's *Slow Man***

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### **Abstract**

The paper discusses the relationship between nation and transnationalism in John Maxwell Coetzee's prosaic work *Slow Man* (2005). Coetzee explains the trauma of (un) belongingness and separation through the character of Paul Rayment. A national cum transnational writer, Coetzee, through his writings, has always tried to bring reality sensitively by presenting the sense of being cut off from one's past and future. The paper shows this concern with sympathy and empathy generated for the protagonist. Key themes that become significant throughout Coetzee's oeuvre are developed here – notably, the feelings of isolation in any form and the dehumanizing elements of nationalism. Coetzee shows an uncompromising stance regarding migration and displacement in the novel, highlighting his authorial genius. The plethora of issues discussed in the novel touched the reader's emotions. Finally, the paper proposes that 'home is too mystical for me' as a practical phrase for understanding the pain of being a lonely immigrant.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Transnationalism, Isolation

### **Introduction.**

John Maxwell Coetzee is one of the most severe and intellectual authors of the 21st century. Born in 1940 in South Africa, Coetzee has closely seen the political unrest in South Africa, and it is reflected in his post-apartheid works such as *Disgrace*, *In the Heart of the Country*, and *Life and Times of Michael K*. He migrated to Australia in 2002 and became a natural citizen in 2006. In a letter to Dick Penner in 1985, he confesses that he doesn't want exile because he is aware of what exile is to writers. (19) He accepted whatever South Africa offered him as a native and author. Despite winning the most esteemed Noble Prize in 2003, Coetzee's reputation of being a writer of recluse and thoughtful fiction has remained the same.

After he migrated to Australia, his writing mode took a new turn. He began to write fiction about Australia, and its setting and themes of migration and displacement became dominant in his works. *Slow Man* is Coetzee's first full-fledged Australian novel with an entirely different setting, characters, and storyline. Anthony Gardner says, "It is undeniably well written, but neither performs nor excites

passion". Roman Silvani believes it received marginal success and "has not provoked a great number of literary critics to analyze it". (135) This paper is a humble attempt to investigate the less discussed novel in the light of the themes of trauma and transnationalism.

### **Theme of Trauma**

Oxford Dictionary defines *trauma* as some mental condition caused by a severe blow, tension, or anxiety, especially when the destructive effects last for an extensive period. The reasons for this can be many, but in the case of Paul Rayment, his accident and physical disability are the most unpleasant things that happened to him. His road accident resulting in the amputation of his leg evokes both sympathy and empathy for the readers. In a thesis on '*Sympathetic Imagination in Coetzee's Novels*, ' Christine Caldwell observes, "Rayment's disability is the story...and the novel itself shows Rayment acknowledging a new kind of otherness: disability". (75) This is Coetzee's peculiarity in that he makes simple things look complicated.

Rayment's disfigurement further aggravates his intention to isolate himself from the outer world, and there are numerous cues of it. Rayment's apartment is "gloomy" and "stuffy" with outdated and boring furniture, and the same is his hospital room where the windows are sealed, the television is mostly off, and the clock time stands still. His sense of isolation takes the form of trauma, as Sigmund Freud asserts in his field of trauma studies, that it can occur from 'several areas of social concern'. Paul Rayment's case is a straightforward example of a person in trauma, as per Freud's studies. The traumatic experiences of his life contributed to his isolated existence as he says, "I am hollow at the core ."Throughout the novel, he remains a person with limited or no social contacts, thus making himself lonely and frustrated.

*Slow Man* describes the physical and psychological loneliness of the protagonist, whose self-imposed isolation infuses a sense of humiliation in him. As an abandoned creature, he feels desperate and lesser. Coetzee describes his existence as "a circumscribed life". The undergoing trauma becomes a life-changing event for him as he loses confidence and interest in everything and, therefore, becomes an empathetic character. In '*A Theory of Narrative Empathy*, ' Suzanne Keen observes that the situations and feelings of the characters in a novel vary and, therefore, do not evoke empathy every time. The case and situation of Paul Rayment are different; his experiences, emotions, and situations arouse both sympathy and empathy. Throughout the novel, readers empathize with him because he can keep his emotions and values alive despite his anguish and existential vacuum.

Marijana Jokic is the only hope for Paul Rayment as he falls in love with her and desires to do every possible help in return for her care. Neimneh and Al-Shalabi say that "care becomes a loving treatment when the caregiver moves the person cared for or when the caregiver moves the person cared for" (37) and that "under Marijana's treatments of care, there is the element of affection and passion transferred to Rayment" (37) Coetzee's traumatized creature Paul Rayment thus becomes a creature of 'love and concern' for Marijana and her family. He somehow overcomes his sense of pain and suffering and accepts his existence with grace.

### **Theme of Transnationalism**

*Slow Man* takes up the issue of nationality and the themes of trauma and isolation. A national cum transnational writer, Coetzee, through his writings, has always tried to bring forth reality in a thoughtful manner by presenting the sense of being cut off from one's past and future. For him, nationalism is a prerequisite of good literature, and *Slow Man* is very close to nationality in an Australian setting. (Tonje Vold)

Paul Rayment is originally from France and living in Australia; therefore, he questions his identity as he says, "Home is too mystical for me" (197). Though the novel is the first Australian work by Coetzee after his migration, Australia is a kind of non-place with no remarkable qualities, as the main character describes his feelings in these words:

"I had three doses of immigrant experience, not just one, so it deeply imprinted itself. First, when I was uprooted as a child and brought to Australia, when I declared my independence and returned to France, then when I gave up on France and returned to Australia, is this where I belong? I asked with each move. Is this my true home?" (*Slow Man* 192)

Paul has never been able to adopt either France or Australia fully and remains a lonely immigrant. In the opinion of Terry Eagleton, a psychic amputee, Paul has been 'missing himself' all his life, adrift between life and death. Three times displaced and now living in the refugee camp in Australia, he is a non-national person, with all the mordant self-ironizing detachment of the literary artist." Paul's frustration and strange behavior toward others, including his home country may then be considered as his willingness to settle for 'something less'. Elizabeth Costello quotes Foucault that "a national author tries to find out the meaning of we in its exclusive form". (40-41) Coetzee's transnationalism is manifested through the character of Paul Rayment, who believes that the national identity has become a business about where one resides permanently and stays temporarily. (197) His oeuvre is characteristically transnational but simultaneously cosmopolitan. This cosmopolitan outlook is seen in *Slow Man* for cosmopolitanism, according to Nussbaum, is "a moral project that is critical of isolationism and requires the cultivation of sympathy beyond existing national boundaries" (45)

Being a transnational and cosmopolitan writer, Coetzee has a remarkable capacity "to imagine himself about others from a critical distance; this same sympathetic and caring capacity, however, is ever more experienced as isolation" (Marta 56). This ability is seen in Paul Rayment when he offers to pay the fees of Marijana's son, Drago, but has yet to receive a positive response.

### **Conclusion**

Coetzee's novel also points out the boundaries of the national framework that shape our lives. By using the themes of trauma and transnationalism in many of his works, he takes into view abstract concepts such as cosmopolitanism, the metaphysical, the global, and the international. The present paper has highlighted the sense of being cut off and (un) belongingness that Coetzee must have felt when

leaving South Africa; Meg Samuelson has aptly called Coetzee "an international author but in a different sense."

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