

AN-OTHER'S MAIMED BODY: MUTILATED STORIES IN COETZEE'S NOVELS

The Body, Desire and Storytelling in Novels by J.M. Coetzee. By Olfa Belgacem. Abingdon: Routledge, 2018. Pp. 212 pp. ISBN 978-0-367-00234-3.

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How can one approach the specificities of literary texts by a close reading without falling into the trap of superficial reading or, worse, a summary of the literary work? This is what Olfa Belgacem, a teaching assistant at the University of Tunis, Tunisia, achieved in *The Body, Desire and Storytelling in Novels by J.M. Coetzee*. Presented initially as a Ph.D. dissertation, the monograph was rewritten for publication. The book was published in 2018 by Routledge in the Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures series, making Belgacem one of the few Tunisian scholars in English and American studies to have their monograph acquire such international critical acclaim and visibility.

In this monograph, Belgacem undertakes the task of interpreting four pieces of fiction written by the South African-born J.M. Coetzee. Taking an often-quoted phrase from *Foe* – “the bodies are their own signs” (qtd in 114) – as her vantage point, the author embarks on a journey to explore the body in and of Coetzee’s texts: *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), *Foe* (1986), and *Age of Iron* (1990). The critic’s interest, as she explains in the introduction, is in Coetzee’s apartheid novels. To the logic of a traditional choice, based on a specific period in the writer’s life, the author adds her own rationale: in these four novels, the critic discerns a pattern that would serve as a leading thread throughout the study. She remarks that in the selected novels the “protagonists have bodies that are in a degenerate condition [...]. The stories of how the protagonists’ bodies are disfigured become an obsession for the narrator. Yet, the narratives’ maimed characters obstinately refuse to give their stories as well as their bodies away” (18). Accordingly, in *The Body, Desire and Storytelling in Novels by J.M. Coetzee*, Belgacem approaches the main characters’ wounded bodies, explores their scars, and comments on the way their flesh is grafted onto the text. The book’s fundamental idea on how the natives’ disfigured bodies are used and abused by the white narrator is further discussed in Belgacem’s article “Taming the Indigenous Shrew: Torture and Narration as Possible Tools to Translate the Natives’ Silence in J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Foe*,” published in *International Conference Proceedings*

on *Science, Art and Gender in the Global rise of Indigenous Languages*. In that study, the critic focuses particularly on the barbarian girl's and Friday's bodies as sites of resistance to the white characters' seemingly benevolent attempts to write down their stories, and points out the perversion inherent to this endeavour.

Belgacem expands on the theoretical and philosophical framework of her study in a detailed introduction. In her approach to the body, the focal point of the book, she embarks on a painstaking endeavour as she surveys the discourses inscribed on the flesh. She traces the conception of the body from the Greek Manichean division of the body and soul in Plato's philosophy, then stops at Descartes's mind/matter binarism and moves on to Foucault's socio-political and epistemological approach to the body in the light of what he defines in *Discipline and Punish* as "political anatomy" (qtd in 5). As the study capitalises on post-colonial theory, Belgacem engages with a dialogue between canonical critics such as Edward Said, Bill Ashcroft, Abdul R. JanMohamed, and Homi Bhabha, elucidating the nuanced differences and controversies of their various theoretical insights. For instance, while Ashcroft focuses on how colonial powers, including literature, have shaped the post-colonial others, Said draws attention to the symbiotic relationship between the Western self and the Oriental other. According to the latter, Western identity is defined negatively, i.e. the self is not what the other is, meaning that it is not barbaric. This opposition between the self and the other is contested in Bhabha's work. Indeed, Bhabha contends that a "Third Space" is created at the moment of the encounter between the self and the other, bringing to the fore the ambivalence, hybridity and in-betweenness at play. As far as Coetzee's fictional works are concerned, Belgacem provides an extensive review of leading critics' often conflicting readings: she relies on the insights of prominent Coetzee scholars David Attwell, Derek Attridge, Sue Kossew, Teresa Dovey, Dominic Head, Laura Wright, and Lucy Graham, etc.

Belgacem's grasp on the various theoretical and philosophical approaches is complemented by an aptly organised book structure. The title's tryptich, "Body, Desire and Story Telling," is reflected in the three-partite structure of the text. Furthermore, to tighten her grip on the body text, Belgacem further divides her chapters into two subchapters each. In the first chapter entitled "Negotiating Power in the Other's Flesh," the author devotes the first section "Colonial Bodies... Resurrected?" to revisiting landmark texts in colonial discourse in order to draw a comparison between the representation of the body in colonial writing and post-colonial texts. Swaying between the vilified and erotised bodies of the other in colonial discourses, the bodies in question take on a different form in Coetzee's novels. For him, the body is maimed, disfigured, and emptied of all its sensuality. In the following subchapter, "Desiring the Maimed, or Eroticism Re-visited," Belgacem dwells on the fact that despite their bodily deformities, the native others

are desirable to the white protagonists. She sketches the degenerating conditions of the body and addresses the erotic dynamics displayed in the four selected novels. By the end, she draws the limits of eroticism or what she terms "the disruption of eroticism" (70).

After exploring the white protagonists' disruptive desire to apprehend the flawed body, in the second chapter entitled "White Voices/ Black Bodies: A Politics of Displacement," Belgacem moves on to examine the main characters' ambivalent desire to comprehend the story behind the other's disarticulated body. In "The Story With/in the Story: Coetzee's Shadow Narratives," her preoccupation shifts to the white protagonists as first-person narrators of the other's stories. She examines the white characters' entanglement with the other's narratives and casts doubts on the "white [protagonists'] burden" to tell the other's story, drawing attention to the political implications of the literary undertaking, namely the further displacement of the other's narratives. In the subsequent subchapter "Closed Bodies, Mut(e)ilated Narratives: Negotiating a Story out of the Other," Belgacem pursues the hermeneutic game performed by the white narrator and provides the readers with poignant examples of the narrators' malaise in (mis)interpreting the story of the other in the four novels. As the native other does not open up, the story can neither be retrieved nor told. Thus, the critic undermines the white narrators' authority and reliability in recovering the other's story beneath the scarred flesh.

The last chapter, "Beyond the B(lo)ody Politics," moves beyond the study of the shattered flesh to reflect on the history inscribed on the body. "The Body as a Historicizing Map" centres on the body as shaped by the historical, political, and socio-economical frames, especially because two of the four novels are explicitly set in South Africa under the apartheid regime. The author evokes bloody scenes and traces of a brutal past and dwells on illustrations of "epistemic violence," as well as the subtle violence inherent to the indifference that construes the body as the bearer of historical violence. She also highlights instances of bodily resistance to what Foucault terms "the pervasive intrusiveness of totalitarian violence" (qtd in 151) as a form of identity marking. The author's argument about the body as a site of the "identarian" quest takes full shape in the ensuing subchapter, "The Body as an Identitarian Map." Belgacem capitalises on the findings of phenomenology to approach both white and non-white characters' perception of their decaying body and to comment on their identarian journey. She proves that only when pain is inflicted on the white characters' bodies can they acquire a better understanding of themselves and come close to understanding the non-white others whose stories they strive to tell.

Belgacem's most controversial claim is saved for the end. In a jeopardising attempt to unmask the writer's identity, the critic reflects on the choice of the white characters as the main protagonists and narrators of the non-white others' stories. Despite "the

death of the author,” Belgacem ‘resurrects’ Coetzee and establishes a parallel between the white writer and his white characters. The author goes so far as to claim that, in a metafictional move, the white author transposes on his white narrators his own ambivalence in the representation of the other or what she terms “J.M. Coetzee’s own ambivalent authorial identity” (13). The fictional narrators share the writer’s anxiety in the strife to uncover and write the other’s stories. She argues that, as far as the dilemma of representation is concerned, the narrators become the author’s alter egos. In the # me too spirit – and much in accordance with Benita Parry’s widely known earlier critique of Coetzee – Belgacem invokes Coetzee to lay bare his own racism.

In the conclusion, Belgacem stops again at the main issues raised in the monograph and further comments on her thought-provoking invocation of the spectre of the author. She comments on the limits of the narrative project, as it offers “no way out of the colonial representation of the other as a body” (194). With a quite original move, she concludes her volume with a meta-textual reflection on one picture of J.M. Coetzee, taken for the book cover of Derek Attridge’s *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. She comments on his mysterious “à la Mona Lisa” smile (196), but more importantly, she shrewdly observes his spectral presence in his in-front-of-the mirror stance, with his right hand beyond the frame. The readers realise that Coetzee’s body, too, is maimed and it is the writing/ right(ing) hand that is missing. Readers are left with a mirror, i.e. a reflection – the original story of the other’s disarticulated body can never be recovered. It can never be re-membered.

Belgacem’s logically structured and clearly argued volume has its own weaknesses, too. Unwittingly, the meticulously detailed introduction runs counter to one of the major promises of the book. The introductory chapter is the book’s weakest part, since – contrary to the body of the text – it is not reader-friendly. Many of the theories and definitions provided do not directly or obviously relate to the issues to be discussed. It could have served the reader better were they incorporated in the related chapters once a particular issue was evoked. Concerning Belgacem’s argument, it must be noted that in dealing with the wounded body, Belgacem invokes Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and brilliantly demonstrates that not only the barbarian girl but also the Magistrate are traumatised characters. However, she systematically links the main protagonist’s wounded psyche to the sight of the tortured barbarian girl, not paying heed to Cathy Caruth’s major argument formulated after Freud. For Caruth maintains that “[t]raumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness” (*Unclaimed Experience*, 91). Yet, Belgacem “suggest[s] that it is the encounter with the other that can account for

the Magistrate's traumatic symptoms [...]. Indeed, the first time he has that dream [children playing, building a castle or sculpting a man of snow] coincides with the arrival of the barbarian girl" (169).

On the whole, however, Belgacem successfully manages to handle J.M. Coetzee's elusive corpus as she reads the four novels from one specific point of reference, "the body," relying on a strong methodological and theoretical apparatus and offering insightful comments on complex scenes. "Against allegories," she revisits the dynamics of the other's body, the representation of the mutilated body, and, paradoxically enough, the voicing out of the muted organ. Her thought-provoking arguments prove to be well-founded and productive. By the end of the hermeneutic journey, through the dissection of the characters' degenerating bodies, the readers acquire a better insight into the sexual politics and power dynamics at play in Coetzee's bodies and texts. *The Body, Desire and Storytelling in Novels by J.M. Coetzee* is a reference book for all readers interested in J.M. Coetzee, especially in his apartheid fiction. It deserves the special interest of researchers engaged with post-colonial writings, body theory, trauma and gender studies.