

**Defying the Empire and Reconstruction of Identity in Selected Works of Chinua  
Achebe and J. M. Coetzee: A Comparative Study**

Jafar Baba

Summary of the Dissertation

Supervisor:

Dr. Zoltán Kelemen

Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies

Department of Comparative Literature

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

University of Szeged

Szeged, 2024

The Western discourse on Africa created a form that essentialized the continent and its people into a narrow homogeneity that completely disregarded the diverse and complex structure of African cultures, beliefs, languages, and social traditions. In this respect, the present dissertation sheds light on the postcolonial discourse in West and South Africa, analyzing four selected works by two major postcolonial writers of the 20th century—the South African writer J. M. Coetzee and the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe—which thematize and are set against the backgrounds of apartheid and the British occupation of Africa. Examining Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964), along with Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) and *Foe* (1986), the dissertation attempts to demonstrate how the selected works are representatives of the postcolonial literary spirit; the struggle to regenerate a revolutionary African identity in opposition to precursor-biased identities mapped out in canonical colonial texts. Additionally, the dissertation sheds light on postcolonial literary resistance, investigating how Chinua Achebe and J. M. Coetzee exhibit canonical resistance through their literary works that challenge or subvert the supremacy of an established Western literary canon. The comparative aspect of the research concerning the treatment of colonialism stems from the writers' ethnic and racial backgrounds. While both writers project a harsh criticism of colonialism and its legacy, their approaches differ and are shaped by their respective positions as colonizer and colonized. Thus, by examining their distinct yet interconnected approaches, the discussion intends to offer insights into how both authors wage a sort of literary war against the Western canonical empire, promoting a more inclusive and diverse literary canon.

Moreover, the dissertation aims to examine the concept of resistance in the selected works while also attempting to address certain questions, such as how did the Western colonial discourse on Africa emerge, and what were the factors that endowed such a discourse with representational authority? How do the selected works question and critique colonial discourse, and what postcolonial literary revolution do they offer? Furthermore, in what ways do such works deconstruct and reconstruct a postcolonial African identity? How do the selected works employ language, narrative structure,

physicality, and silence as modes of identity reformation and re-formation? How does Achebe employ indigenization as canonical resistance, and how does he challenge the written tradition? By what means does Coetzee question the foundations of the Western literary canon? How does he challenge picaresque and adventure narratives through his works? What does a comparative reading of the works of a Black colonized subject and a white privileged colonizer reveal in terms of colonial critique?

The comparative aspect of the research concerning the treatment of colonialism stems from the writers' ethnic and racial backgrounds. While both writers project a harsh criticism of colonialism and its legacy, their approaches differ and are shaped by their respective positions as colonizer and colonized. As a white South African, Coetzee's position can be seen as that of a liberal white whose texts reflect an approach to colonialism that is sort of detached and impersonal criticism of the role that white colonizers played in oppressing the native blacks in South Africa. On the other hand, Achebe's approach, being a black Nigerian who grew up under British colonial rule, is profoundly personal and reflective of a dark, oppressive history in which Achebe, as a member of the black African community, suffered the worst effects of marginalization and colonization. Thus, the dissertation will attempt to highlight how each author represents the African voice in English, along with capturing the rhythm of African life and traditions and highlighting the social, political, and economic situation of both Nigeria and South Africa under colonialism.

The selection of these four texts by Achebe and Coetzee in this study is grounded not only in the contributions they offer to the postcolonial literary discourse, but also in the distinct yet interconnected approaches in addressing issues of postcolonial identity reconstruction and literary resistance. Despite highlighting different settings, colonial experiences, and historical contexts, the selected works offer an interesting comparative analysis of the ways they engage with colonial ramifications on colonized communities as well as the inner struggles of the communities they represent.

Unlike many Nigerian authors of the time, Achebe's works divert from a straightforward nationalistic tone against colonialism and shed light on the richness of pre-colonial life while simultaneously critiquing the flaws, and colonial disruption, of his own ethnic

community. What distinguishes Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* is that, apart from their literary value, they offer a clear depiction of the colonized experience, giving voice to the Black, ultimately silenced, marginalized, and oppressed African experiences under colonialism. Moreover, what makes Achebe's works stand out from other Nigerian postcolonial texts is the way Achebe incorporates indigenous Igbo language, cultural norms, symbols, festivals, and linguistic and cultural hybridity into the English text as means of challenging and subverting the hegemony of colonial misrepresentations of Africa.

On the other hand, J. M. Coetzee's works offer the perspective of the liberal white South African who, as Stephen Watson describes, although he is considered a colonizer, he "does not want to be a colonizer."<sup>1</sup> In *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Foe*, Coetzee departs from plain realism evident in South African fiction that deals with anti-apartheid resistance, and rather adopts a more self-critical form of realism that addresses both white complicity and Black resistance. In other words, rather than presenting overtly realistic novels, Coetzee employs corporeality, intertextuality, symbolism, as well as subversion and reconfiguration of canonical literary genres to question the role and authority of language and narration in disseminating colonial hegemony. While Achebe's works highlight the importance of communal resistance against colonial imposition, Coetzee, on the other hand, highlights individual acts of resistance against narrative control and authority.

Thus, through this clash of representations between an author who attempts to give voice to the marginalized and voiceless, and another who directly attacks colonial narrative authority that claims the ability to represent the colonized, the four selected novels offer a comparative avenue for analyzing the different perspectives of identity reconstruction and postcolonial resistance in two different African settings. Hence, by examining Achebe and Coetzee's works together in a comparative framework, the dissertation attempts to offer a comparative analysis that highlights parallels and contrasts in their ideological strategies, narrative techniques, and literary efforts applied to challenge the authority of

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Watson, "Colonialism and the Novels of J. M. Coetzee." *Research in African Literatures* 17, no. 3 (1986): 377. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3819221>

the Western literary canon. The present dissertation does not intend to offer a full comprehensive analysis of postcolonial literary productions in Africa, nor to cover the entire oeuvres of Achebe and Coetzee. Rather, it offers a comparative case study of four major texts that are representative of the critical strategies both authors employ in reconfiguring a postcolonial African identity as well as challenging and resisting the Western canonical empire. While concerns of Black identity and resistance to the literary canon may be present in other works by Achebe and Coetzee, the selected works offer the most comprehensive and thematically focused explorations of these issues. Although the present study foregrounds textual analysis of the four selected texts, it is informed by postcolonial literary theory, discourse analysis, and narrative strategies that shape this critical engagement within the scope of power, identity, voice, and representation.

The first chapter attempts to offer a comprehensive understanding of “postcolonialism,” shedding light on the controversy surrounding the term and its applications. It then delves into the rise of postcolonial literary theory and its major concepts, thus paving the way to examine how postcolonial literature performs as an antithesis questioning and interrogating dominant colonial narratives. After clarifying the theory and practice of postcolonialism in literature, the chapter then offers a short biography of Chinua Achebe and J. M. Coetzee, focusing on their selected works, and how both authors could be situated within this large literary landscape. By showing how both authors were in a “crossroads” of cultures, the chapter allows readers to grasp a better understanding of the interconnectedness of their literary themes despite their paradoxical positions as a Black colonized and liberal white colonizer.

Chapter two addresses the issue of the ‘other’ identity formation, analyzing the theoretical, epistemological, and psychological was through which the identity of the colonized ‘other’ is marginalized and oppressed in colonial frameworks. Drawing insights from Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Frantz Fanon, this chapter allows readers to formulate a thorough understanding of the oppressive and manipulative nature of colonial identity formation. Thus, the chapter explores the ways in which the ‘other’ is textually and epistemologically oppressed, and paves the way to approach the works of Achebe and Coetzee in terms of how they respond to such (mis)representations.

The third chapter deals with the reformation and regeneration of postcolonial identity in the selected works of Achebe and Coetzee. Through a three-layered reading of pre-colonial life to colonial intrusion and finally Achebe's vision for a reformed Igbo identity, the chapter highlights how Achebe's approach calls for a cultural reclamation of identity through a blend between ancestral values and colonial influences. On the other hand, the chapter examines Coetzee's approach that relies on the role of physicality in shaping postcolonial Black identities, thus focusing on physical rather than cultural reclamation. Building on the analysis of Said, Bhabha, Fanon, and other postcolonial scholars, the chapter aims to offer a comparative analysis of the efforts through which both authors embark on a journey to redefine and regenerate African identities in the aftermath of colonial encounters.

Chapter four focuses on reading the selected works in terms of resistance to the Western literary canon. The chapter reveals how Achebe uses an authentic African voice to represent what Mary Louise Pratt defines as "autoethnographic texts." Through his texts, Achebe resists the canon through two major strategies; the first is indigenizing the canon through linguistic Africanization, while the second strategy is his reliance on oral traditions to defy and challenge the written tradition. The second part of the chapter highlights how, unlike Achebe, Coetzee's approach to resistance focuses on the subversion and reconfiguration of canonical literary genres such as picaresque and adventure narratives. The chapter also reveals how Coetzee's engagement with intertextuality adds further layers of complexity to his texts, allowing them to escape the confinements of South African setting. Through this comparative analysis between a colonized and a colonizer response, the chapter reveals the distinct yet interconnected approaches of Achebe and Coetzee in offering a more inclusive and diverse literary canon.

The dissertation reveals that Achebe focuses on cultural reclamation of identity through a blend of ancestral values and colonial influences. Through his celebration and subtle criticism of Igbo cultural traditions in the face of colonial hegemony, Achebe finds a potential for cultural regeneration and adaptation. In other words, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* depict the epistemic violence of colonialism—or what Said

describes as the cultural imperialism over the Orient—in imposing and forcing an alien identity upon the colonized. However, Achebe resists and challenges this colonial imposition by reconstructing a revolutionary form of identity that aligns with what Bhabha terms as a cultural hybridity or third space, one that is rooted in the Igbo culture and traditions, yet rejects and resists uncritical adherence to indigenous culture as well as the complete assimilation into colonial cultural norms. This ideation is evident in Achebe's depiction of characters such as Obierika in *Things Fall Apart* and Moses Unachukwu in *Arrow of God* as figures bridging past and present, tradition and modernity. By setting Obierika and Moses against the traditionalism of Okonkwo and Ezeulu as well as the complete assimilation into colonial culture of Nwoye, Oduche, and John Goodcountry, the dissertation argues that Achebe's portrayal of his "hybrid" characters offers a vision for a reformed Igbo identity and intimates a brighter and more pragmatic vision of postcolonial identity.

Coetzee's revolutionary approach, on the other hand, grounds the African identity in the brutal realities experienced by the human body, thus stressing the physical rather than cultural reclamation of identity. The dissertation contends that Coetzee's physical interest suggests a more pessimistic view of Black South African identity, where identity is interconnected with suffering and survival in the South African context. The link that Coetzee creates between the body and identity under apartheid regime seems to assert a fragmented and often alienated postcolonial identity in South Africa—one that lacks the capacity of self-representation and marked by social exclusion, yet resist discursive control by stressing corporeality as the core of identity. The discussion reveals how, in their fragmentation and alienation, Michael K and Friday offer a subtle and profound form of resistance that challenge dominant colonial perceptions of identity, and surprisingly serve as models of postcolonial autonomy and freedom. In *Life and Times of Michael K*, Coetzee does not depict K as a character who attempts to reclaim his identity through cultural rootedness, but rather as a corporeal being who resists apartheid's discourse of classification and identification, thus choosing suffering and alienation over discursive control and identity appropriation by the medical officer and others. Likewise, the dissertation establishes how, in *Foe*, Friday's body defies all attempts of interpretation and identification. The scars and mutilations on his body evolve into a site

of power and resistance, transforming his body into a text that cannot be appropriated, translated, or manipulated by Susan Barton, Foe, and even Coetzee himself. In this respect, the dissertation concludes that in terms of identity reconstruction, Achebe's approach is regenerative and reconstructive of postcolonial African identity, whereas Coetzee's is deconstructive, seeking to dismantle the colonial mechanisms and strategies that attempt to capture or define it. Yet, despite their distinct approaches, both Achebe and Coetzee challenge colonial perceptions and impositions of Black identity and offer revolutionary modes that resist colonial totalization.

In the chapter related to canonical resistance, the dissertation endeavors to show how both authors resist dominant literary traditions, yet, as in their attempts of reconstructing postcolonial identities, they engage with canonical resistance through different but interconnected strategies that are informed by their racial and historical positions within the colonial structure. In other words, Achebe, as a black colonized writer, centers his literary vision on reaffirming African cultural autonomy in the face of colonial erasure by indigenizing the Western canon through linguistic Africanization and orality, thus challenging the Western tradition in a form that is deeply rooted in his perspective of cultural restoration. Coetzee's critique, on the other hand, stems from his position as a white South African writer interrogating canonical colonial structures he is historically connected to. The discussion highlights that, unlike Achebe, Coetzee adopts a more subversive and intertextual approach to resistance, transforming and deconstructing forms like the picaresque and adventure narratives, thus destabilizing the Western literary canon from within. That is to say, while Achebe does not merely reject the Western canon but seeks to indigenize and localize it within African frameworks, Coetzee seeks to reconfigure the canon in a way that he undermines and deconstructs its ideological foundations. Whether through Achebe's reclamation or Coetzee's deconstruction, the discussion aims to reveal that postcolonial resistance is not monolithic but rather a complex and diverse process shaped by the interconnectedness between race, power, and history. Despite their distinct methods, Achebe and Coetzee contribute to the postcolonial effort of decolonizing the canon, offering complementary modes of postcolonial resistance.



In discussing their literary revolution, the dissertation concludes that the challenge Achebe and Coetzee's works pose within the postcolonial discourse is of profound importance and magnitude, for their revolutionary oeuvre not only addresses issues within their own cultural and historical backgrounds but creatively transcends all possible contexts and settings. While the core of this study was primarily oriented toward investigating the literary, cultural, and political dimensions of Achebe's and Coetzee's postcolonial interventions, it is pertinent to make a final observation concerning the ethical orientations of both writers. That is to say, the selected novels of Achebe and Coetzee can be seen as exemplifying what Michel Foucault calls *parrhesia*, or the courage of truth. In his *The Courage of the Truth :The Government of Self and Others II*, which is a collection of lectures delivered at the College de France in 1984, Michel Foucault explores the power-knowledge relationship as well as the dynamics of discourse, engaging with the theme of *parrhesia*, which means truth-telling or candid speech. Although Foucault suggests in earlier lectures that *parrhesia* entails a certain degree of risk for the parrhesiast, he shifts his focus to the issue of courage that the parrhesiasts acquire through their speech. He argues that *parrhesia* "involves some form of courage, the minimal form of which consists in the parrhesiast taking the risk of breaking and ending the relationship to the other person which was precisely what made his discourse possible."<sup>2</sup> What Foucault stresses here is the courage that the parrhesiast manifests with regard to the audience to which the speech is directed, even at the cost of risking their bond with such an audience.

In this regard, the courage of truth exemplified by Achebe is evident in his portrayal of the Igbo community in a way that simultaneously critiques colonial powers as well as expanding the scope to reach his own Igbo community. In other words, through his criticism of colonial effects and indigenous practices, Achebe risks the repercussions of colonial violence as well as the possibility of alienating himself from his own native community. Similarly, Coetzee's parrhesiastic courage is evident in challenging and highlighting the injustices of apartheid regime in his novels. Being a liberal white South African who criticizes a regime to which he belongs, Coetzee engages in questioning the

---

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth: The Government of Self and Others II*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Arnold I. Davidson (Hampshire, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 11.

privileges and moral complexities associated with the white race in South Africa, thus facing the same risk of exclusion and alienation experienced by Achebe. Yet, in Coetzee's ambivalent position, being "inside" and "outside" the walls of apartheid, his risk goes beyond the estrangement from his own ethnic community to reach the possible retribution that he might face by the white-ruling authority.

Foucault affirms that *parrhesia* is an interactive discourse between the speaker and the listener; it is not only "the courage of truth in the person who speaks and who... takes the risk of telling the whole truth that he thinks, but it is also the interlocutor's courage in agreeing to accept the hurtful truth that he hears."<sup>3</sup> In this regard, highlighting the repercussions of colonialism as well as the flaws of their own ethnic communities, Achebe and Coetzee's works demand a kind of courage from those who are the subject of criticism, including colonial powers, white South Africans, and Igbo people, urging them to accept such "hurtful truths" about themselves. This complex exchange of *parrhesia* that Achebe and Coetzee engage their readers with extends beyond mere acknowledgement and recognition of historical facts; it calls for a stage of self-examination and reviewing the ethical and moral implications in Nigeria and South Africa alike.

### **List of Publications**

Baba, Jafar. "Breaking the Walls of Representation: Silence and the Inversion of Binaries in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* and *Life and Times of Michael K*." In *Walls and Cultural Spaces*:

---

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth*, 13.

*An Exploration of Historical, Literary and Conceptual Barriers*, edited by James Cannon and Luigi Gussago. Leiden: Brill, 25 September 2025. forthcoming.

—. “Coetzee and Parrhesiastic Courage: A Critique of Apartheid and Colonial Discourse in *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Foe*.” In XXVII. *Tavaszi Szél Konferencia 2024: Tanulmánykötet I* [Spring Wind Conference 2024], edited by Dániel Molnár, Dóra Molnár, and Adrián Szilárd Nagy, 404–412. Budapest: Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége (DOSZ), 2024.

—. “Dialogue, Identity, and Anti-colonialism in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*.” In *Jezik, Književnost i Dijalog – Language, Literature and Dialogue*, edited by Božana Solujić, 103–113. Belgrade: Alfa BK University Belgrade, 2024.

—. “Locating Literary Identity in J. M. Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) and *Foe* (1986): A Critical Study.” In XI. *Interdiszciplináris Doktorandusz Konferencia 2022 Tanulmánykötet: 11th Interdisciplinary Doctoral Conference 2022 Conference Book*, edited by L. F. Kajos, Cintia Bali, T. Puskás, and R. Szabó, 281–286. Pécs: Doctoral Student Association of the University of Pécs, 2023.

—. “Decolonizing Classics: *Frankenstein* in a Postcolonial Perspective.” *European Academic Research* 10, no. 12: 4213–4217, 2023.

—. “A Window into the World of Alice Dunbar Nelson: Review of Tara T. Green, *Love, Activism, and the Respectable Life of Alice Dunbar-Nelson* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022).” *Anachronist* 21, no. 2: 308–314, 2023.

—. “The Duality of ‘Message Generators’: Analyzing the Role of Media in Schmid’s Definition of Terrorism.” In *Tavaszi Szél 2022 / Spring Wind 2022 Tanulmánykötet I*, edited by Dániel Molnár, Dóra Molnár, and Adrián Szilárd Nagy, 523–528. Budapest: Association of Hungarian PhD and DLA Students, 2022.