

Smashing The Boundaries of Fiction and Non-Fiction in J M

Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello

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Abstract

J M Coetzee, the 2003 Nobel Prize Winner is one of the most familiar and yet strange litterateur and critic of the modern times. This is so, because he has never separated the two tasks and has always criticized with his literature. He does not recognize the boundary between the realm of non-fiction that is criticism and the realm of fiction that is novel.

Keywords: J.M.Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello, apartheid, South Africa.

J M Coetzee has merged fiction and non-fiction into one and has developed an informed and at the same time emotional critique of the modern world and its inequalities, especially the relations between the colonizing and the colonized.

Elizabeth Costello, published in 2003, the year that he got the Nobel Prize for Literature, is one such work.¹ Though it is called a novel, but it is really a criticism of the contemporary world. Six parts of the novels had been published before in essay form in the work, *The Lives of Animals* in 1999.² Two parts were added in this work and was called a novel. J M Coetzee once declared that he will not say another word as non-fiction. Everything he has to say, he will say it in the form of a story and he has never broken that vow. In *Elizabeth Costello*, we see for the first time his critical powers at extreme, without every claiming that he is criticizing or that he is engaging in something that is generally relegated to the realm of non-fiction rather than non-fiction.

In effect, Coetzee just dresses up his critique in the form of fiction. In *Elizabeth Costello*, the eponymous lead character is a visiting professor who has to give lectures all over the world, for example the Appleton College in Massachusetts. *Elizabeth Costello* is the alter ego of J M Coetzee. She is giving lectures on animal rights, treatment of animals in animal farming, in the zoos and also by the scientists in the lab. *Costello* is a strict vegetarian and thinks that the desire to become one came from the desire to save her soul. Same is true about Coetzee and so we can guess that he also thinks it is very moral to be vegetarian and hence very immoral to eat meat, especially in an industrial society.

The author *Elizabeth Costello* has very strong opinions about the things that go on in the world. She is very concerned about the farming of animals and is not happy at all at the way they are treated. And she does not make an effort to hide her opinions, something which her son finds difficult to digest. And her son is not the only one who has problems with her harsh and condemning opinions. The views of *Costello* are Coetzee's own view. *Costello* thinks that the way the industrial society treats animals like chicken, cattle and other animals is in no way different from the way the Jews were treated by the Nazis in and during the Second World War.

In fact, what Coetzee does is to hide his extreme opinions behind a veil of fiction. Not unnaturally it draws criticism that this is nothing but escaping from the intellectual responsibility of owning up what one says. Coetzee calls them meta-lectures, something which goes beyond the common act of lecturing. But it can also be portrayed as concealing one's position from scrutiny. He is putting an extreme and intolerant critique, full of

accusatory arguments, without having ever to take full intellectual responsibility for it, as when someone tries to draw him into a debate over what he said, he simply says that it is all fiction.

Elizabeth Costello, as mentioned before is just an alter ego of J M Coetzee. Coetzee won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2003, just before writing Elizabeth Costello and Costello too has won the Nobel Prize in Literature, one month before the events of the book transpire. Elizabeth Costello feels her age both mentally and physically. She is mentally fatigued because she is constantly troubling about thoughts on life and death and art. She has dedicated her life to these meditations. Similar is true about Coetzee if we consider that particular time of the year.

Both Coetzee and Costello are undergoing the transition from the middle age to old age. It is also an end of sexuality and fulfilling relationships for both of them. It may even be the end of writing as both of them feel that they are past their prime in writing. Costello is asking more fundamental questions about life, existential in nature and so is Coetzee in real life. Costello is weary of going to awards ceremonies, lectures, meeting researchers researching on her works, reflecting the feelings of Coetzee.

So, Coetzee has managed to air his concern about how animals are treated and also how he is feeling about, life, death, art and existential view of life through Costello, again dressing his non-fiction in the veil of fiction.³

The chapters of the 'novel' are called as lessons and so in the second lesson, The Novel in Africa, she meets an old acquaintance on a ship cruise to Antarctica, an African writer Emmanuel Egudu. Both of them are on the ship in order to give a course of lectures to the audience. Egudu has a critique of Africa and African novelists. He thinks that Africa has always had an oral culture and so no matter how hard the modern African writers try they will never be able to write a truly African novel. He says that there are so many African novelists around but not a representative African novel.

Egudu expresses that the African sensibility is inherently opposed to the private act of reading and is essentially a celebration of public act of oral recitation.⁴ Costello hates the writer and his views on everything African, showing that Coetzee does not like this view of African novel and writing. He does not think that it is impossible to write an African novel; he thinks that it is just that not enough efforts have been made so far in that direction. And again, he manages to dress it up all in fiction.

The fifth lesson of Elizabeth Costello, *The Humanities in Africa*, is a critique of the Christian aid and missionary activity in Africa. Africa was less than 10% Christian just 150 years ago and now it is around 45% Christian.⁵ Christianity has managed to convert most of the native religions and hence has resulted in destroyed the tribal and ethnic patterns of the local cultures.

Christianity however poses as a benign force in Africa, sometimes the only good force in a continent, which it portrays as the battleground of evil. Costello's sister is working in a mission as a nun. She is a doctor and is a believing Catholic, something which Costello is not. Her sister thinks that the disciplines of humanities arose in order to study the Bible, but later on it caught the Hellenic knowledge and was lost in its pagan illusions. So in her view, Hellenism and thus humanities have failed, as they failed to serve Christianity.

Costello does not believe that. She thinks that it is okay to serve people in need but it is not okay to convert them and think of Christianity as the one true religion. The reader can safely assume that the views of Costello on aid and humanitarian work in Africa and Christianity's role in it are the views of Coetzee, as he has again hid his criticism in the veil of fiction.

In the sixth lesson, Elizabeth criticizes Paul West, a real author, for his imagination of cruel tortures by Hitler's hangman of the conspirators in the Stauffenberg plot.⁶ She goes to a conference to criticize that in a fictional account but finds that Paul West himself is sitting there. She manages to do it somehow. This again shows us the views of Coetzee who is now so much against violence that he even opposes its portrayal in fiction or non-fiction, even if it is for the good cause. But Coetzee has himself does it in the past, particularly in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. So the reader is prompted to wonder, is Coetzee criticizing himself and his previous self while criticizing portrayal of torture and cruelty in fiction? Like other pieces of modern fiction, he leaves the reader wondering about it.

In the last lesson, she talks about beliefs and how one can fake or believe in them. The story goes into the realms of fantasy and Costello reaches a portal where she would only be allowed in if she has the appropriate belief. She replies that she has none and she can change into anyone only if she is allowed into the portal. This also reflects over the political beliefs of Coetzee. In a way, Coetzee is declaring that in the summertime of his life and career he no longer has any beliefs and will make do with anything that comes by.

However, when one looks at the works Coetzee has written, the fictional speeches he has given it is hard to believe that Coetzee does not have any beliefs. In the very work that is under discussion in this research paper, we see that Coetzee has very strong beliefs, about

animal rights, colonialism and minority rights. It is very clear from other works of Coetzee that he has Leftist and Left-leaning political beliefs. So then why does he declare in Elizabeth Costello that he does not any? It may be the case that he does not consider the Leftist beliefs as something different from neutral, objective or non-beliefs. It may be that he thinks that having those beliefs is a natural state of being. But Coetzee hides his beliefs well, as he clouds all of his opinions in fiction.

Elizabeth Costello, is a work in which J M Coetzee hides his political beliefs and opinions behind the veil of fiction. For that purpose, he changes the very rules of writing, and breaking conventions he smashes the wall between fiction and non-fiction, merging the two, presenting non-fiction in the mode of fiction and in effect manages to escape criticism while airing strong and politically controversial opinions.

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