

A study of Coetzee's works from the perspective of postcolonial ecocriticism

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ABSTRACT. *Coetzee is the winner of the 2003 Nobel Prize for literature. Coetzee's creation contains many thoughts and attempts on reality, history, philosophy, language, culture and many other aspects. Basically, each of his novels presents its own unique artistic style, and all involve the frontier issues of knowledge and culture at the time. In many of his novels, the description of nature, animals and colonization deeply reflects his ecological view. Based on the specific description of Coetzee's works, this paper explores natural ecocriticism, social ecocriticism involved in his works, and systematically expounds Coetzee's ecological view, in order to better serve the overall ecological civilization construction in natural and social fields.*

KEYWORDS: *Coetzee; ecological view; postcolonial ecocriticism.*

1. Postcolonial ecocriticism

Postcolonial ecocriticism is a newly emerging trend of literary criticism. It draws on and integrates the study of postcolonial literature and ecocriticism to provide a new dimension for the study of literature and the construction of a harmonious and sustainable society. Postcolonial ecocriticism: literature, animals, environment, published in 2010 by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, explains the relationship between literature, animals, and the environment. In this book, the writers believe that ecocritics should include colonial history, race issues, western Empire hegemony and animal research into the study of modern ecological crisis. Postcolonial ecocriticism is a research perspective that is helpful for the complete elimination of hegemonism, the neo-colonial behavior of occupying the territory of other countries, and the pursuit of ecologicalism worldwide. Postcolonial ecocriticism has realized another major shift in postcolonial research and ecocriticism research, and it has also demonstrated the positive thinking and involvement of academic research in issues of human future in the context of globalization.

2. Coetzee and his works

Coetzee is a white South African novelist, literary critic, translator, and university professor. He moved to Australia in 2002 and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003. He is one of the most complex, innovative and intelligent novelists of contemporary writing. Coetzee's creations include thinking and trying on many aspects such as reality, history, philosophy, language, culture, etc. Basically, each of his novels presents his own unique artistic style, and all involve the frontier issues of knowledge and culture. He has made great contributions to solving the stylistic crisis of contemporary novels and injecting new vitality.

Scholars' research on Coetzee and his works mainly focuses on the following aspects: First, the study of the themes and ideological connotation of the novels. Research in this area considers Coetzee in the historical, literary, colonial and political context of South Africa, focusing on ethics, postcolonial theory, narratological theory, and modernism. Second, the study of creative theory and narrative strategy. The experimental features of Coetzee's novels are particularly striking. There are almost no two novels with the same style. Such unique creative style and narrative methods have attracted scholars to study his works in depth. Third, Coetzee's comparative study with other writers. This type of research puts Coetzee and his works in a global perspective, and compares and categorizes them with other world-renowned classic writers. It fully illustrates the seriousness and high quality of Coetzee's works.

The ecological consciousness contained in Coetzee's works is rarely involved in the research. Although Coetzee is not an ecological writer, his works are full of concerns about the crisis of human existence and ecological crisis. In his novels, there are questions about the weak groups, animals and plants, and the perplexity of human existence, reflecting a strong sense of social responsibility and ecological responsibility. This paper attempts to reread the text from the perspective of postcolonial ecocriticism, which is of great academic value to show the ecological view of Coetzee's literary works.

3. The basic elements of the formation of Coetzee's ecological view

During the growth of a person, the influence of the environment on personal temperament will have an important impact, and the formation of the writer's ideology will be affected by the personal temperament of the writer. Coetzee's personal growth environment and experience are the foundation of his ecological view.

3.1 The growing environment of racial discrimination and cultural conflict

From Coetzee's autobiographical novel *Boyhood*, we can learn about his personal growth environment and social atmosphere. His early life experience made Coetzee keenly aware of the outside world, especially the conflicts and

contradictions that existed between the parents, all of which greatly affected Coetzee. In the work of *Boyhood*, the protagonist often becomes deeply intertwined with the panic and contradiction because of the parents' repeated quarrels of life chores. It is trivial to the daily thought that in the daily life, mothers will be constrained by their father's traditional thoughts when buying some daily necessities for their daily needs. Mother was eager to break free of the shackles, which caused great pressure and pain to the boy. The different cultural backgrounds of parents make them more misplaced in their racial identity. The impact of racial culture made it difficult for him to establish his own and strong sense of belonging from an early age. His growth experience also shaped Coetzee's innate ability to speak with suspicion and resistance to all power. Open-minded thinking and diversified cultural perspectives have gradually formed since Coetzee's youth, and criticized anthropocentrism for the lack of morality and humanity in the bloodshed and oppression of nature, which made life in nature miserable. He wanted to establish an ideal ecological environment in which all things coexist in the world, so as to lay the foundation for Coetzee to form his exclusive ecological concept.

3.2 The emotional memory of integrating and loving nature in childhood

Coetzee's grandfather, Gert Coetzee, bought a farm in Koups in 1916. Coetzee went to the farm for the first time at the age of four. The farm was a witness to his happy hour. The life he experienced on the farm and the nature he came into contact with make him naturally realize the charm of nature and the value of life, and at the same time make his body, mind and spirit find a valuable home. The emotional memory formed in Coetzee's character runs silently throughout the entire process of his creation, and the vivid style and personality characteristics conveyed from his novel are vivid illustrations. Although the novel *Boyhood* generally does not reflect a bright emotional tone, the description of farm life in it expresses a positive and clear intention. The vast farm is full of all things and full of vitality. On this farm, it becomes Coetzee's catharsis of emotion and soul. Coetzee's love of the farm is from the heart, not deliberately catering. It is innocent nature. In the life and experience of the farm, Coetzee was not interested in the busy farm work, but in favor of everything on the farm. Everything in Coetzee's farm is alive and well worth loving. In *Boyhood*, he wrote: "*Voelfontein is a kingdom in its own right. There is not enough time in a single life to know all of Voelfontein, know its every stone and bush. No time can be enough when one loves a place with such devouring love.*"

In *Life & Times of Michael K*, K suffered from poverty and hunger. While he was listening to another patient's nagging, in his own mind "*K listened to the birds in the trees and tried to remember when he had known such happiness.*" In Coetzee's works, birds become a symbol of spirituality, which can bring infinite vitality and arouse people's sincere feelings. People and birds should keep ingenious contact naturally, coexist and get along harmoniously.

Thanks to his personal experience in the countryside, Coetzee can feel the unique and irreplaceable spiritual comfort and aesthetic feeling brought by nature. He believes that the complex emotional experience passed to nature by humans is

rooted in his sensitive, melancholic, and changeable mind, and further stimulates his creative inspiration. In real life, Coetzee is a vegetarian, because he has different feelings for the natural creatures. He does not kill, and follows the imprint of harmony and coexistence in heart. All of this became a direct source of Coetzee's ecological consciousness.

4. Ecocriticism in Coetzee's works

4.1 Natural ecocriticism

Coetzee is a typical writer with inner conscience. In his masterpieces *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Disgrace*, *Life and Times of Michael K*, and *The Lives of Animals*, he described the destruction of human beings and their impact on nature. The killing of animals was bloody and slammed at the values of anthropocentrism.

In *Waiting for the barbarians*, the outbreak of the anti-colonial war of the barbarian tribes indicates that the ecological disaster of this oasis is inevitable. Before the colonists came, there were oasis everywhere, and the lake was rich of water plants. "There are old folk alive among them who remember their parents telling them about this oasis as it once was: a well-shaded place by the side of the lake with plenty of grazing even in winter." However, in order to occupy the colonies and promote the colonial process, "we have reclaimed land from the desert and built irrigation works and planted fields and built solid homes and put a wall around our town." And the result is described as follows, "Every year the lake-water grows a little more salty." In order to defend the barbarians, they decided to build a defensible line. "So they have fired the brush. With the wind blowing from the north, the fire has spread across the whole shallow valley. I have seen wildfires before. The fire races through the reeds, the poplars flare up like torches. Animals that are quick enough – antelope, hare, cat – escape; swarms of birds fly out in terror; everything else is consumed." "They do not care that once the ground is cleared the wind begins to eat at the soil and the desert advances." These ruined natural scenes show that the colonial war has completely affected the natural ecological environment of the colony.

In *Life and times of Michael K*, the devastation caused by the war was more obvious when K was on his way to the countryside. "Leafless vineyards stretched before and behind." "He moved deeper into the orchard. Everywhere was evidence of neglect." When he really saw the decline of Visagie Farm, all his fantasies about his hometown were shattered. "The shutters were closed and a rock-pigeon flew in at a hole where one of the gables had crumbled, leaving timbers exposed and galvanized roof-plates buckled. A loose plate flapped monotonously in the wind. Behind the house was a rockery garden in which nothing was growing. There was no old wagonhouse such as he had imagined, but a wood-and-iron shed, and against it an empty chicken-run with streamers of yellow plastic blowing in the netting-wire." This is in sharp contrast to the beautiful hometown Michael's mother recalled. The long-term war has already destroyed the harmonious and beautiful hometown and country, and the original beauty has disappeared.

In *The Lives of Animals*, Coetzee described the miserable situation of animals under human's maltreatment, which effectively depicts human's ruthlessness and indifference to animals and ecology. The penguins described in Coetzee's novel are killed by random sticks and thrown into the hot iron pot. The violent human beings will not feel self reproach and shame for their actions, but will further destroy the penguins.

4.2 Social ecocriticism

Disgrace is a very good novel written by Coetzee in 1999. The novel is about David Lurie, a 52 year old white professor in South Africa, who was expelled from the academic world for having an affair with a female student. He went to live on his 25-year-old daughter Lucy's farm, but he was unable to communicate well with her. He had to deal with people who were previously dismissive and do jobs that he didn't want to do before. Soon, the farm was robbed by black people, the daughter was raped by black people, and finally became the wife of a black person. The harshness of each piece in the novel is fascinating by chance and surprise.

In the post apartheid era, there are many social contradictions in South Africa, such as land ownership disputes, ethnic conflicts, violent crimes, police incompetence and white people's survival crisis. Racism makes white people always in the center of rights and discourse, while black people appear as a backward and ignorant image of the other. Therefore, black people have a natural hatred for the White regime and the white people and their descendants. Lurie, who had received western civilization education, could not accept the fact that "the center status of white people has collapsed". His prejudice against black people and his sense of superiority as a white person made him unable to bear his daughter's black friends. When his daughter was gang raped by black people, as a once decent person, he felt his powerlessness completely. Being gang raped is a miserable experience for white girl Lucy, but also an exciting revenge for black people. Racism has greatly changed society and human nature.

Waiting for the barbarians is one of Coetzee's most influential works. Through a virtual Empire, a virtual history, he made up a series of stories to express his thoughts. Coetzee presented the colonial aggression of the Empire in the form of a fable to the readers. While showing his sympathy for the weak, concern for the future and destiny of mankind, and opposing colonial violence and torture, Coetzee also criticized the huge damage caused by the racial colonial war to the ecological environment. In the novel, the protagonist, the old magistrate, is sympathetic to the "barbarians", and he sent the barbarian girl to her own tribe. After Colonel Joll's arrival, he opposed the war against the barbarians. But he was powerless. He was ashamed of himself, because he was a member of the Empire and a complicity in cruel acts of war. After he was tortured, in prison, he also doubted the correctness of his benevolence towards the barbarians.

Blinded and guided by the rumors of the Empire, the people in the town imagined the fishermen and nomads as barbarians who would come to their homes

to smash, rob and set fire to their house. When the prisoners were brought back, they even “*press forward to take a turn or simply watch the beating from nearer*”, and they became a group of numb spectators and a group of onlookers. When the old magistrate was charged for the crime of treason with the enemy, no one defended him, and played him like a “monkey.” Town dwellers lost their self through lies and violence, and social relations were greatly damaged. This also fully shows the social and historical evils and hegemonic logic of colonialism.

5. Conclusion

The ecological view in Coetzee’s literary works is not unchangeable. It is a very three-dimensional and complex system. This has certain reference significance for the development of real society, and is worthy of further research. As a responsible and conscientious writer, Coetzee’s ecological view reflected in his works enlightens us to use natural resources in a controlled and planned way and build a harmonious and sustainable society from a holistic perspective.

Acknowledgements

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