

Review and Prospect of the Research on Coetzee's Works

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ABSTRACT. *South African writer Coetzee is the winner of the 2003 Nobel Prize for Literature. His works have unique artistic characteristics and rich ideas. This paper aims to sort out the overall situation of Coetzee research and the key aspects of Coetzee research, point out the problems in Coetzee research, and propose a feasible new research direction.*

KEYWORDS: *Coetzee, review, ecological view, narrative strategy.*

1. Introduction of Coetzee

John Maxwell Coetzee is a white novelist, literary critic, translator and university professor in South Africa. He moved to Australia in 2002. He is the first writer who twice won the Booker Prize, the highest prize in British literature. In 2003, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. He is one of the most complex, innovative and intelligent novelists in contemporary writing. Coetzee's creation includes thinking and trying 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 cutting-edge issues of knowledge and culture, making great contributions to solving the stylistic crisis of contemporary novels and injecting new vitality.

2. Review of Coetzee's research in China

Before Coetzee won the Nobel Prize for Literature, there were few studies on him and his works in China, only occasionally mentioned in some common sense introduction materials, and translations about the names of Coetzee and his works were different. The first paper in China to study Coetzee's work is Wang Lili's *The Decline of Colonialism: A Review of the 1999 Booker Prize-winning Novel Disgrace*, which introduces the content and ideas of the novel, and reveals the inevitability of the consequences of colonial rule. Zhang Chong and Guo Zhengfeng published *The Cost of Crossing the Boundary: An Interpretation of Coetzee's Booker Prize Novel Disgrace*, pointing out that *Disgrace* shows multiple cross-boundary among individuals, civilizations, cultures and social forms. After Coetzee won the Nobel

Prize for Literature in 2003, the interest of Chinese scholars of studying this neglected contemporary literary master was aroused rapidly. After more than ten years of translation and research, research on Coetzee and his works in China has formed a situation of numerous participants and multiple perspectives. The research in China mainly focuses on the following aspects.

2.1 Postcolonial research

Due to Coetzee's identity of a descendant of the colonists, the postcolonial features in his works have become one of the hot spots in the study of his works in China. Gao Wenhui's book, *Coetzee in the context of postcolonial culture*, explains in detail how Coetzee created his works in the context of postcolonial culture to solve the problems between history and the present, between history and novels. Cai Shengqin's paper, *Deconstruction of Myths and Self-anatomization: On Coetzee's Contribution to Post-colonial Theory*, reveals Coetzee's literary thoughts in the context of post-colonialism: the colonized and the descendants of the colonists are both the objects harmed by colonialism, and they are in the process of cultural choice and confusion. Wang Ni and Xiang Tianyuan's paper, *The Image of the Subaltern in Coetzee's Novel: From the Perspective of Post-colonial Theory*, argues that Coetzee tries to break the dictatorship of historical writing through literary creation and reproduce the richness and diversity of "marginal culture".

2.2 Narrative theory research

In order to deeply analyze the literary practice of Coetzee and accurately grasp the dialogism in his novels, some scholars apply the theory of narratology to interpret Coetzee's works. In *Feminist narrative perspective of Coetzee's novel Foe*, Han Ruihui pointed out that Coetzee questioned the classics and criticized the oppression of women by the patriarchal discourse system. Duan Feng published his book *A Challenge to Historical Discourse: An Exploration of Coetzee's Four Open and Dialogic Fictional Narratives*, in which he analyzed four Coetzee's books from narrative tense, narrative person, narrative perspective, and the overall structure. He analyzes the complex relationship between Coetzee's works and historical reality and historical discourse.

2.3 Diasporic identity research

In recent years, diaspora literature has become one of the hotspots of cross-cultural research. When intellectuals fled to other places and are separated from their homeland geographically, although they strive to integrate into the mainstream culture of the country they live in, they cannot avoid the rootless weightlessness. The national cultural memory of the home country is mixed with foreign languages, nationalities and cultures, forming a new cultural discipline "Diaspora Literature". For most of his life, Coetzee drifted between different countries, and he was always uneasy between his home country and other countries. His multiple cultures made

him swing in the cracks. His multiple identities and past experiences are often revealed in his works, giving his works unique cultural elements and cultural perspectives. In her dissertation *Foreigner Forever—on Postcolonial Diaspora Perspective in J.M. Coetzee's Writing*, Wang Jinghui analyzed the influence of Coetzee's diaspora status on his writing strategies, and explained the perspective and significance of the method of transcendental otherness formed in the process of his diaspora. In *The Love of the Diaspora—an Analysis of Coetzee's Slow Man*, Wang Chengyu pointed out that Coetzee revealed universal social problems in his works, especially diaspora's identity, cultural and psychological belonging. In *J.M. Coetzee's Diasporic Writing and Cultural Connotations*, Du Wenhui believed that Coetzee's works presented the style of diaspora writing and had the cultural characteristics of escape and marginalization.

2.4 Postmodernity research

Postmodernity is a kind of social and cultural trend of thought in 1970s. Its main feature is deconstruction. It aims at releasing the control and depression suffered by people, pursuing the maximum freedom of life and thought. For the postmodernity embodied in Coetzee's works, scholars in China have also made corresponding research. Qin Haihua, in *Expanding the limits of novels and seeking for new themes — looking at Coetzee's post-modernism novel view from the perspective of Slow Man*, argues that Coetzee pays attention to the survival dilemma of ordinary people in the post-modern society. In her master thesis *Postmodernism Reading of J.M. Coetzee's Fiction In the Heart of the Country*, Hu Huizhen states that Coetzee's works reflect the postmodern diversity in the process of personal redemption, cultural redemption and historical redemption.

Other scholars in China have also carried out research in terms of comparative perspective, novel polyphony and intertextuality. Liu Hong and Cai Shengqin published their paper *Coetzee, and Confession and Redemption in Dostoevsky's Novels: A Comparative Study on the Basis of Intertextuality*. From the perspective of intertextuality, this paper studies the novels of both Dostoevsky and Coetzee from the perspective of intertextuality, analyzes Kelova consciousness and the instability of polyphony, betrayal, confession and intertextuality, together with the distortion of truth and the way to redemption, and the profound theme of reconsideration to search the way of redemption can be revealed.

3. Review of Coetzee's research out of China

Coetzee has long been recognized by scholars and research circles out of China. In the 1980s, there were monographs on Coetzee research published, such as Teresa Dovery's book: *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* (1988) and Allen Richard Penner's book: *Countries of the Mind: the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee* (1989), which explored the allegory narrative and spiritual pursuit in Coetzee's novels. Scholars conducting their research on Coetzee and his works mainly focuses on the following aspects.

3.1 Theme and connotation research

Research in this area puts Coetzee in the historical, literary, colonial, and political context of South Africa, focusing on ethics, post-colonial theory, narratological theory, and modernism. *A Story of South of Africa: J.M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context*, published by Susan Gallaher in 1991, puts Coetzee's work in the historical and political context of South Africa, dissecting the close connection between ideology and language. *J.M. Coetzee and The Ethics of Reading*, published by Derek Attridge in 2005, analyzes Coetzee's works from the perspective of literature and ethics, and discusses such ethical issues as responsibility, confession, trust and betrayal as well as questioning the truth in his works. Others in this regard include Mark Manthuray's *On the Scared in African Literature: Old Gods and New Worlds* (2009), and Neimneh Shadi's *J.M. Coetzee's postmodern corpus: Bodies/texts, history, and politics in the apartheid novels, 1974-1990* (2011), etc.

3.2 Creative theory and narrative strategy research

The experimental characteristics of Coetzee's novels are particularly striking, and there are almost no two novels with the same style. Such unique creative style and narrative techniques attract scholars to conduct in-depth research on his works. In the book *J.M. Coetzee and the Problems of Literature*, Ogden Benjamin traces the evolution of Coetzee's thinking concerning literary form in the non-fiction he wrote between 1963 and 1984. During the first two decades of his career, Coetzee completed a Master's thesis on Ford Madox, a doctoral dissertation on Samuel Beckett, and numerous papers on topics ranging from quantitative stylistics, to linguistics, to classical rhetoric. Although Coetzee's novels have become among the most widely studied contemporary fiction in the world, his earliest writing about literature has been widely ignored. Ogden Benjamin argues that in neglecting Coetzee's early work on literary form scholars have neglected much of his most important thinking concerning both the nature of the novel as a literary genre and literary form itself. If Coetzee's novels are important in large part because of how they rethink the conventions of fiction, then it is critical to understand that his novels are extensions of the thinking he did as a doctoral candidate in linguistics and literature, and as a professor. This kind of research generally do not focus on a specific work, but through the excavation of narrative means to explore the narrative motivation, that is, the narrative philosophy of Coetzee.

3.3 Comparative research 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, which fully illustrates the seriousness and high quality of Coetzee's works. Some people think that the literary works created by diaspora writers are the real world literature. In her dissertation *The Rhetoric of Posthumanism in Four Twentieth-century International Novels* (1998), Lidan Lin compares Coetzee's *Foe* with the novels of

Forster, Beckett and Congwen Shen and discusses the opposition between the self and the other in the works. In the paper *Imagining Justice: The Politics of Postcolonial Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, Julie McGonegal compares Coetzee's works with other writers and reveals their differences in expressing forgiveness and reconciliation between races, and considers these writers aspiration for future democracy. Other studies include: Susan Pearsall's *Aestheticized politics in the work of Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee* (1998), and Elizabeth S. Anker's *World literature, narrative ethics, and the discourse of human rights* (2007).

Through the above literature review, it is found that the current research on Coetzee's postcolonial cultural context is the mainstream, and there are also relevant research on identity, ethical thoughts, subjective dilemmas, political positions, narrative strategies, literary awareness, comparative horizons, etc., but there are few research on the relationship between Coetzee's literary works and ecological outlook. There are two main problems in the previous research of Coetzee and his works. First, the research perspective is slightly narrow. In the past, most researchers interpreted Coetzee's works from the perspective of his South African background and postcolonial or a certain theme. It is worth noting that Coetzee is not only a novelist, but also a translator and literary critic. In the future research, scholars can find a breakthrough from Coetzee's view of literature and art and academic background. Second, the research text is relatively concentrated. So far, most of them have studied only several novels, such as *Disgrace* and *Waiting for the barbarians*. The other works are not received enough attention.

4. A new research perspective: ecologism research

Coetzee is a typical writer with inner conscience. Although Coetzee is not an ecological writer, he has paid attention to the crisis of human survival and ecology in his works. In the books, there are questions about the weak groups, animals and plants, as well as the perplexity of human existence, reflecting a strong sense of social responsibility and ecological responsibility. Coetzee's works explore the ecological environment crisis, civilization, ethnic bias and loss of human nature caused by human wanton destruction and plundering of natural resources, as well as the crisis of social ecology and the crisis of individual spiritual ecology under material desire. A close reading of Coetzee's works is helpful to a thorough understanding of Coetzee's ecological view. Scholars can carry out research on the following aspects. First, the study of the ecological holism of Coetzee's novels. We can concretely understand the multiple crises revealed in the books and the survival confusion encountered by modern people under these crises. Second, animal research dimensions of postcolonial ecological criticism. Through literature retrieval, reading and comprehensive research, we can master the thinking and theory of using postcolonial criticism to solve the modern ecological crisis, and use the theories, and concepts of different disciplines, literature and literary criticism to explore the specific historical, social, political and cultural context of animal images, animal scenes, the relationship between animals and human rights, and the deep connotation contained in the works. Third, colonial hegemony under the meaning of animals.

The issue of race is a permanent theme in Coetzee's post-colonial novels. We can deeply study the narrative method of highlighting racial disputes with animal images in Coetzee's post-colonial criticism context and rethink the nature of human colonial hegemony under the lie of "civilization" and the destruction of humanity to the entire ecosystem. Fourth, animal rights under humane care. Coetzee's concern for the living environment of animals and their lives cannot be separated from humanistic care. Under the care of the humanistic spirit, extending rights to animals is a major theme in Coetzee's novels. Scholars can start from Coetzee's works, feel Coetzee's love for animals, and feel that Coetzee gives his protagonist an attitude of awe in life to pay attention to animals, accurately express animal emotions, and give animal care and animal rights.

5. Conclusion

Coetzee is a writer with profound thoughts. His works explore history and reflect reality, which has important research significance. The ecological view reflected in his works is concrete, systematic and complete. He awakens people's reflection on ecological integrity through the natural ecological disaster, the survival plight of vulnerable groups and races, and the displacement of human spirit described in his works. He also enlightens people to exploit and use natural resources in a controlled way, pay attention to the internal repair of social and spiritual system, so as to return to ecological health and grow, survive and live in a harmonious natural, social and spiritual atmosphere.

Acknowledgements

This paper is supported by the Philosophy and Social Science Research Program in Heilongjiang Province (No. 19WWE296).

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