



RESEARCH ARTICLE

COLONIAL HERITAGE AND RACISM IN *BOYHOOD* BY COETZEE JOHN MAXWELL

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ABSTRACT

Colonisation has deeply impacted African identity, as it led to the distortion of indigenous cultures, and practices. The legacy left during that period, known as colonial heritage, has fostered the issue of race. Thus, racism appears as a strategy used by the colonizer to subjugate the colonized. Ultimately, Coetzee's characters in *boyhood* are victims of marginalisation in schools and at work. This article attempts, by the means of post-colonial theory and critical race theory, to examine colonial heritage and racism through ideological state apparatuses. It shows how colonisers have settled a system of rule that has shaped African identity and culture. Thereby, colonial heritage distorts and disgraces African's identity and culture through a clear-cut distinction between blacks and whites in South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Colonisation has been marked by intense periods of white exploration and domination in Africa to such an extent that this has occasioned blacks' subjugation. Following this time of unrest, many are the authors who tackle themes related to colonisation and its impacts on Africans. Among them, we have recourse to John Maxwell Coetzee whose literary outputs explore issues such as identity, colonialism, human suffering and racism. In such a way, the present article throws light on colonial heritage and racism in *boyhood* by Coetzee. It focuses on colonial heritage as a determinant factor in the shaping of the discussion about race. To preclude any misunderstanding, it is of great importance to define the key terms. Racism involves the idea that race of one group of people is superior and has the right to rule or dominate other people. Regarding colonial heritage, it refers to ideological state apparatuses of the colonial time that still exist and haunt people. Ideological state apparatus is a key concept developed by Louis Althusser which refers to the body of institutions, educational, cultural, religions and communications that shapes beliefs, values, and consciousness to maintain colonial power. Being so, these ideologies are incarnated through education, religion, and media establishing racial hierarchies by creating racialised categories. These apparatuses as theorised by Althusser, tends to set inequalities and subordinate the colonised peoples. The institutional systems inherited during colonial period that occasioned racial marginalisation, benefit colonisers. In Coetzee's novel *Boyhood*, colonial heritage is marked by

western apparatus that is inherited from colonial time. Though being in post-apartheid period, the ideological state apparatuses still undermine people. South Africa keeps on undergoing racism because of the ideological state apparatuses. Simply put, colonial ideologies and racism are intertwined. This study aims at establishing a link between colonial heritage and the question of race which is its direct consequence through Coetzee's *boyhood*. In the same vein, we intend to demonstrate that colonial heritage has much contributed to distort Africans culture and identity which results in blacks' subjugation. All things considered, colonial heritage through ideological state apparatuses has created two kinds of individuals. The whites who are the privileged race and endowed with intellectual capacities and the blacks, the underprivileged ones, taken as savage and uncivilised. South Africans are denied access to any form of religion apart from Christianity. White religion is promoted as the one through which colonisers can accomplish their mission of domination. Black religion is viewed as savage and disgraceful. It is crucial to note that Coetzee's characters in *boyhood* are victims of the inherited ideological state apparatuses causing racism. The character of John is a clear illustration. In fact, he is refused access to white school because of racial hierarchies. This marginalisation is due to the fact that he is from the black community and does not belong to Christian religion. To control the effectiveness of the use of the state apparatus in colonies under their domination, colonisers resort to ideological state apparatuses like school, Christianity and media. Blacks are not allowed to go to the same school

attended by whites. This can be evidenced in *Boyhood* where John has difficulty to find a school in Cape Town because of his origin. When it comes to change school, he is asked questions about himself and his father. He is simply refused access to schools attended by whites. To reach that objective, postcolonial theory will be used to decode and examine this work. The theory fits in this study because it deals with post-colonialism and its effects on Africans. And the subject under discussion is the concept of racism which is much discussed in post-colonial societies. For a better understanding, our work is divided into three major parts. The first part deals with western school and coloured marginalisation. It focuses on the way colonisers use school to marginalised and dominate black people. The second part is about Christianity and marginalisation. Religion has become a means of marginalisation of Africans. This aspect is perceived at school and also through Christianity. As for the third part, it throws light on media and indigenes' cultural distortion. Medias play an outstanding role in the distortion of Africans culture and practices.

Ideological state apparatuses as instruments of racial marginalization

In fact, ideological state apparatus is a postcolonial key concept coined by Louis Althusser which made the economic exploitation of the colonialism appear natural and just by embedding racial subordination in the fabric of society, normalising inequality and limiting access to opportunities for non-white communities. It is used by Althusser to testify the controversial relation and power dynamic between the colonised and the colonizer. Considering this concept, Althusser alludes to the body of institutions—educational, cultural, religious, and communications—that shape the popular class' values, beliefs, and political ideas to legitimise and reproduce the conditions of production. To be more specific, ideological state apparatus refers to western school education, religion, politics, and media used by the State government. This ideology has a powerful impact on colonised peoples because it advertently reinforces colonial systems and indoctrinate people by fostering "false consciousness" and acceptance of social hierarchies making inequality seem natural. Furthermore, the objective behind this system is to maintain their dominance and have total control over colonised. In *Boyhood*, the post-apartheid period is full of western apparatuses. Though being in the post-Apartheid period, South Africans keep on undergoing racial discrimination and hegemony because of the inherited apparatuses. The oppressive and hegemonic functions of such ideological state apparatus are given credence by Vincent B. Leitch (2001, p. 14) in the following terms:

Hegemony designates the continuous ideological domination of all classes by ruling class through such nonviolent stabilizing and consensus-building institutions as church, school, family, the media, the mainstream arts, trade unions, business interests, and technoscientific establishment. These institutions are what the celebrated Marxist theorist Louis Althusser calls 'Ideological State Apparatuses' (ISAs): they manage social instability and conflict to impose and maintain hegemonic order, working for the most part outside of official state power.

Therefore, the ideological state apparatuses set a clear difference between whites and blacks and this situation has caused the enslavement of black people in South Africa. These

oppressive apparatuses still play the same roles in post-apartheid period as it appears in *Boyhood* where Coetzee portrays the blacks as victims of the inherited ideological institutions. As proof, John is victim of whites disgraceful discourse that considers him as barbaric, uncivilised and savage. His mother has to find a new school for him to continue his education. As such, they get an interview at Rondebosch Boys' High. He is victim of marginalisation and undergoes whites politic of domination and enslavement. During the interview, despite the fact that John's report shows that he comes first in Worcester, the headmaster informs him that he will not find it easy in Cape Town:

Through the influence of his mother's brother Lance they get an interview at Rondebosch Boys' High. Dressed neatly in his shorts and shirt and tie and navy-blue blazer with the Worcester Boys' Primary badge on the breast pocket, he sits with his mother on the headmaster's office. When their turn comes they are ushered into a wood-panelled room full of photographs of rugby and cricket teams. The headmaster's questions are all addressed to his mother: where they live, what his father does. Then comes the moment he has been waiting for. From her handbag she produces the report that proves he was first in class and that ought therefore to open all doors to him. (J. M. Coetzee, 1997, p. 135).

At first, it is difficult for John's mother to find a school for his son education. Then as they finally get access to the school of Rondebosch Boys' High with the help of Lance, the brother of his mother, the school headmaster does not test his intellectual capacity before making his mother know the type of school that he can get access to. The headmaster brings shame upon him. He makes John be aware of his belonging to the inferior race. Though John is a mixed race, the headmaster informs him that in Cape Town he cannot be taken as white. In this western community, John is classified as an indigenous Coloured. Therefore, it is difficult for him to benefit from white education. The headmaster in this context informs John about the privilege that is given to whites in Cape Town. He reveals that the Coloured and whites do not have the same privileges as far as school education is concerned. School in such a standpoint considers John as an inferior race and positions the pure English as the dominant race. School keeps on sinking John in a state of marginalisation. What is predominantly worth of interest and denounced here, is the racial hierarchies. John finally gets access to university thanks to his education. There, he keeps on being marginalised. Thus, John is set in the margin by the University authorities while the natives English are given priority and put at a position of superiority in *Boyhood*. In this context of being in the margin and excluded, John experiences once more racial discrimination. Coetzee's narrative is basically denouncing the influence and impact of Europeans' civilising mission on the colonies under their domination. In dealing with this aspect, the novelist is raising the issue of race which is a strategy used by whites to keep blacks under their control and be able to fulfill their civilising mission through their ideological state apparatus.

Indeed, the opening phrase "Once upon a time" evokes the language of fairy tales, suggesting that the belief in cleverness as an all-powerful "yardstick" belongs to a naïve and idealised childhood worldview. As an "innocent child," he assumes that intellectual ability alone determines worth and achievement, reflecting both youthful egocentrism and the meritocratic myth

promoted by colonial education systems, which privilege academic success while masking deeper social inequalities. The shift introduced by “Going to university put him in his place” signals a harsh confrontation with reality. University functions as an ideological and institutional space that dismantles his sense of uniqueness. The phrase “put him in his place” implies hierarchy and discipline, therefore, suggesting that the educational system not only evaluates intelligence but also enforces social ordering, reminding individuals of their relative insignificance within a competitive structure.

Finally, the emphatic repetition “not the cleverest, not by a long chalk” underscores the depth of his humiliation and alienation. Moreover, despite the idea of humiliation and subjugation, this repetition testifies the view that blacks are considered as savage and uncivilised. Consequently, they don’t deserve any consideration. This realisation destabilises his identity, exposing the fragility of self-worth built solely on intellectual superiority. In the broader context of *Boyhood*, the passage reflects Coetzee’s critique of the myths of exceptionalism fostered under colonial and apartheid-era ideologies, where success is presented as individual achievement while structural power relations remain unexamined. Overall, the quotation captures the painful transition from innocence to self-awareness, highlighting how institutions such as the university strip away comforting illusions and force the individual to confront limits, hierarchy, and vulnerability. As a western cultural institution, the university also functions ideologically by promoting the belief—common within white colonial discourse—that, to borrow from B. Ashcroft et al. (2004, p. 210), “culture is whatever people do,” thereby naturalising its own norms and values as universal.

As it can be noticed, whites mostly believe that they are superior to any other race and possess the university culture. They bring the university to teach John that since he does not originate in western culture, he cannot fully master the western culture that this institution incarnates. Following this conception, he is being denied to be the cleverest student. In this condition, westerners bring their educational institutions to be extrinsic racist. Western schools are educational institutions which are built in such a way that they make moral distinction between members of different races because of the belief that the racial essence entails certain morally relevant qualities (K. A. Appiah (1992, pp. 13, 14). Westerners’ believe that white race entails intellectual and moral values that make them consider John as belonging to an inferior race. The dominant aspect raised here is the marginalisation of indigenous people that gives rise to racism. The next aspect to be unveiled is ideological state apparatus that leads to Christianity and marginalisation.

Christianity and Marginalisation: As regards Christianity as an ideological state apparatus, a concept developed by Althusser, means viewing the church and religion institutions as powerful instruments shaping beliefs, values to maintain whites’ dominance. As such, they contribute like school to strengthen their ideology by giving credence to white’s culture embodied by Christian religion. Blacks have been refused access to certain places where whites only can go. From this situation, blacks are victims of any form of marginalisation which goes from individual to societal. To show the racist dimension of western ideological state apparatus, Coetzee

portrays in *Boyhood*, Christian religion that marginalised the non-Christians. The novelist depiction of Christianity in western school complies with R. O. Kamada’s (2010, p. 119) standpoint when he writes: “School and Christianity had combined ... to destroy the traditional social structure”. In Cape Town, in schools and at church, the non-white students are marginalised and overlooked by white people. The Coloured are victims of marginalisation because they are not Christians. Consequently, westerners have no consideration for them and treat them as an inferior race. Referring to John in *Boyhood*, the narrative voices:

THE GREAT SECRET of his school life, the secret he tells no one at home, is that he has become a Roman Catholic, that for all practical purposes he ‘is’ a Roman Catholic. The topic is difficult to raise at home because their family ‘is’ nothing. They are of course South Africans, but even South Africanness is faintly embarrassing, and therefore not talked about, since not all everyone who lives in South Africa is a South African, or not a proper South African. In religion they are certainly nothing. Not even in his father’s family, which is much safer and more ordinary than his mother’s, does anyone go to church. (J. M. Coetzee, 1997, p. 18).

As a matter of fact, during his first day at school in Cape Town, John says he is a Roman Catholic. As the teacher asks about his religion, John answers that he is a Roman Catholic. But it happens that this information cannot be heard at home because in terms of religion his family has no consideration. The lack of consideration of his family in the domain of religion in South Africa is a trope of his Coloured family marginalisation. Because John’s family is not Christian, they are not given consideration by Christian religion. In this consideration, Coetzee’s portrayal of Christianity parallels with A. Césaire’s view when he contends that with colonisation westerners have:

laid down the dishonest equations *Christianity = Civilization, Paganism = Savagery*, from which there could not but ensure abominable colonialist and racist consequences, whose victims were ... the Negroes. (2000, p. 33)

The endowment of Christian religion with racism is strengthened when consideration is given to the religions that John’s teacher presents in the following conversation:

‘What is your religion?’ Asks the teacher. He is sweating, he does not know what to say. ‘Are you a Christian or a Roman Catholic or a Jew?’ she demands impatiently. ‘Roman Catholic,’ he says. (J. M. Coetzee, 1997, pp. 18–19).

Through this quotation, we clearly understand that the teacher is promoting Christian religion and does not give any choice to John. As for John, he suffers from whites’ hegemonic power which places blacks at a position of disempowerment. Western religions are taken as superior and the ones through which John must believe and follow. Through Christianity, whites are raising blacks’ awareness as for the acceptance of their religion which is given priority. This also shows that they are the only religions that the teacher considers worth practicing. Apart from these religions, none traditional religion is to be

considered and practiced. None of the religions presented to him refers to his community. In this wake, he finds himself lost. Therefore, he does not mirror himself in them. To a certain extent, the teacher does not give the opportunity to John to think of another religion. He rather imposes three religions among which he is obliged to choose one. The fact imposing their religion to John shows their power of domination. John is faced with a situation where there is no choice and he is systematically imposed white religion. As John is compelled to choose one of the imperial religions, he mentions that he is a Roman Catholic. Despite this choice, John finds himself being marginalised. The narrator mentions: "When the questioning is over, he and another boy who says he is a Jew are motioned to stay behind; the two who say they are Christians go off to assembly" (J. M. Coetzee, 1997, p. 19). Since John does not choose to be a Christian and because the other boy is not a Christian, the teachers separate them. They reject John and the other boy who do not mention that they are Christian to the assembly. They only conduct of the Christians to the assembly and the non-Christians are left forgotten. Regarding this aspect, Christianity is considered as the privileged one and deserves to be given credence.

Furthermore, the Christian religion marginalises John and all the students in the school who are not Christians. The frequency of the marginalisation brings John to say, "Twice a week the separation of sheep from goats is repeated" (J. M. Coetzee, 1997, p. 19). For John, the non-Christians are the sheep and the Christians are the goats. In African tradition, sheep is said to be not clever. To qualify a person as a sheep, it is to tell that person that he or she is not intelligent. In this condition, Christian religion considers the non-Christians as individual who lack intellectual capacity therefore, are worth to be separated from the Christians. John considers the fact of accepting to be a Roman catholic as a mistake. He thinks about a way to change his answer of being a Roman catholic. He wants to tell the teachers that he is one of them. Such a thought sets him in a dilemma. The narrator mentions, "But he has gone too far now, there is no going back. If he says, I made a mistake, I am actually a Christian," he will be disgraced" (J. M. Coetzee, 1997, p. 21). John is so much marginalised that he attempts to make believe that he is Christian. In order to escape from white control, he advocates Christianity. This shows that by marginalising the non-Christians, their aim is to denigrate them so as to give prominence to white. Christians in such a viewpoint brings, "western institutions to fail to treat black people according to common standards of morality and decency" (C. K. Awuyah, 1998, p. 203).

Media and Indigenes' Cultural Distortion: Among the tools of the ideological state apparatuses that helps establishing colonial dominance in colonies, there is media. Like school and Christianity, media appears as a powerful instrument at the service of the state government. From the aforementioned idea, it plays a significant role in the shaping of cultural distortion. Coined by Louis Althusser, this concept explains how institutions like news, film, and social media mold public consciousness, shaping worldviews, tastes, and behaviors to normalize existing power, often unconsciously, through cultural narratives. Viewing in this perspective, it parallels Coetzee's conception which makes use of the media to reveal the racism of the western ideological state apparatus. Coetzee's representation of media in his fiction under study shares Althusser's vision of this means of communication. Indeed, for Louis Althusser, media influences perceptions, memories, and

understanding of society. It also serves as consciousness of the ruling class by strengthening its power over the colonized people. Apart from this idea, it encourages the dominated class to accept the ideology of the ruling class as natural and common sense. As media, the news bulletin in *Boyhood* is worth mentioning. Standing either as radio or television, the news bulletin is a strong imperial media that serves whites interest and distorts the indigenous culture. At first, it is an apparatus that distorts the culture of the country and uncovers that though being in the period of post-Apartheid, the Empire, specifically the British, still hold the control of the country. The third person narrator discloses:

The news bulletin used once to come from England, before the Nats took over. First there would be 'God Save the King,' then there would be the six pips from Greenwich, then the announcers would say, 'This is London, here is the news,' and read news from all over the world. Now all that is finished. 'This is South African Broadcasting Corporation,' says the announcer, and plunges into a long recital of what Dr Malan said in Parliament. (J. M. Coetzee, 1997, p. 68).

It should be noted that the news as presented in the passage, reveals a lot of falsities about South Africa. This is done with the sole objective to maintain Africans in such a way that they find themselves inferior. The most striking imperial act brought forth and which distorts the country is the use of the British national anthem to address South Africa. In fact, the use of this symbol has a great significance in the shaping of their policy of domination. It brings black people to feel themselves white, hence the idea of indoctrination. The expression "God Save the King" originates in England. It is a national anthem used by the British. Such an anthem is what the news bulletin uses even when giving news about South Africa. This distorts the country at several levels. The distortion at first lies in geographical location. History teaches that South Africa is located in Africa while England is located in Europe. Africa and Europe historically exist as two different continents. Knowing that the British anthem is used to cover the different regions of British nation located in Europe, making use of it to address South Africa is to make believe that South Africa is located in Great Britain while this is not the case. For South African to be covered by the British national anthem, it historically has steps to undergo. It must be located in Europe. Even when it is so, it must specifically be part of the territory of Great Britain. Once that is done, then the news bulletin can make the territory be covered by the wings of the British national anthem. But as long as history does not reveal facts in such manner, the news bulletin's act of addressing the country of South Africa with the British national anthem is an imperial act that gives a false geographical location to South African territory. In such a context, the news bulletin is unveiled as, to borrow from B. Ashcroft et al, "the media by which the ruling class's interest is presented as the common interest and thus comes to be taken for granted" (1998, p. 116).

From what precedes, I could be said that Coetzee's *boyhood* is really concerned with the distortion African's culture through the means of communication incarnated by media. In this condition, the reason of their civilizing mission has nothing to do with the realities Africans are confronted to. The primary objective of the ideological state apparatuses used by colonisers is to legitimize their ideology, ensuing stability by shaping individuals' beliefs to align with their interests.

Indeed, Coetzee does not miss to make use of radio to unveil racism from western ideological state apparatus. The radio is part of what Marxists call ideological state apparatus. They view radio as an instrument of social control rather than neutral information. Media ownership by the ruling class serves their interests, distorting reality and hindering revolutionary awareness. Radio is owned and control by the dominant class, who use it to disseminate ideologies that justify their dominance and make use of inequality to rule. As false consciousness, it fosters distorted views and makes people accept and believe in what they do, rather than challenging their system of enslavement. Moreover, it plays an important role in the distortion of the culture of the indigenes in South Africa. In fact, next to the news bulletin, the radio is considered as a media of cultural distortion and false consciousness. Before any match, as John challenges his father to know the winner between the Transvaal and Western Province, his father answer is that the winner will be "Western Province" (J. M. Coetzee, 1997, p. 110). This idea shows that despite the situation prevailing, the truth will always be at the profit of the imperial power.

Ultimately, it is through the radio that Jack supports western province to the detriment of the local team. It can even be said that the radio alienates Jack, the father of John. The radio brings him to forget about supporting the local team and take the western team as his own one. As such, the radio causes his cultural distortion. The radio in this sense of distorting the traditional culture echoes Tanure Ojaide's standpoint of media when he writes, "globalization is another form of Westernization through new media and migration" (2012, p. 4). This means that globalisation is a pure creation by whites to have total control over the world market and benefit from it. In *Boyhood*, the radio is another form of global media through which western concern is perceived as the concern of all the different communities of South Africa. Western Province is taken by Jack as the country's concern while the local team needs to be supported. The radio in this condition promotes western culture to the detriment of South African local cultures. J. M. Coetzee portrays media in order to show the racist aspect of the ideological state apparatus. In this novel, during the carnage of Sharpeville where the police fire the black South Africans at the benefit of the minority of white people, the narrator voices that "the press is too frightened to come out and say what anyone with eyes in his head can see" (J. M. Coetzee, 2002, p. 37). The press in this standpoint of fear keeps mute to the concern of the black South Africans. The fear of the press to record the truth shows that this media is at the advantage of white people. Because the press fears, it cannot denounce the violence and killings that the whites inflict to the black community. In such a position of being frightened to tell the truth, the press distorts the event as experienced by the black community. While analysing colonial heritage through ideological state apparatuses and racism in such statements of making fear to people, one might understand that racism is due to the distorted view of colonisers who seek to create distinction between individuals for their own profit.

CONCLUSION

Through this study, we can easily understand that colonisation is at the heart of the discussion about racism particularly in South Africa post-apartheid.

Colonisers through the heritage left in the territories under their control has given rise to African's marginalisation and disempowerment. This fact has deteriorated the relation between blacks and whites and racism appears as the immediate aftermath. In a careful analysis of his novel, Coetzee proves that colonial heritage such as ideological state apparatuses of the post-Apartheid South Africa is nothing but racist institutions that serve the interests of imperial powers. In addition, the novelist makes known that the fact of existing in a post-Apartheid period does not bring the institutions to get rid of their ideological function of marginalising blacks in South Africa. On the contrary, the situation still goes on in post-apartheid period. To materialise the racist function of the ideological state apparatuses, the novelist portrays Coloured John who is victim of discrimination at school in Cape Town. As well, the author represents John and the non-Christians to be marginalised during the assembly in St Joseph's school in Cape Town to show the racism of western religion. All these aspects discussed previously, demonstrate that colonialism reinforces white position to the detriment of blacks. And racism appears as the strategy used to reach their goal which is to exert one's dominance.

The study has proved that with Coetzee's novel under study, colonial heritage such as ideological state apparatuses bring about racism. The system applied has permitted to set differences between races. They do exist to serve only the whites and impose their supremacy. In *Boyhood*, John and the non-Christians are marginalised during the assembly in St Joseph's school in Cape Town. The study has unveiled that school is a tool used to marginalise the black community. This aspect has been analysed as Ideological repression. Christianity is part of these numerous instruments of discrimination. It creates doubt in African's mind and strengthens the white's ideology. It has also been demonstrated that the use of media as a means of communication aims to control and set themselves at a position of supremacy, marginalising the dominated class. The depiction of all this blasphemy by the novelist is to bring to the surface the trauma engendered by South Africans. Intrinsicly, the concept of racism is the fact of colonisation in African countries. As a strategy to maintain their power over colonised people, they undertake colonisation which results in blacks' subjugation.

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