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Adelaide: 'The very portal to the abode of the dead' in J.M. Coetzee's *Slow Man*

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Abstract: *Slow Man* (2005) belongs to the category of Australian fiction, the first one after Coetzee shifted to Australia in 2002. The paper offers a reading of a less-discussed novel by Coetzee in light of its Australian setting. It argues that Coetzee's later writings lack a comprehensive representation of place. Specifically, the paper examines whether Adelaide, Australia, is effectively portrayed in *Slow Man* because it is generally observed that Australia fails to emerge in *Slow Man*, even though the main character has lived there since his migration, which suggests that Coetzee attempted to depict a new place but ultimately failed to do so.

Keywords: Australian Setting, toponyms, Adelaide, existential vacuum

Introduction

Australia has figured primarily in Coetzee's late fiction after he migrated to Australia in 2002 and became a natural Australian citizen in 2006, thus putting an end to all the speculations regarding his intentions to leave South Africa. *Slow Man*, *Diary of the Bad Year*, and *Elizabeth Costello*- all these works have Australia as the setting. The present study explores whether Coetzee describes the newly adopted Australian setting more explicitly and significantly (in *Slow Man*) or whether it is just a 'portal to the abode of the dead'. Boehmer believes Coetzee presents Australia very realistically and schematically as his previous home-South Africa, however, one can still argue that the presentation is different but bleak (despite using real toponyms at many places) Regarding the background and the new setting of the novel Melinda Harvey confirms, "For Coetzee in Australia, rendering place becomes an option, not an obligation ---something he had always dreamed of" (30) showing the influence of his precursors Kafka and Beckett that the setting can be often artificial and characterization



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is more crucial. *Slow Man* is a changed novel in terms of its geographical setting, which cannot be ignored. In his review of the story, the Independent newspaper writes that “the setting is the Adelaide suburbs, but it might as well be Copenhagen for all the attention paid to the backdrop”.

In an interview with Tony Morphet, Coetzee once admitted, “I don’t believe in the kind of realism that takes pride in copying the ‘real’ world.” Coetzee’s aversion to giving importance to places in his recent works has made it clear that for him, ‘aural’ tone is more impactful than being visible. This essay agrees with Coetzee’s confession of describing a new place with difficulty.

“One can appreciate and enjoy many geographies, but there is only one that one feels in one’s bones. And I certainly know from experience that I don’t respond to Europe or the United States in the same way as I do to South Africa. And I would probably feel a certain sense of artificial background construction if I were to write fiction in another environment.” Coetzee’s Australian realism, therefore, is more about abstract descriptions leading to a superficial relationship that is being described through the setting. The description of Australia in *Slow Man* is less accessible and believable for the readers because it seems perfunctory and conventional. J M. Coetzee’s Australia in *Slow Man* is not an awkward place like his native country, South Africa, where he always felt uneasy. A drastic difference between the two places is marked by Melinda Harvey, who notes that:

“The characters of South African Novels are locked into hierarchical power relations or ties of responsibility and obligation, be they loathe to them or not, and the plots are, as if accordingly, wounded as tightly as springs’ while the sketchy settings and listless plots of the Australian novels suggest that history and politics are hermetic discourses in Australia that have little to do with the private affairs of its citizens”. (29)

Slow Man is not a much-analysed novel of Coetzee probably because it has nothing to do with Coetzee’s Africanism—which according to Tonje Vold “has been the most influential way of reading and evaluating Coetzee’s novels” (35). For Coetzee, South Africa was always a different country. In his semi-autobiographical work *Youth*, he confirms this by saying, “He would prefer to leave South Africa self behind as he has left South Africa itself behind. South Africa was a bad start, a handicap. An undistinguished, rural family, bad schooling, the Afrikaans language: from each of these component handicaps he has, more or less, escaped” (62). The choice of the right setting was problematic for him, mainly because



he was unable to set his novels anywhere except in South Africa. For him, his Africanness became a burden. In *Youth*, John of South Africa is therefore presented by Coetzee as a melancholic and lonely person, someone who considers writing in South Africa painful. All these reasons could be considered responsible for his migration, making it one of the themes of his next novel.

Adelaide in Slow Man is a 'non-place'

Coetzee's interest in Adelaide and Australia (as he currently resides there) encourages him to make it the setting of *Slow Man*. There are no references to South Africa in *Slow Man*; it takes up Australia as the geographical location and nationality as the subject. It is about a person in exile in a new setting- Paul Rayment, an exile in Australia. There is no decoration in the novel in terms of style and the lives of the characters. Instead, an existential dilemma is seen that every character is going through.

The description in South African works was of unhappiness in personal relationships. Whatever the theme of the novels written in South Africa, the political issues of the country (South Africa) overpowered everything. Coetzee seems to be free from political implications when he writes Australian fiction. As this is the first Coetzeean work that is fully Australian, Coetzee is mainly concerned with the idea of incorporating the real in Australia, though in a vague manner. His setting in *Slow Man* is with a purpose. Elleke Boehmer rightly says, "It is to profess Australianness, to seek a single-minded, full-hearted commitment". (5)

However, the Australia that emerges in the novel becomes a kind of "non-place" because Coetzee's description of the places and characters is not exotic. The names of the places appear as a strange and weird collocation of incoherent places. "The novel's toponyms are signs that transcend the places to which they refer". (Melinda 23) Coetzee's use of place names never suggests anything about Australian history. Though the setting is Australia and the novel tries to explore Australian identity, the real Australia is nowhere to be seen. He has chosen Adelaide because Adelaide provides an ideal setting for the story of lonely Paul Rayment. Coetzee creates a setting that is suitable to depict the plight of the protagonist. In Adelaide, there are no shopping places near Magill Road, making it "an appropriate setting for a catastrophic accident involving a bicycle and a fast car". The evacuated Magill road has been referred to as a 'dozy city that does not provide outlets for all the restlessness' (219) and loneliness. The novel, on the other hand, mentions places that do not exist in Adelaide, such



as Munno Para, Coniston Terrace, and the River Torrens, Rundle Mall, justifying the fact that Coetzee certainly is a master in portraying the unreal as real.

His migration to Australia was seen as an unexpected move because he had always expressed sincere gratitude for the country of his birth. When he wrote his first Australian novel, *Slow Man*, in 2005, Australia appeared as an imaginative prospect, a myth, just a symbol of territory. The protagonist, Paul Rayment, like Coetzee, is an immigrant in Australia. Coetzee adopted a formal approach to Australia while using it as a setting in his later works. He first created fictional author Elizabeth Costello as his first alter ego before physically adopting the identity of an Australian writer as a sort of preparation. For him, content and style are inseparable as he explains in *Doubling the Point*; he believes both are required for “appreciation” (*White Writing*)

Coetzee’s Australia in *Slow Man* has no important and distinct qualities. Magill Road where the accident of Paul Rayment took place is described by Costello as ‘the very portal to the abode of the dead’ (83), a place too much like a graveyard’ (231) Sue Kossew opines that Adelaide’s ‘famously sedate pace may...account for the “slow” in the title’. (63) So there is a clear hint of Australia as a quiet place in the title.

His South African novels always talked about the history of colonialism in South Africa, but there is nothing of this sort in his late novels, which are set in Australia. Marijana tells Paul “In Europe, people say Australia has no history because in Australia everyone is new. Don’t mind if you come with this history or that, in Australia, you start zero. Zero histories, you understand?” (49) Thus there is an escape from the place in Coetzee’s late novels. Harvey again writes that Coetzee’s late novels...attempt “to face directly the one question that truly engages (s) his soul: how to live,” and this project is en train thanks to the escape from a place that Australia has made possible (32)

Coetzee’s dislike for possession of places in his recent fiction

Paula Martín Salván, in her article ‘*Topographies of Blankness in J.M. Coetzee’s Fiction*’, discusses how Coetzee’s distaste for places contributes to some important themes of his novels. Coetzee’s preference to set his novels in unspecified locations seems to invite allegorical readings (Attridge 2004: 40-41; Rich 1982: 71), imagery of blankness, emptiness, barrenness, and ghostliness in the representation of physical space in Coetzee’s fiction. In *Slow Man*, the Australian setting loses its significance because it becomes everywhere as he describes it. From Rayment to Jokics, all are talking about Australia, but as a place of



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immigrants and not as a place that they have chosen to live. D. J. Taylor in his review aptly points out, “The setting is the Adelaide suburbs, but it might as well be Copenhagen for all the attention paid to the backdrop.” Coetzee’s description of people, various locations, and use of real place names creates a kind of confusion, leading to making it appear as a “non-place”. The late novels of Coetzee are masterful responses to the question of whether a Nobel Prize-winning author can write about a new location, including the most barren and desolate places, without making any assertions about the place itself. “Slow Man” is a novel by Coetzee that features a disabled protagonist named Paul Rayment. He lives in a remote and unpopular city in Australia, which makes him an intriguing character for the shy and reclusive author. This book is considered to be one of the best works with a disabled protagonist.

Melinda Harvey sees the absence of a place in *Slow Man* as “No legs means no setting; Paul’s bicycle accident on the first page of the novel activates a waiver suspending the need to render what Zola called “the solid earth on which [the writer’s] characters are to tread” for the rest.

There are many opinions and reviews available for Coetzee’s Australian works that suggest that he is inclined towards frugality and reservedness. From *Dusklands* (1974) to *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), the sense of place in his works has gradually become insignificant. Judith Shulevitz, a reviewer of Coetzee’s works, asserts, “His settings are barren as deserts, even if they’re in cities.” Similarly, Siddhartha Deb opines that “not since *Disgrace*, his farewell to South Africa, has he written a novel that offers the comforting illusion of realism”

Conclusion

Coetzee’s late fiction set itself apart from the usual methods of describing and using geographical settings. *Slow Man*, *Elizabeth Costello*, and *Diary of a Bad Year* are exceptional works because of the uniqueness of their characters and their actions, not the Australian landscape, which is just like any other place on earth. For Coetzee, Australia is just an option, not a compulsion – something that he always dreamt of. In this literary shift, Coetzee progresses as a world writer, a true successor of Kafka and Beckett. His Australian works offer a “cleaning of mind” and “growing detachment from the world” by the self-conscious move of giving less or no importance to the place.



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