



Mehlin, Hans. "J. M. Coetzee delivering his banquet speech." *J. M. Coetzee* – Photo gallery. NobelPrize.org, Nobel Media AB 2021, 27 Feb 2021, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2003/coetzee/photo-gallery/>.

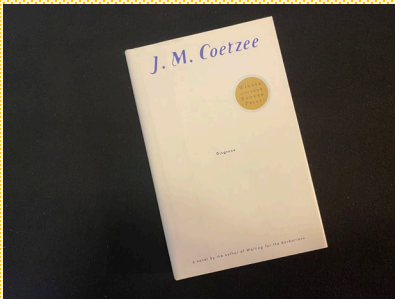


Photo by Eric Meljac



Rape in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* and J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Please note: this project is a work-in-progress and it deals with sensitive issues such as assault on women and systemic racism. Such graphic issues present complications that cannot be fully fleshed out in a single poster.

My research interests hinge on concepts of “the just” manifested in sub-Saharan postcolonial narratives in times after “justice” was meted out by patriarchal, White, European colonial powers in the forms of slavery, murder, genocide, sexual assault, concentration camps, and other atrocities against indigenous peoples. How does one recuperate or return from a crime against humanity, without themselves committing a crime against humanity?—a paradox theorist Jacques Derrida tackles in his work when he says, “Sometimes these events, these massive, organised, cruel murders, which may have been revolutions, great canonic and ‘legitimate’ Revolutions, were the very ones which permitted the emergence of concepts like those of human rights, or the crime against humanity.”

In this work, I am interested in the way two different sub-Saharan postcolonial writers use colonial women’s bodies as symbols of the way colonial violence is expressed through transference. In 1967, under the name “James Ngugi,” Black Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o published his now famous novel *A Grain of Wheat*, which takes place against the backdrop of the Mau Mau Uprising. In that novel, a colonial woman, Dr. Lynd, is raped by native Kenyans a short time prior to the *Uhuru*, or Kenyan independence. But in 1986, Ngũgĩ revises his novel to, as critic Carol M. Sicherman notes, exhibit his “mature understanding of the role of history in African literature and his own role in the rewriting of Kenyan history.” He removes the scene of rape and substitutes that violence for a graphic scene in which Dr. Lynd is tied and gagged while her beloved dog is brutally hacked to pieces before her helpless eyes. Attack dogs signified an extension of colonial territory because they had been historically used for both colonial violence and protection of White bodies from Black bodies. In other words, Ngũgĩ replaces a scene of rape (in an early version) with severe violence against a dog (in a later version)—suggesting a sometimes uncomfortable authorial description of the anger of the colonized against its victimization, which gives rise to the exploitation and brutalization of colonial women, though one that, in Ngugi’s case, he eventually revises in favor of colonial dogs. Women’s violation as stand-in for a nation’s violation is not an uncommon trope. Years later, in his Booker Prize winning novel, *Disgrace* (1999), White South African writer J. M. Coetzee depicts a scene in South Africa wherein the main character, David Lurie’s, daughter Lucy is raped by indigenous South Africans—a scene crucial to the novel because the attack on Lucy results in her speaking *against* her father, asserting ownership of her body, and rendering David Lurie, a White South African, a pariah not only at the university where he once taught, but also within his own small family unit. In this same scene, Lucy’s protective dogs, kept in kennels outside her home, are brutally slain with shotgun blasts. So, too, Coetzee pairs the rape of a colonial woman with violence against an extension of colonial power in the ruthless slaughter of dogs. I am interested in exploring the way both authors articulate the anger against colonial violence as it is transferred onto the bodies of colonial women as symbols of the nation. What this pairing of novels shows is that similar tropes are used to represent decolonization in the fiction of African writers who address these historical movements. The battle of decolonization for these writers takes place over women’s bodies, a troubling notion, as well as through the elimination of a violent threat in the action of killing violent-breed dogs.

Other critics have noticed similar patterns. Looking to several African novels, Obioma Nnawmeka claims that women have a “liminal nature” in Africa, particularly during the postcolonial era, that seems to sanction their sexual assault as a postcolonial victimhood trope. As critic Ania Loomba notes, “from the beginning of the colonial period till its end (and beyond), female bodies symbolise the conquered land.” Such comments suggest that, because of women’s liminality and association with patriarchal possessions, in an effort to assert dominance, or to reflect an internalized patriarchy borrowed from abusive colonization practices, indigenous African men use rape of White women to assert/reclaim dominance over that which the White men have stolen: land, prosperity, and dignity. In these two writings, it is only after such attacks that the women are given “voices” by the authors, suggesting that colonial, White male power is weakening, threatened, and becoming obsolete by making White men helpless to White women, thereby giving the otherwise “voiceless” colonial beings authority over their own bodies and beings—forcing the White men into despair and silence.

Ngũgĩ’s narrative, regardless of the change in the nature of the attack, represents his own countrymen carrying out vicious attacks. Meanwhile, Coetzee risks what will eventually be called racism by the African National Congress, because he portrays Black South African men as rapists, affirming colonial stereotypes of “barbarism.” However, despite these differences in race and contexts, I argue that the results in the narratives achieve similar ends: acts of retribution against the marginalized—even in arguably vicious ways—are instances of decolonization efforts by Black Africans. In Ngũgĩ’s case, Dr. Lynd is forever weakened after her and her dog’s attack (in both versions of the novel), and she is thrown into helplessness in front of John Thompson, a male colonial who runs over a dog as they drive in the countryside at night. Thompson is emotionally and physically vacant and knows no way to comfort a woman who he is responsible for preserving and protecting, thus exhibiting his weaknesses as his own power in Kenya nears its final chapter. Coetzee’s Lucy bears her rapist’s child and agrees to marry Petrus, a Black tenant farmer, relinquishing her rights to her land and body to a native South African, while her father, David Lurie, continues his work shoveling euthanized dogs’ bodies into the crematory at the local veterinarian clinic. The result in both novels is the subjugation of the voiceless under new regimes, which are efforts to drive White men, who do have voices and power, into what Coetzee says in another context “confusion and helplessness” in these rapidly decolonizing lands.



Miller, Shawn. “Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 2019.” Wikimedia Commons. 27 Feb. 2021, [https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ngũgĩ_wa_Thiong'o_2019_\(48139052733\).jpg](https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ngũgĩ_wa_Thiong'o_2019_(48139052733).jpg).

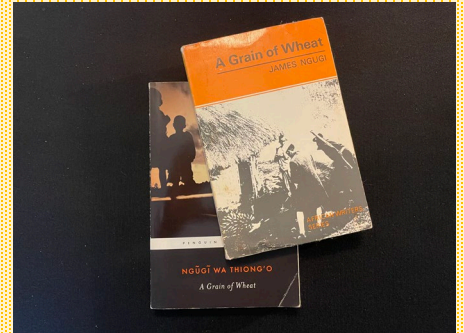


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