On the Violence and Insanity in J.M. Coetzee’s the Master of Petersburg

Ruihui Han
Humanities School, Jinan University, Zuhai, Guangdong Province, China.
E-Mail: hanruihuuh@hotmail.com
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15520/jassh20554

Abstract: There are lots of description and narration in most of J.M. Coetzee’s novels. That is an unique perspective from which he represents the racism in Southern Africa. In The Master of Petersburg, Cotzee mixes up the history and illusion, and retells the life of Dostoevsky, alluding to the violent racial conflict in Southern Africa. The novel uncovers the myth of racism.

Key words: J.M. Coetzee; The Master of Petersburg; violence; insanity

Violence and insanity has been the marginalized factors in literary history, however, in recent years, they become the focus of many literary criticism. In human history, violence and insanity were common which has the considerable impact on many events, because violence can change both the material and spiritual process to a large extent, and insanity is decided by the social or historical process, which related with power intimately. Both violence and insanity are the factors shaped the historical process and social events. Violence and insanity are often combined together, there are many literary works in history represented both the violence and insanity.

Violence is one important factor in J.M. Coetzee’s novel. His works, such as Dusklands, In the Heart of the Country, Waiting for the Barbarians, Life & Times of Michael K, Age of Iron, The Master of Petersburg, are all full of the narrative of description of violence. The violence Coetzee represented in his works includes not only the violence of the white race against black race, but also includes the black race against white race. Violence becomes the special perspective of Coetzee to analyze and investigate of his works. The violence of Coetzee’s works concentrates in the representation of racial conflicts. It is also the irrational phenomenon in Coetzee’s works.

Insanity is also one common factors in his works, and that is a factor to understand Coetzee’s works. The insanity came with the criterion of insanity, which was called ration. Insanity is a marginalized phenomenon in society. However, insanity can be the special angle to investigate history and society. In literary history, insanity is the factor cannot be neglected. From Coetzee’s first novel Dusklands, insanity became common factors represents the special South Africa condition.

The Master of Petersburg is one important novel of Coetzee in that this novel has both the insanity and violence narratives. It narrates the condition of Russian in 19th century, however, the readers would find that the novel is related to South Africa. This novel is one important novel to understand the writing feature of J.M. Coetzee.

The attitude toward and representation of violence and insanity is a key problem in literary history. Sometimes violence is described as the positive and force to change society and history in literary works, and sometimes the violence was represented as the destructive elements for human civilization and humanity. In long history, the insanity has been deemed as the anti-social minds or activities. However, in this day and age, the insanity has been reexamined, for example, Foucault’s research about the insanity renewed the view on insanity.

THE UTOPIA OF VIOLENCE

A number of researches have discuss about the violence of war, which was justified or unjustified (Zhou Yijia & Liu Mingyu, 2013). War is one kind of human violence. The justice or not of such violence are not the objective character of war, but a kind of tools to ferment the anti-war or pro-war passion (Zuo Gaoshan, 2005).

Violence’s justice in some conditions is obscure. For example, in Jiang Guangci’s novels, the violence and justice are connected with each other, even sometimes the justice of violence is plunged into the paradox or the absurd(Wei Chaoyong, 2006) Violence in society can be divided into the
justice and the injustice, but in many cases, violence often is regarded as justice at least by one side of the violence conflict.

The justice of violence is only the result of discourse in such condition. The foot-binding of women had been justified in feudal period of China by social discourse, however, in modern China, it is a kind of injustice violence against women (Yang Xingmei, 1998). The justice of foot-binding of women was caused by the social cultural discourse.

Violence is important topic in Coetzee’s novels. The violence is deemed as the social character and human nature in some of Dostoevsky’s works, so this article will discuss about the common existence of violence in his works. Dostoevsky’s The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee and The Vietnam Project deal with the violence in Vietnam war and colonial activities respectively. Such violence is obvious and abrupt. Nevertheless, the violence in The Master of Petersburg deals with the violence which existed commonly and subtly, and to some extent it is justified in society.

The Master of Petersburg was created on the basis of interweaving Dostoevsky’s experience and his fictional world, especially the novel The Possessed’s content. In the novel The Possessed, Nechaev believes that the utopian world can be achieved by violent terrorism. In the guidance, they assassinate many officials terroristically. In the process, they deny the humanism and admire violence. The Master of Petersburg redescribes the Russian society in 19th century and represents the inner world of the protagonists. Although the novel never mentions South Africa, the readers would be reminded of South Africa in that the violence and insanity in the novels is similar to the situation in South Africa.

In The Possessed, Dostoevsky condemned the terrorism in Russia of 19th century. In this novel, Nechaev wants to create the new world through the violence and committed many crimes. The Master of Petersburg fictions Dostoevsky’s experience and arranges Dostoevsky dialogue and conflict with Nechaev to disclose the illusion of the terrorists. To some extent, The Master of Petersburg becomes a kind of representation of South Africa, because the violence in the novel is similar to the condition of South Africa.

Violence is justified in many cases, although in many cases it is anti-civilization anti-humanism. Especially in some massive social movements, the violence would function in the name of justice and ration. The individual in group would rationalize his or her behave through the group rationalization. With the disappearance of the morality and civilization, some primate whim would be the primary motivation of the individual (Wang Li, 2016) No matter in The Possessed or The Master of Petersburg, violence is the topic. The writer Dostoevsky described and condemned the violence in his novel The Possessed, and Coetzee reflected the violence in Dostoevsky works through his work The Master of Petersburg.

One situation should be noticed in The Master of Petersburg is that the activities of Dostoevsky is fictional, which is different from the real situation of Dostoevsky in 19th century. The real Dostoevsky in history experienced remarriage and had one stepson named Barwell, who was lazy, unreasonable and rude. There were many quarrels in their family because of Barwell. Just as Dostoevsky died, Barwell began to ask around his heritage. The real Barwell did not had the irrational death. He passed away in 1900, in which time Dostoevsky had passed way for 20 years, on the contrary to the description that Dostoevsky investigates the cause of death in The Master of Petersburg.

In The Master of Petersburg, Coetzee described Barwell as the revolutionary and died in his youth in Petersburg of 1869. Dostoevsky gets greatly sorrowful and set from Dresden to Petersburg as soon as he received the news of his son’s death. The real situation in history was that Dostoevsky left Russia with his wife in 1867 in order to avoid the creditor until 1871, when he returned to Petersburg. Coetzee’s description of the death of Dostoevsky’s stepson reminds the readers that the death of Coetzee’s son because of car accident in 1984.

So from above analysis we can find that The Master of Petersburg interweaves the literary image with the reality of history and reshaped the image of Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky was a fantastic revolutionary in his early time, but the suffering in his life rendered him to be a loyal humanist. The novel combined the fictional Dostoevsky, Barwell and Nechaev together successfully.

In The Master of Petersburg, Nechaev advocated revolution enthusiastically, and the axe and blood became the center of his life. He disdained Dostoevsky’s humanism notion and believed that only violence could rebuild a whole
new world. There were also some followers of Nechaev, such as Finnish girl and the landlady, who also mocked the contemporary condition and called for revolution. Their enthusiasm made them like the cold machine without humanity, just as the Russian anarchist Bakunin said in his Catechism of a Revolutionary: “the revolutionary is a doomed man. He had no interests, no feelings, no attachments, not even a name. Everything in him is absorbed in absorbed in a single and total passion: revolution. In the depths of his being he has cut all Linksys with the civil order, with law and morality. He continues to exist in society only in order to destroy it.” “He does not expect the least mercy. Every day he is ready to die.” (J.M. Coetzee, 2004)

However, as for Dostoevsky, he believed that Nechaev etc. were the carriers of the enthusiastic passion and they were not born to be evil. Just as Dostoevsky thought as he conversed with the Finnish girl: “one could take her for a child; but a child in the grip of a devil nevertheless. The devil inside her twitching, skipping, unable to keep still.” (J.M. Coetzee, 2004)

Nechaev believed that violence permeated in Russian society. The chains of violence begins in ministries, and the exchequers, and the stock exchanges, the merchant banks. (J.M. Coetzee, 2004) “The line of force begin there and radiate out in every direction and end in cellars like this, in these poor underground lives.” (J.M. Coetzee, 2004) So he suggested the violence such as incessant assassinations to destroy the current institutions and build the whole new institution. Such actions could even overthrow the god and liberate the angels and ghosts. Besides, “Everyone will go to school again, even the professor. The peasants will be the teachers and the professors will be the students. In our schools we will make new men and new women. Everyone will be reborn with a new heart.” (J.M. Coetzee, 2004)

All the martyrs were worthy for the whole new world. So when the Finnish girl was constrained by policy, the landlady gave her poison in the name of delivering food in order to prevent her surrendered or betrayed the secret. Barwell was both the follower and martyr of Nechaev. So the tenderness and sorrow of Dostoevsky and Nechaev’s coldness and craziness became the obvious contrast. Dostoevsky’s humanism and Nechaev’s revolutionary discourse also formed the dialogue.

In such literary world constructed by Coetzee, almost everyone is involved in the violence. However, almost anyone involved in violence believes the justice of violence and the happy world brought by violence. Even violence becomes the living style of people, because advocator of violence believes that violence would continue in the future world so as to bring out the whole new happy world again.

In the current condition, violence seemingly has the rational precondition. The precondition of violence is the violence. The chain of violence radiates from the governments, ministries and exchequers. Rousseau believed that people should overturn the injustice domination. In The Master of Petersburg, almost anyone wanted to join into the violence.

However, violence would continue if the domination be overturned by violence, because the new world born in violence would have the gene of violence. “Violence becomes history, and history is full of violence.” (Zuo Gaoshan, 2005) Coetzee’s novel The Master of Petersburg is a kind of fable of human history.

Although Dostoevsky does not give the direct comment on violence, it would find that Dostoevsky believed that the revolution could not save the world firmly, because the violence and such corresponding thoughts was only the representation of revolutionary spirit and ideal, and the violence could not disappear after the old social institution was overturned by the violence. The violence would act over and over in the guide of such thoughts, just as Nechaev said: “Revolution is the end of everything old, including fathers and sons. It is the end of succession and dynasties. And it keeps renewing itself, if it is true revolution.” (J.M. Coetzee, 2004) However, the violence and the enthusiastic revolutionary thoughts was rationalized in Russian folk of 19th century. The chaos and corruption rendered the mass had no normal way to attain the right and freedom, so the violence seemed the necessary and effective tool to change the situation and improve the survival condition. The violent revolutionary such as Nechaev burgeoned in the times. They wanted to subdue the God and liberate the angels and ghosts through assassination, however, it was obvious that the idea was utopian. The violence itself was a kind of disaster. Even though the supposed society had been achieved, the violence would also been continued. So the violence could not bring about the real new society, on the contrary, it would repeat the history and bring new disaster.
THE SYMPHONY OF THE INDIVIDUAL INSANITY AND GROUP INSANITY

The boundary of sanity and insanity is blur sometimes. Sanity can be seen as another kind of insanity. There are two reasons for the assertions above. One reason is that the world is in change every moment, so anything in the world is temporary, therefore the sanity and insanity is temporary, and they can be changed in the opinions of people with time flies. Another reason is that anything in the world is relative, so there is no absolute sanity or insanity, therefore, we should not call anything as sanity or insanity absolutely.

There are two kinds of insanities according to the division of insanity’s subjects: the individual insanity and group insanity. The individual insanity is often apparent, because when the individual is insane, he or she would be penetrated easily from the group because of his or her different action or thought. However, if all of people is insane, one would not find the insanity easily because there is no distinctive abnormal action or thought in the group that is different from one another. In the process, the group insanity is rationalized.

In literature history, insanity is an everlasting topic. For example, Don Quijote and Jane Eyre. even in the movie, insanity is also the important topic, the movies such as One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest, The Science of the Lambs, Forrest Gump and A beautiful Mind(Wu Qiaofeng, 2006). The narrative of insanity enriches the literature world, and its meaning should not be neglected (Zhao Shenglan, 2012).

Dostoevsky’s most novels are involved in insanity topic. The insanity gives Dostoevsky a unique perspective and help him form the unique literature content and literary achievement(Fan Yuhui, 2006) Coetzee’s The Master of Petersburg describes the insanity of Dostoevsky, a sort of individual insanity, however, the narrative of another sort of insanity, group insanity, is added in this novel.

The Master of Petersburg place particular emphasis on the description of Dostoevsky’s inner world. In this novel, he narrated the story through the angel of third part. Just like his other novels, he focused on the narrative angel of Dostoevsky. So in the novel, the insanity of Dostoevsky got well represented, even it could say that the insanity was the basic living state of Dostoevsky.

Dostoevsky’s insanity had much hysterical illusion. Sometimes it included the violent and erotic illusions, and the eruption of the turbulent passion. The real Dostoevsky in 19th often described the feelings in his works. Coetzee represented Dostoevsky’s inner world through the description of such illusion. The illusions, such as the horrible imagination, visual hallucination, auditory hallucination, spasm of body and erupt of the emotion, appeared continuously in the novel.

The insanity of Dostoevsky was caused by his pathological state and the suffering of long time. In some situations of The Master of Petersburg, the sorrow for his son’s death was the main cause of his epileptic seizure. His son Barwell was the martyr of anarchism in that Nechaev murdered him when he wanted to quit the so-called “the people’s punishment committee”. In his illusions, the dead Barwell often stood bin the face of him, painfully, sorrowfully and bloody. Sometimes his illusion was the expression of his angry: “He has a vision of Petersburg stretched out vast and low under the pitiless stars. Written in a scroll across the heaven is a word in Hebrew characters. He cannot read the word but knows it is a condemnation, a curse.” (J.M. Coetzee, 2004) The insanity and illusion continued throughout the novel and was the critical part for expressing his inner world. Those contents inter-weaved with the real Dostoevsky in history tactfully. Such interweaving was the important technique of this novel.

The violence of Nechaev was contrast with Dostoevsky’s insanity. As for Nechaev, he believed any martyr was worthy if only the current governmental institution could be overturned. Nechaev’s pursuit of violence was rationalized in that society, so few people realized Nechaev’s was another form of insanity. However, Nechaev’s notion was polarized and anti-humanity obviously. He opposed any individualism. Just as he said:“Privacy is a luxury we can do without. People don’t need privacy.” (J.M. Coetzee, 2004) the denial of individual would caused the lost of individual opinion and it happens in many cultures.

So he made any destruction as possible, even was caught in the situation of hysteria and joy of bloodthirsty. Dostoevsky observed the hysteria: “Nechaevism is an idea abroad in our land; Nechaev himself is only the embodiment of it. Nechaevism will not be extinguished till the times have changed. Our aims must therefore be more modest and more
Nechaev became the leader of the group, and he here was not necessary to be genital and rational. On the contrary, he should be strong, violent and passionate. The group need the leader should be strong, or even tyrannical and cruel. In the process, what the group anticipated was the orderliness as the result of administration and depression, so it required people should be timid and submitted under the tyranny(Sigmund Freud, 2004)

Compared with Nechaev’s concealed and rationalized insanity, Dostoevsky’s insanity was obvious and physiological. Coetzee interweaved Dostoevsky’s illusion into The Master of Peters burg, such as his sexual fantasy for the daughter of landlady. Dostoevsky’s insanity became the mirror of the insanity of Nechaev, just as the novel described: “Time for a fit, he thinks. Then my cup will be full. He sees himself convulsing and foaming at the mouth, a crowed gathering around, and the greybeard pointing, for the benefit of all, to where the pistol lies on the ice. A fit, like a bolt from heaven to strike the sinner down. But the bolt does not come. ” (J.M. Coetzee, 2004) The canal mentioned in the novel is where the criminals are concealed.

“What a clutter there must be under the ice on the canal-bed! With the spring thaw once could trawl a veritable harvest of guilty secrets here: knives, axes, bloodstained clothing.”(J.M. Coetzee, 2004) Dostoevsky’s epileptic seizure was the condemn for the violence and the massive insanity of Nechaevs.

The group insanity is the collective behave. The collective behave would be rationalized, however, it would be extremely disastrous for society (Wang Guibin, 2013). The more traditional in society, the more destructive the collective behave is.

Although the insanity Coetzee narrated is in the literary world, the destructiveness of the group insanity should not be ignored in modern society. It would easy to find that the rationalization of the group would be repeated again and again in history, companying with the rationalized violence. Many cruel wars in history exemplify the notions above.

Coetzee’s novel is created on the basis of Dostoevsky’s novels, and that added more meanings to Dostoevsky’s literary world. Dostoevsky created a kind of morbid literary world(Zhang Shijun, 2006), which is most about the abnormalities of individual. Coetzee broadened the topics of insanity and violence as his novel describes the social violence and insanity.

The state Coetzee describes in The Master of Petersburg has some features of crowd in the opinion of Gustave Le Bon. Gustave Le Bon believed that the mind of the crowd was more absurd than that of individual. For example, he asserted that the law passed in the congress is the product of individual in quiet study but not the crowd, and the product of the crowd would be less qualified than that of individual in any way, no matter what the feature the product had(Gustave Le Bon, 2002). Gustave Le Bon believed that the crowd was easy to believe and influenced by the other factors, and it had no ability to make suitable judgments. With the imagination, it reckon ed the matters and regenerated the imaginations(Gustave Le Bon, 2002).

Such two kinds of insanities exist in The Master of Petersburg, and that impresses the readers that anyone is insane in the novel, or in the other words: sanity is another kind of insanity. The violence is also combined with the insanity. As a result, the society and humanities are harmed.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to discuss the violence and insanity in The Master of Petersburg. The result of the discussion showed that the violence and insanity were the basic topics of the novel. The violence and insanity of Nechaevs were rationalized in the special social condition. On the contrary, Dostoevsky’s insanity was physiological and obvious, so it could be recognized by most of the people and could not be rationalized. By interweaving the fictional Dostoevsky and the Nechaev skillfully, Coetzee destructed the revolutionary discourse. The findings of this article provide insight for the violence and insanity phenomena. It contributed to the existing knowledge of violence and insanity in The Master
of Petersburg. A limitation of this article is that it could not investigate all the narrative about insanity and violence in Coetzee novels. It would be interesting to discuss the insanity and violence in other works of Coetzee.

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