The American University in Cairo

A Thesis Submitted
To
The Department of English and Comparative Literature

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The Castaway:

A Comparative Study of Alienation in Franz Kafka’s The Trial
and J.M. Coetzee’s Foe.

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For My Dear Parents:

My thesis is the most precious thing I can offer and dedicate to you. I am grateful for everything you gave and taught me. If it hadn’t been for you, I wouldn’t have managed to get the Master’s degree and make a dream come true. Thank you for always being loving, kind, generous and supportive and may God bless you.

Your Daughter,
Alia Mohamed Taher
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Abstract

This thesis is a comparative study of alienation. It provides an analysis of the different ways in which the Czech writer, Franz Kafka, and the South African writer, J.M. Coetzee delineate alienation in their works, *The Trial* and *Foe*. Three aspects of alienation are discussed: alienation from self, world and language. Hence, the thesis emphasizes that man’s predicament of alienation, homelessness and exile stems from a failure to recognize a self to which he can relate, an inability to find a home in an alien universe and an incapacity to develop a constructive relationship with words and language. This study not only focuses on man’s existential predicament of alienation, but it also reveals that alienation is an experience that writer and reader go through in their encounter with a work of art. Thus, this study also explores the nature of a work of art and is concerned with the effects of literature on the reader.
Sometimes I wake up not knowing where I am. The world is full of islands, said Cruso once. His words ring truer every day.

J.M. Coetzee, *Foe*, 71
Introduction

“I feel that I exist only outside of any belonging. That non-belonging is my very substance. Maybe I have nothing else to say but that painful contradiction: like everyone else, I aspire to a place, a dwelling-place, while being at the same time unable to accept what offers itself” (Patterson, x). With these words, Edmond Jabès sums up in *From the Desert to the Book* the predicament of “the twentieth-century figure of the alienated individual” (Seigneuret, 39) and “the homelessness of the modern human condition” (Patterson, ix).

Jabès’ words highlight the centrality of the theme of alienation in modern literature since it presents man’s situation and plight in the world. Alienation takes different forms in literature and several writers have attempted to delineate and express the different forms it takes and the causes that produce this terrible and dreary state which is at the core of man’s existence and being.

The experience and state of alienation is a dilemma that man encounters as he enters the world and struggles to deal with and overcome it throughout his life. Man’s experience of alienation starts from his first day on earth as he is born and this is evident in the fact that his first introduction to life and earth is met with a cry. As the infant leaves its mother’s womb, it feels as if it has been deserted and expelled from its home, just as Adam and Eve were expelled from heaven and were doomed to a life of endless wandering and loss in the wide and difficult world.

Man’s life on earth is, therefore, a form of expulsion and an attempt to retrieve the lost paradise and home in which he would find his belonging and place in the world. In his attempt to find his dwelling-place, man attempts to arrive at an understanding of the self, the world he is living in and the language he speaks. However, as he seeks to achieve and develop a harmonious relationship with self, world and language, he is overwhelmed by their complexity and indecipherable nature. He realizes that these three categories that form the basis of one’s existence are doors he cannot enter or penetrate. As a result, he feels alienated from self, world, language and meaning.

The Czech writer Franz Kafka and the South African writer J.M. Coetzee express in their literature man’s state of alienation from self, world and language. In Kafka’s novel *The Trial* and Coetzee’s *Foe*, the self emerges as a riddle that one cannot solve, the world is seen as a strange, unfamiliar and uncanny place into which
one cannot fit or belong and language emerges as extremely complex and labyrinthine. Meaning and interpretation are always either absent or ambiguous and, instead, emptiness and hollowness are prevalent.

In *The Trial* and *Foe*, one encounters characters and situations that highlight man’s estrangement and isolation from self and world. Joseph K. (the central character of Kafka’s *The Trial*) and Susan Barton (the female narrator and central character of Coetzee’s *Foe*) are infinitely embroiled in a battle against the silence and ambiguity of the self and the world. Their inability to decipher the self / world hieroglyphics is the major dilemma which results in their acute sense of alienation, aloneness and desolation in the world. Through these two characters’ endless attempts to comprehend and unravel the self / world mystery, Kafka and Coetzee reveal that man’s problem of assimilation or belonging stems from his inability to penetrate the dark alleys of the divided and dichotomized self and the meaningless, quizzical and unfathomable universe which he inhabits.

This study attempts to explore the different ways in which Kafka and Coetzee present and portray the experience of man’s alienation and utter isolation through a comparative study of their works. In addition, in the analysis of Kafka’s presentation of this theme, allusions are made to other major works (selected short-stories) by Kafka in which this theme is clearly evident.

Through the study of *The Trial* and *Foe*, an attempt is made at showing that both Kafka and Coetzee reveal that alienation is not merely man’s plight in the world, but also that it is the reader’s plight before a work of art. This shows how their works are a commentary on the reader’s response to a work of art since they reflect the effect of literature and the literary experience on the reader. Like Joseph K. and Susan Barton, who are forever lost in the labyrinth of an incomprehensible and puzzling universe, the reader finds himself trapped and entangled in complex and labyrinthine texts that resist interpretation.

Like Joseph K. and Susan Barton, the reader struggles to unravel the mysteries and enigmas of the text in an attempt to find meaning in this inscrutable world. The reader’s inability to find a trace of meaning through which he could be reconciled with the work of art makes him emerge from his experience with this literature of alienation as an embodiment of alienation himself. For like Kafka’s and Coetzee’s marginalized protagonists, the reader feels cast out by the text. He ends his journey with Kafka and Coetzee with no certainty or answers. Instead, like Joseph K. and
Susan Barton, he finds himself constantly asking never-ending and unanswerable questions, the most important of which is: “where do I belong?” or “where does man belong?”

An individual chapter is devoted to each aspect of alienation. The first chapter, entitled, “The Self as a Stranger,” presents an analysis of Kafka’s and Coetzee’s depiction of man’s alienation from the self. The major issues discussed in this chapter are: the self as a riddle and an enigma, the self and its existence as being questionable, the problem of “precarious and threatened individual identity” (Seigneuret, 14). The role of external forces in instilling the feeling of alienation and estrangement from the self will also be discussed, since an establishment and a definition of identity is dependent on these factors, rather than, simply on the individual’s perception of the self.

The second chapter, entitled, “The World as a Strange Place,” presents Kafka’s and Coetzee’s depiction of man’s alienation, isolation and homelessness in a world that has become totally unfamiliar and uncanny. The following major points will be taken up: the causes behind man’s estrangement from the world, the problem of an incomprehensible world, the notion of difference and otherness that heightens the sense of alienation and desolation, the continual search for a destination and a place in which at-homeness is felt, the problem of the world’s silence which creates the feeling of being an outsider, the continual search for an oracle that would answer one’s questions and explain the puzzle of life, and the position of the writer as an outsider. With respect to the final points, the fact that Kafka is a Czech writing in German and Coetzee is a South African writing in English is considered.

The third and final chapter, entitled, “The Nut without a Kernel,” examines the problem of the hollowness of words and language, the “sense of the betrayal of language” (Seigneuret, 41) and the palimpsestic text presented by Kafka and Coetzee as an attempt to reveal the reader’s experience of alienation before a work of art. Within this context, the problem of the absence of a source or foundation on which one could depend for interpretation, “the absolute absence of coherence and meaning at the root of existence” (Seigneuret, 41), the problem of understanding the message and meaning conveyed by the text, and the problem of the literal-minded reader who fails to grasp the message of a work of art are discussed. These concerns are related to the web-like and labyrinthine quality of text and language, the text as an investigation that raises questions but offers no answers, the protean text which contains multiple
layers of meaning and the impossibility of clinging to a single interpretation. Finally, the elliptic text which conceals rather than reveals, the text and its double and the text in conflict with the world are critically examined.

Thus, the purpose of my study, “The Castaway: A Comparative Study of Alienation in Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* and J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe,*” is to explore and examine man’s existential predicament of alienation, homelessness and exile which stems from a failure to conceptualize or recognize a self to which one could relate. The thesis centers around the plight of “the wanderer who can find neither peace nor a place to which he feels an attachment” (Seigneuret, 38), his inability to find a home in a universe which is void of meaning and inability to establish relationship with words and language. The hollowness at the core of the self, world and language is what makes man’s life a difficult task in which he becomes doomed to a terrible existence based on perpetual and endless wandering. No Ithaka is ever arrived at and homelessness and alienation become man’s fate and share in life. This is the experience that Kafka and Coetzee express in their fiction.