

ABSTRACT

Katachthonia:
The Aesthetics of Negation in Works by J. M. Coetzee and Wole Soyinka

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Wole Soyinka integrates into his work the Yoruba space of transition between realms of the ancestors, the living and the unborn. This space of immense stress, through which the god Ogun braved dismemberment in his passage to earth, is the “Fourth Stage” that an individual enters upon his/her death. This project compares the Fourth Stage with a “dark chamber” of torture posited by John Maxwell Coetzee, a space that also places great pressure upon the individuals who occupy it. Torture’s atrocities make its representation extremely difficult, and those who have endured it find it impossible to accurately relate the experience to others. Artists, too, encounter an immense challenge in attempting to capture its essence. Since death, like torture, allows no information to escape, both the torture chamber and the “Fourth Stage” are considered chthonic spaces whose representation requires oblique or negative methods. In this project I consider Soyinka and Coetzee’s use of an aesthetic of negation through which the chthonic manifests as *katabasis* (descent to a lower region), language loss, and the denaturing of the individual. I first explore pain as an unspeakable event and torture as an agent of pain that approximates death and mimics its silence. I also analyze various tropes and myths that both Coetzee and Soyinka appropriate in their negative approach to the exegesis of the chthonic. Using deconstructive

methods, I then explore the texts' language, both in its positive existence as words and its negative existence as silence, gestures and other non-verbal communication methods that are not language but its trace. Finally, I demonstrate that the collective effect of these chthonic expressions upon the texts' main characters is an exertion of such concentrated pressure as is characteristic of the realm, and this results ultimately in the physical, historical, textual and/or psycho-spiritual negation of the individual.

Keywords: Treena Taniesha Balds; Wole Soyinka; J. M. Coetzee; Yoruba; South Africa; dark chamber; chthonic realm; Fourth Stage; phase of transition; katabasis; torture; pain; death; language; linguistics; deconstruction; silence; absence; presence; negation; aesthetics; barbarian; Dostoevsky; Elesin; Cult of As; Philosophy of As; mirror; lamp; representation; ineffability; unrepresentable