

Gardening in 'Other Countries': Schoeman, Coetzee, Conrad

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Both Karel Schoeman and J.M. Coetzee make use in their writings of the garden as a postcolonial trope. Joseph Conrad's (1912) short story 'A Smile of Fortune', written almost a century earlier, also makes use of the garden as a trope, but the ideological and conceptual framework employed by Conrad differs considerably from the work of the latter novelists. Although Schoeman in *Another Country* ([1984]1991) has been accused of a lack of social commitment, the novel in fact contains a sustained debate centred on the ability of a European language (and consequently its community of users) successfully to accommodate itself to Africa. Coetzee's novel *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) evidences the alienating and self-destructive nature of ideological encampments. The novel articulates the hope for, and possibility of a new type of relationship with the African land, whose sustaining value as mother of all things is reaffirmed by K's labour. Conrad's short story 'A Smile of Fortune' (1912) examines the problematic nature of a discourse which is predicated upon difference. All three writers directly or indirectly expose the inability of colonial-patriarchal discourses successfully to contain, (distort or pervert) the meaning ascribed to that which they define as Other.

In all three texts, that which is defined as Other by the dominating discourse falls beyond the semblance of cultivation. The garden is not only an attempt to translate the landscape into understanding, but is also an attempt to create a binary system of signification. In other words, the garden as a sign is an attempt by colonial-patriarchal discourses to establish a sense of Self as garden, by which the Other as desert or wilderness may be known. Paradoxically this very attempt to establish Self and Other through the landscape is problematic. For, as I shall demonstrate, attempts to generate signification appear to result in the generation of meanings antithetical to those intended by the grand narratives and binaries of patriarchy and racism.

I shall refer to Saussure's ([1915]1988:10) understanding of the signifier and signified in his lecture, 'The Nature of the Linguistic Sign' as well as to Lacan's ([1957]1988:80) development of that position in 'The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious', and will locate the three different gardens within the 'language/dis-

course' of postcolonial literature using the three texts cited above. Further to this I shall locate each landscape discussed within suitable literary antecedents. By drawing on the metaphoric and metonymic meanings gardens have had within certain other literary genres, Schoeman, Coetzee and Conrad problematise as well as chart the assimilation of the trope of the garden, familiar in medieval and renaissance texts, into colonial and postcolonial texts as a space and entrepôt.

A language community occurs where the members of a group are agreed upon the transmission of meanings through language. As Saussure (1915:8) says, 'the meaning of a word exists by virtue of a kind of contract agreed upon between members of a community'. This contractual agreement through language upon the purpose and significance of the European presence in South Africa is examined by Schoeman through his rendition of the lives and lifestyles of the succeeding waves of colonists in Bloemfontein. *Another Country* (1991) is therefore concerned with the European colonial transplantation into South Africa. The novel contrasts Versluis' journey to 'awareness of *Other* centres of *Self*' with the fear and inability of a colonial community to allow for such an awareness (Eliot [1871]1965:243; e.a.).

While the coloniser is prepared to penetrate and exploit another space, the colonial community allows for no reciprocity in its relationship with the land that sustains it. Coetzee (1988) in *White Writing* discusses the preoccupation white South African writers have with a landscape that escapes containment within their language. According to Coetzee, the conceptual and linguistic framework of the colonists suited the landscape of Europe with its vertical as opposed to horizontal plains. South Africa with its vast plateaus of desert scrub and long grasses and flat crowned savannah trees demanded of the European eye, aesthetics and linguistic *repertoire*, considerable adjustments. It was this challenge to accommodate the land within a suitable conceptual and linguistic framework that colonists mostly sought to deny. By preferring to re-cast South Africa through existing ideological and linguistic lenses, the colonists become prone to fissures, anxieties and difficulties with themselves and the land, evident in the art and literature of the colonial period.

An example of such a text, although it is not set in South Africa, is Conrad's 'A Smile of Fortune' (1912). This narrative illustrates the colonist's problem of accommodating the landscape to his expectations *vis-à-vis* his treatment of the garden, the place of women in colonial society, and the representation of subjugated races. The gardens of *Another Country* (1991) which are located in South Africa, are the symbolic embodiment of the limitations of language used by Europeans in the context of colonial Bloemfontein—a spring of flowers. The colonist's seeking to belong and problem with articulating the experience of belonging in Africa, is evidenced in the ambiguous physicality of 'literary gardens'.

In other words, by refusing to acknowledge that which pre-dated their arrival,

the colonists establish a contradiction within their psyches. Theirs is a refusal to recognise the inevitable process of hybridisation that accompanies a cultural transplantation into another context. This contradiction defines their existence against the elements, instead of their accommodation to those elements. The garden as a concept is ambiguous because it is of necessity a manifestation of cross-cultural fertilisation (in every sense), and yet is viewed by the colonists as a bastion to shield and nurture them against the encroaching forces of an alien land. A change of ideological optic might result in the view of the garden as a gift from the land to the community in need of nurturing. But then such a view would collapse the binaries that characterise colonial discourse and would make nonsense of notions of Self and Other.

In Conrad's short story 'A Smile of Fortune' (1912), the younger Jacobus, a ship chandler and owner of an enchanting garden, is ostracised by a community whose values are based upon the false binaries of Self and Other. Jacobus' elder brother, also known as Jacobus, has sown his wild seed across the island, creating a labour force of ill-treated mulattos, the treatment and placement of whom are acceptable in the conceptual framework of the colonist. But the younger Jacobus however, a result of his degrading infatuation with a travelling circus woman—who refused to marry him whilst nevertheless bearing him a child—continues to suffer condemnation by the island's decayed French aristocracy for his transgression of *bourgeois* convention. The wilful creation of a mulatto caste is therefore not as problematic for this community as the birth of a white child out of wedlock.

The colonial communities of Bloemfontein in *Another Country* (1991) and of the tropical isle in 'A Smile of Fortune' (1912), share the refusal to acknowledge the Other, who may be a bastard, an indigene or a mulatto. Their refusal is belied by the fact that their gardens, the spaces which sustain them, are themselves products of cross-fertilisation. The 'shared agreement' Saussure speaks of concerning the meaning of the word, termed here discourse, is predicated upon racial and gender binaries which are as possessive as they are alienating. Schoeman's gardens—those of Hirsch, the German-Jewish storekeeper, and van der Vliet are prime examples—are never merely ornamental. Their function is that of the Biblical garden which sustains survival, possession of the land and pleasure. 'Keep(ing) Europe alive ... in the heart of Africa' (Schoeman 1991:8), as Mr. Hirsch states, is a defensive stance against the emptiness and consequent incomprehensibility of the land. This perception of emptiness is false. The emptiness is really an idea of self that is based upon false binaries, which as part of a larger discourse, that of patriarchy and racism, is imposed upon the land. The garden in such a scheme becomes a means of defence against an existential insecurity. Mrs. Hirsch, referring to the garden, says her husband 'conjured it out of nothing' (Schoeman 1991:32). The semiology of the garden encompasses all that is opposite to the wilderness (the space, or the nothingness) that Mrs. Hirsch fears: it is

order against chaos, shade against sunlight, survival against starvation, knowing against the unknowable and so on. As de Jong (1988:2) claims in her discussion of *Another Country* (1990):

The concept of 'White experience' is able only to convey meaning insofar as it denies and excludes its subconscious links with 'Black experience'.

Hirsch's garden, like that of Mrs. van der Vliet, ripples with the sound of voices: the mistress and the servants, the former fearful and suspicious of the land, the latter in servitude to the transplanted values of the deferred Centre, which may be the Kassel or Delft the European left behind (Jacobs 1995:5).

Ironically the 'nothing' Mrs. Hirsch speaks of, which is the wildness of Africa, implies a sign, as Saussure would suggest, that cannot be possessed; a space that cannot be translated into understanding. It is everything that falls beyond the 'knowing' of the garden. Later Mrs. Hirsch speaks of the gardens flourishing as a 'provisional victory' against a country described as 'an enemy, an inimical being' (Schoeman 1991:33).

The land, to which is ascribed the status of Other, is able to—and in the story of Versluis does—reclaim its own. With his use of High Dutch, fastidious habits and bourgeois values, Versluis is the epitome of one who distinguishes between self and other. In the person of Gelmers, the unsophisticated rural Dutchman, who is also suffering from tuberculosis, Versluis meets his *Doppelgänger*. The realisation that within the system of fine discriminations (whether based upon language, race or class) there can be no accommodation with the ultimate Other, Death, is what changes Versluis. To live and die in peace he must abandon the assumptions, values and perceptions of the white colonial community in Bloemfontein. The land as signifier within their discourse is able to elude control of, and finally undermine the dominating discourse. Ultimately we are led to believe that the land has reclaimed its own, in the person of the terminally ill Versluis:

the unknown land grew familiar and the person passing through could no longer even remember that he had intended to travel further. Half-way along the route you discovered with some surprise that the journey had been completed, the destination already reached (Schoeman 1991:311).

Versluis goes out to the land alone, and yet not alone; he is 'embraced' and 'absorbed' as its own. A complete shift in perspective is evidenced here, now Africa becomes that

¹ Begrip soos blanke ervaring dra egter net betekenis oor in die mate waarin dit sy ondergrondse verbintenis met swart ervaring uitsluit

which is associated with Self and Europe becomes that which is Other and unknown (Balfour 1995:8).

The postcolonial debate around the trope of gardening recognises that the garden forms part of the semiology of colonial discourse (it is not for nothing that Jan van Riebeeck writes in his diaries of the need to 'plant gardens' for the replenishment of V.O.C. ships). In Coetzee's (1983) novel, *Life and Times of Michael K*, the garden is located within the same semiology, but employed to a different purpose. K's garden becomes an antithetical sign, an undermining and fertile negation of the sterile sandy soils of the Cape Town municipal gardens in which he worked before leaving with his mother. In 'A Smile of Fortune' (1912) the garden lies within a coalescence of discourses which evidence patriarchal and colonial strains. Saussure (1915:10) refers to the 'linguistic sign as not a link between a concept and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern'. The 'sound' garden is a concept which implies reference to the whole discourse of colonisation. The signifier (garden) is the word whose sign is embodied in the oasis-like symbol apparently captive in an alien and wild space, and whose signification is the discourse which establishes itself in opposition to that defined as Alien or Other.

Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in Coetzee's first novel *Dusklands* (1974), which in this context is used to illuminate the value and difference of K's garden in comparison to the others. Eugene Dawn, strategist and mythologist, announces the abolition of Man's relationship with mother earth. Dawn's proposal, sinisterly similar to Kurtz's 'exterminate the brutes', and reminiscent of Nazism's 'final solution', insists on the complete sterilisation and poisoning of the Vietnamese 'earth'. Not only is his repugnance against the sons of the (Mother) soil revealed in his treatise, but more importantly in his understanding of his sexuality:

My life ... has become a continual battle to keep my poise of mind against her [his wife's] hysterical assaults and the pressures of my enemy body (Coetzee 1974:8; e.a.).

Finally, Dawn's belief is encapsulated in his advocacy of the Athena myth:

We have the capacity to breed out of our own head ... our future belongs not to the earth but to the stars (Coetzee 1974:31).

The horrific outcome of Dawn's internalisation of that myth is portrayed in his subsequent breakdown and his mutilation of his son; effectively Dawn becomes a fragmented and self-alienated being, the Chronos figure who devours his own seed. In effect his end portrays the consequences of betrayal of the relationship between earth and humankind.

Reading the sign through its possibilities of signification enables the reader to find beneath its enigma, as Genette (1988:76) observes, a question which refers to the assumptions and fears that surround and seek to know that sign: 'the inimical being' (the untamed wilderness). Critically this realisation brings forward the acknowledgement that within the discourse of binaries, possession is also dispossession, inclusion can also mean exclusion and potentially, Self may well mean Other.

The *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) re-affirms that bond between the soil and the life it brings forth. Here the ashes of his mother and the sustenance of the soil affirm K's life, both physically and spiritually, between the fences of competing discourses. Coetzee implies a perpetual state of conflict between these two discourses: while we are aware of the discourse of oppression, the discourse of resistance forms a powerful, but implied presence in the novel. Both discourses define the soil as a subject and sign to be known, possessed and regulated. Lacan's discussion of the signifier and the signified when applied to our analysis is particularly helpful as it makes the problematic nature of the garden as sign less resistant to interpretation. 'There is', he suggests, 'a perpetual sliding of the signified under the signifier' (Lacan [1957]1988:87). If Hirsch's garden in *Another Country* (1991) is the European interpretation and translation of Africa as well as embodying colonial discourse, then it may also be validly claimed that the symbolic act of gardening becomes metonymic of the act of naming. In other words cultivation becomes the physical embodiment of a language's attempting to affix a single meaning to the land, thereby coming to 'know' it. This is clearly not the case in *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), where K's relationship with the land is not one of overlordship, but rather of symbiosis.

In fact what Lacan (1988:85) views as the signifier's intrusion into the signified makes us question the very place of that signifier in reality. Mrs. Hirsch's oblique reference to the 'provisional' and therefore temporary nature of the garden and its ability in collusion with the land to defy its European interpretation comes to mind. If meaning is contingent, then this is evidenced in K's garden which is initially unrecognised as a garden by the opposing discourses of the State and the Resistance fighters. K's answers to the soldiers' interrogations as to the nature and purpose of his plot are remarkable for their ability to elude committal to either of the factions who criss-cross the former Visagie lands:

'I'm not what you think', he said, 'I was sleeping and you woke me, that's all'. They [the soldiers] gave no sign of understanding (Coetzee 1983:123).

The crucial lesson K must learn, and does learn on the Visagie farm, is not to become accustomed to possessing the land (as colonial-capitalist discourse would have it): 'Whatever I have returned for, it is not to live as the Visagies lived ... the worst mis-

take', he says (Coetzee 1983:98). Unwilling to become the 'kaffir', and thus possession of the young Visagie's discourse, K abandons the land and the seedlings. He must learn to become a sign, like the land. And the land, which freely intrudes on and recedes from K's garden, is like the very fluidity of language itself; it remains elusive and resistant to a discourse of binaries, and its real and abstract fences which attempt containment.

It is to such a discourse of binaries that resistance writing succumbed, as Ndebele ([1984]1992:47) notes, when it allowed itself to be overdetermined by the need to oppose apartheid). By continuing to relate and protest against the horror and spectacle of South African history, without being able to imagine and articulate a more humane alternative, this type of writing, as described by Ndebele, became maimed and stunted. And *Michael K* represents an effort to be non-binary, non-oppositional and yet to articulate that alternative.

The sustaining irony of Coetzee's novel is that within the discourse of the State, the opulent gardens of Schoeman's *Another Country* (1991) have become detention-camps herding in the homeless surplus populations of South Africa—a grim reminder of the bantustan system. Nadine Gordimer (1994:182) in her article 'The Idea of Gardening' claims that in *Michael K*, 'freedom is defined negatively: it is to be out of all the camps at the same time', but this is not the point Coetzee makes regarding the insidious nature of ideological camps. These camps destroy those within and seek to destroy those without.

K actually finds himself in the space or transfer, as Lacan terms it, between signifier and signified, and Coetzee positions the text within that space. Gramsci's term *interregnum*, may be another way of identifying the space into which Coetzee inserts his text. The *interregnum*, identified by Gordimer as the late period of the Apartheid state's decline, evidences the spasmodic death of one era, whilst the other, as yet unidentified, struggles to be born. *Michael K* chronicles the change of eras in South Africa. In the painful and bloodied process of negotiating the emergence of a new discourse the 'incessant sliding' of the signified under the signifier takes place. This is suggested in the text by the fact that in the past, the Visagie lands and gardens symbolised the possession of the land by colonial discourse, which Othered people like K. The sign, or land, rejects this signification and eventually plays host to resistance fighters, army absconders and soldiers alike. More appropriately it sustains the likes of K, a voluntary outcast between the fences. As a space between competing discourses the land is vital to the process of birth.

Concurrently Coetzee implies a connection between the *interregnum* and its significance for the writer, either crippled by the torsions of power or marginalised to the point of insignificance. K's narrative exists in the corridors between camps. He is squeezed between the discourses the camps represent. One has only to think of the

soldiers' harassment of K, their attempts to extract information and thereby extinguish resistance to state dominion. Or alternatively there are the attempts of the liberal doctor to elicit K's story, hoping for a place for himself and for K in the as yet uncertain future.

If Coetzee located *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) in the future, in an *inter-regnum* between eras, did Schoeman not for comparable reasons position his narrative a century before the successive years of Emergency and Isolation? If one text portrays the birth and the other the death of an epoch, both essentially with similar recognitions and concerns, how can Schoeman's *Another Country* (1991) be dismissed by de Jong as irrelevant and lacking in social commitment? Not only does *Another Country* (1991) demonstrate the inherent self-destructiveness of colonial discourse, but also the potential of those 'between the fences' to anticipate an alternative which acknowledges that real belonging must mean the collapse of artificial binaries which alienate people from each other and the land.

Adele Scheffler, the crippled sister of the young Lutheran pastor in Bloemfontein, and guide to Versluis' awakening soul, is one who refuses the inappropriate European colonial translation of the African landscape. Marginalised in the community because of her deformity and gender, she nevertheless sees the need 'to give the silence a voice' (Schoeman 1991:200) on its own terms and not through the use of German or High Dutch which she views as irrelevant (if not damaging) to the South African landscape. The cultivation of flowers, the neatly tended vegetable rows and swept pathways of Hirsch's and van der Vliet's gardens may appear initially to be innocuous in themselves. But their meaning is belied by the incipient patriarchal discourse of exploitation, possession and contempt for the space into which these communities transplanted themselves. Voicing the silence is not re-creating the landscape to reflect one's own discourse, but is rather allowing oneself to be re-created by and through a new context without being compromised by the 'cultural baggage and arrogance of the deferred centre.

Conrad's short story 'A Smile of Fortune' (1912) although in many ways dissimilar to the two South African texts, is included here because its portrayal of the garden powerfully evidences the collusion of the dominant discourses of this century: patriarchy and colonialism. Driver (1988:4,3) in her essay 'Woman as Sign in the South African Colonial Enterprise' shows that the purpose and place of the woman within patriarchal discourse is 'to perpetuate the (racial) divisions of colonial discourse'. 'A Smile of Fortune' (1912) also provides a particularly good example of the 'signifier's' ability to elude any attempt at fixing signification.

A young captain approaches an island identified as 'the pearl of the ocean' intending to trade with the merchant Jacobus and becomes mistakenly involved with the younger of the two brothers, the ship chandler. Conrad conflates the metaphor of

the pearl used to identify the island with the promise of commercial wealth. Later the 'pearl' becomes synonymous with Alice, Jacobus' daughter, born out of wedlock, whose life is the embodiment of his disgrace, and who is associated always with her father's magnificent garden. Alice is a child of a union which is disgraceful to the decayed French aristocracy because it represents a possibility which menaces them: that of the illegitimate but racially 'pure' offspring of the ruling caste. Her father, accepting and uncritical of the aristocracy's judgement, sequesters Alice in his garden, thereby preventing her socialisation in human and humane company. By agreeing with their verdict on his infatuation, Jacobus develops in Alice the maladjusted, suspicious and deprived person that she is. Alice becomes the external manifestation of the deformity Jacobus perceives in himself.

Her slatternly appearance—the dirty, flimsy wrapper, soiled shoes and unruly mass of hair—owes itself to Jacobus' self-disgust. She is at once a contrast to, and product of the old garden which she inhabits. The garden's allure and beauty is belied by, and owed to, her presence. Conrad opposes the signification ascribed to Alice by the community which seeks to discard her. At times she offers the reader poignant insight into the person she might have become, but for the maiming discourse of her father. The garden owes its luxuriance to Jacobus' wealth which is gained from speculative trade in the Pacific area. It begins to assume the accumulated meaning of the metaphors of corrupt commercial gain, the seductive woman and the seduction of the young man. These are potentially three linked signifieds for the signifier, the garden.

Lacan's (1988:89) definition of a metaphor is illuminating regarding the multiple significations Alice comes to bear within her imprisoning garden:

The metaphor's creative spark springs from two signifiers, one of which has taken the place of the other in the signifying chain, the hidden signifier there remaining present through its metonymic relation to the rest of the chain.

It follows from this that if the garden is metonymic of the colonial enterprise, it may also potentially be a symbol of the female's signification in patriarchal discourse. Driver terms woman 'an object of exchange' within colonial discourse; she is the means and site of mediation between cultures, or in this case discourses: the pearl of great price is the promise of wealth and the possession of the female. In describing the garden, the young man sees Alice as synonymous with the space she occupies.

The garden is Conrad's (1912:41) reconstruction of the medieval idea of the edenic garden, a co-mingling of European aesthetics and lush tropical vegetation:

it was magnificent ... smooth green lawns and a gorgeous maze of flower-beds displayed around a basin of dark water framed in marble rim ... she [Alice] did not stir ...

as if watching the vision of some pageant passing through the garden in the deep rich glow of light and the splendour of flowers.

According to Foucault (1986:24) the garden may also be construed as a heterotopian site because it evidences the presence of conflicting discourses in society. Heterotopias, says Foucault, are 'capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible' (Foucault 1986:25). The garden in 'A Smile of Fortune' (1912) is the discourse within which Alice is held captive, and is simultaneously the space from which she captivates and damns the proponents of that discourse, her father and the young captain.

Conrad's garden is a paradise which becomes desolation, a sign which eludes capture and taunts the would-be possessor. There is no doubt that Joseph Conrad is drawing upon the literary genre of the medieval courtly romance. Alice may be compared to the Rose at the centre of the enclosed garden in Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's *The Romance of the Rose* ([c.1277]1962). The allegory of the courtly romance is equally present in Edmund Spenser's poem *The Faerie Queene* (1609). Book II Canto XII of this poem, where the meaning of the rose receives sinister extension, details the destruction of Acrasia's 'Bower of Bliss' by the intrepid Sir Guyon. Although the knight here must also undergo a series of trials, as in *The Romance of the Rose*, Spenser allegorises the quest by transforming the 'rose' (Bk II Canto XII:74f). Acrasia, although seemingly pure, and surrounded by a Bower of roses and flowers, is nevertheless the seductress (II. XII:77). Her real purpose, as the agent of evil, is to transform goodly knights into slaves of their sexual appetites. Jacobus similarly, and perhaps more perversely than Spenser's Acrasia, uses the lure of his daughter as an instrument (and not an agent) to capture the young captain through his appetite for wealth and sex.

Alice in 'A Smile of Fortune' (1912) like Acrasia, is 'imprisoned' by her bower. The sustaining irony of her situation is that she is the product of her father's unrestrained sexual appetite. In effect she is his lure to the garden, the price of which is neatly figured by Conrad in the golden sovereigns with which the young man acquires a cargo of rotting potatoes, which he in turn sells to the traders at Port Philip Heads where the hinterlands are afflicted by a famine. This act evidences the young man's slide into corruption.

Coetzee's discussion of Girard's triangular forms of desire in *Doubling the Point* (Attwell 1992:74) elucidates for us the sign called Alice. The captain's idealism and naiveté cloaks 'the spirit of covetousness' within him. It is the reprobate Jacobus who manipulates that 'spirit' hoping to escape from his own shame. By extending commercial and other favours to the captain, Jacobus hopes that he will be able to rid himself of Alice. This would have the consequence of removing the material embodi-

ment of his disgrace in the eyes of the island aristocracy, thereby bringing about his reconciliation with them. Clearly Jacobus conceives of no responsibility towards Alice; she is a cast-off from a time best not remembered.

The subject, here the young captain, yields, according to Girard, his autonomy to the sign (or model as Girard terms it), Alice. Jacobus manipulates the captain's desire to possess the 'pearl' and allows for the conflation of Alice with the desired outcome of commercial success. But Alice is possessed already, not only by her garden, but by implication by her father. She becomes the intended 'object' of a very real 'exchange' whose consequence is alluded to via the space she occupies:

The garden was one mass of gloom, like a cemetery of flowers ... she mused mournfully over the extinction of light ... only whiffs of heavy scent passed like wondering souls ... like a voluptuous sigh (Conrad 1912:50f).

The young captain, aware of the 'ignoble transaction', begins to see the garden as the site of treachery; Alice threatens suicide, refusing to be removed to what she perceives to be another prison. Further to this, the young man is repelled by his attraction to what Alice represents to him, which is the sexual relationship of a human animal to a master. This insight is finally what appals the narrator and reader about Jacobus. Alice, in turn, realises that by choosing to remain in the garden and accepting the status her father created for her, she avoids any further degradation at his hands. Her response, effectively the only human(e) choice available to her, signifies the sign's refusal to be fixed either as sign or as object of exchange:

The sign always to some extent eludes control by the will, whether of the individual or of Society: that is its essential nature (Saussure 1915:9).

Alice, unwilling to become another signifier in someone else's night-sky, remains prisoner to her garden and Jacobus to his disgrace. Finally the exchange which Jacobus has wished to bring about does not take place. Critically Conrad appears to acknowledge that the attempt of patriarchal-colonial discourse to determine the place of woman as a 'Sign' results in the obliteration of any signification.

If men are viewed as bearers of civilisation and woman as the occupants of baser stations associated with the 'natural', as Driver (1992:457) maintains, then Conrad certainly problematises that role, showing that through its 'dehumanisation of the oppressed' as Sartre puts it, Patriarchy damns its victims and adherents, depriving both of the autonomy of choice.

Unlike the narratives of Coetzee and Schoeman, Conrad's narrative is unable to imagine an accommodation with that which is defined as Other by the dominating

discourses. It is unable to imagine an alternative means of constructing that world. The figural narrator, the young man, tainted by his experience, returns home to England where commercial transactions and sexuality are regulated and policed by society and the law. Jacobus, his daughter, and by implication the entire island's population of mulattos and enfeebled aristocrats remain petrified within self-annihilating discourses, embodied in the garden.

By choosing the garden as a site of transfer between discourses, all three narratives effectively prevent dominating discourses (and interpretations) from de-limiting the boundaries of signification, thereby reserving for themselves areas of unknowing or what Naipaul (1964:32) refers to as 'areas of darkness'. Like Conrad, Schoeman and Coetzee also critique the discourses which determine power and signification in society. But as their texts are postcolonial, they demonstrate an acute awareness of the fragmentary nature of discourses and flux. These narratives foreground the ability of hidden voices to intrude, re-interpret and overturn seemingly transparent ways of representing the land and its relationship with succeeding generations of migrant peoples.

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