

# Looking for the heart of JM Coetzee

In the wake of this year's Nobel Prize for Literature, articles on J.M. Coetzee have swamped newspapers and magazine all over the world. A veritable glut of them. The overwhelming majority of them blandly laudatory, yawning pieces saying the same worthy things about the newest author-god. So instead, just as a corrective measure, we publish here a piece that appeared in 1999 in The Sunday Times of South Africa. This is how one of his own countrymen, Lin Sampson, viewed him then.

PROFESSOR J.M. Coetzee's voice on the phone sounds flaky, as if it has peeled off in layers until it has become whispery, but still retains a seed-strong centre that can be surprisingly firm. "I am sorry but I do not enjoy interviews." He repeats the words again, "I am sorry I do not enjoy interviews." I ask him if he has done any to promote his latest book, *Disgrace*, and he says he has not.

He manages with those few words to make me feel entirely inadequate: the cocktail pianist asking Thomas Beecham if she could be given a chance to play the Brandenburg concertos with him. I have the feeling that, like those in his book, his words have been carefully chosen and used before. Purposely they do not say "yes" or "no".

If Rian Malan's interview with Coetzee which appeared in the Sunday Telegraph some years ago is anything to go by, an interview with Coetzee wasn't, in any case, going to be a whoopee experience. Malan wrote of Coetzee: "He was sitting at a desk with a writing pad before him and a fountain pen in his hand. I asked a question and he wrote it down." He continues: "He is a difficult interview subject; a notoriously enigmatic man. It is not unusual for novelists to refrain from discussing their work but Coetzee takes it to extremes. On one occasion he refused to reveal to a reporter even his middle name."

For the record then, he was born John Maxwell Coetzee in 1940. He spent his early years in Reunion Park, Worcester. His parents were "bloedsappe" Afrikaners who supported the United Party. He studied English

and mathematics in Cape Town; linguistics and literature abroad. He is now Arderne professor of English language and literature at the University of Cape Town.

On the subject of interviews, Coetzee might be right. They can be absurd, graceless exercises, frequently inaccurate. It would be easier to guess about the man from the colour of his shirt. However people are curious about writers, particularly when they are "world acclaimed". When JD Salinger cut himself off from the world, the world gloated through the ill-written memories of old girlfriends.

I have met Coetzee on a few occasions. Once I sat next to him at a dinner party and he said not one word. It was as if he had made a contract with himself not to talk or offer up extraneous information, no silly chat and no laughter. He had a disturbing habit as I recall of not answering a question at all. According to Malan's article, a colleague said that in all the years he had worked with Coetzee he had only heard him laugh once.

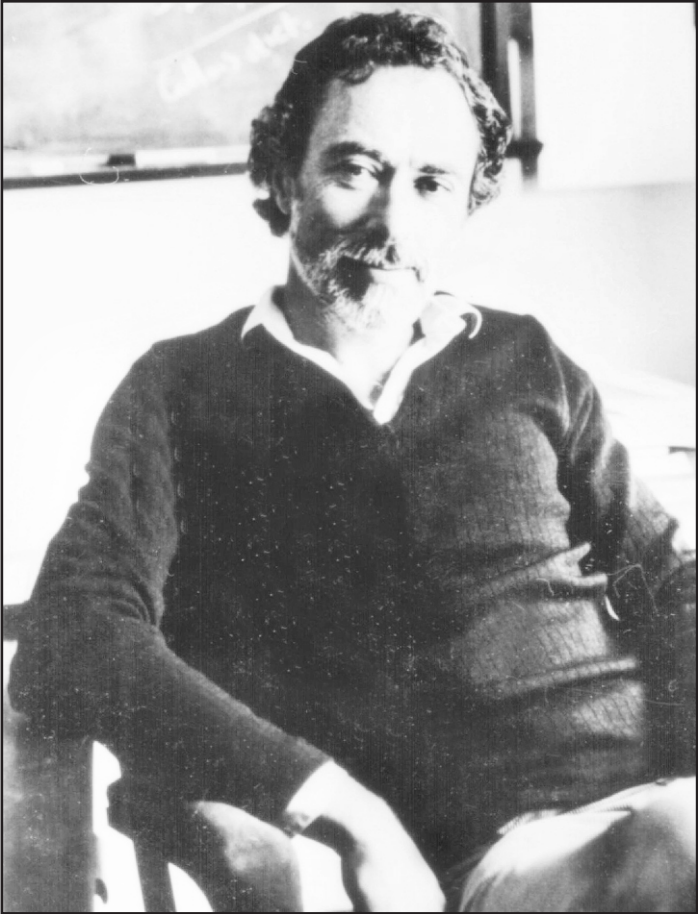
In his autobiography, *Boyhood*, a charmingly recalled memoir, he (third person to remove himself a bit more) shares nothing with his mother. His life at school is kept a tight secret from her. "She shall know nothing," he resolves, "but what appears on his quarterly report." Was this a method I wondered with which he also armed himself against the social round? He emerges from his *Boyhood* memoir as a man who likes to demonstrate his power through the pettiest endeavours.

A colleague says, "Have you ever considered that he might be shy?" Yes, I have considered

shyness. I have also considered the matter of rudeness or perhaps even a sort of social dyslexia that makes it impossible for him to be convivial. In *Boyhood* he "flees polite talk because its formulas 'How are you? How are you enjoying school?' baffle him". Not knowing the right answers he mumbles and stammers like a fool.

It is no secret that many of Coetzee's books are autobiographical in the way that novels are, a piecemeal jigsawing of the things that happen in a person's life. In *Disgrace*, he goes as far as to describe a thinly disguised University of Cape Town. He has mined his life, and even the central trunk of this book about a professor who has fallen from public grace recalls shades of an English department at the university, which has over the years had its own skirmishes with what was once called "moral turpitude", today known as "sexual harassment".

Cape Town is a small place and Coetzee is known to be aloof and inaccessible, a man of almost Jesuit self-discipline and dedication. He does not drink, smoke or eat meat. He cycles vast distances to keep fit, looking like an urgent fishmoth riding through the countryside. He is known to be a man of enormous will power with a passion for rugby. His dislike of easy communication is attributed variously to shyness, arrogance or maybe just a desire not to squander words or ideas in idle conversation. I had wanted to chat (although I doubt this is a word he would approve of) to Coetzee because his early life so closely resembled mine that when I read *Boyhood* I burst into tears. His father like my father was disgraced. He lived in Plumstead. I lived below the line in Claremont. His father like mine trudged out every day to look for a job and like my father slipped back into his pyjamas in the afternoon with a half jug of brandy beside him. His father went to the Wynberg Hotel every night and came home and got sick in the lavatory. My father went to the Avenue Hotel in



Claremont and came back and got sick. There might have been things to talk about but maybe not.

My sense of Coetzee is that his first instruction is to preserve himself and his talent against all marauders. He has no intention of turning cartwheels for the press. A quote from *Disgrace* goes thus: 'These are puritanical times. Private life is public business. Prudence is respectable, prudence and sentiment. They wanted a spectacle: breast-beating, remorse, tears if possible. A TV show, in fact. I wouldn't oblige.' However, he did oblige when asked to be filmed in a recent high-profile SABC television programme, though he remained sadly dumb as they went over old boyhood turf. Perhaps we should be grateful for this attitude of self-preservation. It has made it possible for him to produce a prodigious amount of brilliant

writing and carry on working as a university professor. He published two minor novels in the '70s, and then came *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *The Life and Times of Michael K* (which received the Booker prize) and *Foe*, a disturbing trio. These are stories that seem set in ether, almost entirely devoid of references to race. They are nothing so simplistic as allegories about the land of apartheid, and yet they are all uniquely South African in terms of some fugitive inner landscape.

His next book, *Age of Iron*, differed from its predecessors in that it was explicitly political, set in Cape Town during a time of turbulence and stark choice. It was a dark time both for the country and for Coetzee. He buried four close relations while this novel was under way - his ex-wife, who died of cancer, both parents and a 23-year-old son, who died in a fall from a high

balcony.

In *Disgrace*, the text is fleet and primed with light, almost friable, prose, and had I been given the book without the author's name I could have believed that I was reading someone like Anita Brookner. It had that same brief summing up of emotions that sound so plausible until probed, the same use of classical allusions muddled in successfully with everyday happenings. I have always marvelled at how some writers can make you believe that thinking about making dinner, your mind might alight on the events leading up to the battle of Pharsalus or the murder of Pompey.

*Disgrace* records the downfall of David Lurie, twice-divorced professor of classics and modern languages (now dumbed down to communications 101). There are wonderful lines in it. Talking of his lesbian daughter, Lurie says, "Sapphic love: an excuse for putting on weight." Describing Byron sitting with the women in Ravenna, playing Faro and bored, he writes, "In adultery, all the tedium of marriage rediscovered." However, linked with Lurie's personal story is Coetzee's exposure of a South Africa where all codes of behaviour for people, both black and white, have become perverted. Criminal acts like rape can be claimed as the righteous revenge of the aggrieved, not only in the eyes of the criminal but in the eyes of the victim. When the drama unfolds Lurie is writing an opera with a Byronic theme which acts as a sub-plot but never quite works.

My difficulty with the book was that it seemed to be written by two different authors, which I found offputting - even eerie. It is possible to see the first part of *Disgrace* as a protest against the inhumanity of the whole institutionalised politically correct world. On the other hand, the main character could be seen as a selfish and uncaring man who is intent on exploiting a young defenceless woman who

is badly in need of help. The story line flickers around the word "rape", which seems to have become the symbol of the pious Left. There is even a nod towards the fashionable "date rape" of women's magazines. An irreverent English don I know who lives in Oxford once said, "Rape is the only sex Lefties know." And although I am sure that the world is littered with theses on Coetzee's attitude to women, I found myself more than once wondering if he loved them or hated them. He seems a man beguiled by physical beauty but fearful of those (himself included) marooned on the island of age and ugliness. But it is the ending that is so disturbing and seemed to me, seen in the realistic sense in which most of the book was written, so criminally irresponsible that it should carry a danger warning. Even if the ending is metaphoric - and indeed the gentle sun and bees busy in a field of flowers give it a soap-opera gleam we are either way on the old Coetzee turf of terrible endings with blood on the floor. I recall Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron* lying under a bridge in her night clothes, half conscious while street children probed her mouth for gold teeth.

The Coetzee terrain has always flirted with the rather wearisome notion of atonement and prices to be paid: a blood-letting demanded by the land. There is on the part of the author such obsession with the sense of punishment and pain that accompanies being (a white) South African that his books vibrate with moral whisperings. Although he has said that he considers himself a storyteller above all else, many of his books are so full of hidden messages that they read like religious tracts. The reader is never quite free of a sense of rectitude that hovers round the text like the twitching of lace curtains, allowing one a glimpse of a writer who himself seems to fight the endless demons of right and wrong. In *Disgrace* Lurie sees himself as a thinker whose inner life is corrupting his outward

behaviour and who eventually takes ethical refuge in the cause of animals and a mad crusade with vet Bev Shaw to caress and brush back the hair of dogs as they are euthanased.

One criticism of Coetzee's work is that he never really tackles the situation of South Africa head on. Most of his books are evasive, allegorical, mired in metaphor. *Disgrace* might have been a conscious attempt to readdress the situation. And although he has grappled with a realistically observed contemporary South Africa, what started as an entertaining and well-crafted read became a book with such a flawed ending that one could not escape the notion that Coetzee had tried to reconcile a creeping despondency with the country with some view - however cranky - of a workable future in order to appease a spectrum of political thinking. Some people might think that this is a brave book to have written at this time in the history of South Africa. I consider it an excellently written cop-out.

In the end perhaps I would have not had the strength or even the intellect to interview Professor Coetzee. Malan says, "Beyond a certain point, all his answers became lengthy meditations and I eventually found myself at a loss."

Malan then asked him what he thought his flaws were and Coetzee writing down the question answered, "How many would you like?"

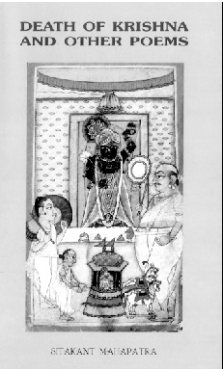
Malan decided to leaven the silence with an anecdote of how when he was filming in Soweto he asked the mortuary attendant if he could bring out some corpses for the cameras. "How many would you like?" the mortuary attendant asked.

Coetzee looked up sharply, apparently rather startled. He put a line through the question, muttering that his flaws would not be aired in the Sunday press.

# Indian Poetry in English: Kolatkar and Mahapatra

KHADEMUL ISLAM

In this occasional series we will look at Indian poetry written in English. Though it has tended to be treated as the poor man's Indo-Anglian literature -- with Salman Rushdie also weighing in when he wrote in his Introduction to The Vintage Book of Indian Writing:1947-1997 (though he did make time for Kolatkar) that while "it was evident to us that the rich poetic traditions of India continued to flourish in many of the sub-continent's languages, whereas the English-language poets, with a few distinguished exceptions (Arun Kolatkar, A. K. Ramanujan, Jayanta Mahapatra, to name just three), did not match the quality of their counterparts in prose"-- we would nevertheless be failing in our duty to our readers if we did not introduce them to the varied voices that inhabit this particular poetic landscape.



## Sitakant Mahapatra

There is a deceptive simplicity in Sitakant Mahapatra's poetry. He is an Oriya poet who deals with his remembered village by the banks of the River Chitropala, his children, parents and grandparents. They explore life, meditate upon it, with a child-like innocence, which he implies must always be the essential state of the poet's being: only the child-like can enter into the kingdom of heaven. But beyond the simple themes and language lies the eternal quest: man's search for meaning in his uncertain existence, his anguish in knowing that the only certainty is death. Mahapatra's poetry weaves together the recurring rhythms of life as embodied in tribal poetry, with the post-modern questioning, existential anguish and pain of the 20th century poet. Rooted in nature and the daily rhythms of life, the changing seasons, these poems celebrate both life and death. They stand at the intersection between time and timelessness, between imagination and prayer.

## This Is Why We Are Human

(translated from Oriya by Bikram K. Das)

Not because we can converse  
with fellow human beings  
on this ancient earth  
from light-years away in space;  
but, even after sitting—hours together,  
next to someone dear  
not even a word rises to the lips.

No need to take all the trouble  
Of journeying to the moon, the stars, or the sun.  
For, standing here on this mother earth,  
we can cancel out the sun  
with just the bare palm of our hands;  
we can make him jump  
out of the bucket of water  
and dance on the mud-washed wall;  
we can plant the moon  
on the beloved's chest  
and the stars in her eyes.

We are human  
not because we can compel words  
to say whatever we intend to say  
but we discover that the errant words  
can never be cajoled or persuaded  
to do our bidding.

We are human  
because we can't face up to the truth  
blazing as sun;  
and instead, in love with illusory words,  
those half-truths in half-light and half-shadow  
we hide behind them  
all our life.

This is why we are human  
not because all information, all knowledge  
are garnered and arranged  
in *puthis* and computers  
within our reach;  
but because we spend the long morning  
looking madly for the  
misplaced pair of eyeglasses.

## Arun Kolatkar

Arun Kolatkar--a recluse without a telephone in his home-- won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1977 for his series of poems (first published in 1974) in *Jejuri*, which immediately established his reputation as one of the most important Indo-Anglian poets. That same year the first collection of Kolatkar's Marathi poems, *Aruna Kolatakaracya Kavita*, was also published and, in large measure owing to the celebrity engendered by *Jejuri*, forced a gradual, indeed begrudging, reevaluation and acknowledgment of Kolatkar's major place in the canon of modern Marathi poetry. By the sixties Arun Kolatkar, along with others such as Gopalakrishna Adiga (Kannada), Ajanta (Telugu), Ayyappa Paniker, N.N. Kakkad (Malayalam), Ajney, Muktibodh, Raghuvir Sahay (Hindi), Dilip Chitre (also Marathi), Navkant Barua, Nilmani Phookan (Assamese), Labhshankar Thaker, Sitanshu Yashaschandra (Gujarati), Akhtar-ul-Iman, Balraj Komal (Urdu), K.N. Subramanyam, Jnanakoothan (Tamil), had ushered in modernism in Indian poetry. As Ayappa Paniker himself wrote "Arun Kolatkar, being a bilingual poet, is heir to the western modernist ironic mode as well as the medieval Indian devotional mode. The two modes in their strange combination give strange results. His apparent simplicity of syntax heightens his subtlety and surrealist power. His irony is not untouched by a deep personal concern." True words, and in the poem reproduced here we find both the modes.

## Yeshwant Rao

Are you looking for a god?  
I know a good one.  
His name is Yeshwant Rao  
and he's one of the best.  
look him up  
when you are in Jejuri next.

Of course he's only a second class god  
and his place is just outside the main temple.  
Outside even of the outer wall.  
As if he belonged  
among the tradesmen and the lepers.

I've known gods  
prettier faced  
or straighter laced.  
Gods who soak you for your gold.  
Gods who soak you for your soul.  
Gods who make you walk  
on a bed of burning coal.  
Gods who put a child inside your wife.  
Or a knife inside your enemy.  
Gods who tell you how to live your life,  
double your money  
or triple your land holdings.  
Gods who can barely suppress a smile  
as you crawl a mile for them.  
Gods who will see you drown  
if you won't buy them a new crown.  
And although I'm sure they're all to be praised,  
they're either too symmetrical  
or too theatrical for my taste.

Yeshwant Rao,  
mass of basalt,  
bright as any post box,  
the shape of protoplasm  
or king size lava pie  
thrown against the wall,  
without an arm, a leg  
or even a single head.

Yeshwant Rao.  
He's the god you've got to meet.  
If you're short of a limb,  
Yeshwant Rao will lend you a hand  
and get you back on your feet.

Yeshwant Rao  
Does nothing spectacular.  
He doesn't promise you the earth  
Or book your seat on the next rocket to heaven.  
But if any bones are broken,  
you know he'll mend them.  
He'll make you whole in your body  
and hope your spirit will look after itself.  
He is merely a kind of a bone-setter.  
The only thing is,  
as he himself has no heads, hands and feet,  
he happens to understand you a little better.

