

Subjectivity in Coetzee's *Childhood of Jesus*: A Žizekian Reading

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of the present paper is to trace the elements of Žizekian subject in the main characters of Coetzee's *Childhood of the Jesus*. To pave the way for such an analysis, a short background about the main notions are provided in addition to a terse summary of the novel itself. Quotations and conversations are aptly chosen to analyze the main characters process of subject formation. Before going through the analysis, the three orders, imaginary, symbolic and Real are discussed in details. David, John and Ines are considered as the main characters and the researchers try to shed light on the process they are undergoing in the new land and whether they afford to be a Žizekian subject or not. So, their interaction with the Big Other through Symbolic order, their reaction toward language and the effect of Real on them are elaborated one by one. The paper concludes that among all the characters, only David affords to become a Žizekian subject through standing against the Big Other and understanding the cracks into the Symbolic orders.

Keywords: Big Other, Real order, Subject, Subject Formation, Symbolic order, Žizek

I. INTRODUCTION

The present paper tries to discuss Slavoj Žizek's Psychoanalytic "subject" and traces it in John Maxwell Coetzee's *Childhood of Jesus*. Although untying nodes and nexuses of Coetzee's works is definitely a complicated task, by decomposing the twists of the plots and tracing the remarkable elements which are essential for our analysis, this mission is accomplished here. First of all, a brief history of the key notion, "subject" is provided step by step to show the way it passed during the human history. Then, the nature of Žizekian subject is discussed. After that a terse summary of the story is recounted illuminating every single point that will be necessary in the subheadings. The most remarkable part is applying the theory in the novels which is meticulously done through providing quotations and relevant theories to enrich the argument. In this story the question is whether the characters reflect Žizekian "subject" or not. Ultimately, an overview of the significance of the whole paper is provided.

Among different concepts included in Žizek's works, the major terms which are selected to be covered in this paper are the "subject", "subject formation", the "Other" and "trauma" in the above-mentioned novel. Prior to reading the story, the Žizekian concepts used in this study are clarified briefly. The Žizekian "subject" is the form of human's consciousness, as opposed to the contents of that form which are individual and special to that person. A person has to detach himself from the world and locates himself in a void to see the world. Žizek places the subject in the empty space devoid of all content. The subject is, in other words, a void. Žizek's purpose is to evoke this gap, this irrepressible void, without lapsing into a phantasy of completeness.

Žizek argues that the "subject" exists at the interface, or on the borders between the Symbolic Order and the Real Order. rather simply, without the interaction between the two Orders, the "subject" would not exist at all. If the Symbolic was not an inadequate account of the Real, if, one could catch the Real directly, then one, as a subject, would disappear. The thing that makes one a subject, is the signifying chain and the decisions one makes in regard to it and that would have disappeared and; therefore, one along with it.

The Symbolic works upon the Real; it introduces a cut into it. Clearly, one of the ways in which one can recognize the Real is by noting when something is indifferent to Symbolization. One enters into the Symbolic Order as soon as he is named or otherwise classified in this way, but previous to that he is in the Real. A traumatic event stands for, for Žizek, the archetypal relationship between the Symbolic and Real. It defines the point where the Real interrupts the smooth running of the Symbolic. This is how the relationship between the Real and the Symbolic proceeds: the Real just keeps on, but how one can understand the Real changes with the Symbolic?

The next concept is Žižekian "subject formation" and the procedure of forming a Žižekian "subject". From a psychoanalytic angle, Žižek's initial position is that the self must embrace its own otherness to become and recognize itself as "subject". For Žižek the subject is formed by a loss, by the removal of itself from itself, by the expulsion of the very ground or essence from which it is made. In other words, the subject, must externalize itself in order to be a subject at all. As long as one stays within chains of causes and effects, everything makes sense; but the subject is what resists sense. According to Žižek in *Jacques Lacan: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, the subject's place is both where chains of causes and effects are broken and where there is a continuous effort to deal with and make sense of this nonsensical, inassimilable real (2003: 233). The foundation of the subject is a trauma, an accidental event, a mishap. No immediate and evident reason or cause for the subject can be pinpointed. The interaction between the "Symbolic" and "Real" orders is crucial in Žižekian definition and formation of "subject". When the smooth-running "Symbolic" is interrupted by a cut of "Real" into it, the person who becomes aware of his "Symbolic" surrounding and takes an action, is defined a Žižekian "subject". This part seeks to trace the presence of the "Symbolic" and "Real" orders and to discuss the ability of characters to be placed in Žižekian void in the above-mentioned novels. It analyzed the characters of immigrants to realize if they can experience the Žižekian "subject".

II. DISCUSSION

As mentioned earlier, one of the recent novels of Coetzee is *Childhood of the Jesus*. The present story was analyzed in the light of Žižek's two concepts: "subject" and "subject formation". This part of paper applied the two concepts to answer the questions posed earlier: What is the significance of "subject" in *Childhood of Jesus*? To what extent the main characters of *Childhood of Jesus* could be read as Žižekian subject?

As discussed before, Slavoj Žižek introduces the "subject" as a void with no strings attached to it. The Žižekian "subject" is out of him/herself. In this sense, Žižekian "subject" must be an object first, then to be a "subject". The present section tries to demonstrate whether the immigrants in the novel can be defined as Žižekian subjects. The role of "Symbolic", "Real" and "Imaginary" orders would be analyzed in the selected novel to discuss the subjectivity of different characters. Before starting the elaborations, the summary of the story was presented.

The first chapters are saturated by Spanish words and expressions. It begins by the arrival of two new comers to Novilla, a new land where the language is Spanish. A man newly named Simon is responsible for a five-year old boy called David. They are asking for food and place and work in the center of immigrants. Since the key of their room is not available, the young attractive lady working in that office, Ana, provides them a place to stay. This humiliating favor is a shelter in the yard of her house with a blanket and some slices of bread as dinner. Strange things begin to happen. There is nothing more than bread, buses are free and they are welcomed like a dirt. A job is provided for Simon but they cannot pay in advance so someone lends him some money. Then, a windowless dull room is given to them in which the boy asks about the whyness of their immigration. When they settle in their own place satisfied for having a job, Simon plans to start looking for David's mom. The registry office doesn't give them any record of the lost mother because of the fact that she is not expecting them. A new life, a new name. The boy, thumb in mouth, does not even tell her mom's name. He just asks about the plan of going back home, over the seas. The boy makes friend easily, first with Alvaro, Simon's colleague, then with El Ray, a carthorse. They are invited to watch a football match which strangely is free like buses.

In the fourth chapter Ana invites them for a picnic in which she behaves seductively and simultaneously cold. She suggests that the boy will form a habit of the moderate diet of being hungry most of the time. The boy says he had no idea about his mom's name and appearance so Ana ask him if it matters that the guardian finds a new mom for him. They start talking about the current situation, Simon comments that this country is so bloodless, everyone is so well intended but with no desire. Then they continue their conversation in an explicit dirty way about embracing. After a heated discussion, they say goodbye and go to find a restaurant. In the next chapter, they ask for the variety of nourishment, something except bread, but the only thing Alvaro suggests strangely is catching rats and eating them. Even with the additions of fruits to their diet, the body exhaustion doesn't leave them. When Simon goes to the clinic for the deterioration of his health and the dizziness he experiences from time to time, but all he is prescribed to be "don't look down". His friend, Alvaro assures him that even if he feels dizzy and falls, they would save him. One day at work, Alvaro was hit by a man named Daga while the boy was a witness. The event that rose a lot of controversies among Simon and the boy.

Finally they are given an apartment in the East bloc where is more desirable than the west one. They move there with no difficulty since they have few possessions. Their neighbor is a lady who teaches violin and her son Fidel who becomes friend with the boy soon. The lady called Elena and Simon start sleeping together. Their growing friendship is so good for the children but still Simon thinks she lacks storms of passion.

‘To my ear that is an old way of thinking. In the old way of thinking, no matter how much you may have, there is always something missing. The name you choose to give this *something-more* that is missing is passion. Yet I am willing to bet that if tomorrow you were offered all the passion you wanted—passion by the bucketful—you would promptly find something new to miss, to lack. This endless dissatisfaction, this yearning for the something-more that is missing, is a way of thinking we are well rid of, in my opinion. *Nothing is missing*. The nothing that you think is missing is an illusion. You are living by an illusion.’ (2013: 45)

He finds the life too placid for his taste. Simon even cannot find any news on the radio due to the fact that they think there is nothing going on around the world. To him everything lacks the due weight. Simon and David go to countryside for sightseeing. In a grand building, they see three people, a lady and two similar men playing tennis. Simon claims that the lady is David's mom. He articulates the proposal and the lady accepts to become his mother. Elena invites Simon and talks about giving up David to Ines. But Simon says you are all animosity and jealousy.

The next event is the altercation at work with two of his friends. His friend, Alvaro insists on the fact that handing down the boy is not true. Alvaro asks Ines for permission and Simon is permitted to see the boy at the right time. The next day she calls because she needs a plumper and Simon goes to help. After a while Simon starts to read Don Quixote for the boy. David reacts so arbitrary to the book and reading procedure that Simon thinks about sending him to school but Ines doesn't agree. Once the boy was kidnapped by senior Daga and Simon took him back. At his 6th birthday, David is sent to school but he shows abnormal behavior there. They are invited to visit the school psychologist to uncover the secret of David's unsettled behavior. School authorities agree on sending David to Special learning center at Punto Arenas. The boy can read and write but he plays a fool all the time. A court is held to decide whether David should go to Punto Arenas or not. David is sent to Punto Arenas by force and soon escapes. To escape from the law of sending 6-year old children to school they set up to a new life in North. In this journey the boy invites everyone to come to live a new life.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, Zizek places the "subject" in a void, detached of any particular interests and needs. As Zizek asserts in *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*:

The subject of democracy is not a human person, "man" in all the richness of his needs, interests, and beliefs. The subject of democracy, like the subject of psychoanalysis, is none other than the Cartesian subject in all its abstraction, the empty punctuality we reach after subtracting all its particular content. (1992: 125)

The "subject" must free him/herself from customs and traditions or any kind of strings that attaches him/her to any discourse to be defined in Zizekian terms, a "subject". Zizek argues that the border between the "Symbolic" order and the "Real" order is the void that the "subject" must be in. The individual forms a Zizekian "subject" when he/she takes an action or reacts to the cuts of the Real into the Symbolic.

The first thing pops to everyone's mind is the probable relation of the novel with the so called biography of Jesus Christ. In a quick glance, it has nothing to do with the original story. In the novel, there is a five-year old boy whose letter of identification is lost accidentally in the sea when he was coming to the new land with a group of other people to grab the bright future by forgetting the nightmarish past. The boy was called David in the new land and a man newly named Simon tried to play the role of a guardian for him. David, a biblical name itself, reminds the first sentence of Gospel: A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1). All over the story, there is nothing about the boy's father. This can simply remind you of Jesus who was born out of Virgin Mary. They report that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived and that she “was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18)

After their arrival, they ask for a place to live in but what they are offered, is a yard:

"Where exactly will we be spending the night?"

‘Here.’ She indicates the yard. ‘I’ll come back in a while and see how you are getting on. The building materials in question are half a dozen sheets of galvanized iron, rusted through in places—old roofing, no doubt—and some odds and ends of timber. Is this a test? Does she really mean that he and the child should sleep out in the open? He waits for her promised return, but she does not come. He tries the back door: it is locked. He knocks; there is no response.’ (2013:10)

They are treated like "a dirt" there. This misbehavior is so disgusting at the first sight that he asks himself "why this pointless misery?" the other bitter point after arrival was the food, which was less than sufficient and simpler than biblical stories: bread and water. Whenever David asked for more food, more bread was offered. Here, again what sparks in mind is the simplicity of Jesus lifestyle.

In the new country, Simon was given a job, not too heavy to suit his age, then they were provided with a flat which was like any other flat around. The boy, with his thumb in his mouth as usual, repeated a question:

"No, I mean, why are we *here*?" His gesture takes in the room, the Centre, the city of Novilla, everything.

'You are here to find your mother. I am here to help you.'

'But after we find her, what are we here for?'

'I don't know what to say. We are here for the same reason everyone else is. We have been given a chance to live and we have accepted that chance. It is a great thing, to live. It is the greatest thing of all.'

'But do we have to live here?'

'Here as opposed to where? There is nowhere else to be but here. Now close your eyes. It is time to sleep.'"(2013:17)

Simon tries to find the mother but through the office which is useless. They are told that people come here to forget their past so you cannot expect us to provide you with any information about the mother. Simon was so surprised about the people in the new country that he says:

'Do you know what surprises me most about this country?' A reckless tone is creeping into his voice; it would be wiser to stop, but he does not. 'That it is so bloodless. Everyone I meet is so decent, so kindly, so well intentioned. No one swears or gets angry. No one gets drunk. No one even raises his voice. You live on a diet of bread and water and bean paste and you claim to be filled. How can that be, humanly speaking? Are you lying, even to yourselves?'

Passion doesn't exist. Moderation is the pivotal part of their life. People are good but not that good. He finds someone whom he prefers to be the child's mother. The lady accepts the responsibility and in a twinkling of an eye comes to live with the boy and sends the so called guardian off.

There comes a time when David goes to school. Although he is so clever and he carries Don Quixote with himself everywhere, he abstains to read and he questions everything in mathematics. Why two plus two equals four? So David is considered a special case and according to the regulations should be sent to another school for children with special problems.

The nominated mother does not agree with such a displacement and after too much ado, she decides to run away with the boy and her two brothers. After a long discussion, the brothers refuse to accompany them but instead Simon eagerly accompanies them to run away. During the strange journey, David invites others to come with them to experience the new life in a new place regardless the fact that they themselves don't know where they are heading to.

The primary assumption about this novel is that the straight collapse of the big Other deviates the procedure of subjectification for five- year old David. In this part, first the big Other is defined tersely. Then, the researcher tries to trace the elements required to prove this collapse through providing sufficient quotations from the novel parallel with the Lacanian descriptions. This collapse is clarified through a meticulous reading of *Childhood of Jesus* under various sub-categories such as the parents, language, reading and numbers.

The 'big Other', the Other written with an upper case 'O' refers either to the Symbolic Order as it is experienced by individual subjects, or to another subject in so far as that subject represents the Symbolic. For example, the law is an institution which is part of the Symbolic Order so it is, therefore, the Other. Equally, a policeman, because he represents the institution of the law, is also the Other. His Otherness proceeds from the fact that he is a place-holder or representative of the law. According to Myers, this Otherness is, therefore, more radical than the otherness pertaining to the Imaginary, because it cannot be assimilated by the process of identification (2003: 23). As Julian Wolfreys, Ruth Robbins and Kenneth Womack assert, in Lacanian psychoanalysis the Other signifies a radical alterity irreducible to any imaginary or subjective identification (2006: 74). The big Other is what causes the alienation of subject in the symbolic order. The subject doesn't speak unless the big Other makes him to speak. To put it in a nutshell the big Other is whoever and whatever that doesn't let the subject decide on his own actions.

The analogy of the name of this novel is discussed earlier in which it is mentioned that David has a parallel life with Jesus Christ as far as the name of novel can suggest. With no father, even the name of father, and then

having a virgin mother and then trying to save people's life, and eating bread and water as biblical food, there is no doubt that these similar details are mentioned on purpose. But for an acute analysis here, the researcher is supposed to consider the other side of the coin. Looking through Zizekian scope, mother is the first fulfillment of the big Other to a child. On the one hand, one of the most pressing issues in this book is finding David's mother who probably start a new life and does not bother to find her son. So the boy lacks the primary understanding of the big Other. On the other hand, one of the most repeated statements in the first five chapters is: " I am not his father, I am not his uncle, I am only his guardian" which means David is not able to experience the father or at least father image to get to know the Symbolic order.

According to the definition of big Other, it is anything that restricts the subject to be the master of his actions. The earliest stage of this restriction is the language. It is another name for the big Other that controls and manipulates the actions of subject. In order to transfer things from the real order into symbolic, the very requirement is language. All through the novel, language overshadows every single matter. They have learned Spanish in camps during a two-week class. Simon states that "Our very words lack weight, these Spanish words that do not come from our heart".(2013:45) Simon doesn't speak Spanish very well but the boy masters it in a short time but after a short while David says: " I don't want to speak Spanish any more. I hate Spanish."(2013: 47) the boy stands against the language, technically he protests with no clear reason. It seems first the problem is only with Spanish.

"WHY DO I have to speak Spanish all the time?"

'We have to speak some language, my boy, unless we want to bark and howl like animals. And if we are going to speak some language, it is best we all speak the same one. Isn't that reasonable?'

'But why Spanish? I hate Spanish.'(2013: 113)

Up to here the only problem is with Spanish. But by going through the explanatory details and taking one step forward, the researcher comes to understand that David stands against the language per se. in a way that somewhere he says:

"I want to speak my own language.'

'There is no such thing as one's own language.'

'There is! *La lafafa yam yingtutu.*'

'That's just gibberish. It doesn't mean anything.'

'It does mean something. It means something to me.'

'That may be so, but it doesn't mean anything to me. Language has to mean something to me as well as to you, otherwise it doesn't count as language.'(2013:119)

The radical belief of David toward language makes him a rebel at school. Although he has learnt reading through Don Quixotic, he acts up at school and pretends he cannot read. He disobeys the school rules. Consequently, the psychiatrist invites his parents for David's extraordinary communication.

"He cannot even sound the letters of the alphabet. I have never come across such an extreme case. A specific deficit linked to symbolic activities. To working with words and numbers. He cannot read. He cannot write. He cannot count."(2013:131)

Even the psychiatrist mentions the word "symbolic". David has problem with the boundaries of the predetermined language and the arbitrary significations of alphabets and numbers. His teacher even says:

"He is finding it difficult to adjust to the realities of the classroom. [] In reading, David has unhappily made no progress, none at all. Other children who are not as naturally gifted read better than he does. Much better. There is something about the activity of reading that he seems unable to grasp. The same goes for figures."(2013:130)

David knows the numbers and the alphabet but everything seems inconsistent and incoherent for him. He cannot even accept that two plus two equals four. He sometimes talks about a crack or a hole that may suddenly swallow him as it happened for Don Quixotic and he fell down into a hole. This matters is discussed inside out in the next part.

One of the most repeated words by David is "crack" in which he is always worried to fall. What is this crack and how is it related to the title of this thesis is yet to come. The first time he mentions this word is like this:

'Come on, hurry up,' he says irritably. 'Keep your game for another day.'

'No. I don't want to fall into a crack.'

'That's nonsense. How can a big boy like you fall down a little crack like that?'

'Not that crack. Another crack.'

'Which crack? Point to the crack.'

'I don't know! I don't know which crack. Nobody knows.'

'Nobody knows because nobody can fall through a crack in the paving. Now hurry up.'

'I can! You can! Anyone can! You don't know!' (2013:28)

He is to speak about something that people cannot see normally, something beyond their understanding. The crack that exists everywhere and everyone can fall into it. Apparently, he does not speak about a crack in the pavement. But a crack into the symbolic.

Even when he is forced to use numbers, he points to the space between them.

'Numbers *can* die. They can fall out of the sky.'

'That is not true. Stars can't fall out of the sky. The ones that do seem to fall, the shooting stars, aren't real stars. As for numbers, if a number were to fall out of the ranks, then there would be a crack, a break, and that is not how the numbers work. There is never any crack between the numbers.

No number is ever missing.'

'There is! You don't understand! You don't remember anything! A number can fall out of the sky like Don Quixote when he fell down the crack.'(2013:113)

There seems to be no way to justify David about this crack. Obviously, he sees something that others cannot see. Even somewhere, he claims that there is a crack between the pages of the book.

Why are you handling the book so roughly?'

'Because. Because if I don't hurry a hole will open.'

'Open up where?'

'Between the pages.'

'That's nonsense. There is no such thing as a hole between the pages.'

'There is a hole. It's inside the page. You don't see it because you don't see anything.'

'Stop that now!'(2013:106)

His strange obsession with hole, crack and falling into them is the hallmark of what he is experiencing in Novila. He becomes engaged in a conversation about falling with Simon.

what happens when you *fall*?'

'I don't understand. Do you mean, while you are falling through the air?'

'Yes. Is it like flying?'

'No, not at all. Flying and falling aren't the same thing. Only birds can fly; we human beings are tooheavy.'

'But just for a little, when you are high up, it is like flying, isn't it?'

'I suppose so, if you forget you are falling. Why do you ask?'(2013:165)

Zizek apparently talked about this issue in his own way:

An ethics of the real dialectical materialism pints toward the Real by heightening the inconsistency of imaginary-symbolic reality. But the inevitable return of the Real shows the sense in which there is no big other. (2000: 17)

For David, there is no Big Other regarding his understanding of the crack. Vividly, Simon does not have the same idea toward the concept of crack. He even does not pay any attention to the widening cracks in different situations which are considerable for David.

III.CONCLUSION

To recapitulate, among all Coetzee's characters, the only one who affords to be a Zizekian subject is David who stands against the big Other firmly to prove that it does not exist for him. The big Other, be it the language, the mother, the foster mother or school regulations cannot hail the child to accept the symbolic order as such. The most pressing issue in this novel is the quest for identity and the Odyssey toward becoming a subject in which almost all of the characters apparently failed one after the other for the mere fact that from the very beginning, they surrendered wordlessly to the rules and customs of the desireless land of good will and bread and water. But David, hating Spanish, disobeying the school regulations, questioning the abstract mathematics and trying to dismantle reality through magic, is the only one who experiences the crack of the symbolic and finds it widening in strange situations. This crack into the symbolic leads to a rebellion against the big Other and he becomes a subject through experiencing the crack and the void after that.

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