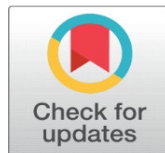
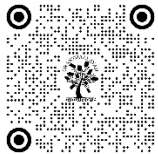


DISCOURSING TRANSNATION SPACE AND LOCATING SUBJECT POSITION IN JM COETZEE'S ELIZABETH COSTELLO AND SLOW MAN: DAVID MALOUF IN CONTEXT

Samim Reza 

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English, Amdanga Jugal Kishore Mahavidyalaya, Affiliated to West Bengal State University, WB, India



Corresponding Author

Samim Reza, samimreza@ajkm.ac.in

DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.2213](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.2213)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

In the Neustadt Prize acceptance lecture (2000), David Malouf had exuded due pride as an Australian and argued that the “power of language” enables one to remap the world “so that wherever you happen to be is the center” (Le, 2019). Malouf’s statement, it is argued, embraces a conspicuous turn from cosmopolitan to transnational. Although, the transnational turn yields certain benefits which are not served in being a cosmopolitan, however, according to Bill Ashcroft, it still fails to fix a definite “subject position”. Ashcroft argues that a definable subject position can be achieved not through embracing transnational turn but being within the space which he calls “Transnation”. This article interrogates the case of JM Coetzee, the South African born Nobel Laureate (2003) who happens to be an immigrant to Australia (therefore, bearing a hyphenated identity), and also contextualizes Elizabeth Costello, a fictional character in two of Coetzee’s Australian novels, in order to discourse the transnation space and locate Costello’s subject position.

Keywords: Australianness, Cosmopolitanism, Hyphenated Identity, Racism, Transnation, Transnational

1. INTRODUCTION

In an article published in *The Guardian*, Claire Heaney writes: “(JM) Coetzee’s acquired ‘Australianness’ is deliberately adopted and stressed, but the attempt to claim him as an Australian seems to belie an underlying sense of cultural inadequacy” (2014). Some pertinent questions with which this article may thrive are: What exactly is Australianness? How does one define and determine “cultural inadequacy”? What are the parameters to assess one’s cultural (in)adequacy? These questions find no answer in Heaney’s article; however, he impresses that the questions are self-assertive – signifying that one must meet certain criterion to earn cultural adequacy and acquire Australianness to be reckoned an Australian. Heaney explicitly puts JM Coetzee’s hyphenated identity (South African-Australian) under scanner and conspicuously turns vituperative in criticising Coetzee’s Australianness which, according to him, is “adopted and stressed”.

JM Coetzee, the South Africa born novelist and two-time winner of the Booker's Prize along with innumerable prestigious accolades, had migrated to Australia in 2002. He was born in South Africa to a Dutch father and an English mother in 1940. He spoke Afrikaans at home and English at school. He spent his childhood and adolescence in South Africa as a privileged white during the Apartheid era (1948-1994). Following the Sacville massacre in 1960, he left South Africa to join IBM in London as a software engineer after his graduation from the University of Cape Town (UCT). Soon he left the job to start a teaching career at the State University of New York (SUNY) in USA. He applied for citizenship but his involvement in the SUNY campus protest against the USA's Vietnam War led to the rejection of his application. He came back to his homeland Cape Town and joined the UCT, his alma mater as a Professor of English literature in 1972. He continued in the post until his immigration to Australia in 2002. As soon as he left South Africa for Australia, he was nominated for Nobel Prize, and awarded in 2003. Despite this bonafide reason for rejoice, Coetzee could not avoid the controversies related to his present identity and former nationality and alleged "cultural inadequacy" as a South African-Australian.

Coetzee had published three Australian novels following his settlement in Adelaide, Australia: Elizabeth Costello (2003), Slow Man (2005) and Diary of a Bad Year (2007). In Elizabeth Costello, the protagonist is a fictional Australian author of considerable international repute in academia. The old Mrs. Costello is touring the world for lecturing on different topics ranging from literature to animal rights, but Australia as a promising nation-state with plenty of resources never features in any of her lectures. In the next two novels, the protagonists of non-European, non-British, and non-English speaking origin are the dislocated immigrants in Australia who are desperately struggling to either gain or forge, earn or acquire the standards and merits which Heaney and many others call Australianness – a set of unscripted and undefined cultural and linguistic codes or parameters in a cumulative sense. Some of these immigrant protagonists are still rooted in their former nation, clinging on to their former national identity and sentiment, and find it difficult to attain whatever is meant by cultural adequacy in terms of Australianness; for some it is a must-attain task at the cost of any risk and they resort to means of forgery to elevate their representation in terms of the newly adopted nationality and to disrupt any cultural identification system in terms of what Bhabha ideates as "nationness" (Bhabha, 1990: 303). To speak in Ashcroft's words, they are the victims of "bordering practices... subtle and unrelenting bordering practices (which) are generated by the nation's ideological hegemony" (2020: 1). This paper intends to hold a discourse based on Ashcroft's theory of transnation by attempting to locate the "subject position" of Coetzee himself and the fictional protagonist named Elizabeth Costello who appear both in Elizabeth Costello (2003) and Slow Man (2007). This task is undertaken on getting triggered by Ashcroft's observation (in his essay Australia: Transnational or Transnation?):

"The forces of nationalism, patriotism, national mythologies and social pressures place insidious and constant pressure on individuals to conform. These pressures are perpetrated not only by state organs but also by the media, which occupy parochial and ideological spaces as well as that of the nation. Added to this, the worldwide increase in states' surveillance of their populations has infected Australia as well. It is these bordering practices, rather than physical borders, around which national populations circulate." (2020: 1 – 2)

Though Ashcroft refrains from articulating racism as one of the chief driving forces of what he calls "bordering practices", however, in a different context he says, "Nationalism is always complicated by ethnocentrism and racism, and as nationalism proliferates, violence increases" (2014). Noticeably, Coetzee also does not articulate racism as a trope in any of his Australian novels; it is however implicit in what his protagonist Paul Rayment in Slow Man calls "national identity business" and also evident in the portrayal of the hyphenated characters in the said novel who are subjected to racialisation.

2. DAVID MALOUF AND TRANSNATIONAL TURN

David Malouf speaks of himself as a writer who "happens to be" Australian (Le 2019) and exudes due pride for being an Australian. In Johnno (1975), his debut semi-autobiographical fiction, his doppelganger confesses:

"If my father's father hadn't packed up one day to escape military service under the Turks; if my mother's people, for God knows what reason, hadn't decided to leave their comfortable middle class house at New Cross for the goldfields of Mount Morgan, I wouldn't be an Australian at all." (Le, 2019)

Malouf's doppelganger gestures conspicuously at the serendipity behind the national identity he carries. Apparently, this is not only the story of David Malouf or his doppelganger alone; the majority among Australians would share a similar account as a prolegomenon to their Australian national identity. In the said lecture delivered at the University of

Oklahoma, Malouf describes himself as an Australian author “whose immediate world and material happen to be Australian” (Wltadmin, 2022). Malouf further speaks of “the power of language” and explains it as “a means of structuring, interpreting, and remaking experience” and prescribes its use as a powerful device “to remap the world so that wherever you happen to be is the center” (Le, 2019). What is unique about Malouf’s prescription is that it attempts to reappraise the concept of cosmopolitanism and thereby displays a decisive “transnational turn” (Jacklin, qtd in Ashcroft, 2020). In explaining the term transnational, Ashcroft connects it with “bordering practices”:

“This is not to deny the transnational networks in which Australia is located. Australia is an immigrant nation stolen from its Indigenous owners, ninety-eight per cent of its population having migrated here from other places. In this respect it may be regarded as ‘transnational’ if we take that term to describe an inward as well as outward movement of people and institutions across borders.” (2020: 2)

Ashcroft finds the “‘transnational’ character of the Australian population” as ubiquitous chiefly because of “its government’s necessary engagement both with countries in the Asia-Pacific region and those powerful states whose relationship must be carefully balanced” (2). Evidently, when Malouf ideated a move away from cosmopolitanism, he was thinking in terms of transnationalism as a more convenient faculty which could reap further benefits by engaging “the power of language”. However, according to Ashcroft, transnationalism as a “character” or a faculty is always already there in the “ninety-eight per cent” of Australians. Hence, the point of concurrence between Malouf’s ideation and Ashcroft’s proposition, it may be said, is that the “transnational turn” reaps multiple benefits at political, economical and social levels which being cosmopolitan does not serve. Malouf might have considered some of these benefits that come with transnational turn prior to delivering his lecture.

3. TRANSNATION SPACE

Ashcroft’s theorization of the idea of transnation comes handy to capture this momentous turn, the transnational turn: “But I want to suggest that the bordering practices of the state to introduce different way of conceiving the transitivity of the nation in the concept of transnation” (2). The ambit of this theoretical framework is definitely ambitious and expands to enfolding issues emerging with “bordering practices” in Australia which faces various challenges due to escalated rate of trans-border mobility. A relentless critic of the “bordering practices”, Ashcroft acknowledges the exigency as well as inevitability of such mobility for the interest it serves to aggrandize the political and economic gravitas of the nation at international level. A very significant aspect of the theory is that its rational framework helps Ashcroft to abandon the rigorous task of segregating the immigrants into distinct diasporic categories and additional subcategories based on their ethnicity, religion, or any such criterion. Ashcroft’s idea of transnation emerges from his observation that “no nation is synonymous with the state – and before national borders have been crossed, the national subject is already the subject of a transnation” (2010: 72). He conceptualizes transnation as “a space in which those boundaries are disrupted, in which national and cultural affiliations are superseded, in which binaries of centre and periphery, national self and other are dissolved” (73).

Malouf puts extra effort in repositioning himself as a transnational (a preferred ascription over cosmopolitan), a category in which, according to Ashcroft, Australian population have always already been fitted in. Malouf, however, seemingly fails to conceive its difference from the idea of transnation that Ashcroft formulates. This failure, it may be said, keeps him aloof from considering the issues emerging out of the “bordering practices” of the state and the post-immigration troubles faced by the new immigrants arriving from non-European and non-English speaking countries. His statements appear to advocate and prescribe that traumatic effects caused by physical displacement may be overcome and negotiated by engaging “the power of language” into remaking the experiences and remapping the world. Probably, Malouf keeps in mind the case of his protagonist named Ovid only, the fictionalised Greek author who allegorically represents the early European settlers in Australia in his much celebrated novel *An Imaginary Life* (1978). Inquiries into the nature of the “power of language” postulate, invariably and unquestionably, that the “language” Malouf speaks of is English, and the “centre” he talks about is located within a larger and grand space which is essentially Europe. Such a lenient narrative, however, serves to bypass the woes suffered by a large number of immigrants in Australia who are non-European in origin as well as non-English speaking, and who find mention as those suffering from “cultural inadequacy”, carrying hyphenated identity and lacking Australianness (Heaney, 2014).

4. ELIZABETH COSTELLO AND SLOW MAN

Coetzee's first literary homage to his newly adopted homeland was Elizabeth Costello published in the year 2003 in which he brings in an Australian character who however travels the world for most of the times than being within Australia. Critics have opined that Costello is none other than the version of Coetzee's female self, his alter ego and his female doppelganger. A Coetzee admirer Boehmer declared the occasion of the novel's publication as the initial phase of Coetzee's adopted Australian realism. Although Coetzee had already produced a series of autobiographical works, but creating doppelganger was something quite new, and an oblique adoption of the popular literary artifice cultivated by a number of Australian novelists including Peter Carey and David Malouf.

In Elizabeth Costello (2003) the eponymous protagonist is portrayed as a celebrated writer who travels extensively and engages in philosophical and ethical discourses. She is aloof from everything that defines Australia and stages Australianness. She is introduced as an Australian author, but apparently she does not enjoy being called one. Her lecture topics comprise universal ethical issues, rights of animals, holocaust etc., regardless of any pure academic persuasion, audience expectation or public interest, specific national relevance, mainstream political awareness, and nothing that is topo-/demo-/mythographically Australian. She dislikes and does not answer questions related to her fictions, techniques of fictioneering, as much as about her nationality and the nation she belongs to. Is she transnational? She enjoys a global reputation but she eludes finding a centre into it by means of engaging what Malouf said "the power of language" but she is transnational in the sense inferred by Ashcroft. She has authored a book titled *The House on Eccles Street*, a reworking of James Joyce's *Ulysses* implying that she is skilled in alluding and allegorising instead of going local. She falls short from being a Maloufian transnational. Is she belonging to the space which Ashcroft terms transnation? Well, it's too early to answer this question since her positionality – her "subject position" – is apparently suspended until her reappearance in the next fiction i.e. *Slow Man*.

Slow Man (2005), Coetzee's second Australian fiction, may be read as a complex exploration of identity spectrums and the theme of loss suffered by select characters embodying diverse hyphenated-Australian identities. The novel chiefly depicts the inner struggles of the protagonist named Paul Rayment who meets a horrible road accident resulting into amputation of his right leg. At metaphorical level, the amputation is a permanent loss of the wholeness of his natural and real self. Rayment refuses to attach prosthesis to his body which is but a refusal to adapt to a hyphenated identity and a painful confession of a perennial nostalgia in the memory of the losses he has suffered. Indeed, the novel explores nodes and interstices of the interplays between or among different identities – chiefly national and cultural, through analysis of various characters struggling with the hyphenatedness of their identity. Rayment, a French-Australian, embodies a deep attachment to his physical integrity as much as to his cultural heritage and former nationalistic sentiment while resisting the idea of redefining his post-amputation identity by refusing to use prosthesis. Now an Australian, a hyphenated Australian, Rayment reminisces: "I had three doses of immigrant experience, not just one, so it imprinted itself quite deeply. First, when I was uprooted as a child and brought to Australia; then when I declared my independence and returned to France; then when I gave up on France and came back to Australia. Is this where I belong? I asked each move. Is this my true home?" Rayment unhesitatingly says, "I am not at home in France." Unfortunately, he is neither at home in Australia and ruefully says: "I am not we of anyone" (Coetzee, 2006). The amputation has effected a metaphorical stripping off his original French self. He suffers inner turmoil because the amputation was unavoidable just as inevitability of force-adapting to Australian identity. In contrast, Marijana and her son Drago, two other characters in the novel, being Croat-Australians are equally bothered with their hyphenated identities but the botheration is limited to their preoccupation in attempts to improve their livelihood and lifestyle in a new country where they settled and attempt to adopt its nationness, the Australianness, through their thoughts and actions. Adopting to a foreign identity and its nationness turns out a kind of game without rules, an unhealthy contestation on a horizontal cultural space understood within temporalities, for the young teenaged Drago who does not flinch from forgery to impress his belongingness and rootedness by tampering photographs to fix his face and body on the photo in which he never existed. The protagonists in *Slow Man*, it may be said, illuminate the complexities of identity in a world shaped up by diverse cultural influences and challenges, thereby challenge to the notion of an essentialized Australianness.

The reappearance of Elizabeth Costello into the tapestry of this novel i.e. *Slow Man* is a metafictional additive to the narrative by blurring the boundaries between reality and literary creation. Her role is that of an author (who happens to be Australian, just like Malouf) searching for characters and narratives for her next fictional project. She observes the real-life struggles of the hyphenated Australians such as Rayment (Franco-Australian), Marijana and Drago (Croat-Australians) who are either resisting or acquiescing to the metrics, if any, of Australianness. By the end of the earlier

novel, Costello was embroiled in a sort of liminality characterised by indeterminacy and indecisiveness; but in the present novel, she is sanguine of her move, fixed in positionality and determined in action. Within the scope of the earlier novel, she is read as a “cosmopolitan intellectual” embodying “affective cosmopolitanism,” who “explicates a vision of cosmopolitan sympathy” for nonhumans as well as for human “others” (Hallemeier, 2013: 76-78), whereupon her anti-establishment ideas, her reluctance to address the popular interest of her audience, her visible physical exhaustion to speak – partly due to her old age and partly for her conviction in the failure of language and futility of indoctrination, her frequent recourse to philosophizing – all these issues are left unattained, unexplained. Her reappearance in this novel with a decisive but different set of preoccupations, however, problematizes the monolithic discourse. The fundamental question that unsettles the discourse is: Is Costello cosmopolitan? Answer to this question may be found once again in Ashcroft: “Cosmopolitans are not defined by a particular subject position but by an orientation to the other and to diversity. Cosmopolitans, although they tend to be footloose, are not necessarily diasporic subjects; they almost certainly aren’t refugees or labour migrants... Yet these are people who inhabit transnation.” (Ashcroft 2010: 77). The exhaustion and physical tiredness that characterized Costello in the first novel vanishes in the second, replaced by an enthusiasm and physical as well as mental alacrity. This time she does not “philosophize” because “all else” do not fail. In the earlier novel her philosophy of strict vegetarianism failed when she moved to her son’s place in the USA, her promotion for the Greek model of epistemology failed in the altercation with her sister in Africa, (there are other instances of failure as well), and also she failed to locate her central positionality within the space wherever she moved; but this time she decidedly goes sincere in search of the space she truly belongs to. She turns up uninvited at Rayment’s household and begins to stay there. She refuses to leave Rayment’s home despite his repeated signalling that she is not wanted. She closely reads Rayment’s nostalgia and memories of the nation he came from, observes his actions resulting from his deeply felt agonies due to the hyphenatedness of his identity – both physical and national (actions including his falling for Marijana, treating Drago as son, etc.), and his gradually developing proclivity to adapt to the nationness of the new nation (the time-taking transformation is what makes him a slow man). Overall, in this novel Costello abandons going global, instead she goes local and thoroughly scrutinizes the issues generated within the Australian geopolitical space, within the transnation space. To be more specific, she avoids being defined in terms of cosmopolitanism which is, according to Ashcroft, “more an attitude of mind rather than a subject position” but finds her true, real and ethical subject position in and within the transnation space. Additionally, Paul Rayment’s gradual transformation, Marijana’s practical concerns to improve her family’s lifestyle, and Drago’s act of forgery – all explain their tendency to move into the transnation space where “national and cultural affiliations are superseded, in which binaries of centre and periphery, national self and other are dissolved” (Ashcroft, 2020: 2).

5. CONCLUSION

JM Coetzee has always been at the centre of controversies ever since the publication of his debut fiction. Much of these controversies brewed up because of his characteristic reticence. He never addressed any of such controversies either in public forum or artistic. One chief allegation against his authorship was, as was alleged by Nadine Gordimer, that he either avoided or failed to address the historical realities of South Africa chiefly from its Apartheid days (Gordimer, 1984; also see Parry, 1996). His authority as an author was questioned every time in the representation of South Africa in his fiction. The publication of *Disgrace* (1999) had reached, however, an unprecedented height after which, according to many, Coetzee had decided to relocate in Australia. Presumably, Coetzee had anticipated the exigency of fixing his own authorial positionality during his South African days. This can be a subject of discourse in a different context. In the present discourse, the article has endeavoured to locate the author Costello’s “subject position” within the space which Ashcroft calls transnation chiefly within the Australian political and cultural context in order to equate it with that of Coetzee’s own. Getting identified as either cosmopolitan or transnational has not been the satisfactory end of Costello’s intellectual pursuits. She is an established and renowned author who reappears in *Slow Man* only in order to fix her subject position by means of superseding the “national and cultural affiliations”, erasing the “binaries of centre and periphery” and dissolving the “national self and other”. Moreover, the characters portrayed in *Slow Man* also curve a graphical journey toward finding their subject position, partly by negotiation and slow but progressive adaptation, partly by attempting complete erasure of their former national and cultural affiliation and allegiance.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Ashcroft, B. (2010). Transnation. In J. Wilson, C. Sandru, & S. L. Welsh (Eds.), *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millenium* (pp. 72–85). Routledge.
- Ashcroft, B. (2014). A Borderless World: Literature, Nation, Transnation. In *Ethnic Literatures and Transnationalism*. Routledge.
- Ashcroft, B. (2020). Australia: Transnational or Transnation? (pp. 1–14). *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 20(2). <https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/JASAL/article/download/14303/13145>.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.
- Boehmer, E, et al., editors. (2009). *J.M. Coetzee in Context and Theory*. Bloomsbury.
- Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. (2022, April 28). "Exclusive". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 20 Jul. 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Exclusive-Australian-history>.
- Clarke, F. G. (2002). *The History of Australia*. Greenwood Press.
- Coetzee, J. M. (2000). *Disgrace*. Vintage Books.
- Coetzee, J. M. (2008). *Diary of a Bad Year*. Vintage Books.
- Coetzee, J. M. (2004). *Elizabeth Costello*. Vintage Books.
- Coetzee, J. M. (2006). *Slow Man*. Vintage Books.
- Donadio, Rachel. "Out of South Africa." *The New York Times*, 16 Dec. 2007, www.nytimes.com/2007/12/16/books/review/Donadio-t.html.
- Gordimer, N. "The Idea of Gardening." *The New York Review of Books*, 2 Feb. 1984, www.nybooks.com/articles/1984/02/02/the-idea-of-gardening. Accessed 11 Nov. 2022.
- Hallemeier, K. (2013). Elizabeth Costello and Affective Cosmopolitanism. In J. M. Coetzee and the Limits of Cosmopolitanism (pp. 69–96). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Heaney, C. (2014). "Is JM Coetzee an 'Australian Writer'? The Answer Could Be Yes." *The Guardian*, 14 Nov. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/14/is-jm-coetzee-an-australian-writer-the-answer-could-be-yes.
- Jacklin, M. (2009). The Transnational Turn in Australian Literary Studies. *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* (JASAL), Special Issue 'Australian Literature in a Global World,' 1–14.
- Jolly, R. (2010). "'Going to the Dogs': 'Humanity' in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, the Lives of Animals and South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission." (pp. 37–52). Liverpool University Press eBooks, <https://doi.org/10.5949/upo9781846315244.003>.
- Le, N. (2019, May 2). Who Gets to Be Australian? - the Paris Review. *The Paris Review*. <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/04/30/who-gets-to-be-australian/>
- Malouf, D. (1978). *An Imaginary Life*. <https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA58357576>
- Parry, B. (1996). "Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J. M. Coetzee." *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*, edited by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson, London, Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Wltadmin. (2022, August 17). 2000 – David Malouf. Neustadt Prizes. <https://www.neustadtprize.org/2000-neustadt-prize-laureate-david-malouf/>