

Subjectivity in J.M. Coetzee's *Youth*: A Zizekian Study

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ABSTRACT

Subject formation is a controversial topic in literature about which the contemporary versatile Slovenian philosopher, Zizek, theorized so much on the ground of its significance and importance. The other pillar of this study is the African Nobel Prize winner, John Maxwell Coetzee who is one of the most celebrated living English language authors. The purpose of this paper is to trace the elements of Zizekian subject in the main characters of Coetzee's *Youth*. To pave the way for such an analysis, a short background about the main notions are provided. 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. The researchers try to shed light on the process they are undergoing in the new land and whether they afford to be a Zizekian subject or not. So, they 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, John passes all the long way to become a Zizekian Subject but in the last pages of the novel, he compromises with the society and does not evolve to be a Zizekian subject.

Keywords: Big Other, Real order, Subject, Subject Formation, Symbolic Order, Zizek

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to analyze Coetzee's semi-autobiographical novel, *Youth* and deals with the procedure of subject formation for John, the main character of this novel. First, Žižekian concepts, "subject" and "subject formation", will be mentioned briefly and then Coetzee's novel, *Youth*, is studied according to these concepts. In the first section, John's Subject in *Youth*, the character of John will be studied in reference to his career, his love relationships and finally his job. The central question of the present article: In what ways can John be viewed as a Zizekian subject? In conjunction with discussing Žižekian key terms "subject" and "subject formation", the role of the "Other" and "trauma" is

discussed in the subjectivity of John in the selected novel.

II. Zizekian Subject Formation in *Youth*

The symbolic brings in alienation, isolating the subject in himself as he is from his mother. As Pound asserts, "entering the symbolic therefore entails giving up the unity offered by imaginary identifications for an all-encompassing structure that is devoid of any fixed relations, a linguistic barrier or behind which stands the inaccessible real of experience" (2008: 11). The big Other is the aspect of non-psychological, social, symbolic relations treated as such by the subject - in short, the aspect of symbolic "institution". When a subject faces a judge, he knows very well

how to differentiate between the subjective features of the judge as a person and the - objective institutional authority he is gifted with insofar as he is a judge. As Žižek asserts in *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway*, "this gap is the gap between my words when I utter them as a private person and my words when I utter them as someone endowed with the authority of an Institution, so that it is the Institution that speaks through me" (2000: 29). The importance of the Big Other is revealing step by step.

What happens with the operation of the symbolic order when the symbolic Law loses its effectiveness; when it no longer appropriately functions? What one gets are strangely de-realized or, somewhat, de-psychologized subjects, as if one was transacting with robotic puppets that follow a strange, blind mechanism, somewhat like the way they shoot soap operas in Mexico. According to Žižek: "actors do not have time to learn their lines in advance; they simply have hidden in their ears a tiny voice receiver, and a man in a cabin behind the set reads to them the instructions on what they are to do, actors are trained to enact immediately, with no delay, these instructions" (2000: 34). This is vividly the functionality of Big Other in every context for each and every individual. Writing about subject formation could not be possible without paying a selective attention to the notion of big other. Louis Althusser, the French Marxist philosopher, made a significant contribution to the theory of "subject formation". He emphasized the role of ideology and interpellation in the construction of a "subject" (2008: 68). As Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson, and Peter Brooker explain about Althusser's theory in *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*,

We are all subjects of ideology which operates by summoning us to take our places in the social structure. This summoning (or interpellation) works through the discursive formations materially linked with state apparatuses (religious,

legal, educational and so on). The imaginary consciousness which ideology induces gives us a representation of the way individuals relate to their real conditions of existence but being merely an undisrupted and harmonious image it actually represses the real relations between individuals and the social structure. (2005: 148)

Individuals must get rid of their symbolic identity to become a Žižekian "subject". Symbolic identity is exactly what Althusser proposed as "interpellation" (2008: 89). As Žižek points out in *The Plague of Fantasies*, "I can change my symbolic identity precisely and only in so far as my symbolic universe includes 'empty signifiers' which can be filled in by a new particular content" (2008: 119). Regarding his words, becoming a subject detached from the symbolic universe requires empty signifiers for the individual to exert his own will and freedom to fill them. Trauma plays a great role in the shattering of symbolic identity.

As Žižek points out in *The Plague of Fantasies*, "What distinguishes man from animals is thus again the excessive fixation on the trauma (of the lost object, of the scene of some shattering jouissance, etc);[] 'Trauma' is that kernel of the same which returns again and again, disrupting any symbolic identity" (2008: 120). When the individual shatters the symbolic identity, he must confront the "Real" to open up the way for Žižekian "subject". As Žižek asserts in *The Plague of Fantasies*, in order to maintain a minimum of consistency, the subject has to append his being to some 'little piece of the Real' which is 'ex-timate' in the Lacanian sense of the term: an external, contingent, found element which simultaneously stands for the subject's innermost being (2008: 264). In contrast to Žižek, Deleuze claims that personal interests and beliefs construct a "subject". As Constantin V. Boundas notes in the entry of "Subjectivity" in *The Deleuze Dictionary Revised Edition* "In *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, Deleuze outlines that the intensive, integrative act of our practical

interest together with the associative rules of our speculative interest, make the organization of subjectivity possible" (2010: 274). Žižek defines the "subject" as a void detached of any particular interest and belief. As Žižek points out in *The Plague of Fantasies*, the "Thing" is the absolute void, the lethal abyss which swallows the subject; while *objet petit a* designates that which remains of the thing after it has undergone the process of symbolization (2008: 105). Žižek in *The Plague of Fantasies*, mentions that:

The Lacanian subject is thus empty in the radical sense of being deprived of even the minimal phenomenological support: there is no wealth of experiences to fill in its void. And Lacan's premiss is that the Cartesian reduction of the subject to pure cogito already implies such a reduction of every substantial content, including my innermost 'mental' attitudes. (2008: 159)

The subject is dealt not with constituted reality but with the spectral obscene proto-reality of partial objects floating around against the background of the ontological void. As Žižek points out in *The Parallax View*, this inter-space, the gap constitutive of a human being, appears at three levels,

1. First, as the -vanishing mediator between Nature and Culture, the inhuman excess of freedom which is to be disciplined through culture. This zero-degree of humanization can be formulated in Hegelian terms as the reflexive reversal of the human animal (*Mensch-Tier*) into the animal human (*Tier-Mensch*): the shift of the structural place of the same element from the excess to the neutral base, zero-level-that is, from the human excess which distorts animality to the zero-level of humanity.
2. Then, as the Real of antagonism, the difference which paradoxically precedes what it is a difference of, the two terms being a reaction to the difference, two ways of coping with its trauma.
3. Finally, as the -minimal difference on account of which an individual is never fully him/herself, but always only -

resembles him/herself. The Marx Brothers were right: -You look like X, so no wonder you *are* X. . . .This means, of course, that there is no positive-substantial determination of man: man is the animal which recognizes itself as man, what makes him human is this formal gesture of recognition as such, not the recognized content. (2006: 44)

Unlike Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari reject the theory of desire founded on lack and, in effect, also refuse Freud's concept of repression. Žižek went so far to state that "Man is a lack which, in order to fill itself in, recognizes itself as something" (2006: 45). As John Lechte explains, "For Freud, the very possibility of the distinction between subject and object depends on the notion of repression. Repression occurs in the process of the child's separation from the mother and its entry (as Lacan sees it) into the symbolic order - the order of the Law and the Name-of-the-Father" (2001: 117). Taking lack and repression into the account is essential to understand the odyssey of John in *Youth*. The next definition to consider is Hegel's for his inevitable influence on Žižek.

"The Hegelian subject is -ecstatic, its mediation opens it up to otherness, shifting, loss of self-identity; however, there is a critical step further to be accomplished here" As Žižek asserts in *The Parallax View*, "not only is the subject always-already dispossessed-ecstatic, and so on; this ecstasy *is* the subject-that is to say, the subject is the void S/ which emerges when a substance is -dispossessed through ecstasy" (2006: 45). The shift of identity often happens to the second generation of immigrants. They dangle between identifying themselves with their root culture and the culture of the land they are living in. According to Žižek, "the very process of shifting amongst multiple identifications presupposes a kind of empty band which makes the leap from one identity to another possible, and this empty band is the subject itself" (2008: 182). So, the very fact that the identity of the

immigrants is not grounded in their homeland and cannot be grounded in their new place, leads to the probability of subject formation.

III. The Big Other

Defining big Other is one of the earliest tasks that has been done in numerous ways all through this paper but shedding more light on one of the key notions is a must here, "For Lacan, the subject is represented in the signifying chain which consists of the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real Orders"(2012: 63). Big Other, be it the laws and regulations, or history or any similar concepts, is what shapes the behavior of people in society. These concepts resemble Althusser's "ideological state apparatus and repressive state apparatus" (2014: 104). To avoid repeating the prerequisites of becoming a Zizekian subject, the highlights are mentioned briefly here. Big Other does not exist according to Lacan but the illusion of its omnipresent nature makes human being behave in a certain way. A person who finds out about its absence and stands against it may be counted as Zizekian subject if he cuts himself from all the ties.

Although John does his best to free himself from these old ties, it is mentioned that "south Africa is like an albatross around his neck. He wants it removed, he does not care how, so that he can begin to breathe"(2002: 82). John's experience of big Other can be discussed as follows. He has a fundamental problem with language as well as with the real. His encounters with language is so troublesome.

IV. Language: Math and Poetry

Zizek explained the roots of language according to Lacan and Hegel and the oedipal complex. "Every human being is guilty as a being-of-language, since we are able to speak only under the aegis of the paternal metaphor- of the murdered father who returns as his Name. Lacan's version of cogito is accordingly "I am guilty, therefore I am".(1991: 105) this sense of guilt arises from being born inevitably into language

and believing the fact that there is no way out. One of the significant manifestations of the big other is language, be it pure math, poetry or the language of communication. This arbitrary convention that we are forced to accept as soon as we start talking locates us in the symbolic order.

Following Saussure, Lacan asserts that language is a system of signs. This system of signs includes a signifier and a signified. Lacan states that the relationship between signifiers and signified is arbitrary and based on convention rather on an eternal, timeless relation... meaning is created through linguistic differences through the play of signifiers. In the unconscious, the subject always experiences a lack which is unable to be filled with language and consequently forms the identification of the subject in the symbolic order of signifiers. (2004: 105)

John escapes from the real, be it the history, the language or his own maladies and he finds his resort in symbols such as mathematics. What draws him to mathematics, besides the arcane symbols it uses, is its purity. If there were a department of Pure Thought at the university he would probably enroll in pure thought too; but pure mathematics appeals to be the closest approach the academy affords to the realm of the forms. (2002: 26) even it is not hard to guess that it is the mere reason for his love of poetry. He himself is aware of this fact in a way that it is stated: "he has no feel for what is called the real world, fails to understand why things in physics are as they are. Since he would appear to have no sympathy with the real world, he avoids the sciences"(2002: 52). For his passion of literature, he tries to learn Latin to be dominant over the original texts. But a failure again "in his Latin class he has to struggle to keep up, not to make a fool of himself"(2002: 60). His love of poetry, field of university and inability in some fields is not accidental. He cannot understand facts. Facts, the arbitrary conventions of human being and the ideology behind them which is fabricated by the big Other, is

incomprehensible for him. Keeping this in mind, not only can he not learn a new language, but also history. "Without facts, there is no history and he has never had a head for facts" (2002: 28). The existence of Real determines the whole story for everyone.

And the Real - where is it in this circular movement of language? Here the distinction between reality and the Real can be brought into use: reality, as we have just seen, serves as the external boundary which enables us to totalize language, to make out of it a dense and coherent system, whereas the Real is its inherent limit, the unfathomable fold which prevents it from achieving its identity with itself. Therein consists the fundamental paradox of the relation between the Symbolic and the Real: the bar which separates them is strictly internal to the Symbolic, since it prevents the Symbolic from "becoming itself." (2008: 112)

He goes so far in not compromising with the real thing that he ignores the thin line between the reality and imagination the way David has done it in the previous novel "Of course Emma Bovary is a fictional creation, he will never into her in the street. But Emma was not created out of nothing: she had her origin in the flesh and blood experiences that her author experiences that were then subjected to the transfiguring fire of art" (2002: 79). The lack that he experiences through not taking the big Other seriously, is only one of the conditions under which he can be categorized as a subject.

To take one step forward he should be detached from everything to become an empty entity and to transfigure to a subject. The next part answers to the question that is he really detached from everything? And if yes, what is the next step?

V. Alienation of the Subject

As soon as we are taught our first words and we begin to understand that we are not unified with our surrounding and especially our mother, supposedly we enter the symbolic world and become

disillusioned about the image of unity remained from imagery order. As Zizek mentioned in his book, "The use of language implies a loss, a lack since I wouldn't need to use specific names, if I still felt that I was an inseparable part of those things. At this time, the dichotomy between the subject, I, and the object, anything other than me, spring into existence" (2004: 100). Being born into language gives us no other way than surrendering to it. We are all the object of language craving to have the unity with our mother before birth.

Although Alienation and self-annihilation are not the key words of this study, they are mentioned to pave the way for the very part of detachment which is an inseparable stage of becoming a subject for if a person tries or happens to have no strings attached, he experiences alienation. Whether he decides to be so or the society imposes him the situation, he is one step closer to become a Zizekian subject. This alienation can happen in three levels, self, language and society. Everything related to self is mentioned in the next part and language has been discussed earlier, so, John's alienation from his society and his attempts to detach himself is brought here. "The people he works with are too polite to express their opinion of foreigner. Nevertheless, from their silences he knows. He is not wanted in their country, not positively wanted. On the subject of West Indians they are silent too, but he can read the signs. NIGGER GO HOME" (2002: 90). Sometimes this alienation occurs when people become aware of the fact that everything is a charade and they are not sure of the reality of their surroundings. As Tyson puts it:

There are moments in our lives that we feel that there is no purpose to life, that we suspect that religion or all the rules that govern the society are hoaxes or mistakes or the results of chance through which we see through the ideology, in that, we realize that it is ideology and not some sets of timeless values and eternal truths, that has made the world as we know it; this experience,

according to Lacan is the Real. The Real is the uninterpretable dimension of existence; it is existence without the filters of buffers of our signifying, or meaning-making systems. (2012: 32)

The exact same thing happens to John after he has found a job and he has left behind his country: "He is in England, in London; he has a job, a proper job, bettermere teaching, for which he is being paid a salary. He has South Africa. Everything is going well, he has attained first goal, and he ought to be happy. In fact, as the weeks pass, finds himself more and more miserable" (2002:102). Alienation's degree in this novel is difficult to deny. How long will he have to live in England before it is allowed that he has become the real thing, become English? (2002: 107). The way John reacts toward his culture and country and his insistence on leaving his motherland conceptualizes his distance from his own roots." There is only one course open: to flee"(2002: 44). He feels alienated in his own country and for this very reason he leaves South Africa. In the new place, he cannot find himself and remains alienated in any possible aspect. He tries to have no strings attached and when his mother sends letter to him Coetzee puts it this way:

Will his mother not understand that when he departed Cape Town he cut all bonds with the past? How can he make her accept that the process of turning himself into a different person that began when he was fifteen will be carried through remorselessly until all memory of the family and the country he left behind is extinguished? When will she that he has grown so far away from her that he might as well be a stranger?(2002: 107)

John, in an odyssey to find himself, starts a new life and being a disciple of Pound and Eliot, dreams of becoming a poet. In the first half of the novel, he keeps introducing himself as a poet or poet to be who works in office to meet his demands in the same exact way of Pound, Eliot and Kafka. "T. S. Eliot worked for a bank.

Wallace Stevens and Frantz Kafka worked for insurance companies"(ibid.: 64) but as soon as he starts working " he feels his very soul to be under attack"" IBM, he can swear, is killing him, is turning him into a zombie" (ibid.: 51)and he even believes that these vocations are suitable disguises for poets and writers during the modern age. But as soon as he applies for a job and is considered qualified, he commences to lose his talent or inspiration for writing poetry. "The musical impulse within once so strong, has already waned. Is he now in the process of losing the poetic impulse?"(ibid.: 64).

He was filled with the desire of Other before and he has tried to fulfill that desire, a process in which he fails intermittently. The significant point is that he has been affected by the society of the new country so that he cannot maintain his wholeness once again and he surrenders quietly confronting the rules and regulations imposed to him as an immigrant. If he resigns from IBM he must promptly find other work or does leave the country (ibid.: 83). His perplexity is highlighted over and over for example Coetzee wrote: So "what is he doing in England? Was it a huge mistake to have come here?" (ibid.: 61) and he repeats it when John has the shaky pretext of his mother land again here "What is he doing in this huge, cold city, where merely to stay alive means holding tight all the time, trying not to fall?"(ibid.: 65).

The first and foremost desire that obliged him to be in a new place is following the footsteps of great artists with whom he keeps comparing himself to, such as Picaso, Pound and Kafka. He let himself down by stepping backward at the nick of time and losing his inspiration for poetry but he tries to imitate the great artists in their heedless immoral relationships with people markedly girls assuming that girls are in love with passionate artists and poets. His very dream goes up in smoke every time he destroys a relationship recklessly. He could be called alienated every time he has been in a relationship for the mere reason that he couldn't grasp the point of that. In his

affairs he cannot be fully satisfied and he does it as a ritual that should be performed. He seemingly lacks something essential. In his first mentioned relationship, he is so distressed and baffled that he acts as Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* (1955) by writing a record of his daily life with his disgusting worldly-wise mistress and leaving the diary available to her so he can make her go. So his sexual life has turned out to be a failure so far for his self-estrangement.

Up to here, John can be considered self-detached and alienated from his society in any aspects. To put it a nutshell, he feels as a stranger anywhere he goes, and even in language he doesn't fulfill himself and his desire for the language, English, fails him as well as math. He ignores the big Other so he cannot make sense out of the rules and customs and culture and this mentality makes him behave as a jerk. He doesn't care about his mother and just habitually answers her, he deflowers a virgin and easily neglects it, he thinks about destroying the whole atomic project in favor of Russia and finally he starts fabricating some fake poems by computer. The next part is the discussion about his standing against the big Other, intentionally or advertently and its effects of the process of subjectification.

VI. Resistance

The same thing mentioned about alienation can be applicable here for resistance is not a key word but it is easy to grasp that Zizek as a post-Marxian, has an extended matrix and not to be deviated from our topic, this resistance is the same as standing in front of the big Other. It happens when there is a power, and as Foucault claims "power doesn't exist"(Zizek, 1996: 106) the other version of Lacan's claim that "big Other doesn't exist"(Zizek, 2005:42). So far, resistance is standing against the big Other so it is of high importance. In the context of psychoanalysis Zizek brings an example

Let us take the case of an atheist becoming a believer. He is torn by fierce inner struggles, religion obsesses him, he

gibes aggressively at believers, looks for historical reasons for the emergence of the "religious illusion", and so on- all this is nothing but proof that the affair is already decided. He already believes, although he doesn't yet know it. The inner struggle ends not with the big decision to believe, but with a sense of relief that, without knowing it, he has always-already believed, so that all that remains is for him to renounce his vain resistance and become reconciled to his belief. The refined sense of the psychoanalyst is best attested by his ability to recognize the moment when the "silent weaving" has already done its work, although the patient is still beset by doubts and uncertainty. (1991: 66)

Resistance is another element that enables the researcher to judge whether the only main character of the novel, John, is a Zizekian subject or not. The very concept of immigration pinpoints the existing resistance toward rules and regulations of his country. He acts out toward the immigration rules when he quits from his official job by house sitting in a quiet corner. It is noteworthy once again when he deflowers a relative and does not even look behind to see what has happened. The next time he starts working, he ignores morality and his former mentality about war in order to be in an atomic project. There are two guys accompanying him wherever he goes for the mere fact that he is a non-native. For him, nationalism, Morality, inspiration and any other granular concept have lost their meaning. The other manifestation of his resistance is when he wants to try his hand in short story instead of poetry. While he was supposed to forget his country, his story is like this:

The story is set in South Africa. It disquiets him to see that he is still writing about South Africa. He would prefer to leave his South African self behind as he has left South Africa itself behind. South Africa was a bad start, a handicap. An undistinguished, rural family, bad schooling, the Afrikaans language: from each of these

component handicaps he has, more or less escaped (2002: 66).

The reason behind the two accompanying persons at their project is that he is a foreigner and there is a slight probability of his mistake or unfaithfulness or betrayal for he doesn't have the nationalistic feeling toward England and the whole thing can become true. "On the one hand, he would like to do his bit to save Russia from being bombed. On the other, has he a moral right to enjoy British hospitality while sabotaging their air force?" (2002: 162). All above-mentioned situations are the examples of his resistance and his disrespect for the big Other which leads to a trauma. "a sudden emergence of resistance (ranging from ironic doubt to horrified refusal) confirms that we are finally on the right track" (ibid.:146). When a person finds out about the mere lack caused by the absence of big Other. The next part is the discussion about the consequence of John's awareness and his trauma.

VII. Trauma

Trauma links subjectivity to Lacan's real. In Lacan, the real refers to that which cannot be directly inscribed or experienced, such as death or sexual difference, but which keeps insisting, and manifesting its presence through repetition. "In short: the past does determine the present, but the very mode of this determining is overdetermined by the present synchronous symbolic network. If the trace of an old encounter all of a sudden begins to exert impact, it is because the present symbolic universe of the subject is structured in a way that is susceptible to it" (1991: 202). As Zizek points out: "it is something that persists only as failed or missed, in a shadow, and dissolves itself as soon we try to grasp in its positive nature. Zizek also suggest that "this is precisely what defines the notion traumatic event: a point of failure of symbolization, but at the same time never given in its positivity_ it can be constructed only backwards, from its structural effects" (Boheemen, 1999: 19). There is

something wrong about John but only God knows what. The history of his country and what has happened in or for his family, and what he experiences in London life which cannot be put into words transformed him to a traumatic figure.

The importance of trauma rests on the notion that trauma is always "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in its attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very action and our language (Boheemen, 1999: 20).

There is not any trace of the event itself anywhere in the story but its effect is crystal-clear throughout the novel. His problem with his country, his problematic relationships, and his very lack are all signs of his trauma.

Trauma is a paradoxical structure, working by means of indirectness: it manifests itself through and as its consequences, its aftermath and effects, but itself not directly accessible to the consciousness or memory. It shows within the text of subjectivity what seems to remain outside it and what must be presupposed if all other elements are to retain their consistency (2000: 42).

John's understanding of his circumstances, politics, history, real and language caused his trauma. The hints and points which are related to Zizekian procedure of subjectivity are all mentioned so far. At the final part, every single clue about language, Big Other, trauma and alienation is mentioned to see if John can be a Zizekian subject or not.

CONCLUSION

John, who is the mirror of Coetzee himself during all the years of fighting and attempt to be a new person by putting away his past, underpins his subject formation from the very first step. He plans to forget his past, a project in which he fails frequently regarding the letters he writes for

his mom and the foreshadowing of Africa in all his thoughts and even his practice of writing short story. Žižekian subject is a void with no string attached. At the first place, he is attached to his past with a thin string. He becomes aware of the lack existing in his life or character or language "there is something essential he lacks" (2002: 7). He wants to be the real thing. The real English. The real poet. The real lover. He wants to be the artistic character who works a respectable occupation and fulfill his desires and put them into words like his role models. Pound and Eliot. John even stands against the concept of big Other which is believed by everybody and is defined by no one. To recapitulate, John passes all the long way to become a Žižekian subject,

He puts away his past, tries to be completely detached, he perceives the existence of a fundamental lack in himself, he does his best to fill the emptiness he has found, the but through the last pages of the novel, he compromises with the society, he doesn't spoil the atomic plan and he starts writing fake poems through surrendering to the language of technology and computational random choice of words.

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