CHAPTER I

PERSONAL BACKGROUND OF THE WRITER

John Michael Coetzee was born on 9th February 1940 in Cape Town. His father Zacharias Coetzee was an attorney; his mother, Vera Wehmeyer Coetzee, was a school teacher. His brother is a journalist. His grandparents on both sides were Afrikaner sheep farmers. One of Coetzee's remote ancestors arrived in South Africa in the eighteenth century and wrote down part of the history of the Hottentot tribe as Coetzee ironically describes it "not as Hottentots saw it but as from above".

J.M. Coetzee's father was anglicized so Coetzee was educated in English medium schools. He spoke English at home; Afrikaans with relatives. He speaks Dutch fluently in addition to German and French. In an interview with David Attwell, published in 'Doubling the Point' he says that he has never belonged to the Reformed Church though he has been "shaped by that culture in a perverse way". He says he would not be considered an Afrikaner because English is his first language and has been since his childhood. People who speak Afrikaans as their first language but do not meet further racial, political criteria are not accepted as Afrikaners. In an ethno-linguistic sense he is one of many people in his country "who have become detached from their ethnic roots . . . and have joined a pool of no recognizable ethnos".

Coetzee lived in numerous small towns in rural Cape Province, as well as the suburbs of Cape Town. He received his undergraduate degrees in Mathematics and English by 1961 from the University of Cape Town. In 1962 he sailed to London and worked for International Business Machines (IBM) as a computer programmer till 1963. From Coetzee's life sketch given in the Current Biography yearbook 1987 (Moritz:105) we come to know that in London he discovered films of Ingrid Bergman, Satyajit Ray and Jean Luc Godard in the Everyman Theatre. In his spare time he studied literature and wrote poetry. He spent his evenings in the British Museum reading fiction "and the rest of the time tramping the cold streets of London seeking the meaning of life". He gave up poetry in 1963 and spent 1961-65 in the laboratories of International Computers, Bracknell, Berkshire as a Systems programmer.

In September 1965 he sailed for the United States to complete his graduate studies at the University of Texas. He spent "three dull productive years in Austin getting a professional education". He learned the rudiments of criticism from James Sledd. He read Eliot and Pound and could not understand what people saw in Shakespeare. He found grammar more interesting than literature; read Chomsky. He began to speculate about what was required to produce a great book.

Coetzee went to the State University of New York, Buffalo in 1968 as an assistant professor of English. He began reading
history. In the university libraries he found several reports by the early white settlers of their "civilizing mission" in South Africa including accounts of exploration, the teaching of Christianity, the compilations of "makeshift grammars" of South African tribal languages by missionaries, and records of punitive expeditions against the tribes" (Moritz:105).

In Buffalo Coetzee was invited to offer a course on African literature. It was then he started to read and re-read more carefully the African writers. The drama, particularly West African drama, seemed more interesting than the poetry or fiction, though nothing truly fascinated him. He perceived that if he were going to stay on in the United States, it might well have been as an Africanist. In his interview with David Attwell (Coetzee:1992:338) Coetzee said that he "tried to find an imaginative place for himself in the Third World and its narratives of itself. He read Cesaire, Senghor, and Fanon; read Lukács on the 'duties' of realism; he even read Chairman Mao 'On Literature and Art'. He received his Ph D from the University of Texas in 1969.

While teaching in Buffalo, he resolved on New Year's Day 1970, to begin writing a novel. From his numerous colleagues he learned something about the life of the mind while the bombs went on falling in Vietnam. The Vietnam war, the assassination of the South African Prime Minister H.F.Verwoerd, the "architect of Grand Apartheid", and the rampage of Charles Whitman, a University of Texas student, who shot and killed a number of people
from a bell tower on the campus, raised some moral questions which troubled him. The Americans he "lived and worked among, fine people, generous, likeable, liberal in their values — were nevertheless as little able to halt the war machine as liberal whites at home were able to halt the forced removals". Whatever his private feelings, he felt he was "as complicit in one case as in the other" (Coetzee:1992:337).

Coetzee was then thirty years of age and had published nothing. He was offered jobs in Canada and Hong Kong which he turned down at the last minute.

His two children: Nicholas and Gisela were born in the United States. Coetzee divorced their mother in 1980. Throughout his stay in the U.S. he missed his home country and in 1971 he returned to South Africa. This may be attributed to certain fatality, perhaps, a will to remain in crisis, which he describes ironically as a real resolution to hurl himself bodily into the anti-apartheid struggle" (Coetzee:1992:337). His two novels which germinated in the U.S. were written in 1971 after he returned to South Africa.

In 1972 Coetzee joined the faculty of the University of Cape Town as a lecturer. He became an associate professor in 1980 and a professor of general literature in 1984. He was awarded a D.Litt. by the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, in 1985.

Coetzee held visiting appointments at Buffalo, during S-
pring, 1983-84, and Fall, 1986-87. He has been a full-time academic at his alma mater, the University of Cape Town. He published over forty scholarly articles in reputed journals. He is a dedicated scholar-teacher as well as an accomplished novelist. His devotion to teaching and South Africa is obvious in his continuing his career as a professor and remaining in the turbulent country though he had other options. In one of the interviews he said that each person has his own favourite landscape and his own is that of South Africa. He is still teaching in the University of Cape Town.

He is a player of cricket and tennis and a fan of Rugby and even wrote an essay on its sociology.

Allister Sparks, writing in the *Washington Post* (October 29, 1983) describes him as a 'slightly built man with prematurely greying beard, soft eyes, an even softer voice and an extraordinarily reticent manner'. He is said to be "in a Quandary" about his status as a public figure who is expected to make pronouncements on social issues but prefers to let his books speak for him (quoted in Moritz:108).

His almost physical revulsion against obeying orders made him get through four years of high school without doing military drill "by dint of utterly uncharacteristic, single-minded cunning". Coetzee also mentioned his craving for privacy, his distaste for crowds and for slogans in his interview with David
So far seven novels of J.M. Coetzee have been published. His first work *Dusklands*, published in 1974 by Ravan Press (Johannesburg), and reprinted in 1985, by Penguin Books, comprises two stories: *The Vietnam Project* and *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee*. In *The Vietnam Project* Eugene Dawn, an expert in psychological warfare is driven eventually to insanity due to the stresses of his project and his own associated psychological disturbances. He kidnaps his own child and nearly fatally assaults him. He ends up in a lunatic asylum. In the second story *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee*, a fictional counterpart of Coetzee's ancestor goes for an elephant hunt to the land of Namaquas; gets annoyed that those wild Hottentots have not shown him enough fear and respect; suspects they have humiliated him and visits the place a second time with reinforcements and wreaks vengeance by destroying an entire Hottentot tribe. Ursula A. Barnett in her article "South Africa: *Dusklands*", describes the novel "as the tale of individual savageness of modern civilization pitted against the collective savageness of the untamed".

His second novel *From the Heart of the Country* was published in 1977, (Harper); and as *In the Heart of the Country* by Secker & Warburg in 1977. It was reprinted by Penguin Books in 1982. This is the story of a white woman, Magda, who lives in an isolated farm with her widowed father who seduces his servant's young bride and sets her up at home as his concubine. Magda shoots her father, tries to live on equal terms with her
servants. She is raped by her servant Hendrik who later abandons her and the farm. She continues to live alone on the deserted farm and is considered a 'witch' by the neighbours. "She is unable to change and is doomed by her isolation. She is said to represent the stagnant policies of apartheid" (Matuz:89). This novel won the premier South African literary award, the CNA Prize.

Coetzee's third novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* was published by Secker & Warburg in 1980, and by Penguin Books in 1982. The main character of the novel, known only as 'the Magistrate' is a petty official of the Empire. He runs the government outpost peacefully for years till a neo-fascist torturer, Colonel Joll comes from the headquarters to quell the suspected uprising of barbarian tribes. He persecutes the few 'barbarians' the Empire has succeeded in capturing. Among them is a Barbarian girl who is blinded and her father killed during the torture sessions. The Magistrate tries to reunite the blind Barbarian girl with her family, is branded a traitor, displaced from his office and persecuted by Joll. Colonel Joll fails in his attempts to fight the barbarians who just lead him into the desert and disappear. He returns to the Empire with his soldiers who loot the town. The Magistrate resumes his official position and tries to bring normalcy to the fear-stricken town. Doris Grumbach, writing in Los Angeles Book Review, described it as "an allegory which can be applied to innumerable historical and contemporary situations; the story so terrifying and unforgetta-
ble, is about injustice and barbarism inflicted everywhere by 'civilized' people upon those it invades, occupies, governs" (Trosky:73). This book was awarded the CNA Prize, the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize.

Coetzee's fourth novel Life and Times of Michael K was published by Secker & Warburg in 1983, and was reprinted by Viking in 1984. This is the story of Michael K, an ordinary, seemingly slow-witted individual who wishes to lead a free life away from the world of history and war. He plants a few pumpkin and melon seeds on a deserted farm and begins his life as a cultivator. His life is disturbed and his freedom is tampered with by forces which are beyond his control and comprehension. This novel was awarded the CNA Prize, the Booker-McConnell Prize, and Prix Femina Etranger.

The fifth novel Foe was published by Viking in 1986. It is a retelling of Daniel Defoe's famous tale 'Robinson Crusoe' through a woman's perspective. In this story, Susan Barton, a female castaway is rescued from a deserted island. She attempts to relate her impressions of the only two other inhabitants of the island: Cruso, an old Englishman, and Friday, his African servant. She procures the help of a writer, Mr. Foe to write her story. The core of the story is the silence of Friday. "In the retelling of the story Coetzee examines the complexities of communication and the relationship between author and authority. Coetzee creates a viable philosophical parable of how language
can contribute to oppression" (Matuz:89).

The sixth novel *Age of Iron* was published by Random House in 1990. In this Coetzee speaks of the crisis of South Africa in a direct manner. This is the story of Mrs. Elizabeth Curren, a retired professor of classics, dying of hip cancer and attempting to deal with the realities of apartheid in Cape Town. This book takes the form of a letter from Mrs. Curren to her daughter who has settled in the United States because she cannot tolerate apartheid. As Mrs. Curren's life ends, her urgency to correct the wrongs she never questioned intensifies. This book won the *Sunday Express* Book of the Year Award.

Coetzee's seventh novel *The Master of Petersburg* was published in 1994 by Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd. and also by Mandarin Paperbacks. 'The Master' here is Dostoevsky and the events described are both the background to and the subject matter of 'The Devils' written by him later. In 1819 Dostoevsky returns secretly to Petersburg after hearing about the unnatural death of his step son Pavel, comes into contact with Pavel's nihilist friend Nechaev, whom he identifies with himself and at times with Pavel. The novel is a study in retrospection and introspection of 'the Master' and his attainment of self-awareness that he is not mourning for his son, but for himself and his ultimate conviction that Pavel was better dead.

Besides these seven novels J.M. Coetzee published a critical work, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*
Coetzee was awarded the Jerusalem Prize for the Freedom of the Individual in Society, in 1987. In his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech Coetzee averred:

"...no one is free in a society of masters and slaves. The slave is not free, because he is not his own master, and the master is not free, because he cannot do without the slave. For centuries South Africa was a society of masters and serfs; now it is a land where the serfs are in open rebellion and the masters are in disarray."

Coetzee remarked that "at the heart of the un-freedom of the hereditary masters of South Africa is failure to love". Their love has been directed toward the land -- mountains and deserts, birds and animals and flowers -- which is least likely to respond to love. If the word 'love' is replaced with the word fraternity, we will be shocked to realize that it cannot be had even if both sides strongly feel the impulse. It is a certainty that fratern-
ity comes in a package with liberty and equality. We cannot have one without the other. To achieve this fraternity, all unnatural structures of power which deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and aggravated under apartheid should be destroyed (Coetzee: 1992:97).

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