SYNOPSIS

John Maxwell Coetzee’s fiction strips bare the veneer that protects us, and it ventures unflinchingly into territory of mind and experience most of us are afraid to face. Yet he writes with a sparseness and reticence that keep his work from being overtaxed or overwrought. He treats human pain and weakness with respect and refrains from judgement. At the same time, every work of his explores important sociopolitical issues and their psychological impact, and in every fictional act he reaches for the limits of human endurance.

(Neustadt International Prize Citation)

John Maxell Coetzee, celebrated for his uncompromisingly critical, ethically complex, and highly cerebral writings, is a writer for our time who possesses the courage and the imagination and the skill to probe in fiction what needs to be explored, and he does so while maintaining readability and focus. Since his first novel, Coetzee has shown consistency, continuity, and sustainability and has won important literary prizes with almost every book he has published. For Coetzee to win the Nobel Prize for literature is a recognition of a body of work that is important, thought-provoking, and of outstanding quality.

He is a writer of high calibre. His fiction is consistently strong and his prose sparse, though it conveys a world of possibilities inspite of the reserve with which he writes. The quality of restraint has been commented on by critics, who point out that, given Coetzee’s subject matter (human pain, weakness, and torture – often shown in historical context), it would be unseemly to indulge in gratuitous description. The central issue in much of what he writes is what is often regarded as the fundamental problem of twentieth and now twenty-first century literature in general: how do we witness another’s pain?

The possibility that we might not be able to describe another’s pain, even though we empathize with that person, is a conflict at the heart of every work of writing. Coetzee goes a long way in probing the need to connect on the level of how another person suffers, while acknowledging that one comes up short. Another reason for the widespread interest in Coetzee’s work is, no doubt, that he writes about margins and boundaries. His characters are caught in between cultural and historical states, and the ambiguities of the human condition are writ large everywhere. Nothing is truly clear.
Given its turbulent history, the South African writer faces a unique and difficult situation. Is the primary responsibility of a writer living under apartheid to write or to fight, to produce works of art to struggle to eliminate injustice and oppression? Or are these false dichotomies? While black authors tend to see the political dimension of literature as inescapable, white writers most often view themselves as having an ethical obligation to respond to the rampant injustice that characterizes their society. For those authors who see their work as necessarily political or as involving an ethical imperative, there is nonetheless the constant question of the precarious relationship between their art and their commitment.

The citation for the Jerusalem Prize describes Coetzee as “a great artist” who “stands out in his novel[s] and essays as a fighter for human freedom and dignity.” Yet Coetzee’s unusual narratives continue to defy critical appropriation and do not fit into the accepted categories of social realism and of many South African writers. While many reviewers praise his work for its universal themes, Coetzee’s academic critics often manifest an underlying uneasiness about his work’s political implications that usually can be traced to their presuppositions about the relationship of literature and life. Granting that Coetzee’s “general politicized allegorizing” reminds us “that oppression and injustice are not limited to South Africa, that, in some sense, they are eternal,” Dick Penner, in his first book-length study of Coetzee claims, “Coetzee’s fictions maintain their significance apart from a South African context, because of their artistry and because they transform urgent social concerns into more enduring questions regarding colonialism and the relationships of mastery and servitude, between cultures and individuals” (xiii). Dick Penner draws a distinction between Coetzee “the ethical individual, the Afrikaner concerned with injustice,” and Coetzee “the teller of tales,” who creates the countries of the mind, where the imagination reigns and refuses to be subservient to history’s incessant voices” (20, 21).

The historically conscious critics, who are primarily from South Africa, more frequently employ a neo-Marxist perspective to analyze the ideology of Coetzee’s work and to deplore his political naiveté. South African writers insist that the political should be manifested in literature in very particular ways, and Coetzee’s work does not fit into these
traditions. In recent years, many critics have called for a re-evaluation of and new emphasis on the historical nature and social function of literature. Edward Said argues that in its focus on textuality, contemporary literary theory has ignored the materiality of a text. The call to contextualize has been sounded increasingly by the so-called New Historicists. Moving beyond literary and philosophical sources for literature, New Historicists explore the relationships between non-textual events, different modes of cultural discourse, and the work of literature.

While writers such as André Brink and Nadine Gordimer have been outspoken on the role of the author in South Africa, Coetzee has not said much on his role as a writer. Coetzee’s few comments on his role as a writer have been full of gaps and elusions. Looking at Coetzee’s responses in several of his interviews, one should note that he refuses to be “placed,” to be “labeled,” to be “assigned” a role. This refusal stems not so much from a desire to be private (“keeping it for your own consciousness,”) as from a refusal to accept an authoritarian determination of the role of the writer. Coetzee clearly acknowledges the overwhelming impact of history on his writing. Furthermore, his critical comments on other contemporary South African writers reveal his concern for the social and ethical implications of different narrative strategies. Admitting that, “torture has exerted a dark fascination” on himself and many other South African writers, Coetzee, nonetheless, cautions that the writer who depicts “the dark chamber” must be careful. The novelist has an ethical responsibility not only to refuse complicity with those in authority who practice torture but also to recognize the fact that torture is a sign, a word that desperately needs the exposing light of interpretation. Coetzee claims, “the challenge faced by the author is how to play the game by the rules of the state how to establish one’s own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one’s own terms” (364). Coetzee meets this challenge as discussions of his novels have revealed his keen awareness of the special liabilities of traditional realism and naturalism and his choice of alternative narrative strategies to embody his responses. In his novels, he attempts to create his own terms, to avoid merely fondling the wound or retreating to a depoliticized timelessness, to deal with the reality of South Africa in a responsible and ethical fashion. Coetzee’s work is able to transcend its historical situation only because it is in the first place linked to that historical situation.
The aim of this study, then, is to examine the complexly interwoven relationships of the material reality of South Africa, the various discourses that tell stories about that reality, Coetzee's narrative strategies, and his primary thematic concerns – issues that concern with authority and myth-making, strategies of power and subjection, inclusion and exclusion, voices and silences.

Convinced of the need for change in the society in which he writes, but, at the same time, aware of the compromising nature of the ineluctable “worldliness” of the literary text, Coetzee has had to choose between subsiding into silence and adopting a strategy of paradox. Premised as it is on the uneasy balance between knowledge of implication and hope for transcendence, this strategy can, at best, generate only “intimations” of an alternative to the status quo, “intimations” which are overlooked or rendered unknown by the full force of culture and history. Coetzee usually uses the term “intimations” to suggest that which has been occluded by discourse. In other words, he uses it in a manner strongly reminiscent of William Wordsworth, that is, in contexts and scenes which reject subject-centered consciousness and ratiocinative discourse and posit the idea that we grow out of and are part of a nature which lives in us as we live in it (Ode: Intimations of Immortality and The Prelude X: 726). The aesthetic purpose of the notion of “intimations” is hinted at in one of the interviews in Doubling the Point (341) in which Coetzee describes himself as “someone who has intimations of freedom” and who then “construct representations” of this idea.

The laudatory citation of The Jerusalem Prize Awards Committee appeared in New York Times, of which the select phraseology goes to speak about his “staunch opposition to apartheid and oppression in any form and for writings which combine extreme sensitivity to the condition humane with a powerful prose condemning man’s cruelty to man.” (24-25). If Coetzee does not provide political solutions or a direct call to action to resolve South Africa’s enormous problems, it is because he is striking at a more fundamental problem: the psychological, philosophical, and linguistic bases of the colonial dilemma. One finds in Coetzee's fiction a minimalist programme for prompting change which is, quite literally, undermined as it is articulated.
This brings to question Coetzee's identity as a South African writer. Coetzee's own comments on his ethnic identity show him to be intensely aware of the slipperiness of his position, and of the ambivalence of this site which divides colonial from postcolonial experience. He has spoken of the term 'Afrikaner' as having three different applications, the first two of which would disqualify Coetzee from Afrikaner group membership. The first is linguistic and cultural: English rather than Afrikaans is Coetzee's first language, and he is not 'embedded' in Afrikaner culture, such as the Reformed Church. In its second sense, 'Afrikaner' becomes an ideological tool, moving from an anti-British political agenda in the 1880s, to an anti-black Nationalism in the later years of apartheid. By this definition, those who do not share the political vision – whether or not they are Afrikaans-speakers – can be expelled from affiliation with the group. The third application of the term is the external activity of naming, a brand imposed on the basis of historical association. In *Doubling the Point* Coetzee suggests, he does not have the power "to withdraw from the gang," (342) from the guilt, by association, with the crime committed against Africa by the whites of South Africa. This complex issue of identity is of vital importance in establishing the niche of postcolonialism which Coetzee inhabits. If Coetzee is accurately represented as South Africa's most significant postmodernist writer, a doubt may legitimately emerge concerning his credentials in dealing with the particular historical moment. Coetzee has invariably negotiated with both the sophisticated literary questions posed by the poststructuralist/postmodernist turn and the key social and political issues of the day and has won much critical acclaim. There is no doubt that Coetzee's engagement with history seems oblique when his work is compared with the forms of gritty realism associated with black prose fiction, or, for example, with the novels of Nadine Gordimer.

To examine the novels of Coetzee contextually, that is, as novels both about and written from within the South African situation is to engage in these larger issues. The problem is complicated further by the fact that Coetzee admits to being a linguist before being a writer and speaks of a creative relationship between these functions. In the era of Structuralism's ascendancy in the West, an intellectual allegiance such as Coetzee's involves far more than simply being self-conscious about the nature of one's medium; it also involves working into fiction nothing less than the notion that language is a primary,
constitutive element of consciousness and of culture at large. However, through Coetzee's writing and its historical placement, many western intellectual currents have now flown into the turbulent waters of colonialism and apartheid.

For Coetzee, art-work is not solely dedicated to imitating social reality but it possesses a utopian potential. In "The Novel Today," (1988) he raises questions about the writing that "supplements' (2-3) the discourses of class, race and gender, the writing that deals with the stated conflictual relations resulting in the South African colonial history. Coetzee cogently argues that novel as a genre can "occupy an autonomous place" and "to operate in terms of its own procedures and issues" rather than a replica of history for "its principal structuration" (2-3). Despite his contradiction of the apriori status of history in its relation to literature, he suggests that the writer stands at the crossroads of choosing between aesthetic autonomy and supplementing history.

Although Coetzee respects the claims of both reflexivity and historicity, he does not seek a mediating or neutral role in the field of cultural politics. Behind the narrative subjects of each of the novels, and each of his principal characters such as behind, Eugene Dawn, Jacobus Coetzee, Magda, the Magistrate, the Medical Officer, Susan Barton, and Elizabeth Curren, Lurie, and Lucy – lies an implied narrator who shifts stance with and against the play of forces in South Africa. In other words, Coetzee's figuring of the tension between text and history is itself a historical act, one that must be read back into the discourses of South Africa where one can discern its illuminating power.

In South Africa, however, Coetzee writes not as a citizen of the First World but of the Third – or perhaps the First within the Third – and therefore, like other white South African writers, he faces the problem of cultural authority. His relationship with the European canon entails an accusation of complicity in a history of domination. Coetzee's response to this situation is to interrogate the specific form of marginality he represents. In Foe, Friday's enforced silence represents what a monocultural, metropolitan discourse cannot hear; but the silence also overwhelms and closes the novel itself, in an act of authorial deference on Coetzee's part. Friday's silence is therefore not only the mark of Coetzee's unwillingness to receive the canon as the natural breath of life; it is also the
mark of history, and the mark of South Africa, in the text of a novel that scrupulously acknowledges its own limited authority.

The intersections of the past and present are obvious in each of his writing. In *Dusklands*, the mad and twitchy Eugene Dawn has his Vietnam War, while an ancestral Coetzee shoots the Africans he has just discovered. Mad, lyrical Magda murders her father *In the Heart of the Country*, but fails to undo patriarchy. In *Waiting for Barbarians*, the Magistrate, initially complicit with the torturer, becomes, once tortured, the only source of order and civil life as the novel ends, entering the suspended life of waiting for the barbarians. In *Life & Times of Michael K*, colonial authority as the unnamed magistrate, the spinster, and the explorer – are replaced by a named colonial subject, marginalized by others, centered in himself. Admiring revolutionaries from afar, Michael K is a brilliant representation of the silent person over whom others fight the revolution. Although the novel’s second part ends with the interpreters of alterity running comically, hopelessly, after their resolutely silent, escaping subject, the novel continues to be praised for “enabling the other to be heard” and “letting the other speak.” As if to prevent a repetition of the compliment, in *Foe* Coetzee pulled out Friday’s tongue, he also stepped back from the present to consider its struggles over race, self, gender, writing, as filtered through a revision of a foundational text. In *Age of Iron*, he stepped into the State of emergency, and then moved away again, in a now well-established rhythm, to consider present myths, sexual, revolutionary, and literary, through the mask of Dostoeceztcoetzee (*Master of Petersburg*). *Disgrace*, confronts the reader with the stark realities within the South African context with regard to its history, socio-political complexities and ironies and comments strongly on the failure of human sympathy as a consequence of colonialism and apartheid.

The wider scope of the present study is to offer specific analyses of particular texts, with a sense of the possibilities that they offer for reading and interpretation. The thesis is in five chapters. The Introductory chapter brings together the literary biography and the ideological predilections of one of the most important South African writer after Nadine Gordimer. It offers an overview of his writing in order to place the texts discussed in the subsequent chapters in the right context of value and meaning. The chapter also attempts
a brief study of the various influences that have shaped his imagination, his art, and his credo as a writer, defining at the same time the parameters within which he has chosen to work, given his Afrikaner identity.

The three main chapters of the thesis which constitute the bulk of the thesis focus on his philosophically dense, ironic, and self-reflexive fiction that has exhibited a consistent suspicion of political authority without being either didactic or propagandistic. Both his fiction and his non-fiction offer merciless portraits of devastation wrought by state power: South African apartheid, European imperialism, the U.S. War in Vietnam, the totalitarian violence of Nazism and Communism. His most recent writing contemplates — among many other things — a radical rejection of the state itself. In this complex work, his characters’ lives are marred by the conflicts and limitations in which the state itself originates. Indeed, Coetzee suggests that the politics of an oppressive state are only one dimension of a broader web of contention that encompasses the private struggles of his characters. In Coetzee’s fiction, the story of domestic life can be nearly as cruel and merciless as the political world. But at least the misdeeds and missteps of private existence have sometimes the virtue of being freely chosen. For Coetzee’s characters, the difference between involuntary subjection to the state, and a freely chosen individual path, however harsh and barren may be the only difference that matters.

Coetzee’s early fiction — Dusklands, In the Heart of the Country and Waiting for the Barbarians — dealt with in the second chapter, involves a struggle with colonialism as defining the oppressive but ineluctable conditions of existence and self-consciousness. It underlies the entire corpus, which can be described sequentially as beginning with an aggressive imperialist violence in Dusklands followed by settlement of uncertain standing and duration in In the Heart of the Country. A defensive phase of anticipated revolution is presented in Waiting for the Barbarians. Throughout the novel Coetzee more concerned with a specific issue looming over South African political life: the question of torture. His earliest novel, Dusklands, was the first example of the capacity for empathy that has enabled Coetzee time and again to creep beneath the sin of the alien and the abhorrent. A man working for the American administration during the Vietnam war dreams of devising an unbeatable system of psychological warfare, while at the same time his private life...
disintegrates around him. His reflections are juxtaposed with a report on an expedition to explore the country of the native Africans, which purports to have been written by one of the 18th century Boer pioneers. Two forms of misanthropy, one of them intellectual and megalomaniac, the other vital and barbaric, reflect each other.

His second novel, *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) reflects a later stage of South African history in its account of a crazed woman, Magda, who lives on an isolated sheep farm in the Cape desert at the beginning of the twentieth century. From exposing the way historical discourses have worked to construct and reinforce the hierarchical systems of oppression in South Africa, Coetzee in *Waiting for Barbarians* (1980) turns to a more allegorical rendition of the dynamics of contemporary life in South Africa. Apart from continuing to echo certain elements of Afrikaner discourse in *Waiting for Barbarians*, Coetzee in the novel is more concerned with a specific issue looming over South African political life: the question of torture. In the magistrate’s relationship with the abandoned “barbarian” girl he finds himself attracted by her awkward creeping movement and her misshapen feet. The connection to the unclean is heightened by her other mutilations. Because she has been half-blinded she bears a scar by her eye “as though a caterpillar lay there with its head under her eyelid, grazing” (1). A ritual is speedily established in which the magistrate washes and massages the girl’s feet, frequently interrupted by waves of sleep, “like death to me, or enchantment, blank, outside time” (1980: 31). Ritual offers both a fantasy of atonement and a means of symbolically negating or reformulating the past.

The Third Chapter deals with *Life & Times of Michael K*, *Foe*, *Age of Iron* (1990), reflecting the era of Apartheid, Apocalypse and Victimization. *Life & Times of Michael K*, was set in modern South Africa at a time of revolution. The scenes of the novel evoke the social breakdown of post-Soweto South Africa during the 1980s, the novel’s theme represents the fears and concerns of the time. Michael’s life reveals many truths about the oppressive systems of South African life in its evocations of the past, the present and the future. Most of Michael’s silences occur when he is confronted by a person who wishes to exercise authority over him. *Foe*’s focus on nature, narrative and imagination and on the question of who will remain silent are thoughtful responses to the questions of speech and
silencing confronting Coetzee in his new role as a prominent South African novelist. As a symbol of oppression, Friday represents those who have been silenced because of race, gender, and class. Like the barbarian girl and Michael K, Friday’s textual reality speaks eloquently of the silences imposed throughout South African history on Others. In assuming the White Man’s burden, Susan begins to romanticize Friday, pleading that he be allowed to sleep near Cruso: “He would rather sleep on the floor at his master’s feet than on the softest bed in Christendom” (41). The loyal servant that she depicts in this scenario suggests the humble and subservient Friday of Defoe’s novel. Age of Iron (1990) shows Coetzee’s search for a form that facilities truth-telling and presents an alternative to manipulation of history. In Age of Iron, Coetzee turns to a novelistic form more realistic than any of his previous books, but still employing a figurative or allegorical narrative technique. Mrs. Curren on the brink of death begins to explore ultimate issues telling her daughter, “This was never meant to be the story of a body, but of the soul it houses” (185). Her death-bed confession reveals her changing attitudes towards her country and her conviction of her own historical responsibility. Her story records an attempt “to keep a soul alive in times not hospitable to the soul” (130). Coetzee locates the progress of the soul in the context of the material and the historical, the body and the times. Speaking often of her “metamorphosis,” Mrs. Curren witnesses the terrible emotional and spiritual struggle of one facing death, attempting to give birth to “the soul, neophyte, wet, blind, ignorant” (186). In that struggle, Age of Iron traces the efforts of liberal white South Africans to find an ethical position in the paradoxes and contradictions of their history.

The Fourth Chapter deals with Master of Petersburg (1994), Disgrace (1999) in the Post-Apartheid Phase. Coetzee's impulse to assess the relationship between writers and public violence becomes even more evident in The Master of Petersburg, where he turns to the theme of terrorism. Coetzee invents an encounter between a fictional Dostoevsky and Nechaev that thoroughly destabilizes the relationship between the novelist, Czarist, and his subject. Although never simply doubles for each other, Dostoevsky and Nechaev, in Coetzee's version, are drawn into a dialogue that points to their disturbing similarities. Unlike Foe, Coetzee's rewriting of Robinson Crusoe, The Master of Petersburg is written in late twentieth-century language that defamiliarizes Dostoevsky's world; Coetzee takes
advantage, for example, of late twentieth-century freedoms to spell out details of sexual relationships. Familiar features, samovars and tenements, philosophical policemen and saintly beggars, share the pages with apparently deliberate anachronisms such as Anna Sergeyevna’s tendency to sound like a talk-show therapist: “what struck me when you told the story was how angry … you still seemed to be.” (27) Disgrace offers a dark depiction of South Africa’s transitional tremors since the nightmare of the apartheid has not dissipated overnight. Many black South Africans still live in impoverished conditions with a high unemployment rate and crime rampant. The novel portrays the politically precarious situation of the whites and the contemplation of the meaning of whiteness in the new South Africa that seeks to leave behind the racist and imperialist discourse that previously defined whiteness as a social identity. Forced to resign from the university because of his affair with his student, Melanie, Lurie seeks refuge with his daughter Lucy on a small holding in the Eastern Province, where she grows flowers and vegetables for the market in nearby Grahamstown and runs dog kennels. He meets Petrus, the African who assists Lucy and has recently become her co-proprietor, and expresses his concern about her isolation. Locked into Lurie’s view of things, the new South Africa to those who are poor or black or both at this moment seem a telling exception as it introduces a new layer to the accumulating meanings of “the times”. To black as well as white, there are new fears about personal safety. In Coetzee’s fiction, the racially or socially privileged characters have virtually no understanding of the inner world of the “other” who has been excluded from such privilege.

The fifth chapter brings together the major narrative devices and thematic concerns in the novels discussed in the body of the thesis as also his contribution to the very mode of writing. Attention has also been paid to his entire oeuvre, their governing ideas and formal procedures showing Coetzee as a writer particularly suited to the preoccupations of contemporary academic discourse. The chapter traces the New Era in South Africa and the country contending with the complications of freedom, discussing in brief the works produced after Disgrace – Elizabeth Costello (2003), Slow Man (2005), Dairy of a Bad Year (2007) and also the three fictional biographies of Coetzee, Boyhood (1997), Youth (2002), Summertime (2009). Convinced of the need for change in the society in which he
writes but, at the same time, aware of the compromising nature of the ineluctable “worldliness” of the literary text, this writer has had to choose between subsiding into silence and adopting a strategy of paradox. The chapter also suggests the lines along which Coetzee has developed in recent years, illustrating the refreshingly different perspectives on his work, and the sorts of debates that have characterized Coetzee scholarship. It is worth noting, then, that these debates that have characterized Coetzee criticism and which still underlie some of the most recent critiques of his work, are continuing within different political circumstances even in contemporary South Africa.

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Coetzee’s early fiction involves a struggle with colonialism as defining the oppressive but ineluctable conditions of existence and self-consciousness. It underlies the entire corpus, which can be described sequentially as beginning with an aggressive imperialist violence in Dusklands followed by settlement of uncertain standing and duration in In the Heart of the Country. A defensive phase of anticipated revolution is presented in Waiting for the Barbarians. Throughout the novel Coetzee more concerned with a specific issue looming over South African political life: the question of torture.

His earliest novel, Dusklands, was the first example of the capacity for empathy that has enabled Coetzee time and again to creep beneath the sin of the alien and the abhorrent. A man working for the American administration during the Vietnam war dreams of devising an unbeatable system of psychological warfare, while at the same time his private life disintegrates around him. His reflections are juxtaposed with a report on an expedition to explore the country of the native Africans.
which purports to have been written by one of the 18th century Boer pioneers. Two forms of misanthropy, one of them intellectual and megalomaniac, the other vital and barbaric, reflect each other.

Coetzee’s accomplishments in his first published move of fiction, Dusklands, are considerable. He has produced a formally complex work containing contemporary American politics and eighteenth-century South African history with skillfully rendered psychological realism and self-reflexive fictional techniques. Dusklands is two novellas, “The Vietnam Project” and “the Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee” conjoined by the common theme of colonial oppression and the use of Coetzee in each. In Part – I set in the United States during the Vietnam era, the narrator’s bureaucratic supervisor is named Coetzee. In Part – II, set in the South African interior during the eighteenth century, Coetzee is presented as the “translator,” and his “father,” Dr. S.J.Cetzee as the editor of an “historical” document (nouvelle) presumably written by Jacobus Coetzee. Jacobus is a fictional creation of the real J.M. Coetzee, based on his distant historical ancestor, Jacobus Coetzee.

He has achieved a wide readership both within and outside South Africa. He is generally regarded as one of the most important “white writers” of his generation. The term “White Writing” was used by Coetzee as the title of his collection of critical
essays on South African culture and letters, and refers, he suggests, not to a writing that is any different from "black" writing, but that it is white "only insofar as it is generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African" (16). This awareness of the ambivalent status of the settler/colonial society within Africa is an important strain that runs through Coetzee's work and that has rendered problematic for some critics. Neo-Marxist historicist criticism, concentrating on material and economic history, has rendered harsh judgements on some of Coetzee's novels, accusing him of an irresponsible or metaphysical escapism. But viewing his novels within the social, cultural and rhetorical context, his fictional output presents the oppressive practices that pervaded South African life for hundreds of years. South Africa is a country in which discourse itself has contributed to oppression, a country whose history has been deliberately constructed to maintain white supremacy. Coetzee's response has been to expose and subvert national myths of history, as well as to create alternative narratives – stories to hold up against the nightmare of South African history. The stories he tells emerge from South African realities, but they suggest in their very form and technique that an alternative to those realities exists. Avoiding the authoritative voice of history, Coetzee presents a storyteller's elusive, ambiguous, yet lyrical account of South Africa. While a variety of elements are at play in Coetzee's work, it is interesting to study how his novels respond to the discursive practices of South Africa. Those practices in turn are influenced by a complex mix of historical realities, psychological states, and metaphysical beliefs. Despite limits being imposed by the historical situation, it is possible to attain an approximate and tentative understanding of the reality. One's horizon can be broadened and changed because of the influence of another horizon. Coetzee's novels themselves insist on the possibility of exposing a false history and exploring an alternative story. Coetzee's novels also suggest that a more accurate human history would encompass more than just the material world and the will to power: it would include outcast voices and the ineffable transcendent.
The laudatory citation of The Jerusalem Prize Awards Committee appeared in New York Times, of which the select phraseology goes to speak about his “staunch opposition to apartheid and oppression in any form and for writings which combine extreme sensitivity to the condition humane with a powerful prose condemning man’s cruelty to man.” (24-25)

The demand for his works is related to the world’s interest in the politics, literature, culture, and society of South Africa. However, Coetzee’s fictions maintain their significance apart from a South African context, because of their artistry and because they transform urgent societal concerns into more enduring questions regarding colonialism and the relationships of mastery and servitude between cultures and individuals. Given the diversity of Coetzee’s individual works, each novel forms an entity in terms of form and fictional technique, while the thematic unities can be observed throughout. Despite the diversity in form and settings and a variety of characters – white, black, coloured, Afrikaner etc., many of the Coetzee’s protagonists struggle to escape the Cartesian division between the self and the others that is the base of all colonial and master/slave thought. Thus, the protagonists face a dilemma even if they are personally innocent of any acts of oppression; they still share responsibility as members of the colonizing group. This paradox leads to a certain tension at the heart of Coetzee’s fiction that some critics have found disturbing. If Coetzee does not provide political solutions or a direct call to action to resolve South Africa’s enormous problems, it is because he is striking at a more fundamental problem: the psychological, philosophical, and linguistic bases of the colonial dilemma.

This brings to question Coetzee’s identity as a South African writer. Coetzee’s own comments on his ethnic identity show him to be intensely aware of the slipperiness of his position, and of the ambivalence of this site which divides colonial from postcolonial experience. He has spoken of the term “Afrikaner” as having three different applications, the first two of which would disqualify Coetzee from Afrikaner group membership. The first is linguistic and cultural: English rather than Afrikaans is
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To examine the novels of Coetzee contextually, that is, as novels both about and written from within the South African situation is to engage in these larger issues. The problem is complicated further by the fact that Coetzee admits to being a linguist before being a writer and speaks of a creative relationship between these functions. In the era of Structuralism’s ascendancy in the West, an intellectual allegiance such as Coetzee’s involves far more than simply being self-conscious about the nature of one’s medium; it also involves working into fiction nothing less than the notion that language is a primary, constitutive element of consciousness and of culture at large. However,
through Coetzee’s writing and its historical placement, many western intellectual currents have now flown into the turbulent waters of colonialism and apartheid.

For Coetzee, art-work is not solely dedicated to imitating social reality but it possesses a utopian potential. In “The Novel Today,” (1988) he raises questions about the writing that “supplements’ (2-3) the discourses of class, race and gender, the writing that deals with the stated conflictual relations resulting in the South African colonial history. Coetzee cogently argues that novel as a genre can “occupy an autonomous place” and “to operate in terms of its own procedures and issues” rather than a replica of history for “its principal structuration” (2-3). Despite his contradiction of the apriori status of history in its relation to literature, he suggests that the writer stands at the crossroads of choosing between aesthetic autonomy and supplementing history.

Although Coetze respects the claims of both reflexivity and historicity, he does not seek a mediating or neutral role in the field of cultural politics. Behind the narrative subjects of each of the novels, and each of his principal characters such as behind, Eugene Dawn, Jacobus Coetzee, Magda, the Magistrate, the Medical Officer, Susan Barton, and Elizabeth Curren, Lurie, and Lucy – lies an implied narrator who shifts stance with and against the play of forces in South African culture. In other words, Coetzee’s figuring of the tension between text and history is itself a historical act, one that must be read back into the discourses of South Africa where one can discern its illuminating power.

In South Africa, however, Coetzee writes not as a citizen of the First World but of the Third – or perhaps the First within the Third – and therefore, like other white South African writers, he faces the problem of cultural authority. His relationship with the European canon entails an accusation of complicity in a history of domination. Coetzee’s response to this situation is to interrogate the specific form of marginality he represents. In Foe, Friday’s enforced silence represents what a monocultural, metropolitan discourse cannot hear; but the silence also overwhelms and
closes the novel itself, in an act of authorial deference on Coetzee’s part. Friday’s silence is therefore not only the mark of Coetzee’s unwillingness to receive the canon as the natural breath of life; it is also the mark of history, and the mark of South Africa, in the text of a novel that scrupulously acknowledges its own limited authority.

The intersections of the past and present are obvious in each of his writing. In Dusklands, the mad and twitchy Eugene Dawn has his Vietnam War, while an ancestral Coetzee shoots the Africans he has just discovered. Mad, Lyrical Magda murders her father In the Heart of the Country, but fails to undo patriarchy. In Waiting for Barbarians, the Magistrate, initially complicit with the torturer, becomes, once tortured, the only source of order and civil life as the novel ends, entering the suspended life of waiting for the barbarians. In Life & Times of Michael K, colonial authority as the unnamed magistrate, the spinster, and the explorer – are replaced by a named colonial subject, marginalized by others, centered in himself. Admiring revolutionaries from afar, Michael K is a brilliant representation of the silent person over whom others fight the revolution. Although the novel’s second part ends with the interpreters of alterity running comically, hopelessly, after their resolutely silent, escaping subject, the novel continues to be praised for “enabling the other to be heard” and “letting the other speak.” As if to prevent a repetition of the compliment, in Foe Coetzee pulled out Friday’s tongue, he also stepped back from the present to consider its struggles over race, self, gender, writing, as filtered through a revision of a foundational text. In Age of Iron, he stepped into the State of emergency, and then moved away again, in a now well-established rhythm, to consider present myths, sexual, revolutionary, and literary, through the mask of Dostoecoetzee (Master of Petersburg). Disgrace, confronts the reader with the stark realities within the South African context with regard to its history, socio-political complexities and ironies and comments strongly on the failure of human sympathy as a consequence of colonialism and apartheid.
The thesis is in five chapters. The Introductory chapter brings together the Literary Biography and the ideological predilections of one of the most important South African writer after Nadine Gordimer. It offers an overview of his writing in order to place the texts discussed in the subsequent chapters in the right context of value and meaning. The chapter also attempts a brief study of the various influences that have shaped his imagination, his art, and his credo as a writer, defining at the same time the parameters within which he has chosen to work, given his Afrikaner identity.

The three main chapters of the thesis which constitute the bulk of the thesis focus on his philosophical dense, ironic, and self-reflexive fiction that has exhibited a consistent suspicion of political authority without being either didactic or propagandistic. Both his fiction and his non-fiction offer merciless portraits of devastation wrought by state power: South African apartheid, European imperialism, the U.S. War in Vietnam, the totalitarian violence of Nazism and Communism. His most recent writing contemplates — among many other things — a radical rejection of the state itself. In this complex work, his characters’ lives are marred by the conflicts and limitations in which the state itself originates. Indeed, Coetzee suggests that the politics of an oppressive state are only one dimension of a broader web of contention that encompasses the private struggles of his characters. In Coetzee’s fiction, the story of domestic life can be nearly as cruel and merciless as the political world. But at least the misdeeds and missteps of private existence have sometimes the virtue of being freely chosen. For Coetzee’s characters, the difference between involuntary subjection to the state, and a freely chosen individual path, however harsh and barren may be the only difference that matters.
The present dissertation is in five chapters. The introductory chapter discusses the writer’s place in South African literature, his literary biography and literary output. It also traces the various influences on the writer, his stance as a writer, and discussing in brief, the major themes in his writing. The chapter further elaborates the various issues and concerns in his novels, his identity as a South African writer, explaining the writer’s stance, during and after the apartheid regime in South Africa. It dwells on Coetzee’s historical perspective, Afrikaner’s ignorance of the world developments, mapping at the same time the tribal mentality of Afrikaners. This chapter further proceeds to present Coetzee’s perception of colour and his representation of history that sets in his self-reflexivity and allegorization. A brief reference is also made to the ideological representation of African landscape in Plaasroman that culminates in his romantic works of art.

The first three novels of Coetzee, Dusklands, In the Heart of the Country, Waiting for Barbarians reflecting the Apartheid and the Colonial Phase (1964 – 1980) in South African history have been dealt with in the second chapter of the thesis.

His second novel, In the Heart of the Country, (1977) reflects a later stage of South African history in its account of a crazed woman, Magda, who lives on an isolated sheep farm in the Cape desert at the beginning of the twentieth century. From exposing the way historical discourses have worked to construct and reinforce the
hierarchical systems of oppression in South Africa, Coetzee in Waiting for Barbarians (1980) turns to a more allegorical rendition of the dynamics of contemporary life in South Africa. Apart from continuing to echo certain elements of Afrikaner discourse in Waiting for Barbarians, Coetzee in the novel is more concerned with a specific issue looming over South African political life: the question of torture. In the magistrate’s relationship with the abandoned “barbarian” girl he finds himself attracted by her awkward creeping movement and her misshapen feet. The connection to the unclean is heightened by her other mutilations. Because she has been half-blinded she bears a scar by her eye “as though a caterpillar lay there with its head under her eyelid, grazing” (1).

A ritual is speedily established in which the magistrate washes and massages the girl’s feet, frequently interrupted by waves of sleep, “like death to me, or enchantment, blank, outside time” (1980: 31). Ritual offers both a fantasy of atonement and a means of symbolically negating or reformulating the past.

The Third Chapter deals with Life & Times of Michael K, Foe, Age of Iron (1990) reflecting the era of Apartheid, Apocalypse and Victimization. Life & Times of Michael K, was set in modern South Africa at a time of revolution. The scenes of the novel evoke the social breakdown of post-Soweto South Africa during the 1980s, the novel’s theme represent the fears and concerns of the time. Michael’s life reveals many truths about the oppressive systems of South African life in its evocations of the past, the present and the future. In situation after situation, Michael stumbles over his words, whispers a response from a dry throat, or simply does not answer a question. “You don’t talk,” says a man working with him to clear the railway tracks. “I thought you must be sick” (43). Michael’s silence frustrates the medical officer, who is himself an effusive talker, “I am not clever with words,” Michael tells him (139). Most of Michael’s silences occur when he is confronted by a person who wishes to exercise authority over him, which evokes a feeling of stupidity within him. Foe’s focus on nature, narrative and imagination and on the question of who will remain silent are thoughtful responses to the questions of speech and silencing confronting Coetzee in his
new role as a prominent South African novelist. As a symbol of oppression, Friday represents those who have been silenced because of race, gender, and class. Like the barbarian girl and Michael K, Friday’s textual reality speaks eloquently of the silences imposed throughout South African history on Others. In assuming the White Man’s burden, Susan begins to romanticize Friday, pleading that he be allowed to sleep near Crusoe: “He would rather sleep on the floor at his master’s feet than on the softest bed in Christendom” (41). The loyal servant that she depicts in this scenario suggests the humble and subservient Friday of Defoe’s novel. Age of Iron (1990) shows Coetzee’s search for a form that facilitates truth-telling and presents an alternative to manipulation of history. In Age of Iron, Coetzee turns to a novelistic form more realistic than any of his previous books, but still employing a figurative or allegorical narrative technique. Mrs. Curren on the brink of death begins to explore ultimate issues telling her daughter, “This was never meant to be the story of a body, but of the soul it houses” (185). Her deathbed confession reveals her changing attitudes towards her country and her conviction of her own historical responsibility. Her story records an attempt “to keep a soul alive in times not hospitable to the soul” (130). Coetzee locates the progress of the soul in the context of both the material and the historical, the body and the times. Speaking often of her “metamorphosis,” Mrs. Curren witnesses to the terrible emotional and spiritual struggle of one facing death, attempting to give birth to “the soul, neophyte, wet, blind, ignorant” (186). In that struggle, Age of Iron traces the efforts of liberal white South Africans to find an ethical position in the paradoxes and contradictions of their history.

The Fourth Chapter deals with Master of Petersburg (1994), Disgrace (1999) in the Post-Apartheid Phase. Coetzee’s impulse to assess the relationship between writers and public violence becomes even more evident in The Master of Petersburg, where he turns to the theme of terrorism. Coetzee invents an encounter between a fictional Dostoevsky and Nechaev that thoroughly destabilizes the relationship between the novelist, Czarist, and his subject. Although never simply doubles for each other,
Dostoevsky and Nechaev, in Coetzee's version, are drawn into a dialogue that points to their disturbing similarities. Unlike Foe, Coetzee's rewriting of Robinson Crusoe, The Master of Petersburg is written in late twentieth-century language that defamiliarizes Dostoevsky's world; Coetzee takes advantage, for example, of late twentieth-century freedoms to spell out details of sexual relationships. Familiar features, samovars and tenements, philosophical policemen and saintly beggars, share the pages with apparently deliberate anachronisms such as Anna Sergeyevna's tendency to sound like a talk-show therapist: "what struck me when you told the story was how angry ... you still seemed to be." (27) Disgrace offers a dark depiction of South Africa's transitional tremors since the nightmare of the apartheid has not dissipated overnight. Many black South Africans still live in impoverished conditions with a high unemployment rate and crime rampant. The novel portrays the politically precarious situation of the whites and the contemplation of the meaning of whiteness in the new South Africa that seeks to leave behind the racist and imperialist discourse that previously defined whiteness as a social identity. Forced to resign from the university because of his affair with his student, Melanie, Lurie seeks refuge with his daughter Lucy on a small holding in the Eastern Province, where she grows flowers and vegetables for the market in nearby Grahamstown and runs dog kennels. He meets Petrus, the African who assists Lucy and has recently become her co-proprietor, and expresses his concern about her isolation. Locked into Lurie's view of things, the new South Africa to those who are poor or black or both at this moment seem a telling exception as it introduces a new layer to the accumulating meanings of "the times". To black as well as white, there are new fears about personal safety. In Coetzee's fiction, the racially or socially privileged characters have virtually no understanding of the inner world of the "other" who has been excluded from such privilege.

The fifth chapter brings together the major narrative devices and thematic concerns in the novels discussed in the body of the thesis as also his contribution to the
very mode of writing. Attention has also been paid to his entire oeuvre, their governing ideas and formal procedures.

The Last Chapter offers an overview of the writing in the Post-Apartheid regime and the debate over the novel’s employment of documentary social realism as a means of commenting on and affecting historical reality that has come to a climax in the nineties, with the publication of a paper by Albie Sachs, a white ANC lawyer and autobiographer who has lived in exile for many years. The chapter traces the New Era in South Africa and the country contending with the complications of freedom. The Chapter discusses in brief the works produced after Disgrace like Slow Man (2005), Dairy of a Bad Year (2007) and also the three fictional biographies of Coetzee, Boyhood (1997), Youth (2002), Summertime (2009) with references also made to Elizabeth Costello (2003). An Overview is presented on Coetzee’s critical oeuvre showing Coetzee as a writer particularly suited to the preoccupations of contemporary academic discourse. The chapter also deals with the roster of characters and post-modernism and delineates in Coetzee’s fiction a minimalist programme for prompting change which is, quite literally, undermined even as it is articulated. Convinced of the need for change in the society in which he writes but, at the same time, aware of the compromising nature of the ineluctable “worldliness” of the literary text, this writer has had to choose between subsiding into silence and adopting a strategy of paradox.