Chapter III

‘Can the Leopard Change Its Spots?’: Coetzee and the Issue of Race

Our thesis, with its focus on the works of J. M. Coetzee, would have to address the question of colonialism which developed around the notion of race and in effect created a margin in the country that faced discrimination and social exclusion (both societal and spatial), with the implementation of the policy of apartheid by the White settlers. In this chapter we deliberate upon the operation of this structure of colonialism and its creation of a pattern of the ‘centre’ and the ‘margin’ in the early novels of Coetzee, dating from *Dusklands* (1974) to *Disgrace* (1999), with the exclusion of *The Master of Petersburg* (1994). We identify characters like Jacobus Coetzee, Magda’s father, Colonel Joll and David Lurie as integral to the system of oppression and suggest that their identities as colonizers/settlers somehow condition their attitude towards the colonized or the ‘native’. We also reflect on the changes that affect this binary notion of ‘self/other’, colonizer/colonized within this structure, once it is questioned and challenged by forces external to its edifice.

If history operates significantly to fashion the Black, the African, the woman, the disabled, the colonized, the non-human to be the marginalized, then in Coetzee’s fictive world there is a continuous questioning of these certainties. Coetzee employs various mechanisms in order to deliberately destabilize the simple positions of ‘self/other’, ‘margin/centre’. This chapter analyses how notions of race contributed to the practice of racial discrimination within and without South Africa. Coetzee uses irony, allegory and intertextuality among other strategies to explore the ways in which the apparatus of colonialism can be created but also challenged through history. While certain narratives ironically present the historical processes of colonial exploitation, others highlight the reiteration of such sharp categories at a point where apartheid is challenged. Coetzee’s protagonists are situated in and conditioned by history, yet each character and narrative presents unique facades and complexities of the margin. It is the country’s history that is
most fluid, as it is caught in a cusp of transition and witnesses an exchange of power, thereby producing mutations in the very notion of ‘otherness’ that populates Coetzee’s novels.

The writer, positioned in South Africa in a period when apartheid practices were acutely caught up in fashioning the nation’s history, has the racial ‘other’ as a major subject in his work. The objective of Coetzee in the first novella, comprising his novel *Dusklands* (1974), *The Vietnam Project* quite obviously is to incriminate the entire American people and country in the brutalization and dehumanization of another, albeit of a different race and colour, and situated at a different geopolitical position, nearer the Orient. The text highlights the fact that the dominance of the Western powers is achieved against the insufficiency of the racially ‘other’, with ‘hearts bathed in obedience’: “The father cannot be a benign father until his sons have knelt before his wand. The plotting of the sons against the father must cease. They must kneel with hearts bathed in obedience.”\(^1\) Eugene Dawn in fact assigns the position of the ‘father’ to the United States of America, and effectively the obedient ‘son’ to the Vietnamese.

The novel’s juxtaposition of the United States of America in the 1960s with the eighteenth century colonial endeavours of the Dutch in South Africa, is to reveal the sameness in the modus operandi of colonial powers across place and time. Accounts of the savage ‘native’ are likewise produced in Coetzee’s second novella, *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee*, to dehumanize the people of that land and validate Western colonial and imperialistic incursions:

> The one gulf that divides us from the Hottentots is our Christianity. We are Christians, a folk with a destiny … The Hottentot is locked into the present. He does not care where he comes from or where he is going.\(^2\)

In colonial discourse, it is cannibalism that becomes the ultimate fact for the degenerate ‘native’ population, and this holds true with the African people in Coetzee’s novella:
A bullet is too good for a Bushman. They took one alive once after a herder had been killed and tied him over a fire and roasted him. They even basted him in his own fat. Then they offered him to the Hottentots; but he was too sinewy’, they said, to eat.³

Coetzee’s insight into the reality of human society and culture in South Africa is manifest in this excerpt from an interview, published shortly after the public release of *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), and can also be read as symptomatic of the world in which the South Africans were living:

The desert archetype is about a lack of society and the lack of a shared culture, a feeling of anomie, a feeling of solitariness, a feeling of not having human ties with the people around one …we find ourselves living in a country of fragmented or obsolete cultures: African culture is fragmented, Afrikaner rural culture is equally fragmented, and the cities are just agglomerations, with no distinctive urban culture. So for the people whose roots have been cut, who have no sense of identity to the extent of not even knowing what their roots were, the image of the desert in which one is solitary has a lot of meaning, and yes, I would say that socially it has a lot of relevance.⁴

In *Life & Times of Michael K* (1974), Coetzee involves not the present but the future, a time during and following a race conflict with its culmination in a civil war. Of the many novels written by Coetzee, it is *Life & Times of Michael K*, where the protagonist represents South Africa’s disenfranchised Coloured population. Coetzee’s own portrayal of Michael K is worth quoting in this context:

This is a book set in a recognizable South Africa of the – what I think is the near future, nearer future. It is about Michael K, a young gardener of no particularly distinguish intellect, who has fled the city where everything is falling to pieces under the impact of the war, and has managed to get some kind of garden going again on a deserted farm far from everyone. He lives in a burrow in the ground
like an animal and grows all he can grow, namely pumpkins, and
living on a diet of pumpkins ... his strength is rapidly diminishing.\(^5\)

Likewise in *Age of Iron* (1990), we deduce a powerful likeness that emerges
between the central character and the social and physical circumstance of apartheid
afflicted South Africa. Elizabeth Curren is mortally ill and the illness cancer serves
as a metaphor of the infected and warped nature of South African society. In this
regard she often refers to South Africans as ugly, deformed and barely human. As
the novel proceeds, it increasingly emerges from Coetzee's use of mythological
analogies that it is apartheid state’s structure of power that inflicts this deforming
influence on its citizens. For example, Mrs. Curren claims that her tumors have
been “sent by Saturn”, \(^6\) the Roman God of agriculture and harvest, and whose
reign incidentally was known as the ‘golden age’. Furthermore, the State and its
ideological apparatuses are on many a time related to Circe, \(^7\) who was believed to
turn men into animals. In Coetzee’s apartheid afflicted South Africa, the evocation
to the legend of Circe could explain the transformation of human beings into stone
and swine. The supposition here then, is that the state’s power dealings have had a
dehumanizing impact on the South African people:

It is the roaming gangs I [Elizabeth Costello] fear, the sullen-
mouthed boys, rapacious as sharks, on whom the first shade of the
prison house is already beginning to close. Children scorning
childhood, the time of wonder, the growing time of the soul. Their
souls, their organs of wonder, stunted, petrified. And on the other
side of the great divide their White cousins soul-stunted too,
spinning themselves tighter and tighter into their sleepy cocoons.\(^8\)

Though *Age of Iron* explicitly refers to the South African context, the point holds
for all societies which have been ‘defined’ by ‘unnatural structures of power’.\(^9\)

Coetzee’s being born into a racially volatile society and his decision to
write from that place and on that situation forced certain limitations on his artistic
freedom. First there was an obvious expectation of him of producing politically
defined literature. His countryman and fellow writer, Alan Paton’s assertion to this
effect read as: “it would be very difficult to write a story in South Africa that had nothing to do with apartheid. It is one compelling factor in your life”.\textsuperscript{10} We are acquainted with the fact that Coetzee himself was bestowed the Jerusalem Prize for his “staunch opposition to apartheid and oppression in any form” and for writings, which “combine extreme sensitivity to the \textit{condition humaine} with a powerful prose, condemning man’s cruelty to man”.\textsuperscript{11} But at the same time we are also to remember Coetzee’s own words:

For the writer the deeper problem is \textit{not} to allow himself to be impaled on the dilemma proposed by the state, namely either to ignore its obscenities or else to produce representations of them. The true challenge is how not 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.\textsuperscript{12}

Allen Richard Penner in the introduction to his book, \textit{Countries of the Mind} (1989), quotes Coetzee’s declaration at a Writers’ Workshop of the supremacy, the fictive power of the artist:

\begin{quote}
Whereas in the kind of game I am talking about
You can change the rules if you are good enough.
You can change the rules for everybody if you are good enough,
You can change the game.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

There are writers like Alan Paton, Andre Brink and Alex La Guma who give no credence to the concept of ‘Art for Art’s Sake’ operating within the creative and literary boundaries of South Africa: “There is no Art for Art’s sake in a book based upon the truth about apartheid, for an author who chooses this shameful and vicious oppression of people as his theme”.\textsuperscript{14} Coetzee on the other hand, believes that humanity looks for objective truth not as much as from journalists as from artists, because “the artist, answerable to no man, only to his own art and conscience, is the nearest thing to a truth-teller we are likely to have”.\textsuperscript{15} Steadfastly believing in his vocation as an artist, Coetzee therefore impresses upon the world his location within South Africa as differing and different from many of his
contemporary writers, who do not oppose the “colonization of the novel by the
discourse of history” like he does. Consistent with Coetzee’s contention, Clive
Barnett comments on the nature of writing done by Gordimer:

[Gordimer’s] political urges are seen to impinge upon the quality of
the novel’s writing. A dualism is set up in this sort of evaluation,
between the novels which escape the murky traps of a society
saturated with political significance, and novels which apparently
succeed in rendering political reality but are, by this very token,
condemned to a lesser aesthetic judgement. While reflecting on the conflicting discourses of history and fiction, Coetzee, it
seems, is furthermore endeavouring to disengage himself from contributing to the
routine dogmatic conflicts captured in the fiction of the times, plausibly demanding
to unshackle his own novelistic discourse from being considered as explanatory of
the country’s history. In this speech quoted here, we can identify Coetzee’s sharp
objection to succumbing to the pressures of the political:

In times of intense ideological pressure like the present, when the
space in which the novel and history normally coexist like two cows
on the same posture, each minding its own business, is squeezed to
almost nothing, the novel, it seems to me, has only two options:
supplementarity or rivalry.

A relation of contention between the two discourses would eventually lead to:

A novel that operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in
its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of the procedures
of history and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by
history ... I mean a novel that evolves its own paradigms and
myths, in the process (and here is the point at which true rivalry,
even enmity, perhaps enters the picture) perhaps going so far as to
show up the mythic status of history – in other words,
demythologizing history. Can I be more specific? Yes: for example,
a novel that is prepared to work itself out outside the terms of class conflict, race conflict, gender conflict or any of the other oppositions out of which history and the historical disciplines erect themselves.\textsuperscript{19}

In total disagreement regarding the connivance between the two discourses, Coetzee seems to issue a caveat:

\begin{quote}
    in South Africa the colonization of the novel by the discourse of history is proceeding with alarming rapidity […] Storytelling […] is not a way of making messages more – as they say – “effective”. storytelling is another, another mode of thinking.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

In the light of this historical positioning, Coetzee’s writings are marked by a certain ambiguity, uncertainty. Stephen Watson seeks to account for the many contradictions inherent in Coetzee’s writing, by invoking Albert Memmi’s notion of ‘the colonizer who refuses’. What Watson suggests as being difficult for Coetzee, is precisely documented in Albert Memmi’s \textit{The Colonizer and the Colonized} (1965):

\begin{quote}
    He may openly protest, or sign a petition, or join a group hostile towards the colonizers. This already suffices for him to recognize that he has simply changed difficulties and discomfort. It is not easy to escape mentally from a concrete situation, to refuse its ideology while continuing to live with its actual relationships. From now on, he lives his life under the sign of a contradiction which looms at every step, depriving him of all coherence and all tranquility.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

Coetzee has been thoughtful of the liberties his racial identity necessarily accorded to him in South Africa, otherwise denied to the Blacks or the Coloureds, and his work therefore has logically revolved around the experience of writing under such a repressive regime and of the dichotomy of representing racial alterity. This ironic reticence is an attribute of Coetzee, which allows him to question any easy and simplistic narrative appraisal of the colonialist position. Attentive towards his
nation’s and family’s protracted participation in the order of apartheid and in fashioning the racial ‘other’, Coetzee seems to question how successful and true is a depiction of the margin from within a position of complicity. Critics like Jane Poyner have identified this predicament of Coetzee in their appraisals adroitly:

These factors made the responsibility and accountability of the White intellectual and writer more pressing and complex: how were White intellectuals and authors to represent others’ stories without implementing an ethically doubtful authority over them? What such narratives force us to do is to examine our own positionalities and activities to interpret and represent the other.22

Occupying the hesitant and ambivalent position of the White liberal in South Africa, who both enjoys privilege and criticizes the apartheid system that makes those privileges possible, Coetzee then tackles the issue of morals, ethics, human responsibility towards honest presentation of reality through his engagement with and absorption of Samuel Beckett among other modernist writers. In this context, Beckett’s writings of his middle phase, comprising Watt (1953) and the trilogy of Molloy (1951), Malone Dies (1951), and The Unnamable (1953), became vital to Coetzee. In the Beckett trilogy, Coetzee was introduced to a text intensely insecure of its ability to truthfully narrate; its subsequent failure, and the resulting realization of writing as self-deception. Coetzee personalized these Beckettian premises to devise his own principles of writing and to further review the ‘White South African writing as a form of self-deception.’23 In Coetzee’s critique, the writing is self-deceived because there can be only a sense of forged, untrue and deceitful compassion between the writer and the subject.

Coetzee’s view of writing, as failure in truth telling and a deception, dominates and shapes his fiction and is implicit in works like, Waiting for the Barbarians (1980), and Age of Iron. The Magistrate’s enterprising efforts at self-scrutiny do not succeed and he comes no closer to revealing the truth about himself. After Joll’s first torture of the prisoners, the mortified Magistrate,
criticizes Joll’s manner of extracting information, but proceeds instead to face up to his involvement in the overall scheme of the Empire:

(On the other hand, who am I to assert my distance from him? I drink with him, I eat with him, I show him the sights, I afford him every assistance as his letter of commission requests, and more. The empire does not require that its servants love each other, merely that they perform their duty.)\textsuperscript{24}

The Magistrate’s misery at the hands of the Empire’s representatives does not allow him to comprehend the real trauma of the barbarian tribe or even the girl who is even more removed from him because of her gender. No matter how much torment he endures, his suffering cannot be equated with that of the barbarian girl. His positionality in the town, dependent on his race, colour and status in a patriarchy, accords him a difference that cannot be overlooked.

The same untrustworthiness regarding the Whites’ identification, empathy, solidarity and love for the Black, is depicted in \textit{Age of Iron}. The White liberal position is accredited to a woman in this novel in the character called, Elizabeth Curren. Mrs. Curren’s narrative of identification and empathy with ‘John’, the anti-apartheid resistance fighter, after he has been murdered, is similarly to be questioned. Similar is the gulf between Elizabeth Curren and John as was between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl. They exist at completely different planes altogether. Mrs. Curren can rage against the perpetrators of apartheid:

I want to rage against the men who have created these times. I want to accuse them of spoiling my life in the way that a rat or a cockroach spoils food without even eating it, simply by walking over it and sniffing it and performing its bodily functions on it. It is childish, I know to point fingers and blame others.\textsuperscript{25}

But then she does not, or we should say cannot, even embrace the Black resistance activists, mostly young adolescent boys someone like Bheki and John. When John is seeking refuge in Florence’s quarters, Mrs Curren reflects, possibly on the huge
gulf between the two, separated by race, gender, class, age and approach: “I do not love this child, the child sleeping in Florence’s bed. I love you but I do not love him. There is no ache in me toward him, not the slightest”. For Coetzee, the psychological pressure from living and writing in such a society generates another predicament, the question of the truthfulness of one’s self and characters created by that self. In his talk on the Russian writer, Fyodor Dostoevsky, which Allen Richard Penner recorded in 1984, Coetzee believed:

As someone from South Africa, the question of sincerity in particular occupies me because we are in a social/political situation where, for a White person to say, ‘Yes, I am for the overthrow of the reigning system,’ is a peculiar thing. Because the question is, is the motive behind it a desire to climb onto some historical bandwagon? In other words, how does a person know if he is sincere in a situation like that? How does he know that he is speaking the truth?

Resembling the literary exertions of Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka, Coetzee’s novels, as many critics have claimed, stay ‘inconsolable before history.’ Their essential pose is that of Mrs. Curren in Age of Iron, invited by Mr. Thabane to witness the terrible devastation of a Black township: “‘To speak of this’ – [she] waved a hand over the bush, the smoke, the filth littering the path – ‘you would need the tongue of a god’”. In interviews, Coetzee similarly underscores his personal speechlessness by talking of how he is “overwhelmed,” how his “thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world”.

In one way Coetzee has performed a “symbolic resignation” from the “master caste”. He, in his persistence to project his own position in relation to the ‘masters’ as ‘equivocal’ and ‘feminized’, has been able to achieve a semblance of detachment. When Coetzee speaks about the position that he occupies as a White male author and academic (that is before his move to Australia in 2002) in South Africa, he is alert to assign to his own location a complex combination of both power and powerlessness. In the most obvious sense, Coetzee, as a White man, is...
necessarily associated with the most dominant group in a colonial society, and as a White man and writer, who is in tune with the ‘Declaration of African Writers’, and their objective of attaining ‘humane and universal ideals for the peoples of the world’, he is uniquely vulnerable.32

What we seek to establish now is that, how repeatedly Coetzee uses narrative strategies as a way of speaking back to the political on fiction’s terms. Allegory, irony and intertextuality operate as narrative strategies in Coetzee’s texts where individual history and national history seem to be juxtaposed. Jeremy Tambling in his book, Allegory (2010), opines that: “Both allegory and irony trade in concealed meanings, suggesting that there is something within language itself, which when it is used, involves forms of deception, doubleness and punning”.33

It is hardly surprising that one of the terms in the critical lexicon, most frequently applied to Coetzee’s novels, is allegory. Rebecca Saunders defines the allegory as:

“A kind of language in which a text’s literal meaning is foreign to its proper meaning … From Greek … (allos: other) and … (agoreuin: to speak), allegory means literally to speak other than one seems to speak”.34

We may question Coetzee’s need for these literary devices in the first place. If Coetzee’s novels are not seen sufficiently relevant to, or specific about, the present turmoil and anguish in South Africa, it is because he deliberately tries to address a more fundamental question about the language and apparatus of worldwide colonialism, of which his own birth country is only one manifestation. Coetzee’s proclivity to expose colonial suffering has invested power into his novels to tackle dilemmas facing South Africa as well as the larger international community. Coetzee has chosen to write not about the “provincial” but about the “universal” that, “purged of uniqueness and alterity,” can express “a spiritual and moral truth beyond politics or culturally determined structures of signification”.35 When interviewed by Stephen Watson about the time from 1965 to 1971, when he was residing in the United States of America, Coetzee had confessed: “The major
emotional involvement, from a political point of view, was not with the South African situation but with the war in Vietnam”.

Coetzee would go on to add an observation that he saw “the South African situation as only one manifestation of a wider historical situation to do with colonialism, late colonialism, neo-colonialism”. Coetzee had significantly also claimed that, “In all my novels, except in In the Heart of the Country, war comes into the picture and is, of course, a reference to the civil war tearing South Africa apart. But war is also a historical metaphor. Violence does not exist only in my country”. As if to link the South African racial problem with the global historical process, the writer added, “I am suspicious of lines of division between a European context and a South African context, because I think our experience remains largely colonial”.

Derek Attridge in his book, J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading (2004) has noted in the chapter titled, ‘Against Allegory’, that the appeal to allegory is fundamental to our reading of Coetzee:

Their distance – with the exception of Age of Iron and Disgrace – from the time and place in which they were written, the often enigmatic characters (the barbarian girl, Michael K, Friday, Vercueil, and many others), the scrupulous avoidance of any sense of an authorial presence, the frequently exiguous plots: all these encourage the reader to look for meanings beyond the literal, in a realm of significance which the novel may be said to imply without ever directly naming.

It is therefore understandable, that Coetzee’s appraisal of the attitude of racial domination in western colonial history has a wider span and deeper implication, than has the moderate critique of the practice of racial segregation in South Africa, though his first novel Dusklands is somewhat unambiguous in ways of addressing the situation in South Africa. Derek Attridge in his reading of Life & Times of Michael K can also draw an allegorical reading, notwithstanding the fact that the novel deals with an actual space and place, well known to Coetzee and anybody
familiar with the landscape of the ‘rainbow nation’ – Cape Town, Stellenbosch, the dry farmlands of the Karoo:

*Life & Times of Michael K* invites a different sort of allegorical reading. Since it, too, occurs in a setting that is outside actual history (though in this case not outside real geography) … Once again, this allegorical interpretation responds to important features of the novel: the portrayal of a country ruled by means of military and police coercion, in which there are no unpatrolled spaces for the misfit, the opter-out, the maverick, and in which the liberal conscience – personified by the medical officer– struggles (largely unsuccessfully) to find a way of palliating the violence of the state.\(^{41}\)

Similarly, an attempt can be made to read *Disgrace* allegorically, where David Lurie’s exploitation of first Soraya and then Melanie are allegorically expressive of White exploitation of the Black or Coloured population. From their physical descriptions and other clues it would seem that both Soraya and Melanie are, in the South African nomenclature, ‘Coloured’. The liaison with Melanie is not only influenced by the power relations of the patriarchy but also that of the academy and most considerably race; their encounter is contextualised within the precincts of colonial history. In the entreaties of Dr. Rassool, seeking an unmistakable response to the question of remorse on Lurie’s part, are the reverberations of the frustrations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, when documenting the declarations of those, guilty of apartheid crimes, but who seemed to remain unapologetic till the last:

\[W\]e went through the repentance business yesterday, I told you what I thought. I won’t do it. I appeared before an officially constituted tribunal, before a branch of the law. Before that secular tribunal I pleaded guilty, a secular plea. That plea should suffice. Repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse.\(^{42}\)
But it is *Waiting for the Barbarians* which is truly allegorical in that, it is a novel of a make-believe empire, of an imperialism which is simply an extension of colonialism. The novel for many critics can be inserted into a sub-genre of ‘the political allegory or fable dealing with modern totalitarianism’.\(^{43}\) Clive Barnett stimulates the debate further: “Allegory is understood here as a trope that uses the particular situation as a way of rendering general or universal themes.”\(^{44}\) Likewise D. Donaghe, on the subject of Coetzee’s novels opines, “[they] have a suggestion of parable about them. Sometimes they imagine further forms of man’s inhumanity to man … and sometimes we are allowed to interpret them more specifically, their moral brought nearer to home.”\(^{45}\) For this description of a colonial enterprise, Coetzee has an imaginary desert landscape at the front line of an unspecified empire, and situates it somewhere in the distant past. The death of Steve Biko, the South African political prisoner, who died mysteriously in captivity, is unquestionably a presence in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. However, the fiction alludes to not just the apartheid regime in South Africa but to all such systems operational across the globe. Critics have argued about how they can find references to echoes from many such politically oppressive systems from the Roman through the British to the Third Reich and the Soviet Union of Stalin’s era.\(^{46}\)

The main character in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is the Magistrate who is an archivist, dabbling in archaeology. In the Magistrate’s town there is the advent of Colonel Joll and his retinue of servants with the objective of finding trace of barbarian tribes who are reportedly posing a threat to the Empire. Colonel Joll takes over the reign from the Magistrate in investigating an old barbarian man and his young relative, a mere boy. The old man dies during the course of the interrogation, and Joll’s official statement is almost reflective of the language of such political deaths during interrogation in South Africa in the hands of the Secret Police. What the Magistrate witnesses when he opens the shroud, is suggestive of the death photographs of Biko: “The grey beard is caked with blood. The lips are crushed and drawn back, the teeth are broken. One eye is rolled back; the other eye socket is a bloody hole.”\(^{47}\)
In Coetzee’s novel, Colonel Joll defines “barbarians” as all indigenous peoples on the frontier. And they are a substantial threat to the Empire as perceived by those at the ‘centre’. We are made aware of how the barbarians had inundated a field; how they had sexually dishonored a young girl; how merchants had been assaulted and so forth. But one spots these barbarians only on one occasion, and that too briefly, and that too in a small number, and not somewhere in the vicinity of the town but when the Magistrate is returning the blind girl to them in the mountains. Other than that, the barbarians continue to stay at the margin of the White man’s empire. Possibly they exist more in the minds of the empire than in actuality. Coetzee perhaps is reminding us that the images of the ‘other’, that the state ideology produces of its enemies, are self-realized portrayals, often drawn from panic. Even though this is definitely true of the South African situation, the author’s intentions are indisputably to inflect this narrative with the proposition that all imperialist endeavors might be likewise set. One of the characters by the name of Paul Zumthor, in *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), sums up this broader embrace, charging seventeenth century Europe of having initiated this endemic activity, imperialistic in nature and wanting to “spread itself across the world like a cancer; stealthily at first, but then running wild, ravaging all sorts of life-people, animals, plants, habitats and languages”.

Paul Rich seizes upon this idea of “civilization” that legitimized such incursions into the land of the “barbarians”, as in Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*:

White settler political ideology in South Africa has traditionally seen itself as the embodiment of some form of “civilization” against the threatened “barbarism” of African majority rule. The term has a significance both in its Victorian imperial roots and in its facility for acting as a kind of common ideological denominator binding the political discourse of both Afrikaner and English settlers into a common defense of “White civilization”.

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Traditionally, the term ‘barbarian’ has long been used in discourse for those who are not Greek, not Roman or not Christian. The ‘civilized’ tribes, when assessing a land or people alien or unknown to them attributed the derogative meaning of the word ‘barbarian’ to them. Coetzee’s Magistrate likewise cannot be truer than when he points out that the disapproval for the barbarians is “founded on nothing more substantial than differences in table manners, variations in the structure of the eye lid.”

Colonel Joll uses the methodology of torture on the ‘native’ people, the ‘barbarians’ to procure ‘evidence’ to persecute them, as they threaten the security of the colony, of ‘civilization’. Barbara Eckstein comments on the error of the entire process: “Like the torture practiced by his cohorts in our geographic and temporal world (from Chile to Pakistan; from history’s beginning to this minute), Joll’s process of torture is an inversion of the trial. In a trial, evidence may lead to punishment but punishment is not used to produce ‘evidence’ ”.

Having procured the incriminating ‘evidence’ against the unsuspecting tribesmen, living at the margin of the Empire, the rationalist Colonel Joll prepares a document of their involvement. The report resonates with the same temper and language of so many, prepared by officials serving the interests of colonial powers, across the globe and particularly in Coetzee’s South Africa:

During the course of the interrogation contradictions became apparent in the prisoner’s testimony. Confronted with these contradictions, the prisoner became enraged and attacked the investigating officer. A scuffle ensured during which the prisoner fell heavily against the wall. Efforts to revive him were unsuccessful.

Sometime later, Colonel Joll, trusting the Manichean code of distinction between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’, White and Black, good and evil, rationality and sensuality, inscribes the word ‘ENEMY’ on the backs of his prisoners.

The point that we had made earlier concerning the element of untrustworthiness about the Whites’ recognition, understanding, feeling of commonality and love for the racial ‘other’, is illustrated once again following this
incident of torture witnessed by the Magistrate. The double thought is typically manifest here in the words of the Magistrate: “I wish that these barbarians would rise up and teach us a lesson, so that we would learn to respect them”. He is, at the same instant, besieged by an opposing thought: “Do I really look forward to the triumph of the barbarian way: intellectual torpor, slovenliness, tolerance of disease and death?” Along with the townspeople, the Magistrate unearths that the fishing community is dirty and then is distracted by their unhygienic lifestyle, their often public defecation. Finally he concludes, “all together we lose sympathy for them. The filth, the smell”. He even floats the idea of mass murder or genocide that would allow a fresh start with no such filth, dirt, or ugliness around:

Now herded by their guards they stand in a hopeless little knot in the corner of the yard, nomads and fisher folk together, sick, famished, damaged, terrified. It would be best if this obscure chapter in the history of the world were terminated at once, if these ugly people were obliterated from the face of the earth and we swore to make a new start, to run an empire in which there would be no more injustice, no more pain. It would cost little to march them out into the desert (having put a meal in them first, perhaps, to make the march possible), to have them dig, with their last strength a pit large enough for all of them to lie in (or even to dig it for them!), and, leaving them buried there forever and forever, to come back to the walled town full of new intentions, new resolutions.

Though this idea of Nazi like genocide can never be realized by the Magistrate, he does at this point of the novel associate sickness and ugliness with the local people. But the one thing that can still incriminate the Magistrate is that, effectively in his mind he would have created the ‘other’ and would have even planned their execution. And the Magistrate would also come to identify his similarity with Colonel Joll. Much like Coetzee, the Magistrate is complicit in the work of Empire:
For I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent, pleasure-loving opposite to the cold, rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells when times are easy, he is the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of imperial rule, no more, no less.\footnote{57}

The indefiniteness of the setting of \textit{Waiting for the Barbarians} enhances the allegorical nature of this work, while distancing it from the traditional liberal novels of Alan Paton and Nadine Gordimer designed to address a social or political problem in a specific place and time. Nadine Gordimer, when speaking on Coetzee’s use of the allegory, elucidates:

> It seemed that he did so out of a kind of opposing desire to hold himself clear of events and their daily, grubby, tragic consequences in which, like everyone else living in South Africa, he is up to his neck and about which he had an inner compulsion to write. So here was allegory as a stately fastidiousness; or a state of shock. He seemed able to deal with the horror he saw written on the sun only – if brilliantly – if this was to be projected into another time and plane.\footnote{58}

In actuality, intended always as fiction and not as disguised treatises or tracts, Coetzee’s novels are answers to situations of discrimination, domination but also determined opposition rising above ‘real’ time and place. Coetzee in his fiction allegorizes the tensions and dreariness that characterize the modern world and time, not merely that of apartheid South Africa. Tony Morphet duly acknowledges the universality of Coetzee’s fiction: “His novels view the world of apartheid modernity (rather than apartheid South Africa)”.\footnote{59}

Coetzee, essentially the ‘teller of tales’ and ‘illusionist’, demands that the imagination should reign absolutely and refuse to be acquiescent to history’s unremitting voices. But we can also argue that his fiction listens to other voices, voices emanating from the literary canon or tradition, only that this literary cultural tradition is principally European, and clearly “high”.\footnote{60} It is interesting to note that Coetzee has even written “Homage” to European and American modernist writers,
like Rainer Maria Rilke, Robert Musil, Ezra Pound, William Faulkner, Ford Madox Ford, Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett, whom he recognizes as a part of his literary heritage. On the other hand, he discards the home-grown literary tradition in South Africa. As a South African writer, Coetzee questions himself if he has any connection or attachment with South Africa’s indigenous tradition:

The short answer is that in 1960 there was no South African writer, novelist or poet, to whom I as a young man could turn for a significant and vital lead in how to respond to, how to feel about, and therefore how to write about, my homeland. Certain times and places throw up writers who measure up to the challenge they provide, others do not. Australia threw up Patrick White, a writer who could go into the heart of the country and return with a version of that country powerful enough for his readers to believe in and take a lead from … South Africa threw up nothing comparable; or which today I regard as, even thirty years ago suspected to be, false and corrupt.\(^6\)

As Derek Attridge too documents this literary indebtedness of Coetzee to a European tradition in his book, we gather how intertextuality is another key literary term frequenting criticism on Coetzee’s fiction. Julia Kristeva elucidates the fact that, ‘every text builds itself as a mosaic of quotations, every text is absorption and transformation of another text’.\(^6\) The particularly intellectual quality of Coetzee’s fiction is of course immediately noticeable. Stephen Watson documents in his essay that in the first lines of *The Vietnam Project* one finds:

a few transposed lines from a John Berryman poem amid other sly allusions to William Carlos Williams, T. S. Eliot and Franz Kafka … Henry James makes an appearance toward the end of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and, clearly, the very title of Coetzee’s latest novel makes a bow to Kafka, perhaps particularly to “A Hunger Artist,” whose showman starves because there is nothing in the world worth eating. But it is not only in its use of quotation that the intellectual
quality of his work is manifest. His books are steeped in other books. Eugene Dawn himself mentions Bellow’s *Herzog* and Patrick White’s *Voss*.63

Derek Attridge, in his reading of Coetzee’s fiction mentions among other things:

the way the narrator of *In the Heart of the Country* weaves into her text the words of canonic writers, and hears, or believes she hears, fragments of the Western cultural encyclopedia descending to her from passing aircraft. *Waiting for the Barbarians* takes its title, and one aspect of its sociopolitical dynamic, from a poem by Cavafy, and alludes as well to Beckett’s best-known play; while the name of the central character in *Life & Times of Michael K*, often referred to just as “K”, cannot … fail to recall Kafka. 64

*LIFE & TIMES OF MICHAEL K*, written in the style of Kafka, using the third person narrative and the past tense, enables association between Coetzee and Kafka to be set up the most. This fact, and the nomenclature of the central protagonist, along with the ‘K’ of the title, may support a reading of this kind. Also approximating Kafka, the novel copes with the confusion of the stressed and abandoned individual amidst an intimidating humanity. Teresa Dovey, while correlating Michael K with Kafka’s heroes, situates *LIFE & TIMES OF MICHAEL K* in the type of “the novel of the inarticulate victim” and connects Michael specifically with Kafka’s Joseph K of *The Trial* and K. of *The Castle*, noting that all three are “the dispossessed ones … victims of the process”.65 She further notes that the burrow which Michael K inhabits on the farm replicate the dugout in Kafka’s story *The Burrow*. Coetzee too explicated his indebtedness to Kafka in “Time, Tense and Aspect in Kafka’s ‘The Burrow’. We comprehend that Michael K is deformed with a hare lip and therefore his sense of otherness runs deeper and is more complex than that of any being racially marginalized. Michael K ultimately is forced to reject society and his life is converted into an insect like existence, with him burrowing deep into the earth to escape reality and the history of war. Coetzee’s fellow compatriot and novelist, Nadine Gordimer however rejects outrightly the Kafka connection, stating
that the letter K “probably stands for Kotze or Koekemoer and has no reference, nor need it have, to Kafka”.

According to Attridge, it was in Foe, a writing back to Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719), that “Coetzee made canonic intertextuality a fundamental principle: its manner of proceedings is to rewrite, and fuse together, the biography of Daniel Defoe and those of several of Defoe’s fictional characters”. We can add to this list, Age of Iron where classical intertexts like Hesiod’s Works and Days (765-767), come into play. This allows other critics like Stephen Watson to formulate the opinion that ‘almost all the initial difficulties of Coetzee’s novels vanish if one happens to have read the same books that he has’.

Coetzee’s objective in incorporating intertextuality as one of his writing essentials, could be to maintain the aura of ambivalence he so desperately craves, while avoiding the postulation of providing a narrowly based political position. Coetzee is attentive to the danger that writing originating from South Africa will be read only as a manifestation of, or a struggle against a particular political situation. Coetzee’s works seem eager to escape that typecasting. Rather, Coetzee in wanting to premise his novels upon an assumption of universal, moral and aesthetic values, would intentionally make use of the existing canonical tradition than otherwise.

Foe is Coetzee’s most unremitting encounter with a crucial text of imperialism, Daniel Defoe’s novel Robinson Crusoe. It has time and again been the practice of postcolonial writers to initiate counteractive discourses challenging assured European canonical texts. While the canonical texts establish the boundaries of the colonized subject, the post-colonial texts in response, generate the essential space for the ‘other’. Foe differs from other post-colonial re-writings of canonical texts, in that it does not endeavour to simply recover the voice of the colonized ‘other’. Rather it tries hard to relegate to memory the stifling or silencing of this racial ‘other’ (here Friday), the history of forgetting, of which Daniel Defoe’s novel is itself a part. Foe recreates European realities in basically postcolonial terms, all the while overturning the hierarchical order set by Defoe and questions the philosophical assumption of White male superiority.
The story is manifestly told by a woman narrator Susan Barton, who is marooned on an island with “Cruso” and “Friday” with the tongue cut off. In Defoe’s/Crusoe’s original narrative, there is a complete absence of any woman figure in the island and subsequently of a woman’s narrative. Friday loses his subjectivity as he positions his head at Crusoe’s feet, and has this motion construed by Crusoe as a sign of his servitude to that colossal culture that Crusoe represented. By imaginatively re-creating a canonical text, Coetzee attempts to bring vehemently to his readers’ consideration the silences, the narratives that have been erased or removed by the colonizer’s dominant discourse. We are to be responsive towards an understanding of gender silence and a race silence.

The ‘Cruso’, as Coetzee spells his name and whom Susan encounters, is not Defoe’s Crusoe, adventurer, “lord of whole manor … king, or emperor over the whole country”. The Cruso we encounter in Coetzee’s novel appears as the historical original of the fictional Crusoe we already know from our access to the canon; but Foe’s obvious intertextuality works to upset any simple relation between historical account and imaginary creation. The Cruso that Susan Barton meets on the island resembles Defoe’s adventurer only in external. Susan, endorsed by Coetzee himself, transforms Crusoe, the surrogate of the Enlightenment European male subject who manipulated Nature, the colonized subject and feminine subjectivity alike, into Cruso – a weak, fragile, diseased, largely irrational individual who cannot differentiate between ‘truth’ and ‘fancy’. When Susan encounters Cruso for the first time, he is at age sixty, having settled into somber regularity, resentful of any sort of extra activity. He had once bestirred himself to build a hut, fence-gate and oven, but his efforts beyond that are a study in simplicity. Cruso even rejects Barton’s proposition that he maintains a journal, saying, “Nothing is forgotten … Nothing I have forgotten is worth the remembering”. Had he kept a journal, it would have been undependable, Barton concludes for he tells her one day that he is the son of an affluent businessman, the next an underprivileged child with no family, one day that Friday had come as ‘a mere child, a little slave boy’, the next that Friday had been a mature cannibal, whom Cruso had preserved from being eaten by fellow cannibals. Like Cruso,
Foe too is not in keeping with the historical image of the Enlightenment man. Though he represents the voice of the White male author, the picture he cuts in *Foe* is rather deplorable. He reckons the ‘island’ as a boring place. He is rather more interested in portraying in his book (overwriting Susan Barton’s original narrative by the name of “The Female Castaway. Being a True Account of a Year Spent on a Desert Island. With Many Strange Circumstances Never Hitherto Related”), Susan’s two eventful years in Bahia, than Crusoe’s and Friday’s insipid stories. Faced with his own financial troubles, he seizes upon Susan’s story as a possible way of making money. In the process he proposes to ‘reduce the island to an episode in the history of a woman in search of a lost daughter.’

Coetzee’s Friday is also a striking contrast to Defoe’s representation of a Black slave, a Carib, whom Crusoe described as, “a comely, handsome fellow, perfectly well-made, with straight strong limbs, not too large, tall and well shaped ... and a great vivacity and sparkling sharpness in his eyes ... His skin was not quite Black, but very tawny ... of a bright kind of dun olive colour that had in it something very agreeable”. On the other hand, Susan Barton’s observation of Coetzee’s latter-day Friday, an African, is quite indifferent: “the small dull eyes, the broad nose, the thick lips, the skin not Black but a dark grey, dry as if coated with dust.” She observes more than once that she finds Friday “in all matters a dull fellow”. The Anglo-Franco Barton indicates through her observations and subsequent comments some racial biases also like when she finds Friday’s “wood smoke” smell revolting. Friday is a Black and possibly a cannibal, but Friday’s tale will on no account be known as he has had his tongue taken out, and cannot even tell the story of the maiming: “He is a Negro slave, his name is Friday ... Nothing you can say will persuade him to yield himself up, for he has no understanding of words or power of speech.” Foe appeases Barton: “we deplore the barbarism of whoever maimed him, yet have we, his later masters, not reason to be secretly grateful? For as long as he is dumb we can tell ourselves his desires are dark to us, and continue to use him as we wish”. Friday’s silence due to his tonguelessness can be read as an indication of the unimaginable and complete damage absorbed by Blacks under racist, opinionated conditions. We may agree
with Allen Richard Penner when he says at the conclusion that ‘the result is a virtually unbridgeable gap between races and cultures’.  

We had already initiated a debate on how Friday’s subjectivity had been erased in Defoe’s novel. In keeping with the traditional attitudes towards the colonized as exposed in Defoe’s text, Coetzee reveals the customary European attitudes towards the ‘native’ in Foe. Within the imaginary colonial space of the novel, Coetzee initiates an analogous satire of eighteenth century European racist attitudes to the tutoring of the slaves or, in twentieth century South Africa, Bantu Education. Friday is not admitted to more than a paltry allowance of the English language. It is no surprise that even Susan Barton presumes to know what is suitable or best for Friday. She rather rebukes Crusoe for not teaching Friday the master’s language: “You speak as if language were one of the banes of life, like money or the pox,” said I. “Yet would it not have lightened your solitude had Friday been master of English? You and he might have experienced, all these years, the pleasures of conversation; you might have brought home to him some of the blessings of civilization and made him a better man.”

Later in the novel, Daniel Foe’s attempt to make Friday ‘learn’ the civilized language, in keeping with the European’s desire to ‘teach’ the ‘native’, is also dismissed summarily by Friday. Instead Friday draws his own illustrations on the blank “slate” provided to him by Foe, which to Susan appears to be the design of leaves and flowers: “the leaves were eyes, open eyes, each set upon a human foot: row upon row of eyes upon feet: walking eyes.” It may be understood that the foot belongs to the exploring colonizer, which tramples over the eyes of the colonized; eyes that are insightful of the dreams and desires of the indigenous people.

Foe, like The Vietnam Project or Waiting for the Barbarians, does not offer a direct connection to contemporary South Africa. Coetzee’s works are remarkable in that they examine the universal worldwide approach of colonialism. The novels, from time to time, not only allude to an authentic historical actuality, but they also give us in a fantastic form, the sort of consciousness that this reality dictates. If
colonialism involves the capture and suppression of a land (like Vietnam and South Africa) by a foreign race (like the Americans or the Dutch), then the human relationship that is crucial to it is correspondingly one of power and powerlessness. It is this facet of colonialism that receives the most extensive treatment in Coetzee’s fiction.

It can also be claimed with conviction that within the world of Coetzee’s fiction, his characters, set often in colonial or postcolonial settings and situated on the margin, can be read as many-accented signifiers of both disempowerment or resistance, power or powerlessness, denial of a subject position or its appropriation. Gayatri Spivak, in her case study on *Foe*, credits Friday as ‘the unemphatic agent of withholding in the text’. Spivak refuses to perceive Friday as a subservient slave, as the West would like to do. At times, Coetzee too, through an intelligent use of irony, reverses the hierarchical order in a transitory world of colonialism/postcolonialism.

The ‘other’ in Coetzee’s fictive world denounces the control of the White, dismantles the edifice of power by taking recourse to simple means. They variously appropriate violence, deception, betrayal, and mockery; thereby endangering the perceived notional superiority of the White ruler. In a way, Coetzee is repeatedly questioning the very premises of power and powerlessness that one generally associates with the process of colonialism. Also, he demonstrates, how precarious is the position of dominance as certain Whites (representative figures of the Dutch/British/White colonial rule) like Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee cannot be allowed to identify complacently with the powerful, the superior through their own acts. Ironically, their acts themselves are deplorable and heinous and contemptuous in their savagery, intolerance, indolence and heartless conduct, not those of the negatively typed ‘other’, the barbarian, or the ‘native’.

This ambivalence in the reading of the characters, caught in the colonial dialectic, can be best explained through the literary device of irony, which Coetzee employs amply in his fiction. *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*
(2005) contains the definition of irony as given by Quintilian and Cicero: “irony as saying the opposite of what one means, communicating an intentional mockery (anti-phrasis), or as saying something else than is expected in the given circumstances (using euphemism, periphrase, allusion, or hyperbole).” Coetzee uses irony to challenge just how stable our assumptions and conventions are. He also employs irony to reveal a fundamental problem for the writer:

The problem of irony is at one with the problem of politics: how do we know what others really mean, and on what basis can we secure the sincerity and authenticity of speech. The word *eironeia* was first used to refer to artful double meaning in the Socratic dialogues of Plato, where the word is used both as pejorative – in the sense of lying – and affirmatively, to refer to Socrates’ capacity to conceal what he really means. It was this practice of concealment that opened the Western political/philosophical tradition for it is through the art of playing with meaning that the interlocutors of a dialogue are compelled to question the fundamental concept of our language.

Irony is employed by Coetzee and is integrated within the structure of his novels themselves, to reveal the ambiguity that characterizes him and subsequently his writing. The authority that is ascribed to certain White characters in his fiction is doubtful and is to be questioned in the context of the changing times. We would surely remember the first novella, comprising *Dusklands, The Vietnam Project*, wherein we witness the rise and subsequent fall of Eugene Dawn, assigned to produce a report on the potential of broadcast propaganda in the American War with Vietcong. But Eugene concludes the report by rejecting propaganda as part of military strategy and avidly willing a massive chemical attack on the enemy country itself. The report which makes up the section numbered 1. 6, “Victory”, includes the comment: “I [Eugene Dawn] dismiss phase IV of the conflict. I look forward to Phase V and the return of total air-war”, and imagines an assault on the mother earth herself. Preferably by means of the soil poison PROP – 12.
In the course of his charting the ‘New life’ propaganda report, “Questions of conscience lie outside the purview of … study”.

Dawn’s aggressive attitude towards the North Vietnamese is part of his larger repulsion towards humanity in general. To represent this loathing, Coetzee uses descriptions of emblematic photographs. The album includes one photograph of a slaughter. The horror is inherent not so much in the gruesome exhibit as in Dawn’s derisive and detached rhetoric: “it is heartening to see that, marmoreally severe, these faces are as well defined as the faces of sleepers, and their mouths decently shut. They have died well. (Nevertheless, I find something ridiculous about a severed head … I giggle). The detachment from social roles ultimately manifests itself in a psychotic break in which Dawn spears his son, leading to his confinement in a mental asylum.

Ironically, Eugene Dawn turns out to be the victim of the very system that he was serving and which confines him later. He is the product of a perverse system – all his “calls are monitored by Internal Security.” He only wanted recognition as he thought that he was the man with vision, and his report could have been a way out for the besieged Americans in Vietnam. His own superior, named Coetzee, “so utterly without vision,” would later mock his report and marginalize him from the scheme of things.

Moreover as a White, Eugene Dawn (who seldom leaves his desk, much less the continent United States), exhibits none of the valour or visionary ability that typified the pioneering Whites journeying into foreign and unconquered territory. Instead of ending up victorious, Dawn becomes the victim.

Similarly, at the commencement of his journey north with his Hottentots, Jacobus, the White-hunter-explorer is enormously secure in his sense of power. It is he, he tells us, who designed each day’s march, conserved his oxen, supplied the food, and maintained discipline among his charges: “They saw me as their father. They would have died without me”. Both Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee are profoundly enmeshed in the ideological exertion of imperialism and Empire, frantically establishing the myths of the father. When the eighteenth century travelling party reached a Namaqua Village, Jacobus’ pomposity attained its peak:
‘Perhaps on my horse and with the sun over my right shoulder I looked like a god, a god of the kind they did not have yet. The Hottentots are a primitive people’. 93

Worse, “they lacked all will, they were born slaves”. 94 Jacobus’ descent from these lofty heights is abrupt. While he is picturing himself as a bronzed horseman, he realizes that a group of Hottentot boys are mockingly calling him “Long-Nose”. Later, when he is busy with the protocols of his visit to this ‘native’ village, gifting tobacco, a tinder box and wire to the chief, the villagers rummage through his goods; when he intimidates them with his rifle (typifying White power.), they ‘hiss’ at him. To complete his humiliation, he develops a huge carbuncle near his anus accompanied by a high fever. His survival then depends on the good will of the Namaqua, who quarantine him in one of the huts customarily in use by menstruating women. Resolute next morning to recover his dignity and his servants from their new found free life, he is snubbed by all but his faithful Klawer. Jacobus’ succinct final narrative would then go on to describe his wrathful punishment of his humiliators, who would have to pay with their lives for their earlier audacity.

In Coetzee’s scheme of things, the narrative of hegemonic forces can generate the dynamics that can ironically ensnare its very progenitors and render them similarly vulnerable and defenseless. Magda in In the Heart of the Country, like Coetzee, displays the implications of living in a society as divided as South Africa, where the possibility of a language of like exchange does not seem to be achievable. She recognizes that the language that she speaks with her Black servants, has been polluted by her Afrikaner father and regime that he represents:

The language that should pass between myself and these people was subverted by my father and cannot be recovered. What passes between us is now a parody. I was born into a language of hierarchy, of distance and perspective. It was my father tongue. 95

Language is a shared medium of exchange but ironically it cannot represent the fervour that Magda feels for both Hendrik and Klein Anna. In such circumstances, Magda visualizes herself as existing outside the margins of human society, in an
elemental state of “unthinking animal integrity”.

The failure of reciprocity between Magda and her father as well as between the Black servants and herself (born a White, but also as a woman within the patriarchal regime of settler-colonialism, Magda finds herself in a position of ambivalence), is later dramatized in her disorientation towards the end of the novel, where she increasingly loses her grasp over time and sanity. The novel, with its unreliable narration, compounds our understanding; but it is for sure that Magda’s state of disorientation begins to heighten after she brings Hendrik and Klein-Anna into the house, following the imaginary murder of her father. Soon she indulges in two separate accounts of rape by the male Coloured servant Hendrik. A way of responding to the episode of the first rape in the novel is to read it as a result of Magda’s racist suspicions, and born out of her vulnerability in a male society. The second rape with its upsetting details could be real in nature. The immensity of Hendrik’s difference, as a Coloured and as a servant finally elicits an astonishing outburst of queries from Magda who can only imagine herself as a ‘Black widow’, devoid and deprived of male sexual contact:

What more do you want? Must I weep? Must I kneel? Are you waiting for the White woman to kneel to you? Are you waiting for me to become your White slave? Tell me! Speak! Why do you never say anything? . . . How can I humiliate myself any further? Must the White woman lick your backside before you will give her a single smile? Do you know that you have never kissed me, never, never, never? Don’t you people ever kiss?

Soon after Magda’s tirade, Hendrik and Anna flee the farm by night. Cast aside by the community of humans, Magda is forced to resort to communion with the elusive sky-gods in her effort to find a language that is unmediated by social division. Yet all her efforts fall through, leaving her in a state of thwarted passion and heartrending despair:

Why will no one speak to me in the true language of the heart? The medium, the median – that is what I wanted to be. Neither master
nor slave, neither parent nor child, but the bridge between, so that in
me the contraries should be reconciled.\textsuperscript{98}

In Coetzee’s \textit{Waiting for the Barbarians}, it is on the frontier itself that categories
merge, distinctions blur and power swaps hands. Prior to the intervention of
Colonel Joll and his fellow emissaries, it was the Magistrate who was responsible
for the administration of the frontier town. But with the coming of Joll and taking
over the administration from the Magistrate, Coetzee depicts the transient nature of
power. The novel contains the reflections of the narrator, the Magistrate, who for
years has been the commandant in the frontier village of about three thousand
people, and who prior to Joll’s arrival, had looked forward to a quiet withdrawal
from public domain. The Magistrate is a servant of the same Empire that Joll
represents but right from the initial pages, Joll seemingly tries to displace him in
position, in authority. Further divisions arise between the Magistrate and Joll with
regards to their respective attitudes and treatment of the barbarians. Although the
Magistrate, like Joll, is equally receptive to the imperial and hegemonic discourse
to which he has been naturalized, there is an ethical and human aspect of the
Magistrate that is repulsed by Joll’s atrocities and barbarities. The Magistrate’s
detachment from Joll leads on to the detachment with the Empire, and leads him to
experiment, feebly enough, with the dialectic relationship which is forbidden by
Empire. At night he sleeps with a barbarian girl, who is blind, crippled, almost
destroyed by the attentions of Joll/Empire. Eventually by making a demanding and
dangerous journey beyond the frontiers of Empire and returning the girl to the
barbarian community, the Magistrate tries to move closer to discovering an identity
that is no longer totally enclosed by ‘Empire’. This act places the Magistrate in a
liminal space, between the ‘barbarians’ and ‘the agents’ of ‘the Empire’. He
returns to face the official disapproval of the Third Bureau of the Empire in the
form of one of Colonel Joll’s inferiors, a Warrant Officer who accuses him of
‘treasonously consorting with the enemy.’\textsuperscript{99} The once chief judicial officer of the
frontier settlement is then dethroned from the very seat of authority that imperial
culture had seemed to make available to him and in the process, is rendered just as
vulnerable as the woman and the non-White in the face of structured domination.
The case of the ironic reversal of fortune can be deduced in another significant novel, *Age of Iron*. The altercation between the individual and the state ideology in a hostile world is carried forward to this novel too. Born into apartheid South Africa, Elizabeth Curren has to reconsider her beliefs, her way of life and values built up over a lifetime, when she discovers that she is incurably ill. The novel is in effect a staging of a personal struggle with disease and also a diseased society, which eventually undermines the future of White liberals, because of their obvious involvement in the crime of apartheid. Living in the shadow of death and witnessing a fast erosion in the ethical certitudes, and the inadequacy of concepts, like ‘honour’, ‘shame’ and ‘goodness’, the protagonist, though born into the master caste is rendered defenseless, fragile, anxious and apprehensive. It is true that Elizabeth, though philosophically opposed to the ideology of apartheid, till the time of her confession, had never had to share the same terrain with the racial ‘other’ (though practically speaking, there is a Coloured woman staying with family in Curren’s backyard). But things change and a time comes soon enough when Elizabeth has to dismantle the code of ‘proper behaviour’ and grows close to and starts depending upon the grimy, stinking, alcoholic Vercueil, a non-White.

We could draw parallels from Nadine Gordimer’s *July’s People* (1981), where Maureen has to deal with the culturally offensive (much like Elizabeth Curren) Blacks, living in the outskirts of ‘civilization’, after their escape into the countryside in order to survive. Maureen’s sanitary uptown lifestyle is undoubtedly challenged in the open countryside. Similarly in Coetzee’s novel, when Mrs Curren willingly journeys into the heart of the Black community, to one of their townships, she comes face to face with reality as opposed to the ‘land of smiling neighbors’. Gordimer in her novel has Maureen journeying deep into the interiors of the African rural, wherein she finds that her relationship to the landscape alters from the vacationer sensitivity to one, where she minglest with the peasant culture of the African women. Gordimer’s somewhat idealized rendering of a humanistic African society can be criticized for its postulation that gender alliance can surpass class divisions between bourgeois/White and working class/Blacks.
Coetzee on the other hand, sees the impossibility of the project of such humanistic association on a gender basis. In *Age of Iron* the actuality of strife-torn South Africa is laid bare by Curren’s visit to Guguletu Township, where she is confronted with a “looming world of rage and violence”, in which “people [are] revealed in their true names”. Mrs Curren learns that the English names by which she has known her servant’s family are not ‘true’ names. Florence’s son, “Once I knew him as Digby, now he is Bheki”; her daughter, “The elder, whose name, says Florence, is Hope (she does not entrust me with the real name)”; her husband, “William – not his true name but the name by which he is known in the world of his work”; Florence herself, “Perhaps I alone in all the world called her Florence. Called her by an alias. Now I was on ground where people were revealed in their true names”. But a time will soon come when the absent (the ghosts) shall be present and the present (the presences) absent, as Mrs Curren understands it and communicates to Vercueil:

> When I walk upon this land, this South Africa, I have a gathering feeling of walking upon Black faces. They are dead but their spirit has not left them. They lie there heavy and obdurate, waiting for my feet to pass, waiting for me to go, waiting to be raised up again.

In her investigation of the prospects of transcending the power relations of contestation, which characterized her contemporary society, Elizabeth Curren tries to give up on the privileges of the White in that land:

> I want to be saved. How shall I be saved? By doing what I do not want to do. That is the first step: that I know. I must love, first of all, the unlovable. I must love, for instance, this child [John] . . . He is here for a reason. He is part of my salvation.

Unlike Jacobus Coetzee, Elizabeth cannot prosper amidst such White aggression with mayhem on the streets: “these are terrible sights … They are to be condemned. But I cannot denounce them in other people’s words. I must find my own words from myself. Otherwise it is not the truth.” Her hunt for truth leads her on to the most horrifying of her experiences, though when the police murders
John in her backyard, Elizabeth tries to scramble into the ambulance with the body. Disallowed from doing so, she walks away from the house and subsequently a group of children coerce a stick into her mouth, opening it in search of gold fillings, while she lies beneath an overpass, too ill to oppose. It is once again the body that bears the impact of humiliation, as was true of the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Coetzee efficiently reduces Elizabeth into the sacrificial symbol of a ‘degenerate’ age, unable to become accustomed to an age with fast and often brutal changes. She consigns herself instead to an unending limbo state, waiting “to embrace death as my own, mine alone”, intensely aware of her association with a regime she loathes, and also her incapability to improve or reconstruct the world. As a consequence of her fraternization with the ‘other’ and existing in a liminal space, Elizabeth Curren is made to experience for herself the full and horrifying effects of imperial violence, much like the Magistrate.

Coetzee’s, *Disgrace* raises a few pertinent questions as well. First it marks a departure in history in the sense that it is a novel dealing with post-apartheid South Africa. What does this new socio-political reality do to the issue of race? We ask whether it disappears totally; is there reconciliation between the two warring factors? What transpires between the pages, is the realization about the problem of race which continues to haunt even after the apartheid regime is officially dismantled.

*Disgrace*, situated in a post-apartheid South Africa, opens with focus on the academic protagonist, David Lurie, a professor in the Communications department of Cape Technical University, which before the “great rationalization” had been the Modern Languages Department at Cape Town University College:

Once a professor of modern languages, he has been, since Classics and Modern Languages were closed down as part of the great rationalization, adjunct professor of communications … He has never been much of a teacher; in this transformed and, to his mind, emasculated institution of learning he is more out of place than ever. But then, so are other of his colleagues from the old days,
burdened with upbringings inappropriate to the tasks they are set to perform; clerks in a post-religious age. Because he has no respect for the material he teaches, he makes no impressions on his students. They look through him when he speaks, forget his name.\textsuperscript{111}

The ‘old’ has made way for the ‘new’; there has definitely been an upheaval in South Africa, a rapidly altering country, with changing value systems. The times changed as it is, allow a Professor to go on teaching deficient in all forms of motivation, all inspiration. Coetzee employs the central character of David Lurie, a proclaimed ‘servant of Eros’,\textsuperscript{112} but ironically also someone who has ‘solved the problem of sex’,\textsuperscript{113} to deal with the difficulties confronting the White community in South Africa, and with some of the options still accessible to them. What transpires within the pages of Coetzee’s \textit{Disgrace} is a comparable tale of reversal of fortunes of a White professor in post-apartheid South Africa. First, the White South African narrator, David Lurie loses his academic job because he seduces a non-White student. Then during a visit to his daughter in Salem, the puritan frontier of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s \textit{The Scarlet Letter} (1850), and the site of oppression of women deemed witches, Lurie is battered by a group of Africans, set on fire, and locked in a room, while Lucy his daughter, is gang-raped. There is an interesting coexistence of the sexual fable and the political fable which both raise questions of power and compliance.

We observe that David Lurie’s experience of changed times starts to grow stronger as Petrus, a Black, comes to play a larger and prolonged role in their lives, especially in his daughter, Lucy’s future. When we first encounter Petrus, Lurie takes him to be just a Black ‘neighbour’, though Lucy calls him her ‘co-proprietor’ and that too ‘quite a fellow’.\textsuperscript{114} Lurie is unconvinced and rather uncomfortable with Lucy, having Petrus live in such close propinquity and his fears turn realistic, when during the attack on the farm, Petrus makes himself absent from the vicinity. Coetzee, in the course of the novel, depicts a South African society that is ensnared in a play of wills and viciously competing forms of subjection. Petrus with Pollux (one of the men involved in the rape), has possibly engineered the attack on the
farm to demonstrate the Whites’ vulnerability and the importance of Black patronage. The Blacks were as if hell bent on retributive violence, the kind apprehended by Desmond Tutu in his speech on the necessity of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

South Africa to Lurie, was still recently, ‘a country where dogs . . . (were) bred to snarl at the mere smell of a Black man,’ and therefore it had now justifiably become a land where retaliation was operational. Lucy’s comparison of her rapists to “debt collectors, tax collectors” indicates her awareness of the price Whites must pay for staying on in South Africa: “Subjection. Subjugation.” All these to the Blacks, with humiliation proportionate to the scandal. If Lucy realizes that she cannot negotiate her position and that it is Petrus who has now moved into a position of authority to rewrite history, Lurie does not. He is unhappy and angry at the changed times:

In the old days one could have had it out with Petrus. In the old days one could have had it out to the extent of losing one’s temper and sending him packing and hiring someone in his place. But though Petrus is paid a wage, Petrus is no longer, strictly speaking, hired help … It is a new world they live in, he and Lucy and Petrus. Petrus knows it, and he knows it, and Petrus knows that he knows it.

What according to Lurie is a better way to keep the Black out? “They ought to install bars, security gates, a perimeter fence, as Ettinger has done. They ought to turn the farmhouse into a fortress. Lucy ought to buy a pistol and a two-way radio, and take shooting lessons.”

One of the novel’s fundamental concerns is a particular adaptation of the ‘self–other’ conflict that was developed in several other works, the clash between master and servant. The depiction of Jacobus’ relations with his Hottentot servants and particularly with the foreman of his farm, Jan Klawer, is the first of the numerous presentations in Coetzee’s fiction, of the master-servant dialectic. Later instances comprise those between Magda and the Coloured servants in In The
Heart of the Country, Cruso/Susan Barton/Foe and Friday in Foe, Mrs. Curren and Florence in Age of Iron, and the one between David/Lucy and Petrus in Disgrace. In each case, the prevailing figure is White, and exercises his or her power over the racially different ‘other’, largely arising out of a sense of racial superiority. And in each case, the servant’s world is mediated by that of the master’s. Derek Attridge explains further:

Racial alterity is thus combined with the alterity of the servant, giving a particular complexity to the question posed by much of Coetzee’s writing: is it possible to do justice to the otherness of the other in the language and discursive conventions that have historically been one of the instruments ensuring that this other is kept subordinate? 119

Disgrace contains many an expression from Whites, discontent with the passing of apartheid and its benefits, like domination over the Black workers, to the likes of Lurie and his departmental secretary Dawn, who is planning to immigrate to New Zealand, to escape from the ‘change’. Dawn’s comments to Lurie are significantly telling of the chaos and the ‘change’ that have been prevailing in the country consequently: ‘“You people had it easier. I mean, whatever the rights and wrongs of the situation, at least you knew where you were.” ‘You people?’ he says. ‘What people?’ ‘I mean your generation. Now people just pick and choose which laws they want to obey. It’s anarchy. How can you bring up children when there’s anarchy all around?”’ 120

Is this then the retributive future of a South African society, a descent into chaos? What is the hope of regaining peace and harmony in a nation, caught in centuries of violence and oppression? And when we analyze the reasons behind Coetzee’s leaving South Africa we may be tempted to consider this violence as a contributing factor. The distribution of power is no longer underwritten by racial difference, and the result is a new fluidity in human relations, a sense that the governing terms and conditions can, and must be rewritten from scratch:
it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity. Coetzee, even as he explores the dynamics of unfolding colonial relationships, warns against the post-colonial critics’ tendency to ascribe determinate roles to the characters. Once familiarly situated in a position of power, Coetzee showcases in the containing pages of the novel, Lurie’s change: “Whatever the answer, he is outraged, outraged at being treated like an outsider”. As for himself Lurie realizes that, ‘his pleasure in living has been snuffed out. Like a leaf on a stream, like a puffball on a breeze, he has begun to float toward his end.” But we recognize that towards the end of the novel, Lucy will in fact offer a form of deliverance for her father, teaching him more than how to appreciate women and to care for animals even when they are too ill to be cured: “There is no higher life. This is the only life there is which we share with animals.” Lucy tries to teach him to recognize difference and to respect the ‘other’, even a dying dog. When Lurie decides to work in Bev Shaw’s dog refuge, he imitates Petrus in that he has now “become a dog man.” This plunge into the natural and the animalistic, an encounter with ominous otherness, forces him to sense otherness rather than just rationally apprehending it.

A few of the novels selected for our study, like The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee, In the Heart of the Country, Life & Times of Michael K, Age of Iron and Disgrace, have a direct relation with the situation in South Africa. But what has been deduced from our study so far, is that Coetzee’s novels do not merely document the marginalization of the typical racial ‘other’. As we witness the mortification and reversal of fortunes of Coetzee’s White characters like Eugene Dawn, the Magistrate, and David Lurie respectively, we realize Coetzee’s objective of problematising the very notion of the ‘other’. All these members, belonging to the dominant caste and class, nonetheless are subject to humiliation, disgrace and contamination much like the typical racial ‘other’. They all have to experience discrimination, separation, criminalization, violence, social
ostracisation and persecution. Coetzee’s White characters, though not victims of oppression historically, are now caught in a postcolonial moment of transition with power changing alliance; they are rendered in the process, vulnerable and weak wherein they are sometimes victims to the very system that produces them; some are victims of their own ego; some are victims of a damaged belief system and some are plainly blinded by their selfishness or sensuality.

Another significant claim of Coetzee is that, the multiple subjects of racial oppression of his novels reveal the universal aspects of such marginalization across cultures. There is a range of racial ‘other’ across geography, location, time and space in the first seven novels, ranging from large communities like that of the Vietnamese and the Blacks; also there are tribes namely the Hottentots and the Namaqua; there is the imagined and imaginary barbarians affronting the colonial Empire. There are individuals, like the Black couple of Hendrik and Klein-Anna, the barbarian girl, Michael K, Friday, Vercueil, Bheki and John, Soraya, Melanie, and Petrus, sharing traits across cultural, geographical and gender categories. But all things considered, we find that the nuances of marginality are unique in every case and in every individual. Of this lot, the tribulations of Klein Anna, the barbarian girl, Soraya and Melanie are compounded in that they are in the disadvantaged position of being born as women. Two of the group, Michael K and Vercueil are also physically challenged – Vercueil draws a disability pension and Michel K has been rendered virtually into a social recluse due to his hare lip. The barbarian girl though not born disabled, is tortured and consequently turns into one. Friday is also a probable fatality of colonial subordination as he has his tongue cut off. Even within communities, there are multiple and various reactions to White dominance – if Jan Klawer proves the many popular perceptions of the loyal servant to the White master, Jacobus Coetzee’s other Hottentot servants prove not to be so. Similarly, Hendrik and Petrus, later on in Coetzee’s novels, problematise the master-servant dynamic significantly – Hendrik typifies the threat of the ‘Black peril’ (i.e. a Black raping a White woman) when he rapes Magda. Petrus in Disgrace, typifying the resurgent Black in post-apartheid South Africa, can propose to have Lucy as his concubine or his third wife. If some engage in the
dialectic of the master-slave relationship, there are exceptions like Vercueil and Michael K, who choose not to – they seek to remain outside the dynamics of society, they seek to remain outside historical consciousness, not wanting to bring a change as sought by the likes of Bheki or John.

Coetzee himself, caught in an ambiguous position of ‘the colonizer who refuses’, has multiple histories to put forward, the history of his own discourse, entrenched in imperialism and colonialism, and the obscured history of the colonized, which has to be recuperated adequately. Coetzee’s fiction has been seen as participating in the struggle to achieve a voice, for those who have been silenced. To be made aware of it, however, is to be reminded of the violence always implied in colonization, in the construction of cultural narratives. It is a necessary challenge therefore that writers like Coetzee (as a dissenting colonizer) are aided in the process of granting a voice to one individual or a group historically rendered mute.

Stressing the incomprehensibility of silence, Christopher Miller has written that, since “the voice remains our central metaphor for political agency and power, silence is the most powerful metaphor for exclusion from the literary modes of production.” He also claims that while some are resolute on its “oppressivity”, others “find in silence itself a different kind of word to be listened to, perhaps a strategy of resistance.” Likewise, Graham Huggan claims that Coetzee’s conceptualization of silence is a typical illustration of a postcolonial script, where it is not a lack of or a failure of speech, but rather “a different kind of speech, a muteness to be perceived either as a form of self protection or a gesture of resistance to prescribed social ‘norms’.”

It would seem that although the various figures of silence in Coetzee’s fictions are the dominated, they are not just ‘victims’ but also ‘victors’. Stephen Watson even claims that Michael K is potent enough to resist “colonisation of the body (through labour camps) or the colonisation of the mind (through charity).” Certain characters, customarily placed on the margin, are accredited with extraordinary and transgressive psychic energies. What Michael K, Friday,
Vercueil and their like in Coetzee’s novels indicate is not an awkward condition of racial silencing, affliction or sullen withdrawal, but rather a plenitude of sensitivity and extraordinary gifts. Michael K’s condition facilitates a mystic consciousness. At one point the narrator says that Michael can sense poisonous plants, “as though he had once been an animal and the knowledge of good and bad plants had not died in his soul.”

As a creature of the earth, Michael communicates his disapproval of the contemporary state of affairs through his silence and passivity. The verbal asceticism of the drunken Vercueil, who means more than he says, is fitting to his metaphysical status, as ‘Verskuil’ in Afrikaans, means to obscure, hide or camouflage. Even the outburst of sounds from the mouth of Friday gives a voice to sensations, sensibilities or desires which surpass those that can be communicated and interpreted in formal language. Silence is neither a sign of compliance, nor merely a strategy of passive conflict, but a counter strategy, through which the ‘other’ safeguards, even asserts, its ulterior status, and in so doing interrogates the fixity of dominant power structures and positions.

Michael K and Friday, despite their historical positioning as marginals, are constantly thwarting the imperial desire to subvert, control and silence. Both are in disadvantaged positions with Michael’s hare lip symbolizing his crippled political voice and Friday’s tongue cut out by slave traders or Cruso, we do not know by whom. Michael’s affliction, besides the physical one, is the social conditioning that controls his civil rights – to travel, to reside in the county, to work freely. Friday’s existence is totally entrenched in his inability to use human language to communicate. We learn very little about Michael despite his being the central figure in Life & Times of Michael K, and similarly we learn almost nothing about Friday in Foe. Both Michael K and Friday become the subject of the colonizing culture, to be construed according to their wishes and whims. But Coetzee has made Michael K and especially Friday resistant to interpretation. That is their nature as figures in the novels – they thwart any interpretation, they remain steadfastly silent.

Coetzee as a writer is ethically obligated to articulate about the marginalized. But at the same time he is alert of the ambivalent nature of his
representation, authorial voice, and even language. The figures of Michael K and Friday illustrate the effectiveness of language as a political tool and paradoxically the ineffectiveness too, and deal with the nature of the Blacks’ unspoken and unmediated story. In *Foe*, Cruso, Barton and Foe through language try to become the author of Friday’s existence, but fall short. Susan contemplates:

Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being reshaped day by day in conformity with the desire of others. I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal; I say he is a laundry man and he becomes a laundry man. What is the truth of Friday? You will respond: he is neither cannibal nor laundry man, these are mere names, they do not touch his essence, he is a substantial body, he is himself, Friday is Friday. But that is not so. No matter what he is to himself (Is he anything to himself?—how can he tell us?), what he is to the world is what I make him.131

Earlier in the novel, the writer Foe attempts to control Friday. Since Friday is mute, Foe suggests that they release his thoughts by Susan’s teaching him to write. Here, Coetzee’s linking of Caliban and Friday becomes obvious. Both are the solitary slaves of masters of desert isles, both are gatherers of wood, and both have language imposed on them, with very diverse outcomes.

The dominant’s analysis and observations on the actions of and intentions of Friday fail at the end of the novel, where Susan is no longer the narrator but simply ‘I’; Friday’s mouth ‘opens’. It is three hundred years later and only one person still lives, and it is Friday and from “inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption”.132 In terms of both the narrative and colonial themes, it is significant that till the last, Friday is submerged, unresolved, and that of all the characters he is the only one still apparently alive. The ‘slow stream’ may well foreshadow the impending outrage of all of the silent ones waiting to break their bonds.

In his treatment of the silent ‘other’, Coetzee is deliberately trying to invest in them the power to defy absorption by the West. Friday’s incomprehensible
graphic art on the ‘slate’, the marker of western civilization, is in fact an act of subversion. Gayatri Spivak has projected this view of the ‘other’ in her investigation of the relationship between Susan Barton and Friday. Michael Marais documents Spivak’s reading thus: “Spivak construes Susan Barton’s apparently well-intentioned attempts to voice the other as attempts to invade the margin”. Spivak suggests accordingly that ‘Foe, in history, is the site where the line between friend and foe is undone’. Radically, Spivak finishes by indicating that each and every one of the ‘attempted violations in the text are resisted and implicitly judged by Friday’s silences’, which she defines as ‘spaces of withholding’:

It is Friday . . . who is the unemphatic agent of withholding in the text. For every territorial space that is value-coded by colonialism and every command of metropolitan anticolonialism for the native to yield his ‘voice’, there is a space of withholding, marked by a secret that may not be a secret but cannot be unlocked. ‘The native’, whatever that might mean, is not only a victim, he or she is also an agent. He or she is the curious guardian at the margin.”

There are obvious problems therefore attached to the assignation of the label ‘victim’ to the colonized or the ‘native’, as revealed from our present analysis of Coetzee’s marginal characters like Hendrik, Klein-Anna, Michael K and Friday, who are situated in such ‘spaces of withholding’. Not only does Coetzee merely represent such acts of defiance of the margin, of the dominant discourse linguistically, but there are also instances in his novel that portray physical humiliation of the White European colonizer too.

Coetzee has always been conscientiously reverential of otherness and receptive to questions of the artist’s ability to represent or speak for the ‘other’. But his posture on Afrikaner Nationalism, as manifest in White domination over Black/Coloured South Africa fundamentally critiques the Whites’ “audacious and well-planned crime against Africa.” And he acknowledges that, “it will be a long time before they [the Whites] have the moral authority to withdraw the brand mark.” How long is that “longtime”? There can be no doubt that at some level in
Coetzee’s work, we are being asked to ponder the wages of White historical sin. And from the evidence of *Disgrace* and *Doubling the Point* (1992), Coetzee in fact casts doubt on the likelihood of ever obtaining closure on a painful past that lives on “in extensive poverty, educational deprivation, and a warped criminal justice system which, because it was developed as an instrument of political oppression, seems incapable of dealing with ordinary crime”.\(^{138}\) According to Elleke Boehmer, “he proposes the far more painful process of enduring rather than transcending the degraded present, where the present is more often than not a rehearsal and prolongation of the past”.\(^{139}\)

Coetzee’s fiction has therefore thematized the role of race in the process of cultural acceptance and exclusion and has been seen as participating in the struggle to achieve a voice, for those who have been silenced. As Derek Attridge observes correctly:

> Coetzee’s works both stage and are, irruptions of otherness into our familiar worlds, and they pose the question: What is our responsibility toward the other? … Coetzee himself speaks of the fiction writer’s sense of “responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged”, suggesting that the process of creation is subject to a similar obligation.\(^{140}\)

The aim of this chapter has been to follow Coetzee’s early novels from 1974 till 1999, in order to explore the depiction of the ‘other’, situated variously in a racial, imperialistic and colonialist set up. But what is more significant in our study of Coetzee’s characters and its findings, is the fact that the White/powerful and the Black/powerless (otherwise liked to be kept within a binaristic framework) struggle consistently to escape their positions of dominance/submission. Coetzee then makes use of his fiction to treat first the question of alterity and then produces fissures in the notion of the homogenized ‘other’ in the face of discrimination.
Notes

5. *Ibid.*, p. 90. Coetzee articulated thus at an open reading of his work on 5 March 1984, about 2 months after the novel was published in the United States.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 133. Coetzee, on the other hand, strives for an objective appraisal of the situation. Moreover, he would be doubtful of the ability of the writer to represent the exact suffering of those marginalized.


36. Penner, *Countries of the Mind*, p. 32.


44. Ibid., p. 291.

45. Ibid., p. 292.


53. Ibid., p. 55.

54. Ibid., p. 56.

55. Ibid., p. 21.


57. Ibid., p. 135.


60. Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics*, p. 68.


64. Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, p. 69.


68. Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, p. 69.


75. *Foe*, p. 6.


81. *Foe*, p. 22.


86. *Dusklands*, p. 28.
100. *Age of Iron*, p. 165.
111. *Disgrace*, pp. 3-4.
134. Spivak, p. 18.
140. Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, p. xii.