Chapter II

The Dynamics of Violence in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee

*Non-violence means an ocean of compassion*

* M.K. Gandhi

J.M. Coetzee situated himself in a very uncomfortable position of being a white man in South Africa who was sympathetic to the blacks. This situation was uncomfortable because although being a white man, his sympathy was with the blacks. However, he could not completely shake off his complicity regarding the manner in which the blacks were treated by the whites. In the Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech delivered in 1987, Coetzee makes a very pertinent statement:

The masters in South Africa form a closed hereditary caste. Everyone born with a white skin is born into the caste. Since there is no way of escaping the skin you are born with (can the leopard change its spots?), you cannot resign from the caste. You can imagine resigning, you can perform a symbolic resignation, but, short of shaking the dust off your feet, there is no way of actually doing it.

Consequently Coetzee was fully aware that he could not escape from his complicity of being a white man, a member of a class of people who exploited the natives, although he himself had no role in it.

Akin to Coetzee, there were several writers especially whites who were sympathetic to the blacks. Several of them expressed their apprehensions about what was happening in South Africa. Accordingly their works addressed these concerns. However, they were on shaky grounds. Neither were they accepted by whites nor
were they wholeheartedly taken to be sincere by the blacks. So the position from where Coetzee wrote, was looked at with askance both by the whites and the blacks. The whites who shaped the government kept an eye on the writers and the laws of censorship curtailed their freedom. However, interestingly Coetzee’s works were not banned or subjected to any censorship.

Coetzee in his novels, explores the nuances of violence which are predominantly an outcome of a colonial and post-colonial condition. Coetzee who lived in South-Africa in his childhood and youth was witness to many atrocious deeds perpetrated by the whites. The state of apartheid resorted to inhuman practices. On the basis of the colour of the skin, human beings were classified as whites, coloured and blacks, in the order of precedence. The whites nurtured the feeling that they belonged to the higher scale while the coloured and the blacks belonged to the lower rung of the society. This in itself fervidly created an occasion for violence as the whites looked down upon the coloured and the blacks and were contemptuous of them. In fact, the natives in their opinion were savages and cannibals who were denigrated by the whites as superstitious and fanatic. The colonisers were not just happy subjugating the natives. On the other hand they wanted to distort and destroy the natives’ past making them feel that they were their saviours. They held forth the argument that if the colonisers were to leave the country of the natives there was no hope for them. Moreover, they expounded the idea that the natives had an absolutely barbaric past before the advent of the colonialists.

In the colonialist regime, the relationship between the whites and other races, the coloured and the blacks, was problematic. Colonialism brought the colonisers and the colonised into an unhappy relationship. The state of affairs under colonialism had an impact on the psyche of both the coloniser and the colonised. The native society was
projected as a society devoid of values. The colonial world was a biased one which was compartmentalised. While one part asserted the superiority of the whites the other vehemently upheld the inferiority of the blacks. Coetzee engages himself with the white black dialectic which positioned the white man in a location of power. Such a relationship generated a lot of violence, apparently and inherently.

The violence expounded by the whites caused severe damage both physical and mental very often creating unerasable scars thus making the damage permanent. Colonialism systematically negated the other person and deprived him of all humane qualities. The colonised thereby became defensive and constantly something brewed in the mind of both the coloniser and the colonised. It is with this inert violence that Coetzee is pre-occupied with, in his novels. Except for the last three novels written after his departure from South Africa, in almost all his novels Coetzee’s engagement was with the dialectics of violence. The relationship between the coloniser and the colonised itself was bound by violence. The coloniser finding himself in alien and formidable territory nursed violence within him and whenever an opportunity came his way he did not hesitate to exhibit acts of violence.

The colonised who were fully aware of the violence latent in the coloniser were always defensive, waiting for something disturbing to flare up. Consequently the relationship between the two was based on doubt and suspicion. Neither the coloniser nor the colonised who were wary of each other trusted mutually and acts of violence were impending in both. The violence that dominated the colonial world inevitably would lead to the destruction of the colonial world. The natives also challenged the colonial world, ready to confront the coloniser at all times. The coloniser was convinced that the native wanted to take his place while the native dreamt of setting himself up in the position of the coloniser.
It is evident that Coetzee makes a subtle exploration of violence in his novels. As an individual Coetzee abhorred violence and was never happy with confrontation of any sort. He avoided any situation that would cause unpleasantness. Hence through his novels he seems to elucidate that violence was no answer to any meaningful engagement among individuals. But this did not impede him from making an in-depth study of the problematics of violence. He takes the reader through the vagaries of violence as it affected both the coloniser and the colonised. In truth, every novel set in South Africa obviously or referentially explores the concept of violence.

Coetzee is fully involved with the phenomenon of violence. He explores how the colonised effectively handled violence and how such violent treatment at times made the colonised rebellious. His focus is also on how the colonised react against violence often passively and sometimes violently as well. In truth the colonised do not often react violently. Coetzee's major preoccupation is with the manner in which the colonised handle violence. The colonised in his novels deal with violence in a very mature and sensible manner. He examines how some of them are adversely affected and get hurt in the process. While some of them accept their lot with immense tolerance, there are others who passively resist violence and some others who get embroiled in the violence.

Ania Loomba, a postcolonial critic avers "Colonialism was not an identical process in different parts of the world but everywhere it locked the original inhabitants and the newcomers into the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history."2 So the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised was far from satisfactory. It is within this problematic framework that Coetzee sets his novels depicting violence which is an upshot of a traumatic relationship.
A brief look at the ideology behind the institution of colonialism is pertinent here. The British colonised many regions for their own profit and gains. However, they felt that it was the ‘white man’s burden’ to ‘civilise’ the natives who were basically abominable and inferior. In the white man’s repertoire the natives were loose and sexually a degenerate lot. All this was propounded and reiterated to justify colonialism. As Homi K. Bhabha argues:

The object of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.... Colonial discourse produces the colonised as a social reality which is once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible.³

This coming together of the coloniser and the colonised under such circumstances naturally results in violence.

Homi Bhabha further contends:

What is articulated in the doubleness of colonial discourse is not simply the violence of one powerful nation writing out the history of another. ‘Be the father and the oppressor..... just and unjust’ is a mode of contradictory utterance that ambivalently re inscribes, across differential power relations, both coloniser and colonised.⁴

In the process of becoming the oppressor, the coloniser inevitably resorts to violence. He feels that violence is the only means by which he can overpower the natives.

Although initially the natives blindly obeyed their oppressors and mimicked them, they soon underwent a change. But before long the natives demonstrated that they had
a culture of their own and it was particular and specific to them alone. As Frantz Fanon avers “It came to an end; the mouths opened by themselves; the yellow and black voices still spoke of our inhumanity.” Slowly the natives started revolting and the subsequent violence resorted to by the natives spelt doom for the oppressors. Sartre in the Preface to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* opines that the sons of the natives had reached a stage where they no longer feared the whites as their fathers feared them, “their sons ignore you; a fire warms them and sheds light around them, and you have not lit it. Now, at a respectful distance, it is you who will feel furtive, night bound and perished with cold.... a new dawn will break....”

It is very apt and pertinent to examine the discourse of violence in the novels of J.M. Coetzee. Ashis Nandy in his seminal work *Intimate Enemy Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* contends that “colonialism colonises minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within the colonised societies to alter their cultural priorities once for all.” The coloniser in truth colonises the minds of the natives also. That is, the colonised are made to believe many things about themselves by the coloniser’s attitude towards them.

In such a relationship between the coloniser and the colonised which is torn apart by the dialectics of violence, the colonised are not simple or naïve people. They are not the stereotype victimised people or as Nandy posits “simple hearted victims of colonialism; they become participants in a moral and cognitive venture against oppression.” The characters in the novels of Coetzee fit into such a description where the native recreates himself. In an environment rid with violence the native fights “his own battle for survival in his own way, sometimes consciously, sometimes by default.” In the process of subjugating the native and exercising violence over him the coloniser becomes a “self-destructive co-victim.”
Nandy speaks of "a world view which believed in the absolute superiority of the human over the non-human, the masculine over the feminine, the adult over the child, the historical over the ahistorical and the modern or progressive over the traditional or savage." Thus oppressive behaviour, savage acts by the dominant or dominating classes were justified by creating binary opposites. This gave the colonisers moral justification for their acts of violence and cruelty. They could accentuate their acts of violence on grounds of being superior people. Hence, initially the marginalised accepted their lot and the position of subservience, daring not to rebel.

Nandy asserts "Crucial to this cultural co-optation was the process psychoanalysis calls identification with the aggressor." To the white man the native was one who only understood violence which was proved wrong. The natives also reacted eventually and entered the fighting phase, although initially they understood only violence. Sartre says "Of course; first, the only violence is the settlers; that is to say, the same violence is thrown back upon us as when our reflection comes forward to meet us when we go towards a mirror." The native also acted against the settler thus beginning to destroy the oppressor.

Nandy discusses how colonialism had its effect on the colonisers also. "It openly sanctified – in the name of such values as competition, achievement, control and productivity- new forms of institutionalised violence and ruthless Darwinism." The coloniser exonerated violence. The process of colonisation also brought a change in the internal culture of the Europeans. The qualities which were base and inhuman in them began to surface. The effect of the coloniser-colonised dialectic was reciprocal "the subjects in the colonies controlled their rulers as surely as the rulers controlled their subjects." So in a way the coloniser showed marks of the colonised and the colonised too moved towards possessing the qualities of the coloniser. This coloniser
—colonised dialectic was mutual and one could be identified with the other. When the coloniser practised atrocities on the colonised he also underwent a drastic transformation. Moreover, he became cruel and unsympathetic towards his men. Nandy avers:

Colonialism as a psychological process cannot but endorse the principle of isomorphic oppressions which restates for the era of the psychological man the ancient wisdom implied in the New Testament and also perhaps in the Sauptik Parva of the Mahabharata: “Do not do unto others what you would that they do not do unto you, lest you do unto yourself what you do unto others.”

Initially the natives feared the guns that the whites had, which were ever pointing at them. The trigger would let go anytime at the slightest provocation from the native. Sartre fervently argues: “They are cornered between our guns pointed at them and those terrifying compulsions, those desires for murder which spring from the depth of their spirits and which they do not always recognise; for at first it is not their violence, it is ours, which turns back on itself and rends them;...” This attitude of the natives stemmed from the way they were treated by the whites. The whites who were fully aware of that knew it was too late to make reparations for all the excesses inflicted on the natives. The native tried to re-create himself through violence desiring to kill the white man, “to shoot down a European is to kill two birds with one stone, to destroy an oppressor and the man he oppresses at the same time...” Ultimately the white man realised the bare truth that violence only led him towards decolonisation. “the native re-creates himself, and we, settlers and Europeans, ultras and liberals break up.”
This process of decolonisation is dealt with by Coetzee in one of his novels when the country is in turmoil and the blacks are out to wreak vengeance on the whites. Fanon states that “decolonisation is always a violent phenomenon.” There was a reversal of the ratio of forces when the blacks demanded this process and were very determined to see it happen. But this is noticeable only in a couple of Coetzee’s novels as is evident from the fact that the protagonists of Coetzee’s early novels passively resist violence. In fact they are not desperate or fatalistic but passive by choice.

By using violence, decolonisation brought about a change in the existing state of affairs in the colonial world. Fanon contends, “Decolonisation, which sets out to change the order of the world, is obviously, a programme of completer disorder.” The oppressed comprised of two types of victims. One who relentlessly fought back and the other who was passive and non-co-operative. Such passive resistance is demonstrated by the protagonists of Coetzee’s novels. Decolonisation modified individuals considerably. Fanon reiterates “the ‘thing’ which has been colonised becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself.” Thus the impact of the colonial encounter was not just unilateral. It put the coloniser in jeopardy as much as it did the colonised.

Aime Cesaire, a well known writer on colonialism argues that the treatment meted out to the natives made them feel rejected which in turn developed feelings of inferiority. When the coloniser committed atrocities, which were starkly brutal and degrading, he in turn became brutal, and was infested with all that was bad. Cesaire expounds, “a gangrene sets in, a centre of infection begins to spread; ... a poison has been instilled into the veins of Europe and, slowly but surely, the continent proceeds towards savagery.”
Cesaire rains harsh comments on Europe which established its colonies out of reckless impunity. He says “colonisation works to decivilise the coloniser, to brutalise him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism...” So colonisation did not leave the coloniser untouched. All the evil that he perpetrated on the colonised brutally affected him also, thus becoming the quintessence of evil.

In his novels Coetzee presents the coloniser in this light. Through the process of colonisation, the evil that lies dormant in the colonisers surfaces in a distorted and ugly manner. The most brutal qualities are kindled in the coloniser and he sets them loose without any restraint. Coetzee vehemently proves the point that violence meted out by the coloniser ultimately boomerangs on him. His character undergoes a sea-change bringing out the worst in him erasing the finer aspects of his personality steadily but surely. He becomes a brute; a synonym for all that is heinous.

Having engendered such qualities in a troubled society, it is imperative that the maintenance of peace becomes inevitable. Hence the police force is constantly in vigil though they are only an agent of the government. Fanon avers that the coloniser is “the bringer of violence into the home and into the mind of the native.” Cesaire perceives that colonisation “dehumanises even the most civilised man; ...that the coloniser, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal.” The coloniser degrades the colonised by making them feel inferior and instilling fear in them. Cesaire further says that they were made to “tremble, kneel, despair and behave like flunkeys.” The colonised are made to feel that they are base and degraded. They are positioned as subjects and are subjugated by the white man. This transaction between the coloniser
and the colonised does not leave the coloniser unaffected. He in turn becomes merciless.

In the novels of Coetzee, the impact of colonialism on the white man is seen very clearly. To remain in the location of power, the white man puts on a pretension of being superior to the native. He constantly struggles to uphold this position of superiority. Colonial discourse construed the colonised as a degenerate lot on the basis of racial origin. They did this to justify the conquest of the native’s land and the exploitation of the native. On the one hand the coloniser establishes that the native is inferior and has to be ruled over and on the other, he is very much aware of the position that he is in vis a vis the colonised. He is in a precarious position that can explode any time. The reaction of the subjugated native is not always mild and submissive. There is also resistance from their side. They also speak against the dominating power. Rey Chow a critic on Coetzee reiterates this point:

Contrary to the model of western hegemony in which the coloniser is seen as a primary active, ‘gaze’ subjugating the native as passive ‘object’, I want to argue that it is actually the coloniser who feels looked at by the native’s gaze. This gaze which is neither a threat nor a retaliation, makes the coloniser ‘conscious’ of himself, leading to his need to turn his gaze around and look at himself, henceforth ‘reflected’ in the native object.28

The coloniser destroys the world of the colonised by trying to erase their culture and tradition. However, the colonised also desire to wreck the world of the coloniser. The coloniser sets up the native as evil to justify his acts of exploitation.

Thus the coloniser is not totally comfortable in the new environment he puts himself in. He is always feigning superiority by considering the natives as inferior.
He is equally uncomfortable by the gaze of the native, as the native is by his. The native also becomes aggressive wanting to oust the settler and "substitute himself for the settler."\(^{29}\)

In the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, the native is never fatalistic. He is well aware that the violence meted out to him by the coloniser is the cause of his suffering. As a result he does not hesitate to use violence against the oppressor. He remonstrates that violence is the only way by which he can wreak vengeance on the coloniser. The violence that the colonised experiences and its impact on him even leads him to a feeling of "I don't give a damn for him."\(^{30}\) He even gets enlightened by thoughts like "my life is worth as much as the settlers, his glance no longer shrivels me up nor freezes me, and his voice no longer turns me into stone."\(^{31}\)

However, such feelings vacillate. Many a time, the colonised sees himself in a helpless state. Initially the native feels nostalgic and tries to retrieve his past. But soon he realises that it is not truly necessary to establish that identity. When the colonised tries to erase the barrier between him and the coloniser he is resisted by the latter. The white man tries to maintain a distance and remain in a position of power. The colonised at times react angrily towards the coloniser or may also remain passive. Nevertheless, the violence that the coloniser perpetrates on the colonised, makes him live in constant fear of the safety of his women who live in the proximity of the natives. He hates the natives and never trusts them.

To justify violence, the coloniser embarks on a mission of constructing the 'Other'. The colonised according to the coloniser is the 'Other' because he is different in many ways from him. He is all that the coloniser is not. The coloniser carves a space for himself from where he exhibits his violence to dominate and exploit the
‘Other’. He possesses power and knowledge. As a result he chooses to exert his power over the native and most often the native becomes a mute spectator which of course is only a façade as he has seething anger in him. The native’s violence within himself is often stirred by the various acts and statements of the coloniser. The native is told that “he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values.... he is the deforming element, disfiguring all that has to do with beauty or morality; he is the depository of maleficent powers....”32 Such statements against him perturb the native and he waits for an opportunity to hit back at the coloniser.

Fanon further expounds that when the natives are made aware of their denigrating nature by the colonisers they are slowly exposed to Western values. However, Fanon states:

But every time Western values are mentioned they produce in the native a sort of stiffening or muscular lock-jaw.... in revenge, the native laughs in mockery when Western values are mentioned in front of him.... In the period of decolonisation, the colonised masses mock at these very values, insult them and vomit them up.33

The native harbours revengeful thoughts which he will let loose at the slightest instigation. He waits for an occasion to retaliate against the oppressors. There are instances where on the slightest provocation, the native expresses his suppressed and repressed emotions. At such times the violence is discernible in the body language of the native.

As Fanon contends, there are also visible changes in the way the native looks at the oppressor at the slightest provocation. It is here that passivity and indifference play a significant role. Some of the natives remain passive not being provoked. This is
a proof and an indication that the oppressor means nothing to them. Any act of provocation by the oppressor fails to register any protest in the native.

Living in South Africa, Coetzee was a witness to the apartheid regime. Hence his novels deal with protagonists locked in an uneasy relationship where they are face to face with the apartheid regime. Coetzee addresses such concerns in his novels. The early novels deal with the manner in which the natives remain unperturbed even when subject to physical harm or torture. The natives do not shy away from physical harm; they face it with grit and determination. Wearing a mask of defiance they do not exhibit any sign of pain or suffering.

However, there are also instances where the natives postulate violence. This is because the natives believe that violence can be encountered only with violence. Several Apartheid laws segregating the whites and the blacks like the Population Registration Act, the Mixed Amenities Act, Group Areas Act, and the Immorality Act engendered serious complications in white-black relationship. The blacks felt cheated in their own land and these laws enabled the whites to blatantly exploit them. These Acts justified and legalised discrimination. However, the natives of South Africa were unhappy with them. As Fanon remarks, “The well known principle that all men are equal will be illustrated in the colonies from the moment that the native claims that he is the equal of the settler. In fact he has already decided to eject him and to take his place; as we see it, it is a whole material and moral universe which is breaking up.”

The moment the native learns that he also has an upper hand, he does not hesitate to wreak violence against the oppressor sparing none. Any act of exploitation is mercilessly defied. Reacting violently, he is forever ready to fight the oppressor.

Coetzee’s engagement with violence in his novels is with aggression leading to passivity and acceptance. In all his novels the coloniser-colonised dialectic is either
aggressive as in the early novels, or passive as in the later novels culminating in acceptance of their lot. But the change in the attitude of the protagonists of the various novels is slow and throws light on Coetzee’s engagement with apartheid in the country where he lived.

In the colonial enterprise, what was peculiar to South Africa was that the colonialists added another dimension to exploitation with the introduction of the system of segregation called ‘apartheid’. The natives were treated as second rate subjects who lacked the capacity racially and culturally to live a decent life. The white man spoke “of the stink of the native quarter, of breeding swarms, of foulness, of spawn, of gesticulation.”\(^{35}\) The whites used violence to negate the natives. Fanon argues, “Violence in the colonies does not only have for its aim the keeping of these enslaved men at arm’s length; it seeks to dehumanise them. Everything will be done to wipe out their traditions, to substitute our language for theirs and to destroy their culture without giving them ours.”\(^{36}\)

Thus, by resorting to violence the coloniser attempts to even wipe out the traditions of the native. This struggle to make the native forget his customs and traditions creates a lot of unpleasantness. The native is told that his myths and legends are all made up and the only truth is the Christian religion. However, when the truth dawns on the native, he forsakes all that the white man has told him. As Fanon contends:

The native is a being hemmed in; apartheid is simply one form of the division into compartments of the colonial world. … the dreams of the native are always of muscular prowess; his dreams are of action and of aggression….The colonised man will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people… the
settler's world is a hostile world, which spurns the native, but at the same
time it is a world of which he is envious.\textsuperscript{37}

The native always dreams of taking the settler's place. However, in the novels of
Coetzee, apart from the earlier ones, the protagonists do not make any attempt to
identify themselves with their oppressors. They demonstrate neither the slightest
anger nor retaliation, evidently accepting their lot. Perhaps as Fanon avers, "A belief
in fatality removes all blame from the oppressor; the cause of misfortunes and of
poverty is attributed to God; He is Fate."\textsuperscript{38} However, this state is not permanent.
Slowly resistance builds up and the native reacts against the whites viewing the
coloniser as their oppressor.

Nevertheless, the white man carries with him the assumption that the native
whether he is black, yellow or white was as Fanon states, "a sly-boots, a lazy bones
and a thief, who lives on nothing, and who understands only violence."\textsuperscript{39} However, in
course of time the native imbibes all the traits of the settler like his cruelty and his
violence and begins to react against the settler. The suppressed anger is let loose one
day and very soon, they start attacking the whites. The violence shown by the whites
on them does not repress them forever. They are no longer willing to endure any
exploitation from the whites thus making their stance very clear.

Fanon clearly reiterates, "decolonisation is quite simply the replacing of a certain
'species' of men by another 'species' of men."\textsuperscript{40} The substitution is total and absolute.
Thus decolonisation creates a situation where the coloniser becomes the colonised and
vice versa. There is a reversal of roles and the violence perpetrated by the colonisers
is now perpetrated by the colonised on their oppressors. The colonisers find
themselves in a frightful situation. But they had to admit that they were only paying
for what they had done to the natives.
Coetzee, in his novels illustrates that in the process of decolonisation the colonised wants to take over the land of the coloniser. He reckons that it is his right to take back the land that was usurped by the coloniser. Violence is handled in a different manner by the whites. They do not think of retaliation but live in constant fear of the natives. Thus it is observed that in the subsequent period of decolonisation the whites do not retaliate, they remain passive and suffer the violence inflicted on them. The white victims feel that the blacks were only taking revenge for what the whites had earlier done to them. Fanon posits, “The native who decides to put the programme into practice and to become its moving force is ready for violence at all times.”

The black youth of South Africa were defiant towards the whites. They were ready to even sacrifice their lives for the cause of freedom. They were passionate about their ideology and were ready to stand up to the police who resorted to extreme means of torture. The elders who could not plunge themselves intensely into the fray however, supported and encouraged the young. As a result of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa, the youth from schools and colleges, rebelled against the whites.

The coloniser constantly maintained that he established control over the natives in order to civilise them. However, the coloniser, according to Aime Cesaire, did not exhibit a single human value. By colonizing the natives the colonisers themselves became a sick civilization. By violence, hatred and racial discrimination he postulates, “slowly but surely, the continent proceeds towards savagery.” By wreaking his anger on the natives the coloniser satiated his sadistic pleasure. Cesaire continues to say that every individual “has a Hitler inside him.” The effect of colonisation can be seen on the coloniser too.
“Colonisation’, argues Cesaire, “dehumanises even the most civilised man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it."44 We find this transformation taking place in Coetzee’s first novel. Although colonisation makes the colonised cringe, the protagonists of Coetzee do not do so. They face adversity with poise and dignity accepting their lot without any resistance. But in some of the later novels Coetzee presents the colonised who want to take the place of the coloniser.

Fanon refers to a leaflet that was distributed in Algeria where trouble was brewing which stated that “Colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence.”45 Interestingly Coetzee, in his novels deals with the colonisers who succumb to violence.

In the Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech (1987) Coetzee vehemently puts forth the following argument, “In a society of masters and slaves, no one is free. The slave is not free, because he is not his own master; the master is not free, because he cannot do without the slave. For centuries South Africa was a society of masters and serfs; now it is a land where the serfs are in open rebellion and the masters are in disarray.”46 Accordingly violence has erupted in South Africa because of the change in power and this puts the master, the coloniser in an uneasy state. Coetzee opines that the relationship between the whites and the blacks has created “stunted and deformed”47 individuals. Coetzee speaks uncompromisingly about the literature that comes from South Africa. “It is a less than fully human literature, unnaturally preoccupied with power and the torsions of power, unable to move from elementary
relations of contestation, domination and subjugation to the vast and complex human world that lies beyond them."^48

The imperial state was ready to use any means by which they could exercise complete mastery over the natives. Hence they came out with their own preposterous assumptions not hesitating to use any base method to dehumanise the native. The natives were constantly reminded that they were uncivilised by resorting to violence to subjugate them.

Violence was used by the coloniser to control and suppress the native since it had a terrible impact on the colonised. However, it was not a permanent phenomenon. The victimised soon began to assert and even defy the coloniser. Nevertheless, we note that even when the colonised are able to overpower the coloniser, there still lurks violence in the colonised which cannot be completely wiped out. It becomes a part of his consciousness just as it is a part of the consciousness of the coloniser.

Although Coetzee overtly does not refer to the real accounts of violence in South Africa in his novels, he echoes the social and political happenings in his homeland which caught the attention of the world. The violence in South Africa was even more intense because of the inhuman practice of the apartheid system. The entire world condemned this practice and vociferously opposed the inhuman violence resorted to by the colonisers.

Fanon pertinently observes that “The violence of the colonial regime and the counter-violence of the native balance each other and respond to each other in an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity.”^49 There is hatred generated among the colonised, terror and counter terror, violence and counter violence. Fanon continues to argue that “for the colonised people this violence, because it constitutes their only work, invests their characters with positive and creative qualities.”^50
Most of the characters of Coetzee do not demonstrate any overt violence. In fact they accept the violence meted out to them. The protagonists in the novels suffer, but their suffering leads them towards finding a philosophical meaning of life without in the least displaying any hatred for the whites. However, the whites in the novels of Coetzee are ruthless in the treatment of the blacks. But they too are very uneasy in this position although they put up a brave front. The colonised know that they can hardly get justice in the colonial framework by peaceful means. As a result some of them retaliate like the young leaders in the Black Consciousness Movement.

The colonised man tries to find his freedom in and through violence. As Fanon avers, “The practice of violence binds them together as a whole, since each individual forms a violent link in the great chain, a part of the great organism of violence which has surged upwards in reaction to the settler’s violence in the beginning.” So violence has the role of uniting the colonised. They shed their differences, they are ready to die for a cause and they stand united. Coetzee mirrors such a stand of the young natives in his novels. As Fanon states, “At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect.”

By resorting to violence which is aimed at the coloniser, the colonised assert themselves and try to regain their lost sense of self-respect. By a show of violence, the native tries to find a space for himself. He becomes fearless which enables him to legitimise his rights trying to acquire all that he has been denied resulting in a sense of defiance. In the colonised, psychological violence if not physical violence is seen ever since the coloniser started treating him like dirt. This psychological violence may at times lead to violence from his part; it may also be suppressed and kept under control. The native may be seething with anger or he may brush off the attitude of the white
man in a philosophic manner. The violence may silence him and this silence may not necessarily be a forced one. It is a silence of understanding, rather a conscious one on the part of the colonised.

In his novels, Coetzee presents the hapless victims of colonisation as the ‘Other’ in the binary opposites. The native is the coloniser’s ‘Other’ in the novels of Coetzee. Coetzee writes using the middle voice which distances the ‘Other’ from the author and gives him the advantage of impersonal writing. Thus he engages with violence in his novels without commenting about it in his own terms. Attwell interprets Coetzee’s novels as “explosive and aggressive work which replays some of the dominating, rationalistic discourses of the West in an attempt to understand forces, both violent and epistemic, which were determining Coetzee’s historical experience and social identity.”

Coetzee’s understanding of the divisive forces in South African society is based on his observation of the aggressive behaviour of the whites and the response that ensued from the natives. The experience that he has, being part of that society which resorted to violence and aggression pervades his novels. The violence in South Africa causes a lot of trauma both to the coloniser and the colonised. Coetzee uses the framework of violence to write his novels; violence wreaked not only on the individual but also on the earth. In his first novel, the enemy tries to destroy the land of the victimised by using chemicals which would destroy the fertility of the land and make it fit for nothing. In the second novella in the same novel the protagonist resorts to violence, to silence and subjugate the native. In the novels of Coetzee, the body is a seat of contestation and is always subject to violence. The body is an embodiment of suffering and pain. The colonisers use guns to self validate their actions. We find that the power that one individual exercises over the other also leads to violence and this
has been analysed in many of his novels. The violence around an individual furthermore makes him withdraw from the society and people.

Coetzee also deals with domestic violence. For instance in one of his novels, he discusses the violence inflicted by a father on his daughter. Psychological violence affects the master-servant relationship. The violence in the white man is one generated out of fear which is displayed for the sake of self defence. Basically the coloniser fears the native and he feels that if he exercises violence on the native, the native can be subjugated easily. To some extent he has achieved this objective but it has also made the violence latent in the native surface. All that is needed for the native is the trigger to let loose his violence.

In his novels Coetzee envisages violence against women who are subject to physical violence. The body of the woman becomes the seat of violence and the oppressor gets pleasure in causing pain to the woman’s body. The oppressor wants a claim over the body just as the empire wants a claim over the colonised land. The description of violence in the novels of Coetzee is implicit. The oppressors behave brutally and act mercilessly. The coloniser exercises utmost violence on the body of the native. The brutality inflicted affects the person not only physically but mentally as well.

Coetzee’s novels clearly stipulate that the violence perpetrated by the empire will finally bring about its own annihilation. Through his novels he illustrates that violence is self-destructive and can never be a solution to the problems of life. The native is excluded from the advantages brought in by the colonial enterprise and ironically the coloniser enjoys the outcome of exploitation. However, this is not perpetual.

Violence only perpetrates violence. Gandhi who fought for freedom from the colonialists in India believed that violence could be outdone by non-violence. Here
we can recall how Gandhi resorted to nonviolence to achieve his end. Coetzee also seems to hint at such non-violence through most of his protagonists. Kailash C. Baral, a critic on Coetzee says that J.M Coetzee, is perhaps the only one among contemporary novelists who is rigorously engaged in exploring the ontological and other issues crucial to the fictional discourse.

The violence at first emanated from the centre and it was targeted at the margin which later boomeranged from the margin to the centre. The very act of segregation by the whites led to violent psychological reaction. However, the natives were helpless and there was nothing much they could do. The whites felt that the presence of the blacks near their dwellings was a threat to them. They surmised that they were the originators of disease. Their attitude to the blacks was demeaning. Naturally such segregation and the callous attitude to the blacks slowly built up violence among the blacks.

The whites enjoyed several privileges whereas the blacks in their own land were denied even the basic amenities. These contributing factors were responsible for a building up of resistance against the whites. The anger of the blacks was seething as they were treated as third rate citizens. This led to segregation on a large basis and the natives were made to live under unhygienic conditions. Fanon postulates:

The town belonging to the colonised people... is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute.... It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other... The look that the native turns on the settler's town is a look of lust, a look of envy: it expresses his dreams of possession - all manner of possession: to sit at the settler's table, to sleep in the settler's bed, with his wife if possible. The colonised man is an envious man.54
The urban space in South Africa was set apart mainly for the whites. The natives were treated as "strangers, migrants, cultural innocents and laboring subjects who lack the capacity, racially and culturally to ever attain European privileges." Gradually the blacks became suspicious of any move on the part of the whites to shift them to different locations. However, the suspicion was righteous as the blacks were displaced during the outbreak of plague in Cape Town. The blacks complained of the inadequate compensation that was paid to them for their properties that were confiscated. They refused to move and slowly black resentment was building up.

Francis Strode a critic avers, "Black homes were quarantined and white-owned homes were not; possessions of blacks were burned, while the goods, the stores, and the warehouses where they worked and contracted the plague had not been touched, because those belonged to whites." This was all done out of the fear of the whites that the blacks would take over and gain control over them. Consequently they segregated the blacks by moving them to locations outside the city. These calculated acts of the whites created a lot of seething resentment in the blacks.

The best areas in Cape Town were kept for the whites as they did not want to be outnumbered within their cities. Therefore the resentment from the blacks was only natural. Coetzee in his novels examines the violent repressive measures used by the State against the blacks. The state of emergency gave unbridled power to the police. They had as Strode remarks, "The right to arrest anyone search any place and seize any property without a warrant; detain any person for at least 14 days while forbidding that person to see a lawyer or to have families notified of detention; ban any person from entering or leaving any area at any time." Moreover the press was under heavy censorship. Coetzee contends:

Having lived through the heyday of South Africa censorship, seen its
consequences not only on the careers of fellow-writers but on the totality of public discourse, and felt within myself some of its more secret and shameful effects, I have every reason to suspect that whatever infected Arenas or Mangakis or Kis, whether real or delusional, has infected me too. That is to say, this very writing may be a specimen of the kind of paranoid discourse it seeks to describe. 58

Therefore, through the clamping of censorship the whites sowed seeds of violence in the minds of the writers too. Coetzee says that all the writers, even those who were not censored were affected by censorship. The whites exhibited violence because of their paranoia. Coetzee further argues, “Paranoids behave as though the air is filled with coded messages deriding them or plotting their destruction. For decades the South African State lived in a state of paranoia…. This diffusion of paranoia is not inadvertent: it is used as a technique of control.” 59 As a result of this there was violence in the mind of the white man and also the blacks and the society broke up. Censorship affected the writers of the time making them highly turbulent and belligerent.

Censorship exercised control over the writers in a violent manner. As Coetzee put it “Working under censorship is like being intimate with someone who does not love you, with whom you want no intimacy, but who presses himself in upon you” (GO 38). Hence the censor is one who makes the writer internally violent. The writer detests him. Yet he is helpless.

The State of South Africa, Coetzee reiterates broke the freedom of writers who questioned the atrocities committed by the State. The writers were arrested and consequently abominable violence was inflicted upon them. They were made to apologise for writing against the State. However, in the long run it was the writers
who emerged victorious as they made the people sensitive to the violence practised by the State through their writings. Coetzee discussing apartheid remarks:

It did indeed flower out of self-interest and greed, but also out of desire, and the denial of desire. In its greed, it demanded black bodies in all their physicality in order to burn up their energy as labour. In its anxiety about black bodies; it also made laws to banish them from sight. Apartheid did not understand itself and could not afford to understand itself. Its essence from the beginning was confusion, a confusion it displaced widely all around itself. (Go 164)

The novelist illustrates how the system of apartheid itself is a source of violence. The institution of apartheid was so rigid that, those who upheld it themselves were in a state of confusion. Their sole purpose was to subjugate the blacks and they felt that they could achieve it by clamping repressive measures.

Coetzee analyses apartheid from the point of view of force. The whites are assured that they can get men to do things by force and therefore use force. Coetzee’s protagonists who become victims of brute force do not retaliate. Their response is similar to the path followed by Gandhi. They embraced non violence. There is all likelihood that Coetzee would have read and heard about Gandhi’s non violence. He echoes Gandhi’s sentiments through his protagonists that “There is harm in the exercise of brute force, never in that of pity.”

Gandhi in Hind Swaraj opines, “Passive resistance is a method of securing rights by personal suffering; it is the reverse of resistance by arms......Everybody admits that sacrifice of self is infinitely superior to sacrifice of others.” This is the method used by Coetzee’s protagonists when they oppose the whites, the settlers. The protagonists of Coetzee offer resistance to the atrocities of the colonisers. However,
they do so by appropriating a passive stance. Gandhi goes on to say that passive resistance is not merely a weapon of the weak. We find that Coetzee’s characters who use passive resistance are actually very strong characters. Coetzee’s attitude towards the white characters in his novels who harmed the blacks is similar to what Bhikhu Parekh, an authority on Gandhi, avers, “all Hindu thinkers insisted that in harming others, the moral agent harmed himself as well.”

Coetzee’s black characters who refused to cause harm were actually like the followers of non violence of Gandhi. Bhikhu Parekh contends:

In Gandhi’s view, it was the wish not to cause harm or destruction, that is, the ‘element of conscious compassion’ that constituted the ‘essence’ of non-violence. In the Indian traditions, harm was defined widely to include not only physical but also psychological, moral and others forms of pida or klesa (pain) Gandhi accepted this broad definition of it.

Insulting others, humiliating them, reducing their self respect and expression of anger were also forms of violence. The whites in Coetzee used this as well.

Parekh argues that Gandhi “was convinced that the reign of violence could not be ended by adding to it and that non violent struggle was the only answer. However, he realised that non-violence did not come easily to those not fully trained in and committed to it, and that most ordinary men and women resorted to violence when provoked beyond endurance.” Thus we see that Coetzee’s characters who do not resort to violence even when they encounter aggression are evolved beings. The violence that humiliates and brutalises them gives them immense moral power and strength.

Coetzee thus explores this sort of violence in his later novels when the blacks started to react against the oppression of the whites. In some of the novels, Coetzee’s
characters resort to violence against the whites. "Every oppressive and exploitative system ultimately depended on the cooperation of its victims, and it would not last a day without their active or passive material and moral support."\(^{65}\)

The violence of the whites was a result of intense selfishness. But the violence depicted by the blacks was born out of the need to preserve self-respect and dignity. Parekh rightly points out:

Gandhi argued that although non-violence was far superior to violence, the latter was ‘infinitely’ better than cowardice. A coward lacked ‘manliness’ and was committed to nothing more elevated than sheer survival. By contrast, a man prepared to use violence had pride and self-respect and was prepared to die rather than surrender what he held dear.\(^{66}\)

In Coetzee’s novels the youth of South Africa take to violent means against the whites. Coetzee, writing about such acts of the youth, without overtly referring to the political and social movements in South Africa, seems to justify the violence used by the black youth. The stance taken by Coetzee echoes Gandhi’s views on violence. Gandhi also knew that one could not always abide by non-violence. Violence many a time was necessary and unavoidable especially as Parekh reiterates “when used in the pursuit of such values as individual and social life, justice, and the assertion of human dignity and the development of courage or when provoked by unbearable oppression.”\(^{67}\) Coetzee unquestionably seems to have been influenced by Gandhi in his views on violence.

Coetzee’s condemnation of violence is similar to what the Hindu thinkers expounded. These thinkers disapproved of violence mainly on four grounds. Parekh contends:
For one set of thinkers, all life was a manifestation of Brahman, and hence sacred. For another, all living beings were rightful members of the cosmos and, as such, entitled to respect and autonomy to be interfered with only when they transgressed their naturally ordained boundaries and threatened to harm others. For some others, the use of violence necessarily involved strong passions, especially anger and hatred, and disturbed the equanimity and moral harmony of the agent. For yet others, it corrupted his consciousness, defiled his soul and hindered his spiritual progress. While the first two arguments rejected violence for what it did to others, the last two were primarily concerned with what it did to the moral agent. However, the emphasis varied considerably, some preferring to concentrate on the harm done to the victim, others on that done to the agent.68

In Coetzee also we find a similar engagement with violence. He believes that in harming others the person or persons who perpetrate violence are harmed as well. And he illustrates through his novels that although the victims suffer, there is a moral triumph for them and for the victimiser there is a degeneration of the self.

Parekh opines, “For the Hindus, if causing harm or destruction was inescapable or required, to maintain cosmic or social order, and not born out of ill will or malice, it was fully justified.”69 Coetzee justified violence perpetrated by the young black boys who believed that they were fighting for the freedom of their country.

The white man in South Africa indulged in violence that was malevolent. Malevolence meant ill will towards or hatred of others, a wish to harm them even when they posed no threat to one’s interests. That is what the white man did in South Africa and Coetzee illustrates this in his novels. For Gandhi, Parekh says “the thought
of harming another itself was violence.” Coetzee also refers to such violence in his novels. In his first novel the protagonist contemplates revenge and comes back to wreak vengeance on the natives. However, the violence of the blacks in another novel was not of the contemplated kind; it was a fight against the whites to protect themselves from ignominy. The violence of the blacks was for the pursuit of legitimate and just self-interest.

Gandhi, argues Parekh, also believed “that all life was equally sacred....he argued that since men were self conscious, rational and moral beings they had a greater moral worth. This did not give them an ‘absolute’ superiority over animals and a right to do with them what they like, for animals too were legitimate members of the cosmos.” We see such a stand taken by Coetzee in his book *The Lives of Animals*, whose protagonist airs similar views about man’s treatment of animals. Coetzee engages himself ethically with the idea of pain and suffering of animals in this novel.

Gandhi’s views on untouchability were first vented in South Africa. He claimed equality for the Indians with the whites. The whites in South Africa maintained that for centuries Hindus had been treating large masses of their own people as untouchables. However, Gandhi organised a struggle against the whites through peaceful means.

The non violence Gandhi followed “was born of conviction and was based on the purification of the body and mind....anchoring life on moral principles and higher ideals.” Coetzee moulds his characters on these lines. Though they are not lofty people they have imbibed principles that make them emerge out of the violence afflicted on them with equanimity and poise. Making non violence a way of life and an attitude of the mind they do not seem to have any offensive thought or ill will or anger against their enemies. They are examples of human beings who do not think
violence, or show violence in their action. There is no hatred in them. This is the framework Coetzee uses in his novels to represent some of his protagonists who passively resist the atrocities of the whites.

It is a fact of history that on September 11, 1906, the Indians gathered in the Empire Theatre of Johannesburg (South Africa) and took a pledge under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi that they would offer Satyagraha against the injustices perpetuated against Indians by the South African government. Coetzee would certainly have heard about Gandhi and his leadership in South Africa. Perhaps that could be the reason why he wanted to address the inhuman practice of apartheid and make his protagonists resist such practices in a non violent manner.

The non violent struggle started by Gandhi in South Africa produced wonderful results. It created a new way of handling violence. This was continued by Nelson Mandela in South Africa. Undoubtedly Coetzee may have been influenced both by Gandhi and Mandela and therefore he makes his characters use passive resistance to protest against the whites.

The characters in Coetzee also use the weapon of non co-operation. The protagonist in one of his novels refuses to talk even when he is asked to. He maintains silence as a protest and being truthful, he has peace of mind. Gandhi also held that non violence cannot be put on like a garment but should reside in the heart of the individual. Coetzee uses this framework making his protagonists not to resort to violence even when provoked. However, in some of his novels the youth especially are highly volatile. The protagonists of Coetzee who revolt against the white regime are also ready to fight it out all by themselves. This is one characteristic that Gandhi wanted in those who were ready to fight against violence.
Thus, Coetzee’s handling of violence in his novels enables us to analyse his novels from the point of view of the coloniser/colonised dialectic. The white man by introducing the inhuman practice of apartheid and by securing it by passing laws is able to subjugate the blacks. He resorts to brutal ways to demean the blacks. The practices he employs to inflict pain are atrocious. The blacks in the novels of Coetzee are a mute lot who passively resist the whites. Some of the protagonists even remain silent as a sort of defiance. The passive resistance which Coetzee writes about is used to secure rights by personal suffering. We find many such examples in the works of Coetzee. His novels will be analysed keeping in mind his interrogation of violence and engagement with it.
Notes


3 Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1990) 70.

4 Bhabha 95-96.


6 Fanon, preface 12.


8 Nandy xiv.

9 ibid xv.

10 ibid xv.

11 ibid x.

12 ibid 7.

13 Fanon 15.

14 Nandy 32.

15 ibid 39.

16 ibid 31.

17 Fanon 16.

18 ibid 19.
19 ibid 23.
20 ibid 27.
21 ibid 27.
22 ibid 28.
24 ibid 13.
25 Fanon 29.
26 Cesaire 21.
27 ibid 22.
29 Fanon 41.
30 ibid 35.
31 ibid 35.
32 ibid 32.
33 ibid 33.
34 ibid 34.
35 ibid 33.
36 ibid 13.
37 ibid 40-41.
38 ibid 42.
39 ibid 14.
40 ibid 27.
41 ibid 29.
42 Cesaire 13.
43 ibid 14.
44 ibid 20.
45 Fanon 48.
46 David Attwell, ed., 96.
47 ibid 98.
48 ibid 98.
49 Fanon 69.
50 ibid 73.
51 ibid 73.
52 ibid 74.
53 Attwell 5.
54 Fanon 30.
56 ibid 148.
57 ibid 149.
58 ibid 195.
61 ibid 79.

63 ibid 117.

64 ibid 134.

65 ibid 133.

66 ibid 135.

67 ibid 137.

68 ibid 109.

69 ibid 109.

70 ibid 118.

71 ibid 118.