Chapter V

The Narrative Techniques in the Novels of Coetzee

And by the way, everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise. The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt.

Sylvia Plath

A writer stands apart on the basis of the tools he employs to express his concerns. The effectiveness of a writer is dependent on the narrative techniques that he employs in his works. The novel as a literary form lends itself to many techniques. We have a variety of novels like historical novels, psychological novels, realistic novels, allegorical novels, parodies and so on. As a writer uses these forms he can resort to various techniques to express himself. The success of a writer depends to a large extent on the manner in which he presents the development of the plot. The scholarly stance of a writer becomes evident in the manner in which he handles the narrative. The narrative can have many layers of meaning and it is carefully woven into the fabric of narration by using various techniques like authorial intrusion, dialogue, alienation, deconstruction and so on.

Coetzee positions himself as a writer who engages with a colonial and post colonial discourse. He deconstructs the binary of the centre and the margin. Coetzee's works also tend towards the post modern. However, it is a futile exercise to try to label Coetzee as he does not just fit into one slot as such. Coetzee's intellectual and artistic leanings are informed by various influences like the milieu, scholarship, his rootedness in linguistics and stylistics. Coetzee subverts the dominant discourse of the centre and the margin. His
novels are metafictions and self reflexive. They refer to historical moments but he deliberately fictionalizes them. The protagonists in some of the novels are physically deformed or mentally traumatized. In spite of these limitations, they face oppression and solve the confusions around them with equanimity. They appear to be repressed but they standup for freedom. The dream sequence which serves as motif in one of his novels, projects Coetzee’s optimism. Coetzee employs intertextuality when he writes his novels. Hence, we have him writing a parody of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and also about the story of Dostoevsky in the novel *The Master of Petersburg*. His language is appropriated from the diction of police reports in some of the novels where he deals with the whites who try to subdue the blacks. They are similar to the reports that are published in newspapers about prisoners who died in detention. The English used by Coetzee’s black characters is the same as that used by the whites. Unlike other writers who inevitably made the black characters use a baser variety of English, Coetzee’s natives do not do so. He does not attempt to reconstruct history through language.

It was Teresa Dovey’s study of Coetzee’s novels in her book *Novels of J.M.Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* that drew a lot of attention to the narrative techniques of Coetzee. Coetzee, Dovey pointed out used parody, allegory and deconstructive techniques in his novels. Attwell, a critic of the works of Coetzee says in his book *South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, “Dovey was able to make the startling but justifiable claim that the novels possessed a preemptive theoretical sophistication that disarmed the critics in advance.”

Coetzee’s narrative techniques are highly influenced by writers like Beckett, Kafka and Nabakov. A study of the non-fictional works of Coetzee gives certain insights into his fiction. His interviews with David Attwell and the essays edited and published in
Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews, give us an insight into the scholarly mind of the writer. Dominic Head avers, "The Coetzee style is in effect, a carefully worked out compromise between political obligation or duty, on the one hand, and intellectual integrity, on the other."2 Coetzee's novels deal with history as discourse. Although he does not attempt to recreate or rebuild history in his novels, his discourse is rooted in historical time. Coetzee himself says that history is not a reality and that history is a kind of discourse. Though Coetzee admits to being influenced by Beckett, Kafka and Nabakov in several interviews, he has evolved a narrative, distinct and particular to him alone. Of course, narrative technique is one of the arresting features of an author. Coetzee uses a variety of techniques in his novels. What is very conspicuous is the space, time and location in his novels. All his novels except for the last three which he wrote after leaving South Africa, are centred more or less explicitly in South Africa, although Coetzee does not overtly state them. His style is sparse, to the point, without elaborate descriptions or authorial intrusions. If it is not the first person narrative that he is using, it is the third person narrative, and the story is told from the point of view of several characters in the narrative. Coetzee is sincerely engaged with the social and political goings-on in South Africa.

In the South African milieu, as in other African societies, art is an integral part of society. Hence, South African writers used this creative form of expression to expound their social responsibility. Writers from South Africa like Athol Fugard, Breyten Breytenback, Nadine Gordimer were socially committed writers who used their fiction to address the socio-political concerns and their resistance to apartheid. Their works addressed the social and political concerns as they believed that writers had a social responsibility. Coetzee who did not use his fiction overtly for this was termed evasive.
However, we should note that Coetzee used his fiction in a very creative manner by employing various narrative techniques to voice his concern for the socio-political reality in South Africa. Most of the writers in South Africa presented a realistic picture of what was happening in South Africa.

The techniques Coetzee uses are scholarly and imaginative. Hence his texts go beyond just being records of the socio-political reality of South Africa. He transforms reality into a work of art and hence his difference as a writer of fiction.

Coetzee is a foil to Lewis Nkosi's statement that all African literature is journalistic. Coetzee uses his protagonists as representative of a genre that opposes the ruling class or the settler. But the opposition exemplified by his characters is different from that of the normal ones. These characters are evolved human beings, who have chalked out a path for themselves. They resist the atrocities and high handedness of the white man in a passive manner. Non violence seems to be the order of the day for them, except perhaps in the novel *Age of Iron* which is primarily about the revolutionary zeal of the youth and the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa. But here also the protagonist Elizabeth Curren finds herself at a loss when faced with the violence around her. She cannot live in the midst of violence and the atrocities in the society around her which kills her spirit, just as the cancer within her body slowly eats her tissues leading to her death. Death comes to her in the refuge of a black man who is always by her side when she needs help.

The novel is epistolary in nature. It is a long letter written to her daughter who has fled to America unable to stand the violence around her. The mother is engaged in a virtual dialogue with an absent child, the daughter who is far away in America. Mrs. Curren is central to the novel *Age of Iron*. The mother tries to restore the lost bond with
her daughter as she writes to her. She starts communicating to her daughter on the day she is diagnosed with cancer which is in an advanced stage. She misses her all the more because of her illness. However, she does not ask her to come back. It is only at the end of the novel that Mrs Curren expresses her longing and her resentment towards her daughter for having abandoned her. The cancer that she is suffering from is symbolic and metaphoric of the times she is living in. The novel moves towards a state of self-discovery. Mrs Curren understands why her maid’s son who represents the youth of South Africa rashly faces death.

In his novels Coetzee uses dialogue, narration of an action and also interior monologues whereby we get to know the action of the story and also the development of the characters in the novels. The first novel *Dusklands* explores the beginning of the Afrikaner society along with the ‘Vietnamese project’ which is based on the American involvement in the Vietnamese conflict. It is a metarepresentational work. The Africa that the protagonist Jacobus Coetzee explores is not actually there. It is what he invents. It is a verbal construct. The journey that he undertakes is allegorical. The story of Jacobus clearly allegorises the entire colonial project. He goes on a journey of discovery and instead of discovering something, he subsumes what is already there. Africa and its indigenous population is constructed as Europe’s ‘Other’. Hence Europe can imagine and represent itself. The African inferiority and the European superiority is reinforced. The coloniser’s contact with the native is conditioned by the colonial discourse. The title *Dusklands* evokes the metaphor of European imperialism. The ‘dusk’ in question is that of the long ‘day’ of empire. The ‘lands’ are Europe’s colonies and all places that exist in this symbolic time frame.
The narrative of Jacobus Coetzee comprises three accounts of the same journey. The first is in the form of a journal. The second is in the third person narrative and the third is a translation. The second novel *In the Heart of the Country* is a search for personal identity. The publication of Coetzee's second novel in 1976 confirmed Coetzee as an impressive writer. He developed the theme of violence and alienation which was at the root of western white colonialism. The novel is a first person account of a lonely white spinster, Magda and her solitude. The novel has many allegorical features. After being raped by her servant, Magda lives alone on the farm and invents her metaphysical sky gods with whom she tries to communicate. There is a sense of timelessness in the novel. The novel has been greatly influenced by Beckett's style and substance. It is in the form of a series of fragmented narratives that reflect the fragmented state of mind of the protagonist, Magda. It is written as a kind of journal or first person monologue. Magda is the symbolic daughter of colonialism. The stories she tells are self introspective. The events in the novel are numbered and sometimes subsequent accounts discredit the previous accounts.

*Waiting for the barbarians* which catapulted Coetzee to international fame is an allegorical text. Coetzee examines the imperial theme through the Magistrate who is sympathetic to the natives. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee critiques the Empire and its activities through the Magistrate who being a servant of the Empire, nevertheless indicts it and is sympathetic to the blacks and the natives. In the delineation of the character of the Magistrate, Coetzee places before us an individual who responds sensitively to suffering and who also becomes a victim of such pain because of this quality in him. For the white man there is no space for sensitivity towards the blacks. If he is so, then he also needs to suffer like the black man. Hence the Magistrate is
humiliated by Captain Joll and his men who represent the Empire for apparently showing his sympathy for the native. Space and time in the novel are indeterminate.

The 'Empire' is an emblem of imperialism. Coetzee universalises the dilemma at the heart of imperial conquest generally. This is an important technique as the reader will not try to find parallels in the novel. This is a unique technique of keeping the reader's attention active on the text of the novel rather than treating it as a record of what is happening in South Africa.

In all his novels Coetzee presents to the reader his engagement with apartheid through the consciousness of his protagonists. The protest against apartheid is presented through characters and very often through the life and activity of one man or woman. These characters are ordinary beings, but extra ordinary in the manner in which they handle suffering and pain. They are not great leaders who strive to transform society. They live in their own small space and time but they emerge larger than life. They are people who act with a purpose who make no compromises on their principles. The Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, although a white man, stands by his principles. He finds that the white man is unnecessarily making intrusions into the black man or the Native's space. He cannot understand why Captain Joll has to encroach upon the black man's freedom. He speaks up for the black man but he pays a heavy price for this act of his. Captain Joll and his men lay their hands on him too. "At a basic level, the Magistrate's story suggests an allegory of the situation of the contemporary South African liberal, facing the fact of complicity in apartheid."³

*Life and Times of Michael K* is very much about the South African situation though Coetzee does not state it anywhere in the novel. This is a deliberate technique used by Coetzee. He wants to convey the message that such a condition can exist anywhere in the
world. It is more a human condition than a condition specific to a place or a country. Michael K. is also a protagonist who is an ordinary individual, a gardener in the Municipality, who has his own concept of freedom and lives by his principles.

Coetzee struggles to find a meaningful relationship between his fictional world and his real world. If he depicted the real world as it is, in his novels then he would be no different from the writers who came before him or even his contemporaries. The novelists in South Africa engaged themselves with what was happening in South Africa. They responded to the historical present. The novels of Nadine Gordimer contained realistic representation of the harsh realities of the apartheid era. A few writers including Coetzee, questioned the narrative form. What sets him apart as a writer is his fictional engagement with the real world.

We have to consider the question as to whether Coetzee’s characters are mimetic representations. His characters are not types, but are apparently based on real men and women. They all have their individuality. The writer filters the characters' thoughts with some commentary. Coetzee uses the protagonist to unravel the plot, which moves on as they go through various experiences. In the encounter of Jacobus Coetzee with the Namaquas, although he makes an attempt at self-assertion, he is not able to accomplish it as he fails miserably when the Natives belittle him.

In the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* Coetzee goes to the symbolic to represent the reality. The outpost in the novel is the outpost of the British Empire. Although it is just referred to as the outpost, it is very clear that, Coetzee symbolically represents the outpost as a subsidiary of the British Empire. Captain Joll is symbolic of the evil that is eating into the Empire and his deeds will spell his doom and that of the Empire.
Coetzee does not confine himself to historical details in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. History is used as a minor prop for his discursive debate. In *Michael K* history is just there. The society is in a crisis. The scenario in the novels is the civil war in South Africa which has resulted in unrest and chaos. But the manner in which Coetzee handles this is by placing before us the 'life' and 'times' of Michael K. The novel is centred round Michael K. He is a tramp like character who leads a vagrant's existence. He is Coetzee's literary creation. Coetzee does not make any overt reference to or comment about the civil war which is in the background.

Coetzee is interested more in the impact of the civil war on his protagonist. The novel is the story of Michael K who lives in the backdrop of the civil war. Michael, tries to find a meaning in life by evading people, escaping from people, society and thus the backdrop could have been anything and it need not necessarily have been the civil war. But what gives the novel the authenticity of narration is the truth to the existing state. But that is not Coetzee's major engagement. As in the other novels Coetzee is more concerned about the protagonist who becomes a 'victim' of the existing state of affairs, who has to grapple with his problems, his confusions and his existentialist dilemma in an equally troubling environment.

The novel is preoccupied with social relations. There are a series of episodes where Michael K comes into contact with a character who tries to assert himself by trying to negate him. Coetzee fantasises an escape from history from the painful dilemmas he experiences as a writer in South Africa. K does not bother about the war in Cape Town. There are important autobiographical echoes in Michael K. 'K' is a disguised name for Coetzee. The medical officer refers to K as the obscurest of the obscure. He is referred
to as “a little old man” (MK 135) “an insect” (MK 135) “an ant” (MK 83) “a termite” (MK 66) “a little speck” (MK 97) “a mouse” (MK 136) “a snail” (MK 112).

Attwell says that Michael K is:

a novel about a subject who, miraculously, lives through the trauma of South Africa in a state of civil war without being touched by it; we might also appreciate the contextual sensitivities of Foe, a novel that, while apparently rich in post modern play, is also a skeptical, indeed scrupulous, interrogation of the authority of white South African authorship.

In Life and Times of Michael K, the civil war is being fought trying to make people believe the words of Major Noel, commander of the Kenilworth Rehabilitation Camp. “We are fighting this War”, Noel says, “so that minorities will have a say in their destinies” (MK 215). What Noel is talking about finds parallels in the reality in South Africa. It coincides with the political period. The period about which Coetzee has written in the novel historically tallies with the period when P.W. Botha took the leadership to give adequate representation to the minorities in South Africa which included the whites, the coloureds and the Indians. The black majority was excluded from the system for it was believed that their interests were taken care of sufficiently by the creation of Bantustans. The novel, remarks Attwell, “exploits the unreality of the state’s efforts at constitutional reform; ....” The South Africa that Coetzee presents in ‘Michael K’ is one of utter lawlessness, curfew, riots, looting by the poor and corruption on the part of the rich. “In socio-political terms, it is a finely drawn and sophisticated picture ... the point of this kind of fiction is rather to analyse the hidden propensities of the present from the perspective of an imagined future.” Coetzee minimises the importance of the civil war and keeps it in the background of the novel. The war is not described at all. The political
concerns are totally absent. What we see is the common, everyday problems of the protagonist. This is a conscious technique employed by Coetzee. Coetzee focuses on confrontations which are concerned with individuals and not with war. He presents the greed and cruelty of man rather than what happens during the war at large. Although Coetzee does not give much importance to the war, he deals with a variety of other conflicts. The relationship between Michael and the Medical Officer is similar to the relationship between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl. The novel stands for the quest for freedom. Michael is looking for freedom. He wants to be away from people and from society. Finally he finds it. “At the end of the novel Michael has some tentative understanding of himself, his life, and his achievement, and consequently it is tempting to see the novel as having the narrative progression of a quest, in particular a quest for freedom.”

Coetzee places before us the story of Michael K in the novel. He does not wish to draw any moral or highlight the chaos which is rampant in the society at that time. Coetzee portrays in the character of Michael K, a native with a strong will, who does not intend to surrender to the highhandedness of the whites. Throughout the novel we see that Michael K offers resistance and this is done very passively. Ultimately he emerges victorious.

We need to examine where Coetzee locates himself vis a vis South Africa. Is he standing outside the South African society and making an appraisal or coming to judgments or is he within the society, being part of it, giving a frank expression of what it stands for, its institutions, power relations, human interactions, state vis a vis people, whites vis a vis blacks or blacks vis a vis blacks? We find that Coetzee is more concerned about putting before the reader the happenings in South Africa which is under the
apartheid regime. He is neither judgemental nor does he offer any solutions to the existing situation, although he is a witness to the social and political events.

Another technique Coetzee uses in his novels is the way in which he presents his characters who are inevitably isolated individuals. In the first novel, it is Jacobus Coetzee and Eugene Dawn who are the lonely people. Eugene Dawn becomes obsessed after he is asked to prepare the report for the Defence Department on the Vietnam war. In the motel room he attacks his son with a knife. He is sent to a mental hospital where he is an exemplary patient. Jacobus Coetzee is also an isolated character and because of his seclusion, he resorts to violence and revenge. The protagonist Magda, in the novel In the Heart of the Country is lonely. Her psychological loneliness is stronger than her physical separation.

In Waiting for the Barbarians, the outpost is a remote area. Throughout the novel, the Magistrate feels cut-off both from his people and from the 'barbarians' although he does not want it to be so. However, the protagonist of Life and Times of Michael K is different. He seeks isolation; he wants to be away from human society. However after his mother's death he leads a life all by himself in the lap of nature, cultivating a small patch of land. He is happy being by himself and unhappy when he is sent to a rehabilitation camp. In Foe there seems to be a stylistic departure. There is a socio-political subtext below the narrative surface. In the novel Foe, Cruso, the prototype of Defoe's Crusoe is happy, whereas Defoe's character in not. Similarly Friday, the Negro is also happy to be in isolation. In Age of Iron, Mrs Curren, the protagonist experiences loneliness at a psychological level. Her daughter is away in America. However, later she gets involved in the turmoil the country is facing. The woman enters into a strange relationship with Vercueil who is obviously a native.
In *The Master of Petersburg*, the fictionalised Dostoevsky also faces isolation because he has been alienated from his son. In the novel *Disgrace* also, we have Lucy who lives in a remote farm and David Lurie, her father who is forced to go into seclusion for having sexually harassed a student. Thus we find a similar pattern in the novels of Coetzee.

Coetzee uses repetition as a narrative technique in his novels. In *Dusklands*, we have The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee in three different versions. The three subtexts narrate different versions of the same subject. This sort of structure allows Coetzee to question the veracity of the three accounts implying that any history is a construct.

Coetzee problematises the native, and provides a space to the native. It is similar to how modern theoretical discussions problematise the space of the native in the form of a symptom of the white man. We wonder whether Coetzee’s native gives the white man an existence because of him or the white man is a creation of himself. We find in Coetzee’s novels that the native is not the rebellious, angry type. He is mature but passive as though he has understood the meaning of life and given up the battle. It is the white man in Coetzee’s novels who is perturbed, disturbed, angry and at conflict with himself. This is a change from the customary image of the white man projected in other novels about natives. The white man is unsure of himself and uneasy in the power equation between himself and the Natives.

Coetzee identifies the native as a victim of circumstances, who nevertheless, is not after all, a victim in the real sense, as he does not leave the white man comfortable. However, Coetzee does not give the native a voice in the narrative. Silence is the native’s share. Through this passivity he is able to defeat the white man’s wish to subjugate him. Although the victory may not be quantifiable, it is only felt as we see the white man
stripped of his mask—his façade of being the superior. Coetzee’s natives are not Spivak’s subalterns who cannot speak. They are natives who choose not to speak. By their silence they register their protest. This pattern can be seen in many of the novels of Coetzee. Most of his protagonists are able to express themselves through their silence.

In studies conducted by feminists about women in the Third World countries it was found that women had common concerns about family, dignity and social interactions. However, they were thwarted in their actions by the lack of freedom available to them. In Coetzee, the women characters do not seem to lack freedom. They are victims of social and political hegemony. Coetzee’s women characters are not commodified. They are individuals in their own right who have a space of their own. They are however in conflict with themselves. Magda is constantly battling with herself for her position in her father’s house. She is wrought by jealousy and when her father comes home with his bride, she is overwhelmed with thoughts that threaten her position in her father’s house with the arrival of her father’s new bride. Again, it is the power relations within a hierarchical order that Coetzee addresses. Here, it has nothing to do with the master-slave or ‘us’ and ‘they’ power equation. Magda is battling it out all alone and she solves the conflict all by herself. She enters into a communiqué with the sky gods who alone, she believes understands her. In order to atone for her father’s treatment of Anna Kleine, she invites Hendrik, the farm hand and his wife Anna to live in the house instead of the quarters. But, ironically she is raped by Hendrik. However, she does not repent having called them in. She feels that Hendrik has taken his revenge on her for what her father has done to his wife.

We find a similar attitude expressed by Lucy (the white woman) in the novel *Disgrace* which is clearly about decolonization and its aftermath. She too feels that the
three blacks who has raped her and assaulted her father, are only settling scores with the white man for his atrocities. So Coetzee does not stereotype his characters in the narrative. They act, whether white or black, according to certain principles they believe in. In *Disgrace* we see the whole process of decolonization. The narrative techniques Coetzee employs are the thoughts presented to the reader by the protagonist, David Lurie. The plot moves on with the thought process of Lurie presented to us. The phenomenon of decolonization is presented in the violent episode where Lurie is assaulted and Lucy raped by three blacks. Lurie admits to having committed a transgression. His expulsion from the University is a disgrace for him. He goes to his daughter’s farm and it is here where his personal transformation begins.

The girl whom the Magistrate takes with him to live with him in the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* also has a mind of her own. She registers her protest, though with her passivity. She does not speak, she is silent. She also does not yield herself to the Magistrate; or rather he cannot penetrate her. She seems to be inscrutable. It is only when they leave the frontier and enter the native territory that their relationship is consummated. So is Michael K. in *Life and Times of Michael K*. Coetzee through the narrative of Michael K. establishes the need for freedom and studies the struggle of a man who all alone fights the system out, the system which wants to include him, yet he wants to stay out of it and he proves that it is possible, although with some hardships. The system gets frustrated trying to ‘reform’ Michael K. but not vice versa. In this novel Coetzee examines “the historical and discursive conditions under which white South African authorship must operate – a typically cautious gesture of qualification on Coetzee’s part.”9
The novel *Foe* uses altogether a different narrative structure found in Coetzee's oeuvre. Coetzee uses the narrative to intellectually engage with the writing process and the relationship of the author with what he writes. Hence, we have Susan Barton who is the narrator in the novel telling us the story of her shipwreck and her past, along with the story of Cruso and his slave Friday, drawn as a parody of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. In the process, she is seeking out an author who would write her story. She meets (De)Foe who agrees to write her story and Cruso's story. But she knows that their story cannot be written excluding the story of Friday, the black man. Coetzee hints that no story of South Africa is complete without the story of the Native. Although the Native does not speak for himself, he needs to be spoken to, and spoken about. Otherwise there is no story of South Africa.

The novel *Foe* is divided into four sections. In the first part we have Susan Barton narrating her story, her memoir, in the second we have a series of letters that she writes to Foe. Here, Coetzee uses the epistolary form. Then we have an account of Susan's relationship with Foe and finally we have an unnamed narrator speaking. It is in the first person present tense narrative form. This anonymous speaker could possibly be the author, Coetzee himself. This speaker revisits history with the freedom of an author. The novel ends with the narrator interrogating the mouth of Friday trying to listen to what words will emerge from his hitherto silent orifice. In the novel, Coetzee pays more attention to the act of story telling and as Ina Grabe says, "the novel clearly participates in postmodernism's favouring of the signifier over the signified." Friday cannot speak as his tongue is mutilated. Therefore, the world of Friday (the world of the Native) is inaccessible to the white man (Cruso here). Coetzee is indirectly suggesting that the anti-native attitude of the white results in the native remaining inaccessible to the white. The
white starts to feel confident of himself, thinking that he can civilise the natives, but his efforts are thwarted as the native will not open up. Hence they resort to violence and this becomes an anti-humanist stand on the part of the white man. Friday cannot speak. Neither can his story be effaced. Susan Barton realises that she cannot exclude the story of Friday in her narrative. On her return to England with Cruso and Friday, Cruso dies on the way. This is symbolic because Cruso never wanted his story or (his)story to be remembered. He is comfortable on the island and he is not keen on leaving it. But he has to, on Susan’s insistence, and his death is only symbolic of his reluctance to be a part of the civilised world. Susan is now left with Friday and she walks the streets of London with Friday, although she would have loved to be away from him. She cannot abandon him. Friday becomes a burden to her until she finds a vessel to ship him to his native land. “Cruso, rejecting post-colonial dispossession had died and was buried at sea, at the bottom of which, we can assume, he still lies, his discourse forgotten.”

Although Friday is mute because he has no tongue, he is never colonised mentally. Coetzee shows that although Susan and Foe have their own project, Friday has yet not involved himself in it, but Coetzee hints at a collaborative project that will ultimately lead to the truth. Barton knows that only if she brings out or unravels the story of Friday’s life her narrative will be complete. Chris Bongie in the essay “Lost in the Maze of Doubting”: J.M.Coetzee’s Foe and the politics of (un)likeness” argues: “The problem of (un)likeness is foregrounded throughout the novel, beginning with its very first paragraphs, which put into play an emphatic series of similes pointing in two very different directions: towards the diversity of the material (“like a flower of the sea, like an anemone, like a jellyfish of the kind you see in the waters of Brazil”) and, on the other hand, the totality of the abstract (“like all the saved”). Language occupies the
intermediate space between these two extremes, a space of (un)likeness that marks the
absence of the very things it evokes.”

Susan Barton on the insistence of Foe tries to teach Friday how to write. She draws a
picture of a house and writes h-o-u-s beneath it. She avoids ‘e’ the last letter. Then she
also teaches him to write the words – ‘ship’, ‘Africa’ and ‘mother’. When she asks Friday
to write on his own starting with ‘ship’, Friday writes h-s-h-s-h-s on and on. Friday,
Coetzee seems to say, is rewriting what the coloniser has taught him in his own terms. It
may be a gesture where he decolonises what has been done by the coloniser. Barton is
unhappy about this reversal but Foe accepts it.

The sense of guilt for having abandoned his son is a recurrent motif in *The Master of
Petersburg*. The novel is set in Russia in late 1869. The father mourns the death of his
son Pavel, who dies under mysterious circumstances in Petersburg where he is a student.
He realises after the death of his son that he has failed to understand his son. The novel is
a journey of self-discovery. He re-appropriates his role as a parent symbolically.

In *Elizabeth Costello* and *The Lives of Animals* Coetzee uses the narrative to address
certain issues which are of prime importance to him. Through the character Elizabeth
Costello, Coetzee talks about animal rights. They are in the form of lectures that she
gives at a University in the U.S. where her son works. Coetzee airs his strong views
against meat eating through the character of Costello. Through Costello, Coetzee
expresses his views on the treatment of animals by human beings, violence and evil in
literature. Costello seems to be a spokesperson to discuss views that the author holds.
Coetzee is perhaps exploring the uses fiction can be put to and the effectiveness of such a
method instead of a straight forward lecture or argument.

Throughout his writing career, Coetzee distances himself from his writings. The author stays away, never wanting to be there. It is through the first person narrative that is, the protagonist speaking or otherwise through the third person narrative, that the plot unravels.

When we analyse the narrative of Jacobus Coetzee, we see motifs and mythical images. Jacobus Coetzee is presented as a traveller who goes into the interior land of the Namaquas, the natives. *Dusklands* is a profound meta representational work. It foregrounds the strategies used by Europeans to project the ‘Other’. Jacobus rides like a God through a world only partly named. He tries to project a similarity between colonisation and divine creation. Coetzee is also aware of historical time and he juxtaposes it with the time of narration. The motifs he uses are symbols of consciously constituted ideas. The characters in the narrative are not merely types. They are individuals in their own right, whether they are whites or blacks. The characters are built from the different facets of the authors' psyche and his world of experience.

Attwell says “J.M. Coetzee’s use of sources would seem to be directly related to his critical intentions with respect to white nationalism, which found the confrontational version useful to its purposes.”13 Jacobus Coetzee also uses the first person narrative at the beginning of Part 2 in the novel. Attwell further avers: “J.M. Coetzee therefore omits
cordial exchanges from the record and adds desertion. The immediate purpose would seem to engineer a certain consistency: .... The deeper and more salient purpose, however, is that these alterations radically turn the narrative into a game of power.\textsuperscript{14}

Jacobus Coetzee comes back to Namaqualand to conduct a raid on his servants who has deserted him to reassert his authority.

Boyhood, Youth and Summertime are often referred to as fictionalised memoirs of Coetzee. Boyhood is a memoir written using the third person narrative in the present tense. The narrator is outside the narrative and hence we get to know the life of the young boy from his point of view. We see the working of the mind of young Coetzee. We see him forming his judgements, coming to conclusions by his conditioning. "Women don't ride bicycles: what if his father is right? If his mother can find no one willing to teach her, if no other housewife in Reunion Park has a bicycle, then perhaps women, are indeed not supposed to ride bicycles."\textsuperscript{15}

The young boy is very reticent. He wants to lead a life of secrecy. He loves his mother, yet does not want her to know all about his life. He is very secretive with his mother. "He shares nothing with his mother" (BH 5). He wants her love, yet does not want to admit it. He admires her courage. He likes his mother's refined ways and is critical of his father's uncouth mannerisms. Boyhood is autobiographical, as it tells the story of Coetzee's childhood. However, it is not confessional. Coetzee believes that all writing in a larger sense is autobiographical. Coetzee's use of the third person narrative brings in a distinction between autobiography and biography.

Autobiography is what is written from one's memory. In Boyhood it is Coetzee's memory but it is told from the third person narrative standpoint. He provides shape to memory by reflecting on the events and his reaction to these events of his life.
Both *Boyhood* and *Youth* follow the real life of Coetzee—his childhood and his life as a youth in England, his career as a computer programmer. The style of these novels, using present tense third person narrative with no retrospective self-analysis makes it different from the typical autobiography. It is more a work of fiction. This style that Coetzee employs, enables him to distance the protagonist of the novel and the writer. Tim McIntyre contends:

The use of present tense foregrounds the textual production of these works in the present by the Coetzee of today, while the third person emphasises the distance between the author and his remembered self. The result is a hybrid protagonist: a past self, both alien and vividly present within the present one, a memory that is fallible, distorted, recalled and recreated from the present state. 16

Thus Coetzee uses the present tense and third person narrative to talk about the happenings in the society and to distance himself from the events. Both *Boyhood* and *Youth* recount events in retrospection but not as much as is done in autobiographies.

*Boyhood* is the story of a boy growing up in apartheid South Africa, well aware of his complicity in the multiethnic world of South Africa. Coetzee's attitude towards his father as a growing boy, is that of a jealous child who does not want his mother to share her love with the father. So he secretly nurses vengeance against his father. Though he does not want to appear dependent on his mother, he wants her with him always. He wants her to be at home, waiting for him when he returns from school. At the same time he does not open up with his mother. The young boy detests love: "When men and women kiss in films, and the violin plays low and lush in the background, he squirms in his seat. He
vows he will never be like that: soft, soppy” (BH 121). The boy does not want constant attention from her:

He yearns to be rid of her watchful attention. There may come a time when to achieve this he will have to assert himself, refuse her so brutally that with a shock she will have to step back and release him. Yet he has only to think of that moment, imagine her surprised look, feel her hurt, and he is overtaken with a rush of guilt. (BH 122)

Such are his mixed feelings about love. He loves his mother, yet does not want to share his secrets with her. There is a reluctance to accept parental control. In Boyhood Coetzee presents how children in school negotiate with the teachers. The teachers use the cane very frequently. Each teacher has a distinct cane and each cane has its own character. They are weapons of harassment. Miss Oosthuizen, the class teacher of Class III is cruel with the cane. She hates a boy Rob Hart, by name, the oldest in the class. She wreaks vengeance on him by flogging him. But Rob Hart never cries. After the flogging session, it is Miss Oosthuizen who “heaves at the breasts, and seems on the brink of tears-of tears and other outpourings also....” (BH 6).

The novel is an intimate record of how a young boy’s mind works. We see the childhood of the young Coetzee as narrated by him. However, it is the third person narrative that Coetzee uses. The use of the third person narrative is deliberate because it gives him the freedom to discuss his life candidly, as if he is talking about someone else. It allows him to distance himself from the course of events in his life so that he is able to talk about it very freely. Coetzee feels that he is different from the other boys. This is made obvious throughout the novel. His family speaks English at home, though they are
not English. He has not been beaten by his teachers, he never would want that to happen too. His feet blister when he has to walk bare-foot. All along he feels lonely.

Coetzee is critical of himself when he makes an assessment of himself, “At home he is an irascible despot, at school a lamb, meek and mild, who sits in the second row from the back...By living this double life he has created for himself a burden of imposture” *(BH 13).*

As he recalls his acquaintance with his classmates, Coetzee comes upon certain revelations. It is like an interior monologue. When he is found by one of his classmates, lying on his back under a chair, he is asked what he is doing and he replies that he was thinking. “Soon everyone in his class knew about it: the new boy was odd, he wasn’t normal. From that mistake, he learned to be more prudent. Part of being prudent is always to tell less rather than more” *(BH 29).* The young boy Coetzee is very attached to his mother. “He is too close to his mother, his mother is too close to him” *(BH 37).*

Even as a boy, Coetzee is intrigued by the fact that the black boy is kept away from the society. He feels “this boy, who is a living reproof to him, is nevertheless subjected to him in ways that embarrass him so much that he squirms and wriggles his shoulders and does not want to look at him any longer, despite his beauty” *(BH 61).* He is happy when his mother refers to the old native as ‘wise’. It is a great relief for him to hear that. The young Coetzee feels sad when he sees the coloured boys. “He thinks of Afrikaners as people in a rage all the time because their hearts are hurt. He thinks of the English as people who have fallen into a rage because they live behind walls and guard their hearts well” *(BH 73).*

Coetzee traces how the young boy in him grows up. He no longer enjoys riding the cycle. He is conscious of his mother’s love for him. We see the young Coetzee observing
people and events around him and making shrewd judgements. The young Coetzee is a mature child, self conscious like Coetzee who remains so as a grown up.

The novel *Youth*, again a fictionalised memoir, uses the third person narrative in the present tense. The novel is more of an introspection into his character. Coetzee examines the workings of his mind, what he thinks of himself and his relationship with people. He is again very critical and scathing in his remarks about himself.

Coetzee makes a reference to the police shoot out on Africans who protest against the Pass Laws. Then he recalls how it is unsafe to go out into the streets. He remembers how, when he is taking a class, a senior lecturer strides in and announces that there is a “workers march taking place along De Waal Drive. For reasons of safety, I am asked to announce that no one is being allowed to leave the campus, until further notice…”

When unrest begins to escalate, Coetzee decides to leave the country. He wants to go to a city where he can work and also pursue the arts. He chooses London. He finds a job as a programmer. He gets involved with women, but his affairs are never successful.

However he is not happy with his work at IBM. “The building, a featureless block of concrete and glass, seems to give off gas, odourless, colourless, that finds its way into his blood and numbs him, turning him into a zombie” (*Y* 47).

He regularly visits the library and starts reading Ford Madox Ford as he has registered for his post-graduation in English literature at the University of Cape Town in absentia. He also reads magazines on poems “where he pores over them, trying to work out who is writing what, where he would fit in if he too were to try to publish” (*Y* 58).

Talking about the writing of poetry, he recalls Eliot’s words which he had copied into his diary- “Poetry is not an expression of personality but an escape from personality” (*Y* 61). About prose, Coetzee opines, “Prose, unfortunately, does not demand emotion: there
is that to be said for it. Prose is like a flat, tranquil sheet of water on which one can tack about at one’s leisure, making patterns on the surface” (Y 61).

The narrative unfolds the development of Coetzee as a writer. He, at first, attempts writing poetry. But later gives up. Then he makes an attempt to write prose in the manner of Henry James. “He sets himself exercises in the style of James. But the Jamesian manner proves less easy to master than he had thought” (Y 64).

In the narrative, Coetzee explores his character. A neighbour, an Indian invites him over for food and he wants to reciprocate, but he does not. He muses:

- There must be some gesture to make, some simple act of reciprocation, but he cannot find it, or else will not, and it is fast becoming too late anyway.
- What is wrong with him? Why does he make the most ordinary things so hard for himself? If the answer is that it is his nature, what is the good of having a nature like that? Why not change his nature? (Y 95)

It is strange that the young Coetzee has left South Africa to escape the chaos there. It is even stranger that he wants to cut all bonds with the past. He is also not happy with his doting mother who keeps writing letters to him week after week. “How can he make her accept that the process of turning himself onto a different person that began when he was fifteen will be carried through remorselessly until all memory of the family and the country he left behind is extinguished?” (Y 98).

Coetzee is unhappy being at IBM and resigns. His superior is annoyed and when he asks for the reason, he replies:

- “I was hoping for friendships.” he says when asked by his superior
- “And what, may that be?”
- “I was hoping for friendships.”
"You find the atmosphere unfriendly?"

"No, not unfriendly, not at all. People have been very kind. But being friendly is not the same thing as friendship." (Y 107)

Coetzee eventually meets an Indian, Ganapathy by name, whom he befriends. Ganapathy is not happy with England and tells Coetzee that he should go to America. However, Coetzee does not think it is a wise decision. The novel ends with Coetzee ruminating about how he is not able to write and compares it with his inability to fall in love. "He is well aware that his failure as a writer and his failure as a lover are so closely parallel that they might as well be the same thing" (Y 166).

Summertime, the third fictionalized memoir of J.M. Coetzee subtitled 'Scenes from Provincial Life', begins with notebook entries of Coetzee of the years 1972, 1973 and 1975. The biographer who sets out to write on Coetzee, interviews a woman called Julia, who according to him influenced Coetzee. Julia ends up talking more about herself than about Coetzee. J. M. Coetzee as a writer, is making a point here by showing how biographers gather information and how details are modified. The narrative ultimately is in the hands of the writer. Julia avers:

You commit a grave error if you think to yourself that the difference between the two stories, the story you wanted to hear and the story you are getting, will be nothing more than a matter of perspective — that while from my point of view the story of John may have been just one episode among many in the long narrative of my marriage, nevertheless, by dint of a quick flip, a quick manipulation of perspective followed by some clever editing, you can transform it into a story about John and one of the women who passed through his life.¹⁸
As in *Youth*, Coetzee is very critical of his love relationships. He feels that he is not a success with women. In the numerous affairs he mentions in *Youth* he projects himself as an ineffectual lover. So too, Julia says about her sexual encounters with him, "In his love making I now think there was an autistic quality. I offer this not as criticism but as a diagnosis, if it interests you" (*ST* 52).

Julia discusses how Coetzee has gifted her, his first novel *Duskiands*. Talking to her about books, Coetzee says that if books one writes are read after one's death too, "It affords me some consolation to cling to that prospect" (*ST* 62).

Julia concludes the interview by making a categorical statement of Coetzee. When her husband rages with her when he discovers that she is having an affair, she stomps out of the house and moves to a hotel. Coetzee takes her home and she has a fulfilling night with him. She thinks:

John saw or guessed what was going on in me and for once opened his heart, the heart he normally kept wrapped in armour. With open hearts, his and mine, we came together. For him it could and should have marked a sea-change; ...It could have marked the beginning of a new life for two of us together." (*ST* 84)

Thus through the character of Julia speaking to his biographer, Coetzee himself gives us a critical assessment of himself as a lover through Julia's conversation. This is a novel way of using narrative to make a character study. J.M.Coetzee means to say that conversation or interview can be a narrative technique to build up a character. Here the novelist can stand outside and at the same time, it could be like a first hand version of the character's study, because it is an assessment by a person who knows the character Coetzee.
The second person whom the biographer interviews is Coetzee's cousin Margot who has a soft corner for Coetzee. The biographer tells her that he has made their conversation into a sort of narration and reads it out to Margot. It is interesting to note the technique Coetzee uses here. As the biographer reads out the narrative, Margot suggests a few changes in the words and sentences used. When he says "In private moments, the survivors have intimations of their own end, and shudder" (ST 88). Margot objects to it and he says he would replace that with "Among the survivors, the joking has grown more subdued..." (ST 88). As the biographer narrates, Margot clarifies certain of her doubts. This is interesting as it shows how something gets written. Coetzee is hinting at the process of writing.

None of his relatives appreciate him because they feel that he had left South Africa to escape conscription. They think that subsequently he had ended up as a criminal in America and returned to South Africa in disgrace. Margot is the only one who understands Coetzee. However, she finds it strange that he has not found a girl. But she knows he cannot get along with anyone. He lives with his father and is not happy about it. So he wants to buy a house in Merweville and put his father there. He would visit him every week. "My father and I can’t live together indefinitely, Margie. It makes us too miserable, both of us. It's unnatural. Fathers and sons were never meant to share a house" (ST 133). When Margot tells him that his father does not look as if he is a difficult person to live with, he says "Perhaps; but I am a difficult person to live with. My difficulty consists in not wanting to live with other people" (ST 133).

This section of the novel is mostly in the form of Margot's interior monologue interspersed here and there with dialogues with Coetzee, her cousin. J.M.Coetzee again stresses upon the fact that he is incapable of love. Margot and her husband have a very
fulfilling love relationship “wheras her cousin... She cannot imagine her cousin giving wholeheartedly to anyone. Always a quantum held back, held in reserve” (ST 134).

It is ironical that when Margot visits Coetzee in Cape Town when her mother is hospitalized and they get to talk, Margot asks him why he cannot have a better house “But why not buy a better house here in the Cape? Write a book. Write a bestseller. Make lots of money”(ST 149). Coetzee says:

“I would not know how to write a bestseller. I don’t know enough about people and their fantasy lives. Anyway, I wasn’t destined for that fate.”

“What fate?”

“The fate of being a rich and successful writer.” (ST 149)

Coetzee says this of himself in 2009, when he had already won 2 Bookers and the Nobel! Coetzee is playfully making an understatement here.

The third interview is with a Brazilian ballet dancer, whose daughter is Coetzee’s student for extra English classes at school. She is angry that her daughter is enamoured of her teacher, Coetzee. She writes a letter to him asking him not to play with the feelings of her daughter. In reply she receives a letter by post, in which Coetzee invites her to lunch. She says of Coetzee “No, not sexless. Solitary. Not made for conjugal life. Not made for the company of women” (ST 171).

During the course of the interviews the biographer gets to know more about the life story of the women he interviews than about Coetzee, on whom he wishes to write a biography. Perhaps J.M.Coetzee the writer is trying to tell us that this is how it is when one sets out to write a biography.
Senhora Nascimento is very critical of Coetzee. She feels he is after her daughter. Later he makes his advances to her, writing love letters which are so dry. She does not reply. She sums him up to the biographer:

He was not a man of substance. Maybe he could write well, maybe had a certain talent for words, I don’t know, I never read his books... I know he won a big reputation later; but was he really a great writer? Because to my mind, a talent for words is not enough if you want to be a great writer. You have also to be a great man. And he was not a great man. He was a little man, an unimportant little man. (ST 195)

The interview concludes with the biographer referring to Coetzee’s novel *Foe*, in which he says, Coetzee writes about a woman. “In the final version she is an English woman, but in the first draft he made her a Brasileira” (ST 200). Nascimento asks him to send her a copy of *Foe* “I am interested to see what this man of wood made of me” (ST 210). Coetzee perhaps, indirectly wants to suggest that his characters are based on real people.

The next interview is with Martin whom Coetzee has referred to as a friend. Hence Vincent, the biographer decides to interview him. Both Coetzee and Martin feel that they did not belong to South Africa and feel that their presence there, is illegal. They talk about themselves, “We had a certain style of mind in common, a style that I attribute to our origins, colonial and South African. Hence the commonality of our outlook” (ST 211).

When asked about Coetzee’s role as a teacher, Martin says “All I can suggest is that a strain of secretiveness that seemed to be engrained in him, part of his character, extended to his teaching too” (ST 212). “A perfectly adequate academic but not a
notable teacher” he says. “Approved in principle of letting oneself go, though I don’t think he ever let himself go- would probably not have known how to” (ST 213). Thus, through Martin, J.M.Coetzee lets us know something about himself as an academician.

When the biographer questions Martin whether Coetzee has any special friendships among his students, Martin replies in the negative and then adds: “It would be very, very naïve to conclude that because the theme was present in his writing it had to be present in his life” (ST 215). In other words, J.M.Coetzee advocates that the reader should not try to find parallels in a writer’s work and his life.

In the interview with Sophie Denoel, the biographer Vincent asks her about Coetzee’s life, whether she knows any story about him. She asks him as to why he depends on interviews when he can fall back on the letters, Diary and notebooks that Coetzee maintained. He answers, “What Coetzee writes there cannot be trusted, not as a factual record- not because he was a liar, but because he was a fictioneer” (ST 227). Sophie talking about Coetzee comments, “He was not a militant. His politics were too idealistic, too Utopian for that. In fact he was not political at all. He looked down on politics. He didn’t like political writers, writers who espoused a political programme” (ST 228).

Coetzee recalls his father’s surgery in the hospital. He goes to see him. However, he is not able to reach out to him. He tells him that it is a routine operation. “He could stretch out and take his father’s hand and hold it, to comfort him, to convey to him that he is not alone, that he is loved, and cherished. But he does no such thing” (ST 262).

Summertime ends with Coetzee’s father’s return to his house and Coetzee knows that he will have to nurse him or abandon him. There is no other way. Thus the novel uses a unique technique where a biographer imagines the author to be dead and interviews a number of persons known to the author. Perhaps no author has hitherto used such a
technique. In the novel we find the biographer meeting Coetzee’s ex-girlfriends and acquaintances who talk about their association with him. In the course of the conversation they enlighten him about various aspects of his life. It is interesting to note that Coetzee is very unsparingly critical about himself.

Thus Coetzee succeeds as a well known writer of the twentieth and twenty-first century by using innovative methods in handling the novel as a form. Each novel is different as far as the mode he employs and every time he comes out with a unique manner of writing. All the narrative ploys employed by Coetzee in his novels place him as a novelist who is a class apart. Coetzee by his conscious writing, sparse prose, crisp language, authorial engagement and employment of post-colonial and post-modern techniques has been hailed as one of the important novelists of the twentieth century. Coetzee’s texts make a subtle exposition of his ideological moorings.
Notes


3. Head 75.


6. ibid 91.

7. ibid 91.


14. ibid 46.

