Chapter VI

Conclusion

I know somewhat too much; and from this knowledge, once one has been infected, there seems to be no recovering.

J. M. Coetzee, Waiting for the Barbarians

South African literature until the arrival of Coetzee on the literary scene was mainly concerned with the political and social happenings in South Africa. These issues preoccupied the South African writers, whites and blacks alike. Their engagement with these issues was more in journalistic lines. Most of them presented the happenings in the society in their writings and the literary mode employed was by and large realistic. The writers took to writing with the firm conviction that literature ought to present the reality. The writers gave a true account of the political scenario and the impact of these political issues on social life. There was chaos and violence in the society because of the gruesome institution of apartheid. The treatment meted out to the blacks by the whites was inhuman and caused suffering and pain which was unheard of. The writers engaged themselves with the plight of the blacks and exposed the highhanded behaviour of the whites who acted in a ruthless manner. This created conflict between the writers and the white establishment. As a result many of the writers were imprisoned, exiled and their works banned from time to time. The government came down heavily on these writers who questioned their ideology. They refused to tolerate the writers who criticized the monstrous acts of the whites.

It is in such an environment that Coetzee came up with his first novel in 1974 which was also a critique of apartheid. Although it raised a stir in the literary circle, it failed to get the attention of the government as he was mainly concerned with the
question of apartheid intellectually. Unlike his contemporaries, Coetzee’s engagement with apartheid was fictional and therefore in his novels he did not outrightly condemn the ruthless regime of apartheid.

The study of the works of Coetzee reveals that they are trend-setters in the history of novel writing of the twentieth century. Coetzee emerges as a humanist to the core, sensitively responding to the suffering of the blacks who are subject to merciless treatment in the apartheid regime in South Africa. But even when he deals with the humanitarian element he does not succumb to sentimentality. His characters are well thought of and crafted. They are docile, silent, almost always loners and their actions speak for themselves. Coetzee’s characters Eugene Dawn, the barbarian girl, Michael K, Friday, Mrs. Curren etc. are all individuals who shun society and the company of people. They suffer by themselves accepting their role of being part of the mighty whole. Spending their life without coming in the way of the society or anyone for that matter they also wish not to be disturbed as they try to grapple with their problems in their own small way. These protagonists of Coetzee epitomise the notion of acceptance and surrender. There is in them an acceptance of their fatality without the feeling of remorse. None of them expects any sympathy or pity. They also do not wallow in self pity. They emerge as evolved beings in the course of living through the vicissitudes of life. Coetzee deliberately delineates his characters as independent beings who are able to fight institutions and men in power, being bound by their own conviction and undeterred by the pressure inflicted on them. Through his characters, Coetzee also drives home the point that silence and docility can be effective tools of protest when put to use consciously. His protagonists exemplify this tenet. Michael K refuses to be subjugated by the Medical Officer. The camps are anathema to him and he keeps escaping the camps because he will not tolerate any form of regimentation.
Coetzee’s protagonists are emphatic affirmations of individual will and they refuse to fit into any form of stereotyping. In all the novels the marginalized characters are depicted as lonely, physically challenged or introverts. There is Eugene Dawn, who is mentally disturbed because of the effect of working on the details of the Vietnam War, the Magistrate, who in spite of being a white man is marginalised and made to suffer the same plight as that of a black man because he chooses to speak for the native.

Michael K is with a physical defect — he is hare-lipped and this sets him as different. He is brought up in a separate school and his mother is ever conscious of his physical defect. Michael K is also an introvert who hardly speaks but has a mind of his own. He is able to withstand the pressure from those who want him to conform to their dictates and nothing can change his stand. All the attempts of the Medical Officer to make him speak are futile. Coetzee throws light on the sense of failure faced by the Medical Officer. Not being able to bring round a marginalized character, the Medical Officer faces defeat. This is highlighted so as to bring the character of Michael K. into prominence. Coetzee puts forth the view that strength of will is enough to defeat any high handedness or ideology. It is here that we are reminded of Gandhi’s Satyagraha and Ahimsa. Coetzee’s protagonists are like Satyagrahis who do not swerve from the chosen path and exhibit a kind of stoicism which helps them to keep to their conviction and determinate stand. In a way, Coetzee eulogises his protagonists who are ordinary people with strong convictions. He successfully champions the cause of blacks through his protagonists who are strong individuals although they keep to themselves.

Coetzee’s novels have made a distinct mark in the history of novel writing in the twentieth century. David Attwell, a noted critic and authority on J.M. Coetzee avers,
"Indeed, Coetzee brings to his work, a unique combination of intellectual power, stylistic poise, historical vision and ethical penetration." Coetzee had studied Beckett and was a great admirer of Kafka and Tolstoy. Coetzee was also a critic, translator, linguist and stylistician. But it is in his novels that his accomplishments as a literary person become evident. Coetzee’s fiction addresses the concerns of the times, the political issues and is reflexive in nature and stance. Coetzee posits certain ontological questions in his novels. The coloniser-colonised divide is the underlying thread although he does not restrict himself only to that. In his novels there is a simmering hostility which can set off at the slightest trigger among the natives. The outward calm of the characters is a conscious one. However, deep within there is a turmoil which nevertheless has been subdued. We see that in almost all the novels Coetzee deals with the impact of aggression on the human psyche. Coetzee interrogates the agenda of imperialist ideology in South Africa. He examines how racial hatred could lead to destructiveness both at the level of the masses and the individual. He addresses the difficulty and distress faced by individuals in repressive societies.

Coetzee’s novels deal with the imperial experience in the apartheid regime. The natives in Coetzee are those who have had traumatic experiences, submitting themselves to European superiority imposed upon them under the banner of apartheid. The whites had no concern for their social and economic well being. The natives lost their independence to live life on their own terms. The apartheid laws subjugated the blacks with absolute authority. They had no say in their own country. In his novels we have seen that Coetzee addresses these issues from the point of view of a humanist.

The Magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians remains indifferent to the injustices and violence perpetrated by Colonel Joll on the natives. Coetzee’s innate sense of justice and his sensitive response to injustice in apartheid South Africa has resulted in
novels that strike a chord in the hearts of the readers. In almost all the novels written with apartheid as the backdrop, Coetzee champions the cause of the blacks.

Coetzee was concerned about the human condition and apartheid South Africa provided him ample scope to explore this space by writing about protagonists who were unknowingly caught in the struggles of life. He is therefore, able to explore the self in his novels. Coetzee's characters do not simply accept the imperial ideology; they find their own means of engaging themselves with the situation they find themselves in. The world of the native is impinged by the white man. However, the native is not completely at the mercy of the empire. The native creates a world of his own. Coetzee illustrates the manner in which the native finds solutions to ontological questions in his novels. The natives resist the white man and thereby imperialism.

Although Coetzee does not overtly refer to historical happenings, the experiences that he deals with in his novels have historical identity. Power being everywhere, Coetzee instead of dealing with it per se, engages with it from the standpoint of the self. Coetzee shows how the natives groomed themselves to confront the whites who had dispossessed them of their land. They also became militant as we see in the novel *Age of Iron*. Coetzee presents the change in the relationship between the blacks and whites. The period of decolonization is a time of utter chaos and violence. The blacks are out to reclaim their land. The characters in the novels work towards a change which is epistemological. This change comes from within and is less influenced by extraneous circumstances.

Coetzee believed that literature should not be overtly political which tends towards propaganda. Hence, although his novels are an attack or critique of apartheid and its consequences, he uses the political and social context in a way that his novels do not remain as propaganda. He fuses form and content in such a way that the socio-
political scenario emerges as an excellent work of fiction. "Sincerity (comprising truth-to-experience, honesty towards the self, and the capacity for human empathy and compassion) is a quality which resides within the language of literature," opines Peter Barry in his book *Beginning Theory*. Coetzee’s novels adhere to this norm in that he sticks to the truth and empathises with his characters whose lives he presents before us from the viewpoint of a humanist. Coetzee is concerned with the impact of the black-white encounter. Nevertheless, he addresses these issues in his novels in a detached manner.

Each of Coetzee’s novels is different from the other in execution. The theme of the early novels is about the plight of the natives in South Africa. Coetzee’s engagement as seen is not just with the colonised. He is sensitive to the plight of individuals as a whole. The focus thus has been on the trauma faced by individuals especially in an oppressive regime. Coetzee also engages with the question of authorship and textuality by addressing the aggressiveness of colonialism. Coetzee’s novels become self-conscious and lead to an exploration of the self. The novels are positioned historically though not overtly.

Coetzee’s novels discussed in the earlier chapters reveal a pattern wherein the novelist views South Africa under the apartheid regime. The first novel comprises of two novellas. The first novella engages with the Vietnamese war, while the second is about the war led by the white man against the natives in the eighteenth century. When Coetzee published *Dusklands*, the war in Vietnam was coming to an end. At the same time in South Africa there was an increase in state violence and censorship. Coetzee projects the thirst for violence inherent in the white man in his novel. The presentation of violence is explicit in the novel. The coloniser is an agent capable of violence which is acute. The violence also affects him just as it destroys the colonised
or the native. Jacobus Coetzee soon exemplifies these qualities in himself. The violence exhibited by Jacobus brings out the sadistic streak in him showing the innate tendency in the white man towards brutality. As he resorts to violence, Jacobus is aware of its impact on himself. His jaw becomes tense as he performs the act of cruelty. Eugene Dawn also exhibits violence when he stabs his son. These acts of violence are a result of the self trying to revalidate its position. However, the novel *In the Heart of the Country* shows a change in Coetzee’s treatment of the colonial theme. It deals with the problems faced by the protagonist Magda when she tries to sympathise with the blacks. Magda carves her own destiny and contends that she will live in silence. She treats the farm help Hendrik and his wife Klein Anna on equal terms but realizes that the system will not allow it. A slave cannot remain a mere slave when given equality; he assumes the role of master and hence, her subsequent rape by Hendrik. She becomes the victimized. Throughout the novel Magda expresses her desire to commune with people. However, she is unsuccessful. The novel ends with Magda trying to commune with the skygods as she fails to establish human communication. If *In the Heart of the Country* is an exploration of the self, *Waiting for the Barbarians* is more an exploration of what violence does to people. However, the ending is suggestive of hope. Coetzee deliberately chooses to make the locale non-specific. Although the Magistrate, the protagonist sympathises with the barbarian girl, she identifies him with Colonel Joll, her torturer. The difference is only one of degree. The Magistrate also suffers in the hands of Joll. He is confined to the barracks, humiliated and tortured. The novel makes a very sensitive study of the imperialistic stance of the Empire and the impact of imperialism on those who perpetrate it and those who are subject to it. Coetzee handles violence from the point of view of a sensitive writer. The violence he exemplifies brings out the worst in man and Colonel
Joll and his men are testimony to this reality. The native is not the barbarian as otherwise portrayed by the white man. The coloniser is the barbarian and these qualities lie latent in him. The ending of the novel where we see children making a snowman is an indication of better times to come. In the picture of the children playing with the snowman Coetzee surmises that the future may not be bleak after all.

When Coetzee wrote *Life and Times of Michael K.*, there was a violent release of forces in the society that was leading to a gory state then. The society was facing a crisis and in the novel Coetzee shows how the state failed to address the crisis. Michael the protagonist is one with immense power who is able to stand up to the whites by a mere show of indifference. This novel also ends on an optimistic note. Michael goes away from the camp to lead a life on his own terms. He carries with him seeds he will sow and cultivate. This indicates his return to nature. Even in the midst of war and chaos, Michael stands for regeneration of the human society. He emerges victorious over the system that tries to pin him down. He lives through the civil war without being touched by it and he does it in a very subtle and quiet manner.

Unlike the earlier novels, *Foe* is a parody of the canonical novel *Robinson Crusoe*. In this novel the ‘Other’ is Friday. He is a mute character, unlike Defoe’s Friday who learns the language of his master Crusoe. Susan, the protagonist of the novel tries to make Friday speak. But Friday’s tongue has been mutilated. Susan trying to make Friday speak is similar to the Medical Officer trying to make Michael speak. Friday’s silence is similar to the silence of Michael K. whereby he asserts his identity. The novel ends on an optimistic note too. The novel provides the ‘Other’ with a possibility of resistance.

Although the novels written before *Age of Iron* deal with the colonial condition, they paid less attention to the violence which was manifesting in the South African
society. The novel which is about Mrs. Curren who participates in the violence that the society faces, is an account of her experience leading to self knowledge. Diagnosed with cancer, she prepares herself for her death. Along this journey from life to death, Mrs. Curren goes on to a level of existence, where she acquires a new self through a learning process. She develops a new perspective towards understanding the blacks and comes to the conclusion that, love must necessarily be there in human society if it is to avoid being annihilated. It is when she learns that she is going to die that Mrs Curren sees the surrounding reality. The violence around makes her sympathetic to the blacks and she reaches out to them. The novel The Master of Petersburg is not explicitly concerned with the South African situation. The protagonist, the fictionalized Dostoevsky admits to abandoning his dead son and as retribution, tries to establish communion with his dead son. He declares that as a writer he is unable to transform his experiences into words. Towards the end of the novel, Dostoevsky realizes that only if he surrenders completely will he be able to write. Thus both Foe and The Master of Petersburg are novels where Coetzee engages himself with the question of authorship.

In the two early autobiographical novels Boyhood and Youth, Coetzee again deals with the question of identity. In Boyhood, Coetzee deals with themes of marginalization and alienation that he faces as a boy living in a land that he does not belong to. The boy Coetzee comes to the conclusion that in spite of having an English education and speaking English at home, he can never totally identify with the English. Therefore, he decides to leave South Africa and goes to London in order to meet his destiny. However, he soon realizes that even the mother country has its limitations. Youth again is about the travails of a young man in a foreign country. In both these novels Coetzee’s real life experience is turned into fiction.
In his novels, Coetzee eschews realism. The novel *The Lives of Animals* is actually similar to the Tanner lectures given every year at Princeton University. However, the manner in which Coetzee deals with the issue of animal rights is different from the Tanner lectures which are usually philosophical. The lectures in *The Lives of Animals* are fictional in form. The protagonist, Elizabeth Costello presents her views on animal rights and the killing of animals by human beings. Her views resonate Coetzee’s views too. However, Coetzee does not give answers or comments nor does he offer any solution.

The last three novels — *Slow man, Diary of a Bad Year* and *Summertime* are a complete break from the earlier novels, the setting being different. Coetzee himself has moved to Australia and he engages with questions of the self and death examining the notion of self from different perspectives. The first of these three, reveals Coetzee’s exploration of the self in isolation, the second, Coetzee’s appraisal of the self in relation to others and the third, a novel way of exploring the self as if he were dead.

A study of the early novels like *Dusklands, In the Heart of the Country, Waiting for the Barbarians, Age of Iron* reveals that Coetzee is preoccupied with violence and its repercussions on those who suffer and those who inflict it. The study reveals that both the perpetrator and the perpetrated are influenced considerably by violence which emanated from the centre and was targeted on the margin. This violence later boomeranged from the margin to the centre. The very act of segregation by the whites led to violent psychological reaction, building up violence among the blacks.

The novels are a fine study of how the protagonists react to violence. The black protagonists who do not retaliate accept suffering and pain. They remain passive and silent. This passivity defeats the whites. Although the whites try to colonise the minds
of the blacks, they fail to do so. They are helpless and frustrated when they find that the blacks do not react. However, in some of the novels, the blacks react violently against the atrocities of the whites. For example, in *Age of Iron*, the black youth are defiant and rebel against the whites and their high handedness. However, they tragically meet their end.

Although Coetzee does not overtly mention the place and time of the action in his novels, it is very clear that he is writing about the apartheid regime. Through his novels, Coetzee condemns the inhuman practice of apartheid. The solution that he offers is the practice of peace and harmony. The protagonists have an understanding of life which is the result of their experience. They surmount their difficulties by accepting whatever comes to them. As we have seen, some remain passive, some resist passively and some accept their lot while some become defiant.

This study which revolved round the rhetoric of coloniser / colonised has dealt with the impact of such a relationship on the human psyche. It has also dealt with torture and power in the novels. An examination of the novels has revealed that the relationship between the two is a problematic one. The coloniser wants to assert his authority against the blacks to show his superiority making the colonised feel that they are inferior. There is a systematic ploy to create the ‘Other’. However, in the novels the blacks do not fall prey to the designs of the whites. The blacks are men of integrity and do not easily succumb to the pressure on them. They create a space for themselves and do not let the whites enter this space. For example, in the novel *Life and Times of Michael K.*, the protagonist Michael K. does not allow the whites to make him the ‘Other.’ He does not allow the whites to dominate him. He escapes the camps and leads a life of his own, on his terms.

Similarly the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians* does not react even
when she is subject to torture. She accepts her situation with resignation. Thus, Coetzee is concerned with the unrest and chaos in South Africa and through the individuals caught in such situations, he wishes to highlight that violence can be subdued with passive resistance.

Coetzee seems to offer a solution to the violence perpetrated by the whites. He advocates peaceful means like non-co-operation and passive resistance. Silence also becomes an effective tool. By a show of silence, Coetzee illustrates through his novels that silence defeats the perpetrator of violence and the one who makes an attempt to dominate the 'Other.' By the practice of silence, the blacks do not allow the white man to colonise them. The white man finds that he is helpless trying to dominate the whites.

The study has revealed that although the Empire is the centre and the colonised the margin, resistance from the margin in a non-violent manner can defeat the power of the centre. This is illustrated in the novels like *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K*.

Coetzee by a study of the coloniser/colonised dialectic has thrown light on human nature. The coloniser is delineated as aggressive, ruthless and greedy with a will to subjugate the blacks for his own needs. The sympathetic whites like the Magistrate and Mrs. Curren by the very fact that they are white, become part of the crime against the blacks. The colonised is shown as compassionate and poised, accepting his lot without being aggressive. Coetzee's protagonists are men of integrity though ordinary people. Coetzee's treatment of violence and the protagonists' reaction to it is similar to Gandhian philosophy of non-violence. Except in *Age of Iron*, in all the other novels, the blacks are passive and do not react against violence. Through his novels Coetzee illustrates that violence need not be handled with violence. Non-violent
means can also be an effective weapon against violence. *Dusklands*, *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K.* convincingly exemplify the fact that the blacks are able to bring victory to their side by being indifferent to violence. Coetzee’s protagonists are stoic and do not succumb to violence as they remain undeterred. This kind of silent defiance from the blacks defeats the coloniser.

The manner in which Coetzee has handled violence in his novels shows that he advocates non-violent reaction. This was also the method followed by Gandhi in South Africa. The study concludes that Coetzee perhaps has been influenced by Gandhi and his belief in non-violence. Almost all the protagonists who are subject to violence react in a non-violent manner. Some passively resist violence and some are totally indifferent to it. Silence is also employed as a tool to counter violence. The barbarian girl in the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* chooses to remain silent when the Magistrate starts probing her. Michael K. in the novel *Life and Times of Michael K.* remains silent when the Medical officer tries to make him talk. By being silent he refuses to let the white man dominate him. This is the mode of defiance followed by the ‘Other’. However, Michael does not show any defiance. He just does not cooperate, thereby refusing to be the ‘Other’.

In the course of addressing the dialectics of the coloniser and the colonised, Coetzee makes an exposition of human nature. We arrive at the conclusion that when human beings are exposed to unpleasant situations, their innate nature surfaces. The white man in the course of exhibiting his power becomes the personification of evil itself. In *Dusklands*, the protagonist is under great pressure when he writes about the Vietnamese War, that he loses his equanimity and becomes insane. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* the torture of the natives by Colonel Joll and his men brings out the worst in them. Although the Magistrate shows his concern for the barbarian girl, it is mainly
because he feels guilty about the torture inflicted by the representatives of the Empire of which he is also a representative. He feels that he is similar to her torturers because he is keen on knowing about how she has the marks of torture on her. The novel brings out the fact that in everyone there is a latent capacity for evil. The Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the doctor in *Life and Times of Michael K.* and Susan Barton in *Foe* keep the concept of binary opposites as they see a difference between themselves and the ‘Other.’ The black protagonist becomes an object of sympathy. However, Michael K in *Life and Times of Michael K.* is able to see that behind the doctor’s facade there lies a coloniser who sees him as the ‘Other.’ The doctor, however, is very different from the coloniser Jacobus in *Dusklands*. He is not cruel like Jacobus.

The study reveals that Coetzee spares none in depicting their attitude towards the blacks. He feels that even the whites, who are sympathetic and do not do anything about the violence around them, are part of the atrocities committed on the blacks. Coetzee deals with the issue of power at various levels. He addresses the South African reality, a country torn by civil war and violence. Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron* admits to her complicity in the crime against the blacks although she has never directly participated in the oppression against the blacks. She understands that it is the whites who resorted to discrimination and exploitation which led to the civil war.

Similarly in *Disgrace* also Coetzee focuses on the connivance of the whites in continuing the abominable system of segregation and exploitation. Lucy feels that her suffering is the price she has to pay in order to atone for the wrongs of the whites.

The torture that Coetzee reveals in his novels in abominable and corresponds very much with what is happening in South Africa. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* the scenes of torture are similar to the accounts of torture conducted by the apartheid
regime. Just as many detainees in prison die under mysterious circumstances, in *Waiting for the Barbarians* there are deaths in detention on account of the inhuman torture inflicted on them. The old man is beaten to death. No record of such happenings is kept. Joll forces his first prisoner to confess by inflicting violence on him. Such instances are common wherever torture is practised.

The study shows that the characters in Cotezee though marginalized, are beings with a temperament of their own. They are mature and cannot be manipulated. The black characters are very much aware of their situation, but they do not compromise on their integrity. The white characters who sympathise with the blacks cannot do much and acknowledge their complicity. The protagonists of the novels are isolated characters and they live their life on their own terms. There is no communication between them and the others in the novel and they do not make any effort to communicate. All the novels of Coetzee centre around isolated individuals who do not want any communication.

The protagonists, especially the whites have a desire in them to be recognized by the natives. Hence Eugene and Jacobus in *Dusklands* long to be recognised by the natives, although they do not have any amiable relationship with them.

The doctor in *Life and Times of Michael K.* and Susan Barton in *Foe* perceive the two black characters, Michael K. and Friday as the ‘Other’ and hope to be recognised by these blacks. Susan fails to make Friday speak and the doctor cannot get the story out of Michael. These characters try to recreate the native but the natives do not yield. Thus Coetzee presents the white man who also longs for recognition. The violence that he perpetrates or the sympathy that he shows is a tool to validate his existence vis-a-vis the ‘Other.’ He tries to define himself by relating himself to the blacks.

Although Coetzee’s novels written in South Africa were reflections of the political
and social milieu, Coetzee’s novels were never banned and he did not come under any surveillance by the white authorities. This was not so with his contemporaries. Many of them were exiled or their works were banned. Thus Coetzee was able to react in a very intellectual manner to the reality around him. His writings never provoked the authorities or the government. One reason being that, Coetzee refused to be in the lime-light. He never gave interviews and was not an activist in any sense although, his sympathies were always with the blacks.

For Coetzee, who believed that writers always had the last word, writing was a serious experience. He has indeed made history by writing about the inhuman practice of apartheid. A reading of his novels elucidates what Coetzee mentions in his book *Giving Offence: Essays on Censorship*:

> As an episode in historical time, apartheid was causally overdetermined. 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 wildly all around itself.³

Thus Coetzee engages himself with the impact of apartheid and post apartheid in his novels. Although many writers dealt with the same issue, the study reveals that Coetzee is different from his contemporaries because he was not just concerned with the political and social impact of this evil institution. In fact, Coetzee used it as a backdrop to address a more pertinent issue, the relationship between individuals in an
oppressive regime and the manner in which isolated individuals resolved their dilemma. Although Coetzee had first hand experience of the political and social happenings in South Africa, his novels are not journalistic or propagandist in nature. His works are highly literary and intellectually engaging as he makes his black protagonists reach a high state of realisation and they deal with their dilemmas in an evolved manner.

This study observes that Coetzee has adopted nonviolence and passive resistance as tools for his protagonists to overcome the aggression meted out to them by their oppressors. Given the presence of Gandhi in South Africa and the manner in which he got the Indians who were treated as inferior citizens by the whites, to oppose the whites by using the weapons of non co-operation, non violence and passive resistance, it is very likely that Coetzee would have read about Gandhi’s activities in South Africa. He apparently is influenced by Gandhian thoughts, although he does not mention it anywhere, even in his interviews or otherwise.

Coetzee’s characters emerge as those who are influenced by Gandhian values of non-violence, non co-operation and passive resistance. The protagonist of his seminal work *The Life and Times of Michael K.* would definitely pass for one who stands for Gandhian values. Michael K. is non-violent, non-cooperative and also uses passive resistance as a weapon to confront the oppressor.

Coetzee presents his protagonists and their struggle to find an identity in the face of aggressive behavior in apartheid South Africa. Their struggle is that of all like-minded people of South Africa who opposed the apartheid regime. Coetzee gives a spiritualistic edge to the manner in which his protagonists confront the unfeeling and aggressive coloniser. They grow in stature philosophically and spiritually.

Thus, a study of Coetzee’s novels reveals that though Coetzee does not implicitly
refer to South Africa as such, he uses the political and social condition in South Africa to explore the impact of violence on the human psyche. It is done so because, for Coetzee, it is not the land or the race that is important, it is the human condition that he is concerned about. It is only that in the happenings in South Africa and the apartheid regime he finds a source to study the human mind. The coloniser-colonised dialectic enables Coetzee to examine the manner in which those who have the power and those who do not, react in the face of violence. He records how these entities grapple with issues of the conflicting mind.

Coetzee’s presence in South Africa gave him a first hand knowledge of what was happening in his country in the apartheid regime. Witnessing the atrocities and being sympathetic to the case of the blacks in spite of being white, Coetzee was able to fictionalise the imperialistic encounter and write from the stand point of a humanist interested in the welfare of fellow human beings. He shows how the downtrodden, the so called weak in the society rise to the occasion and go about with life without making compromises. Hence the whites are shown as foils to the blacks in terms of strength of character. The life of the blacks is precarious but they are spiritually strong nevertheless. Coetzee writes like a detached observer and does not offer judgments or solutions. The novels are all open-ended and are subject to many interpretations and readings.

Coetzee’s novels are powerful statements on the inhuman institution of apartheid. However, they are also sensitive studies on the human psyche. Coetzee’s novels make subtle forays into the impact of aggression on the human mind. In his novels he advocates a passive nonviolent approach to violence. Based on the study of Coetzee’s works it is surmised that his protagonists are evolved human beings, in spite of the fact that they often come from the lower strata of society. Though some of them are
deformed physically, they are capable of immense profundity. It has to be noted that Coetzee has definitely been influenced by Indian spiritual thought especially the Gandhian principles of Satyagraha (Truth) and Ahimsa (Non-violence). This is evident in the passive resistance of his native protagonists, against violence meted out to them by the whites. Thus it can be argued that Coetzee’s position as a twentieth century fiction writer is confirmed by the way he handles fiction in a very engaging manner to respond to the immediate issues of his time.

J.M. Coetzee established himself as a fine writer who responded to the gruesome times in his country and came up with novels which reverberated with intensity of feeling. Coetzee inspires his readers to know what it is that cannot hurt others. In his novels he repeatedly makes the point that we commit evil because we are capable of it and we cause suffering to others. He also elucidates that the evil inflicted by others can be withstood by the essential qualities of non-violence and passive resistance. The impact of Coetzee’s works can be summed up in David Attwell’s words, “In hindsight one can see that Coetzee’s struggle has always been to find appropriate points of entry into the narrative of colonisation for the specific interventions of which a self-consciously fictional discourse is capable.” Coetzee indeed remains a highly acclaimed author today. As David Attwell reiterates “Coetzee in fact represents no one but himself – after all, he is distinguished not only by a Cape-specific background but also by a degree of intellectualism unmatched by any other South African writer”
Notes

1 David Attwell, ed., Doubling the Point Essays and Interviews

2 Peter Barry, Beginning Theory. (Manchester: Manchester University

3 J M Coetzee, Giving Offence: Essays on Censorship (Chicago, the

4 David Attwell, J.M. Coetzee South Africa and the Politics of Writing

5 David Attwell, J.M. Coetzee South Africa and the Politics of Writing