Preface

In the thesis *The Ideology, Politics and Method of Space: A Study of Selected Fiction of J.M. Coetzee*, space is presented as a concept that is at once physical, cultural, political and ideological. Many spaces are thus presented as co-existing within the same physical space. As Michel Foucault explains, space is a “site of relations.” As a cultural concept, it plays a significant role in the making of a nation. In this sense, space becomes an essential constituent of social and cultural processes defining society and investing it with meanings. Since space is both a physical and mental construct, it can be said to be simultaneously conceived, perceived and lived in different ways.

The material and ideational nature of space is blended and incorporated into the tale of South Africa that J. M. Coetzee seeks to draw through the second novella of *Dusklands* (1974) titled ‘The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee,’ *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), and *Disgrace* (1999). In this study, the focus restricts itself to the above mentioned three works of J.M. Coetzee as they illustrate an oblique and imaginative account of the crucial events that marked and defined the history of the South African nation. My reading of Coetzee’s first novel, *Dusklands*, has its focus solely on ‘The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee,’ the second novella in the book.

The thesis features a selective use of ideas on spatiality as a cultural concept and on postmodern metafictional aspects that underlie the concept of narrative space. Notions of what constitutes historical ‘truth’ and artistic truth are explored in this study, as is the intellectual stand taken by Coetzee against belligerent aggression in general, the
imperialist enterprise being but one. In the course of this research, my interest in Coetzee’s writing has become centered on his native space, the Cape and its colonial history, as also on the more contemporary happenings in the Republic of South Africa once it chose the difficult path of democracy. In the analysis of Coetzee’s literary space, one comes across the unique socio-geographical spaces the novelist attempts to bring into being. The material dimension of human agency in the actualization of cultural spatiality through power relations is also dealt with. The main thrust of the thesis at this stage becomes a reading on postcolonial discourse.

Literature does not simply report, comment on, or interpret real social space; rather it is involved in the manufacture of real social spaces. Through acts of inscription, Coetzee plots the South African landscape. The textual nature of space is emphasized through the use of the postmodern element of intertextuality and other related metafictional elements. The textual processes serve to highlight the colonial encounter and the imaging of the land and its people. The concept of social space in the thesis has been brought to bear on the reading of fictional narrative texts to illuminate the cultural and political conditions these texts present and to better account for textual narrative structures. My interest in these matters stems from a desire to comprehend more fully our lived experience of the world.

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The introductory chapter is an attempt to arrive at a definition of space in relation to society. Space is defined in terms of a set of relations identifiable at political, cultural, historical and ideological levels. The second section of this chapter
makes an attempt to provide a broad analysis of the concerns discussed by Coetzee in his works. Coetzee’s position as a public intellectual and his stand on the role of the artist in society are discussed. As it becomes evident, the extraordinary political changes in South Africa over the past half a century must be read into the reading grids that form the writing of Coetzee’s novels.

Chapter two, ‘Geographical Spaces,’ is a discussion of how the ideology of imperialism creates unjust geographical spaces in South Africa. This chapter explores the ideological aspects of South African geographical space, as well as the possibilities and the emerging realities of its transformation. The chapter focuses on the ideological and political meaning of place and spatial relations set against the backdrop of colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid lives in South Africa. The political features of South Africa are fundamentally space-dependent, and geography does make a major difference in the lives of its inhabitants. This is a country that has seen the segregation of residential areas on the basis of race, the restriction of black urbanization, the system of migrant labor from rural areas to the towns, ethnicity and the formidable apparatus of state surveillance and control. Against this background, the reader’s attention is directed to the geography of South Africa as it intertwines with Foucault’s notions of power and knowledge.

Chapter three, ‘Body Spaces,’ is a discussion of the presentation of the body in Coetzee’s ‘The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee,’ Life and Times of Michael K and Disgrace. The body is shown as inscribed with meanings, the natural result of being part of a racist regime. The representation of the body as an interpretation of the Hegelian
master/slave relationship in the context of colonial enterprise is examined. Side by side, there is also an analysis of the body as a site of resistance and retribution. Reading the different strands together against the context of colonisation and apartheid policies will help to unfurl Coetzee’s response as an artist to the political situation in his country.

Chapter four, ‘Postmodern Narrative Spaces,’ focuses on the narrative strategy adopted by Coetzee. Coetzee’s work shows a blending of both postmodernism and postcolonialism. Postmodernism is an academic enterprise, whereas postcolonialism is seen as a political activity. The postmodern enterprise of exploring the absences and the silences in art becomes the postcolonial enterprise of exposing political acts of silencing and the imposition of an alien regime on a recalcitrant people in South Africa. Coetzee has always been vocal about the formative literary influences in his life. The influence of modernism, of Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka has helped Coetzee speak about the situation of his times in a unique manner. It has helped bring into the South African novel a concern with the nature of narrative that is more often associated with European and North American postmodernism. The distinctive quality that Coetzee possesses is a combination of textual and political preoccupations couched in a sparse prose style. Using the techniques of metafiction, Coetzee manages to convey the plight of the South Africans, both white and non-white in his country.

Coetzee represents a generation in South Africa that is shaped by apartheid, as his novels demonstrate. Moreover, Coetzee has tried to overcome the close relationship between his personal canon and the history of oppression in South Africa, in his life writing, since he
believes it is “… more productive to live out the question than to try to answer it in abstract terms. When I say I have ‘lived out’ the question I mean I have lived it out not only in day to day life but in my fiction as well” (Dagens Nyheter interview, 2003). Hence, it seems that in Coetzeean terms, fiction writing — fantasizing and storytelling — is not founded on abstract thought, given that finally the intellect alone will prove itself insufficient. Through the medium of cultural space as discourse, the thesis examines the South African world as Coetzee experienced and understood it.