Chapter V: Ethics of Coetzee and Achebe Against Racist Prejudices
Politics and Power in *A Man Of the People*

*A Man Of the People* is about politics and power. Money is a prerequisite to power and Micah Nanga is used in the novel as the symbol of corruption. He was a man of the people because he had money so even though the people completely knew him as a fraudulent man, they continued to worship him. In the story, money holds women, people and choices. To give further justifications:

In the first phase of the story, people were simply celebrating upon the anticipated arrival of Chief Micah Nanga, the most approachable politician and who was known to be a man of the people. Odili Samalu, a former student of Nanga and the protagonist of the story reminisced some of events that happened in his life involving Nanga and some reasons why he has always disliked him. Surprisingly, Nanga was still able to remember Odili’s name, offered Odili a scholarship, and claimed that he wants to see Odili again, as the line goes: “He slapped me again on the back and said I must not fail to see him… I became a hero in the eyes of the crowd.”

When Nanga was talking on the phone to T.C Kobino and was presumed by Odili to be the minister of public construction, Nanga was telling him about the tarring of the road which involves money and he won’t be able to tell TC: “What? Don’t worry about the Press. I will make sure that they don’t publish it…”

Money controls even the press, the media and in this case, Nanga was definite about how money is able to make his name more appealing to the public: “He drank two bottles of beer, smoked many cigarettes and then got a ‘dash’ of five pounds from
the Minister..."-Odili; “If I don’t give him something now, tomorrow he will go and write rubbish about me...”-Nanga³

One of the most interesting lines that would further establish a strong argument is the case of Edna. She was suppose to marry Nanga because of money and because her father, Odo insists her so. Nanga had the money, and that’s what exactly Odo needed for himself. He needed money to suffice his personal desires; he needed money and that’s what made him want Nanga for Edna, Edna didn’t want to marry Nanga, but as she claimed he paid for her to go to college.

Additionally, to further strengthen my claim that Odo indeed does want money, when he talked to Odili about running against Nanga, money would be a tool of his win of course, hence he told Odili:

I hear that they have given you much money to use in fighting against my in law... if you have a sense in your belly you will carry the money into your bed chamber and stow it away and do something useful with it...But if you prefer to throw it away why not ask me to help you?⁴

Last but not the least, is one of the most disappointing thing about Maxwell Kulamo, a lawyer who aims to fight the ongoing fraudulent system is that he accepted money from Nanga’s party. He resulted to bribery so that his party would be able to pay for the minibus. This act violates two aspects of morality: one is the intention and two is the context. The intention of Max to receive the money is just so to be able to pay for the minibus and because his party needed funds; this already specifies deception and dishonesty to the public figure, for the reason that, there are a lot of
other ways to earn money not just accepting something from the other part. Another as it involves context; from the beginning, Odili has understood that Max wanted a clean fight, but why did he result to one immoral act? Hence the fight will not be clean at all. He confirmed so himself, that the world is indeed manipulated by money. Maxwell knows that you can’t fight without money.

I consulted the other boys and we decided to accept… it paid for the minibus…”; “Now you tell me how you propose to fight such a dirty war without soiling your hands just a little. Just you tell me.5

_A Man of the People_ teaches us that politics and power requires a lot of money. This is exposed from the story to the world and it is in fact a still living reality.

**Sexual Morality and Racial Symbolism**

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was set up to establish the truth in relation to past events as well as the motives for and circumstances in which gross violations of human rights occurred in South Africa. It was established to make reconciliation between the blacks and whites. But how does one create the collective subject that a national process of working through would seem to presume in a country where racial groups are so very differently implicated in their country’s history.

As a way of indicating the enormity of the task before the Commission, a skeptical prospective commissioner suggested that only literature can perform this miracle of reconciliation. J. M. Coetzee has done it beautifully in his literature.
Literature can offer a way of working through a collective history by examining three of Coetzee’s earlier novels.

Written during the 1980s, at the height of the apartheid era, these novels testify to the suffering engendered by apartheid precisely by refusing to translate that suffering into a historical narrative.

Rather than providing a direct relation of the history of apartheid, Coetzee’s narratives instead provide a way of relating to such a history. They teach us that the true work of the novel consists not in the factual recovery of history, nor yet in the psychological recovery from history, but rather in the insistence on remaining inconsolable before history.

The truth-telling aspect of Coetzee’s narratives consists not in the presentation of factual information but in the attempt to demonstrate a true grief, a grief that acquires a certain materiality or historical weight despite the insubstantial, fictional context. In *The Inferno*, the shade’s tears call forth a reciprocal response from Dante, who, like the reader, is moved by the suffering of the damned.

Dante’s tears bear transgressive witness to the tyranny of God’s Law, but they cannot effect reconciliation because Dante is powerless to alleviate the shade’s suffering; he and the shade remain on opposite sides of the Law. In the same way, Coetzee’s novels bear witness to the tyranny of apartheid while remaining powerless to effect reconciliation.

Acutely aware that, like Dante, he is no more than a tourist in an underworld of suffering, Coetzee nevertheless strives to affirm the ground of certain solidarity, an
affirmation that would look forward to a day when reconciliation would truly be possible.

Into the evening, as the shadows first lengthen, and then cover everything, I stand at the window. Hendrik crosses the yard on his way to the storeroom, The massed twitter of birds in the riverbed rises and wanes. In the last light the swallows swoop to their nest under the eaves and the first bats flit out. From their various lairs the predators emerge, muishond, meerkat. What are pain, jealousy, loneliness doing in the African night? Does a woman, looking through a window into the dark mean anything? I place all ten fingertips on the cool glass. The wound in my chest slides open. If I am an emblem then I am an emblem. I am incomplete, I am a being with a hole inside me. I signify something, I do not know what, I am dumb, I stare out through a sheet of glass into a darkness that is complete, that lives in itself, bats, bushes, predators and all, that does not regard me, that is blind, that does not signify but merely is. If I press harder the glass will break; blood will drip, the cricket-song will stop for a moment and then resume. I live inside a skin inside a house. There is no act I know of that will liberate me into the world. There is no act I know of that will bring the world into me. I am a torrent of sound streaming into the universe, thousands upon thousands of corpuscles weeping, groaning, gnashing their teeth. ⁶
Following the publication of *Doubling the Point*, a wide-ranging collection of essays by and interviews with Coetzee, together with the book-length study, J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing, David Attwell has emerged as one of the principal apologists for the work of Coetzee.

In order to defend him against the influential neo-Marxist critique of Coetzee within South Africa, which accused the novels of failing to represent adequately the material conditions of apartheid, critics such as Attwell and Susan Gallagher have endeavored to rehistoricise Coetzee’s fiction by emphasizes its discursive relevance to the time and place in which it was produced.

However, this rehistoricization of Coetzee’s work sits uneasily with the deliberately unspecific locales of much of Coetzee’s fiction and with Coetzee’s own insistence on artistic autonomy and on the relationship of rivalry, even enmity that pertains between the discourses of literature and history. In reading the novels back into their context, Attwell admits that he is forced to read Coetzee against the grain, a practice that is somewhat at odds with the meticulous respect for Coetzee’s views both as a novelist and as a theorist that he demonstrates throughout the interviews collected in *Doubling the Point*.

In a review of *Life and Times of Michael K*, Nadine Gordimer ascribes Coetzee’s decision to write what she describes as allegory to revulsion from history. It seemed he chose allegory out of a kind of opposing desire to hold himself clear of events and their daily, grubby, tragic consequences in which, like everyone else in South Africa, he is up to his neck and about which he had an inner compulsion to write. So here was allegory as stately fastidiousness; or a state of shock.
Gordimer seems to be calling for a mode of realism in which places, events, and people are identifiably South African, as in, for instance, her own novel Burger’s Daughter, which chronicles the life of a real anti-apartheid activist.

Only this direct reference to historical reality, Gordimer seems to imply, rescues the novel from political irrelevance. However, as Rosemary Jolly has argued, Gordimer misunderstands the nature of Coetzee’s allegories. The indeterminate settings of the narratives are not simply symptoms of a perverse desire to dehistoricize apartheid; they are instead an attempt both to represent and to contest the historical conditions of apartheid. Jolly thus reads Waiting for the Barbarians as a frontier novel, true to the violent domain of conquest in the present . . . but . . . remaining faithful to the future in that its crucial locations are those which suggest the potential for transition. I would add that Coetzee’s novels do not provide an allegory of the historical events themselves but of our relation to these events.  

The state of shock that Gordimer presents as her diagnosis of the condition from which Coetzee’s novels suffer is in fact the novels’ own self-diagnosis, the explicit subject of each narrative. Rather than pretending that the atrocities of apartheid do not induce a state of shock, Coetzee’s novels dramatize the problem of relating to a history that defies relation.

They attempt to work through their inability to relate to the history of apartheid, their inability to normalize relations between history and the novel.
As a way of delineating his own agonistic relation to apartheid as a dissident white South African, Coetzee constructs a Lyotardian difference between the privileged position of the narrator and the oppressed position of an other whose story the narrator seeks to narrate.

To put it another way, characters such as Friday in Foe, Michael K in *Life and Times of Michael K*, and the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians* remain radically incommensurable with the narratives in which they find themselves; unhomely figures of and for alterity, they embody precisely that material history of suffering that the narrative is unable to represent. Their bodily presence indicates an unmournable, unverbalizable history, a material history that refuses to be translated into words or conjured away by language.

Their status as the racially marked is indicated less by their actual skin color, to which Coetzee makes little or no reference, than by their simultaneous invisibility/visibility. On the one hand, their invisibility as subjects is first of all signaled by their lack of patronyms. Friday and Michael K can only lay claim to first names, while the barbarian girl lacks any name whatsoever.

This lack of the name-of-the-father indicates their extrinsic relation to the narrative’s symbolic order, to the socio-linguistic sign system that governs human relations. They become the negative image of the Enlightenment subject: a sign of the uncivilized, the inhuman, the native, the infant. On the other hand, the physical disfigurements of these figures of alterity render their status as the objects rather than the subjects of history all too visible.
Their disfigurements literally disfigure or un-name them, marking them as bodies that fail to function as the sign of individual humans. As if to emphasize the absence of an interior life, their history is hieroglyphically inscribed on the surface of their bodies, at precisely the points where we would conventionally expect to be granted access to the depths of an interior life: the eyes and the mouth.8

Their disfigurements function to deny us this access: Friday’s severed tongue and Michael K’s harelip constitute literal speech impediments, while the barbarian girl’s blindness renders her gaze expressionless and un-interpretable. Their disfigurements do not so much speak for themselves, as the hackneyed expression goes, as illustrate the impossibility of speaking. They testify to the impossibility of verbal testament.

However, there are also moments in each text where these figures of alterity are more than passive objects, moments of obscure activity that hint at the possibility of a secret interior life. These moments of obscure activity are acts of silent, inconsolable mourning, moments in which these non-subjects actively bear witness both to a loss of history and to specific histories of loss.

Friday scatters petals over the waves to mark the place, or so we are invited to surmise, where his fellow slaves lie submerged. Michael K grows pumpkins and melons in a field fertilized with his mother’s ashes. And the barbarian girl, at least in the Magistrate’s dreams, gestures toward the site of her loss by constructing a model fort, a replica not only of the fort in which she was tortured but also of the fort of a
previous civilization, whose ruins lie buried outside the gates of the present settlement.

Like the narrators, we as readers are only able to witness these acts of mourning from afar, unable to say for sure what losses these figures are mourning. Unable to bridge the gap between their world and ours, we are nevertheless overwhelmed by a desire to align ourselves with their mournful gaze and participate in their inconsolable work of mourning.\(^9\)

In all three novels, then, the reader is invited to identify with the narrator’s inability to identify with the other. Whereas Gordimer invites her readers to identify with both white and black characters, to imagine these different subject positions, Coetzee erects a kind of color line marking the limits of identification, even while he allows the exact color of his luminal characters to remain indeterminate.

In representing the interior life of black and white characters, Gordimer operates under the liberal humanist assumption that the novelistic act of empathy can transcend difference. Coetzee’s novels implicitly argue that to transcend the other’s alterity is to efface that alterity, that the act of empathy is the attempt to imagine the other as the same, as another version of the self.

Coetzee’s novels insist on the difference of the other in order to explore the impossible task of relating to the other as other. They suggest that the possibility of reconciliation lies not in our ability to empathize with the other but rather in an experience of abjection, in which, instead of gaining imaginative access to the experience of another subject, one experiences a radical loss of subjectivity, an
experience if one can speak of experience in the absence of a subject that approximates brings one closer, more proximate to the experience of being other.

“Instead of entering into the experience of another, one experiences oneself as other, as abjected beyond the social order that grounds one’s subjectivity, as subjected to the tyranny of a law that negates one’s very existence as an autonomous subject. The act of reading is thus transformed from an act of empathy that takes place firmly within the realm of the human into a radical experience of abjection, in which we are violently expelled from the realm of the human and precipitated toward the realm of the inhuman.”

For it is only in this underworld of suffering that it becomes momentarily possible to witness, if not to participate in, the true grief of the other.

Before embarking on my readings of the novels, I want briefly to explore two theoretical traditions that are central to Coetzee’s mode of bearing witness. As a way of foregrounding what I see as the complementary relationship between the ethical stance of Coetzee’s novels and their politics, between their relation to alterity and their relation to history, I will suggest that both deconstruction and negative dialectics, often thought of as belonging to antithetical critical traditions, are in fact similarly inconsolable ethico-political practices.

Theodor Adorno’s 1962 essay Commitment sheds a crucial light on Coetzee’s insistence on the autonomy of art. Adorno argues, taking Bertolt Brecht’s political allegories as his exemplum, that committed art i.e., art that is directly committed to a political cause is always
poisoned by the untruth of its politics. Because they bear on the external reality of history, the politics of Brecht’s plays must necessarily remain untrue to the internal reality of the work of art.\textsuperscript{11}

This is not to say that a work of art can not contain a political message, but that this message has to be understood first and foremost within the work of art itself, as the sum, or, to use the Marxist term, the totality, of its internal relations. For Adorno, only the totality of the work of art has any relation to the society in which it is produced: like Georg Lukács, who also opposed Brechtian theatre but for very different reasons, Adorno sees the work of art as revealing the relations of production, the economic forces, that structure reality. However, opposing Lukács’ adherence to the mimesis of realism, an adherence that, as Susan Gallagher points out, is still in evidence in the neo-Marxist dismissal of Coetzee. Adorno argues that art should provide a negative image of society, one that stands in dialectical contradiction to society, as its critique.

For Adorno, there can be no accommodation between the spheres of life and art, no shared or homologous content, even though there is nothing in art which did not originate in the empirical reality from which it breaks free.

It is no coincidence that the two artists that Adorno cites as having produced this negative image of society are the same two authors that have been widely seen, not least by Coetzee himself, as Coetzee’s literary predecessors: Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett.

Nevertheless, when art is called upon to declare its commitment to the revolutionary struggle, in 1930s Germany or 1980s South Africa, it is unsurprising
that Lukácsian realism comes to seem a good deal more satisfactory than the hermetic work of a Kafka or a Coetzee, in all its fastidious refusal not to be poisoned by the untruth of politics.

**Ills of the Post-Colonial State in The Anthills of the Savannah**

Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) exposes the ills of the African postcolonial nation-state in an effort to propose credible alternatives to them. These alternatives are best described as horizons because they do not take the form of systematic solutions or detailed political and social programs. In Anthills we find a groping for possibilities that are largely fragmentary, undecided, often amorphous. Its approach to the question of the nation-state is, moreover, marked by a deep ambivalence. This ambivalence, I will argue, should not be construed as the result of the author's inability to come to terms with the implications of his contradictory views but instead reflects inherent tensions that characterize the postcolonial nation-state and the available alternatives that may remedy its abuses. With the critique Achebe mounts against the nation-state in Anthills, he attempts to clear a space that will enable fresh possibilities and open new horizons. Some of the new possibilities he suggests capture the political alternatives that Africans have put forward to redress the failure of many African nation-states to fulfill their peoples' aspirations. In so doing, Achebe represents the contemporary political situation in its irreducible complexity, refusing to resolve the contradictions that necessarily obtain from such a painstaking representation.

Achebe assigns enlightened intellectuals a significant role in imagining alternatives to the nation-state. He holds that an enlightened leadership of
intellectuals, represented in Anthills notably by Chris Oriko and Ikem Osodi, could be instrumental in leading Nigerians and Africans beyond the impasses of their nation-states. He also proposes the emulation of indigenous forms of government, which valorize plural decision-making and horizontal power relations. This return to pre-colonial societies for the political lessons they can afford may appear atavistic and reactionary, but in Achebe's hands they hold up a mirror to the nation-state, not only to further undermine its legitimacy, but to compete with it for political significance. Alongside enlightened intellectuals and the horizontal political institutions of traditional societies, Achebe dramatizes a woman, Beatrice Okoh, in positions of leadership, something that nationalism has disregarded and that postcolonial intellectuals have started to consider seriously. The novel concludes with a small multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, and religiously diverse group, which offers some utopian possibilities.

The novels of the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe present an essential guide to colonial African history and to the tragic characters this history of mutual misunderstanding has created. *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe’s first novel in more than 20 years, continues his exploration and condemnation of political corruption in post-colonial Africa, an Africa that is the product of (though not excused by) its past.

The post-colonial world of *Anthills of the Savannah* is a world like that of *A Man of the People*. The novel is set in a backward West African state called Kangan, and concerns three English-educated friends who, after a military coup, abruptly find themselves in the roles of president, commissioner of information and editor of the nation’s principal newspaper.
His Excellency, called Sam by his old classmates Chris Oriko and Ikem Osodi, has surrounded himself with a ludicrous executive council, a solid wall of court jesters. They have no problem worshiping someone like him. Added to Sam’s fear of betrayal is his anger at the failure of Abazon Province, the home of his classmate Ikem, to approve a referendum to make him president-for-life. And now, as the novel opens, a delegation from a village in the province has come to demand help for their drought-stricken land.

And how true this is, for Ikem, now editor of The National Gazette, is a crusading poet-journalist who, in scathing editorials, opposes the circus-like public executions in Kangan as well as Sam’s personal bids for deification by having his face placed on the national currency. He is also Achebe’s alter-ego, believing that a genuine artist, no matter what he says he believes, must feel in his blood the ultimate enmity between art and orthodoxy. Ikem longs for union with earth and earth’s people. His love of truth and people transcends political ideology, and he becomes a popular hero among students after Sam dismisses him from the Gazette. In a speech at the University of Bassa, his passion rises to the level of poetry:

You must learn for a start to hold your own student leaders to responsible performances; only after you have done that can you have the moral authority to lecture national leadership . . . I see too much parrotting, too much regurgitation of half-digested radical rhetoric . . . Revolutions are betrayed just as much by stupidity, incompetence, impatience and precipitate actions as by doing nothing at all.12
During this speech Ikem severely criticizes His Excellency. Sam retaliates by making him and the Abazon delegation scapegoats for all Kangan’s ills, then has Ikem arrested. His accidental death follows. Chris, his lover Beatrice Okoh, a secretary in the Ministry of Finance, and Ikem’s pregnant lover Elewa, know their incarceration is next. As Chris goes into hiding, hoping to escape to Abazon Province, Achebe’s novel achieves nearly unbearable suspense, as the entire country collapses into student revolt, midnight raids by Sam’s secret police, the State Research Council, and a coup d’état. As in Shakespeare’s portrayals of the endless succession of kings to the throne, Achebe shows African revolutions as a tragic, surreal cycle of the powerful and self-serving devouring each other, with the people and their wisdom untouched.

Considered in terms of Achebe’s body of work, *Anthills of the Savannah* replays familiar scenarios. There seems, however, to have been a maturing of his perceptions about politics and the human condition. The novel’s only flaw is Achebe’s unwillingness to fully develop Sam by entering as thoroughly into his heart as he does Ikem’s, Chris’ and Beatrice’s. In every other way, however, Achebe has written a story that sidesteps both ideologies of the African experience and political agendas, in order to lead us to a deeply human, universal wisdom expressed so succinctly by Ikem:

> We always take the precaution of invoking the people’s name in whatever we do. But do we not at the same time make sure of the people’s absence, knowing that if they were to appear in person their
scarecrow presence confronting our pious invocations would render our words too obscene even for sensibilities as robust as ours?\(^{13}\)

**Non-Committing Individual of ‘Life And Times Of Michael K’**

One of the most influential of Coetzee’s work, it proposes the theory of the non-committing individual. To read the text, or rather the thing itself, the actual material manuscript, is to be led beyond the text, as if it were possible to follow the image’s lead, its silent movement toward a world beyond the world of representation. Kristeva describes abjection as:

… the communication of a nonverbal speech: a sad analytic silence hovers above a strange foreign discourse, which strictly speaking shatters verbal communication . . . it is necessary that the analyst’s interpretative speech . . . be affected by it in order to be analytical. On this second descent, as the nonnarrator attempts to prise open Friday’s mouth, he dislodges a stream of bubbles: Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused.\(^ {14}\)

These strange, foreign syllables constitute a material language, the language, as it were, of material history, the bodily sign of a substantial grief. They function as a form of metonymic remembrance, in their silent recollection of the modalities of Friday’s silence, of the Os that Friday is said to utter as a mode of prayer in Robinson Crusoe; of the walking eyes that Friday draws on the slate that Foe gives him; of the aporia of Friday’s history as he traces it on the surface of the water; of the hole in Susan’s narrative, which is also described as an eye or a mouth; and even of the island itself.
The last line of the novel wakes us out of the narrative, out of the dream of being able to encounter our darker selves, but nonetheless suggests a possible transference of the affective bubbles of Friday’s nonspeech into the tears of the nonnarrator, and perhaps the reader: His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face. The nonnarrator’s eyelids function as a threshold. The bubbles of Friday’s lament cannot occupy the same space as the nonnarrator’s tears, tears that announce the cessation of the dream, the moment of severance, the irrevocable moment of waking in which we are forced to recognize the gulf that lies between a privileged world where we may dream of slipping overboard into a text and the realm of actual material history.

Coetzee’s novels, I have suggested, labor in memory of the hope of a just future. Although *Life and Times of Michael K* seems initially to function as an apocalyptic projection of what might have happened in South Africa had the National Party not been forced to grant free elections (civil war), it ultimately functions as an affirmation, as a promise of the survival of human nature beyond the end of history and civilization.¹⁵

Critics have rightly read the novel in terms of an opposition between nature and culture. However, even the most sensitive of these readings have tended to account for this opposition by positing an ambivalence at the heart of Coetzee’s novelistic sensibility. Michael Valdez Moses, for instance, sees Coetzee’s work as
oscillating between a Rousseauistic nostalgia for the natural state of man and a Nietzschean self-reflexive scepticism that realizes the impossibility of such a return.

Moses fails to make sense of this tension beyond suggesting that the scepticism tempers, or even cancels out, the nostalgia. Rita Barnard also focuses on an opposition between nostalgia and scepticism, but suggests, via a reference to Adorno, that Coetzee’s nostalgia is directed toward the future.

She narrowly misses the revolutionary potential of Adorno’s negative dialectics by attributing a naive utopian dimension to this nostalgia, concluding by suggesting that Coetzee’s novels look forward to a time in which the novel could again invoke, not ironically, but lyrically, the ‘country ways’ of the pastoral.

To return to such a mode of representation would constitute another forgetting, another denial of history. Against such utopian nostalgia, and in line with Adorno’s sense of the dangers of aestheticization, Coetzee’s novels instead strive never to forget: they certainly look forward to the possibility of justice or freedom, or in the South African context to a day in which humanity would no longer be stunted by the unnatural or inhuman relations of apartheid; however, such a day is predicated not on a utopian nostalgia but on our capacity to live in remembrance.

Nevertheless, Barnard’s otherwise excellent article is a useful exploration of the tension between Coetzee’s critique of South African pastoralism and his own pastoral hankerings. In his critical study *White Writing* (1988), Coetzee shows how Afrikaner pastoralism functions as an ideological evacuation of the landscape, an erasure of the native presence and labor. As Barnard puts it, this secret displacement
is the historical precondition of the Afrikaner’s idyllic map of rural homesteading, by which he is able to claim that the land belongs to him and he to it.

Although Barnard later acutely suggests that K finds a way to reclaim displacement, invisibility, tracklessness, as a form of freedom, early on in her essay she suggests that Coetzee’s response to this forgetting is a simple act of recovery: Coetzee renders visible the places that the system would rather keep out of sight and mind. Had this been Coetzee’s strategy, he would surely have written a realist anti-pastoral, which would have laid bare the material conditions of rural labor. Instead, I would argue that, rather than rendering visible that which was excluded, the novel exposes the mechanism of exclusion; it remembers not native labor itself but the Forgetting of that labor.

The novel begins as if it were indeed possible to relate the life and times of Michael K, as if it were possible to write a subaltern history. However, by the end of the first section, K has eluded the surveillance of the seemingly omniscient third person narrative, abdicated his position as subject, and found a way out of his life and times. Attempting to become no more than a speck upon the surface of the earth, K digs himself a hole in the Karoo and enters a state of hibernation in which his body begins to disappear, in mute articulation of his refusal to be remembered, his desire only to be forgotten.

After he is dug up and taken to a military hospital, a doctor takes up the narrative, and with it, the task of memory. Finding K’s vanishing act a scandalous affront to his scientific knowledge, The body, I had been taught, wants only to live he
attempts to feed, to remember, K against his will. K attempts to question the nature of the doctor’s desire:

And then, in his longest speech of the novel, K places the forgotten life of his mother against the doctor’s claim that no one is forgotten:

My mother worked all her life long, he said. She scrubbed other people’s floors, she cooked for them, she washed their dishes. She washed their dirty clothes. She scrubbed the bath after them. She went on her knees and cleaned the toilet. But when she was old and sick they forgot her. They put her away out of sight. When she died they threw her in the fire. They gave me an old box of ash and told me, ‘Here is your mother, take her away, she is no good to us.’

This passage is key to understanding K’s own bid to be forgotten as a mode of remembrance, as an attempt to identify with the way in which his mother has been forgotten. The doctor is almost right to suggest that K is not so much on hunger strike as merely holding out for the food that he grew for himself in the veld.

K does indeed crave the pumpkins grown on a farm that may or may not be that of his mother’s half-remembered childhood, in a field fertilized by what may or may not be her ashes. But we know that this food offers K little physical nourishment; it only assists him in his attempt to disappear.

For in eating the pumpkins, he incorporates not so much his mother as the absence of a mother whom even he cannot remember. Shortly after her death he finds that he did not miss her, except insofar as he had missed her all his life.
His time on the farm is an attempt to identify not so much with his mother’s idealized memory of freedom as a child as with the un-freedom of her forgotten life as a domestic servant. He attempts to live in remembrance of his mother by eating the nothing of her existence.

Another way of putting this would be to say that K’s body attempts to follow the path of his mother’s disappearance. At the beginning of the novel, K’s mother seems to be dying of swollen limbs, almost as if her body is rebelling against the hidden, forgotten nature of her life, almost as if her body, and its history of suffering, is clamouring for remembrance.

Thus K’s filial devotion, his attempt to transport her back to the home of her childhood, is already a labor of mourning. As he wheels her out through the suburbs of Cape Point and into the veld, he has already begun to grapple with the weight of her history, with a history that has grown, to borrow a term from Foe, substantial.

And when his mother, grown impossibly large, is suddenly translated into a tiny packet of ashes, how could this experience not prove traumatic for K? How could it not prove to be a crisis of remembrance? In reducing his mother’s swollen body to ashes, it is as if the hospital has refused to recognize her demand to be remembered and actively consigned her to historical oblivion.

Thus K’s cultivation of his mother’s ashes, his dogged refusal to forget a mother that he cannot remember, is not just the working out of a private or personal grief. It is a protest against the state’s refusal to remember; it is an attempt to remember a whole class of people that the state would rather forget, a people whom they would rather lock out of sight in camps, as a fellow worker explains to Michael,
a people who they would have come on tiptoe in the middle of the night like fairies and do their work, dig their gardens, wash their pots, and be gone in the morning leaving everything nice and clean.

K’s labor as a gardener is thus simultaneously an attempt to identify with his mother’s disappearance and a protest against this disappearance, a protest against the forgetting of labor. The swelling of the pumpkins, which parallels the swelling of his mother’s limbs, recalls this ambivalence. On the one hand, they assist K in his attempt to disappear; on the other, as they begin to ripen they threaten to betray his secret, nocturnal labor (he only tends to his pumpkins at night, for fear of being observed), as if they too were clamoring for remembrance.

K himself understands his gardening as a mode of remembering the future, as an attempt, in a time of war, to keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children.

K’s own vocabulary, together with the description of the two hills that form the crevice into which he burrows as plump breasts, makes it clear that his desire to maintain a connection with the land is intimately bound up with his refusal to sever the ties between himself and his dead mother.

His labor of love fulfills not only his filial responsibilities to his mother but also his paternal responsibilities: he thinks of his pumpkins not only as the earth’s but also as his own children. Melancholia is thus rewritten as ethical commitment, a commitment that, like Coetzee’s commitment to his art, is also a refusal to
acknowledge what others see as the more immediate political concerns of the present, an untimely refusal to accept that the time for gardening was when the war was over.

Interestingly, Moses also makes this connection between K’s commitment to his gardening and Coetzee’s commitment to his art, but simultaneously seeks to qualify the radical force of this desire to live outside history: Just as K must ultimately acknowledge the hold that society has upon him, and the transitory and effectively powerless state of the solitary reverie, so too must Coetzee acknowledge that the world of fiction is not fully autonomous or immune to external forces.

Racial and Human Predicaments in No Longer at Ease

In No Longer at Ease, Chinua Achebe deals with the society of Umuofia which have been under colonial rule, historically for quite some time now and the people have adapted to the new mode of life. The story of Obi Okonkwo is the story of a lot of young men in his country. His tragedy is the tragedy of that period in the history of Umuofia and Nigeria when the people had lost their traditional ways of life and with it the values that had bound them together. Obi is born into this society where the old values no longer proves useful and is therefore dead. He finds himself at the cross-roads of culture. Achebe has brought in the picture of death to symbolize the death of a society that has been caught up in the dynamic world of change. The old order has certainly died making way for a new and transitional society, which is full of pitfalls, which the average man finds very difficult if not impossible to escape from. Yet this is the transitional stage of a society that has witnessed the dead of a decadent culture and the invasion of a powerful alien culture which is slowly assimilating itself into the ways of the Ibos. No Longer at Ease studies the deeply
personal dilemma that modern tribal societies face as a result of rapid Westernization and the central character epitomizes the death of native cultures.

*No Longer At Ease* relates mostly to Obi and his predicament. He finds that he is no longer at ease inside African society, where bribes are taken, where he is shunned for wanting to marry the woman he loves because of his ancestry, and where he is looked down upon because he has trouble relating the people from the village where he was born. He is not at ease, either, however, within British sectors of society. He is able to speak fluent and good English, he is able to analyze and discuss, but he is unable to relate to someone like Mr. Green. He also feels himself, like other Nigerians, as is evidenced in the retrospective scene about London, a stranger in a strange land while in England.

He misses Nigeria and is in fact nostalgic for her when he is away. He understands what he must do for his country and that she is important; however, his return is different from memory. Memory is, in many ways, shattered when he revisits Lagos and his old home of Umuofia. Furthermore, by the end he finds himself uneasy with his lot in life: he is broke, he has lost Clara and his mother and has given in to taking bribes. Finally he feels guilt for this but it is too late.

There is also the irony of Obi's name, which means the mind is at last at rest. It is supposed to mean that his father's mind is at rest because he was born a boy after so many girls; however, when juxtaposed against the title of the novel it becomes the greatest irony of the novel because Obi is, of course, never, himself, at rest.

The title is perfect because it describes a generation of Africans, in this case Nigerians that find themselves living in between worlds, cultures, and on the verge of
a post-colonial world. Language is an issue that arises out of all colonized countries because the colonized are educated in the language of the colonized. The issue arises time and again in Achebe's novel.

When Obi returns from England, the members of the Umuofian Progressive Union are not impressed by Obi's English because it is too casual. They like to listen to English when it is full and spoken in all its purple prose, in the way that the president of the UPU speaks it. This kind of English is a kind of class token. There is a certain amount of pride, ironically, in the language of the colonizer. This may be, however, because those admiring this English are from an older generation. When Obi is discussing eating yams with his hands he says that the younger generation can do this because they do not fear being called uncivilized, the same may apply to their mode of feeling regarding language.

The younger generation of Obi and Christopher, Obi's friend, plays with language much more easily. For instance Christopher speaks different kinds of English, depending on what he is talking about and to whom he talking. Obi claims that most educated Africans participate in this playfulness with language.

Obi has his own problems with language as is evidenced when he attempts to speak or read for his family in his own language and finds it difficult. His mother tongue, although never replaced sentimentally, is often replaced by an English that comes with more ease. He is able to translate into English and understand. Nevertheless, Ibo is still a special language, the language of home. It is the language that Clara speaks to him when they are alone for the first time, and it is the language he longs for while he is across the sea in England.
Obi never really believes that it is all right to take a bribe, he always seems to do so with a sense of guilt. Nevertheless, there may have been moments where it was simply a fall into complacency or even an act that arose out of the aftermath of desperation.

Obi's financial situation was poor, he owed money to many people, he had his scholarship to pay back, he had to take care of himself, and he had to send money home. The temptation to take a bribe was always present. However, what seemed to put him over the edge was not his financial burden but his loss of hope. He had lost his mother and his lover, plus he found himself constantly out of place and ill at ease. He longed for complacency and contentment, for the kind of attitude that Christopher, an educated friend much like himself, was able to take on. Perhaps he even took the bribes to illustrate that he knew the way things worked that he, too, even if he had gone away for four years, knew how the ways of the Civil Service functioned.

Still, this bribery was never something he was comfortable with but his feelings of unease only amplify by his guilt and his being caught.

Significantly, *No Longer At Ease* was published in 1960, the year of Nigeria's independence from England. This is significant because it is a novel that pertains to a trend of literature called post-colonial literature that still survives. There are many issues that arise out of post-colonialism, issues that authors and writers around the world have had to deal with. Africa, India, and the West Indies all have come out of the colonial era with a new literature that must address the problems that colonialism left behind. Some of the problems in post-colonial regions concern language, education, the conflict between traditional ways and Western or European ways, the
presence of the English, and corruption. Those who later moved into the land of the colonizer (for instance, Obi, while studying in England) experience an entire set of new problems such as nostalgia for home, memory, and the desire for the homeland.

**Ethical Compulsions of the Left**

With reference to the theme of origin and identity, and its related motifs of difference/differing/diversity and belonging/unbelonging, I shall investigate some crucial aspects informing Coetzee’s recent fiction, which has been veering towards a hybridization between the imaginary tale and autobiography, the novel of ideas and the moral essay.

Let us think of David Lurie, the cold, devious but intellectually bright white South African professor in *Disgrace*, a controversial novel where the question of post-apartheid racist violence mingles with a universal, existentialist concern for human and nonhuman animals, and especially of the elderly, depressed Australian writer Elizabeth Costello, the feminine authorial double who – like a persona caught up in a middle ground between sheer fiction and the public domain of intellectuals and academy – can be heard as lecturing and moralizing on vegetarianism and living creatures’ sacred rights throughout *The Lives of Animals* and *Elizabeth Costello*.

The protagonist of the latest (and so far critically unexplored) *Diary of a Bad Year*, an aging South African novelist now living in Australia (just like Coetzee), appears to be another displaced, blurred stand-in for the author, whose self-irony and ideological stances can be detected behind the postmodern mask. 17
Variously called as JC, Juan and Senior C by his inexperienced secretary – Anya, an attractive Filipino-Australian girl who is not afraid of criticizing his views and revising his essays – he has been asked by a German publisher to contribute to a volume of essays comprising the Strong Opinions of some important contemporary writers. The general topic should converge on the urgent issue of what is wrong with today’s world, and JC, now tired of writing fiction, sets out to compose thirty-one thought-pieces on politics, war and terrorism, the hypocritical ambiguities of Western democracy, the nature of the state and its relationship with the citizen.

These grand and dogmatic, left-leaning and often cynical generalizations, though, shall be matched by a more intimate Second Diary (a sort of confessional memoir) and, most significant of all, by a progressive visual fragmentation of the book’s pages, which present a typographical division into three tracks, with the top one enucleating the magisterial essay-opinions and the others lending weight to JC’s tender feelings for Anya, to the girl’s reactions and even her hardnosed boyfriend’s interpolations.

Shifting between public commitment and a counter-flow of emotions and doubts, the text manages to problematize any easy response to philosophical and political questions, while its polyphonic structure is in itself an index of provisionality and an unavoidable confrontation with difference and differing views: of the need for both a voice and a chorus of countervoices censoring authority.18

The strength of K’s resolve becomes clear in the final section of the novel, in which K disappears from the military hospital, returns to his mother’s room at Cape
Point, and then imagines, at the point of his own death, in the transferential space of a final reverie, returning to the abandoned farm, pushing a fellow tramp back to Prince Albert in another wheelbarrow.

This imagined journey, this dream of freedom in which K finally succeeds, perhaps, in taking his mother home, needs to be placed alongside that of the doctor, who imagines following K out into the veld in order to discover the secret of his existence. As in *Foe*, Coetzee presents us with a double ending, a double journey.

Just as the final narrator of *Foe* seeks to confirm his speculations about the shipwreck, the doctor runs after K to seek confirmation of his speculations about K’s sacred garden. But the act of disclosure itself remains a dream. K imagines revealing himself to a fellow tramp who is only present in the narrative as a trace, as the smell of whoever last slept on K’s final resting place of cardboard: it is only possible to reveal himself, or so it would seem, to his own spirit or shade.

*Life and Times of Michael K* is the negative image not only of South African history but also of its fictional predecessor, *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Each novelistic project collapses into the other. In *Life and Times of Michael K* the attempt to relate the interior life of an outcast suddenly finds itself external to this life, forced to take up the excluded, frustrated position of a narrator who cannot fathom the secret of K’s existence.
References

2. Ibid. p. 42.
3. Ibid. p. 46.
4. Ibid. p. 106.
5. Ibid. p. 126.
8. Ibid. p. 274.
10. Ibid. p. 37.
13. Ibid. p. 135.
15. Ibid. p. 234.
17. Ibid. p. 144.