Chapter V

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About a dozen novels of J. M. Coetzee, studied here in some detail in order to understand how he shows violence in the human relationships, open an unfamiliar world before the modern reader. It is a world in which men and women act and interact not necessarily as friends and benefactors of one another but as if they have been mutual sworn enemies since times immemorial. They show intense feelings more of hatred, suspicion and possession than of love, trust and sacrifice. They require no excuse for resorting to violence of every variety and they shed no tears of contrition for the pain they give others. They behave as if they were raw aboriginals who believe only in the lex talionis, the law of talons that governs the jungle life. In this they are atavistic in treatment of the other. They are, for most of the times, thrown into a relationship of retribution without which there is no peace for them. For them violence is genetic and therefore a way of life. In other words, Coetzee’s people in general are seen in their worst actions and reactions that shame the normal humanity. This is not without reason, for Coetzee revives a colonial world which is now no more but which once delighted in the worst possible humiliation and exploitation of humanity by its own kind. Here is humanity at its lowest if what we see and know of the exploiter is real. It does not fail to remind us of Wordsworth’s well-known expression:

“And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made of man.”

It is a relief to know that the time is now irrevocably past and man has understood the blessings of democracy. But, of course, man has really not got completely out of the trammels of violence as the state of affairs in the world show.

The post-colonial African literature in English has added a new dimension to the world literature today. It represents both the characteristic colonial and post-colonial crisis within Africa. Colonialism debilitated the natives on different levels: psychological, social, physical, cultural, political, sexual etc. Having become decolonized now, there is a new comprehensive awakening and the African literature holds mirror to it. The echoes of various upheavals in Africa can be noted in the African literature.
Violence, as the present study has tried to bring out extensively, is one of the recurring subjects in the African novel. A brief survey of the violence in the African novel in English is indispensable for understanding the life of Africa as well as the lives of its colonizers. It draws attention toward the violence in its diverse forms. It helps to understand the colonial and post-colonial African life. The African literature mainly reflects the traditional culture which is a substantial reality, and the colonial ethos which tried to erase it. It is interesting to note that while the traditional culture differs from region to region, the colonial ethos is almost uniformly the same in all the regions of Africa, though both the English and the French were two different colonizers. The uniform pattern confirms that violence is innate to colonization as it is an instrument of controlling power and the entire benefits attendant on it. The novel, a prominent and inclusive modern creative form sensitively and strongly reflects the African milieu. For the sake of convenience of the study a brief regionwise survey has been undertaken specifying the West African, Central and East African and Southern African novel.

A discussion of South African literature is not complete without taking into consideration its social and political background. South Africa entered a new era of freedom and democracy during the nineties. With the wounds of colonial atrocities still unhealed the literature of South Africa naturally focuses on the portrayal of the hostilities between the whites and the blacks.

Coetzee occupies a prominent place in South African literature. He is a writer with a commitment, a vision, and a balance that floodlights certain realities without splashing hyperbolic sentiments on it. His novels reflect his responsibility toward the situation in which he was born, lives and has grown. He exposes the reality of Africa mainly to lay bare the colonial impact on Africa. But apart from Africa some of his novels are set in other countries also and hence he, as if, encompasses the entire humanity in his novels. He attempts to state that any form of violence degrades the oppressed as well as the oppressor.

White imperialism and its upshot apartheid are still the chief threats vitiating the social structure of Africa. The blacks are as helpless as ever against the damage intentionally unleashed on them by the whites in power. They still suffer from the effects of colonization. This situation has prompted Coetzee to give a voice to the suffering of those who suffered the trauma of geographical displacement, alienation, crushing of personal relationships, and loss of national identity.
It is to be marked that despite the seamy side of colonialism repeatedly highlighted in his novels Coetzee remains optimistic in his approach, for he gives importance to the aspirations of the Africans in their struggle for liberty and human dignity by exposing the atrocities inflicted on them. He goes beyond the external historical details and endeavours to register the inner turmoil of his characters. He expresses the ways in which the lives of the natives were changed and affected due to colonization. At the same time he also focuses on the trauma and stress that injured the whites, suggesting that like war suffering also is internecine. He rationally interprets his observes of the Africans as well as the other weak and victimized people in the world. It seems that the past continually attracts Coetzee and therefore all the novels of Coetzee are artistic reverberation of some period of history.

Coetzee’s exploration of violence emphasizes his desire to bring about a finer sensitization toward human suffering. The two novellas in Dusklands offer a critique of war. The violence of the Vietnam War depicted in The Vietnam Project and the massacre of the Namaqua villagers exposed in The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee demonstrate that power exploits the natives brutally. The protagonists of Dusklands confirm the futility of violence. In Foe, Friday’s silence is a result of the various types of violence against him. His silence is his eloquence. Friday succeeds in emphasizing silently that the colonizers must respect the identity of the Negroes and return them their dignity. He does not remain an oppressed Negro but stands for all the oppressed and the silenced in the world. Silence thus becomes an expressive strategy in the novel claiming to bring the brutality to an end and making a plea to understand the silence of the exploited, the tyrannized, and the victimized. In Age of Iron, Mrs. Curren with her compassionate approach toward disparity in her society appeals to the whites to learn to love the blacks. The new South Africa is to be built on the same principle. For her, Vercueil is no more ‘rubbish’ or ‘good-for-nothing.’ She is enlightened to understand that no one is rubbish in the world but all are human. In her feeling of ‘all people together’ lies the answer and hope of the future of South Africa.

In In the Heart of the Country Magda epitomizes a whole complex of mental states such as despair, neglect, stupidity, emptiness, loneliness, and alienation imposed by the colonization. Her choice of staying and dying on the land of South Africa is the fulfillment of her wish of getting a permanent house on the blacks’ land. In the new South Africa love alone between the blacks and the whites will purify their
hearts. Through the struggle of Magda, her father, Hendrik, and Klein-Anna the novel gives a call to allow the natives to be in love with their land and its environment.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* Coetzee emphasizes the destruction of the land and exploitation of the inhabitants by portraying the oppressive regime’s policies to dominate the natives. In spite of their exploitation, the natives do not use violence against the Empire. The Magistrate’s dream that one day the barbarians will return along with the barbarian girl and then everything will be on a new footing indicates that the barbarian girl will be the saviour of her own people. She will create paradise on her land.

The civil and military violence in *Life and Times of Michael K* uproots the innocent Michael and Anna from their normal village life. But in spite of the violence all around, Michael discovers bliss of life in cultivation. He speaks sparingly with people but he speaks much with seeds, melons, pumpkins, leaves, water, mountains, soil etc. These issues in the novel emphasize the importance of the bond between the natives and their land. The novel gives a call to allow the natives to be in love with their land and its environment.

The violence in *Disgrace* explores the post-apartheid climate in South Africa. Lucy comprehends the post-apartheid violence very visibly. Her decision to continue to stay on her farm with her father’s stay in the vicinity emphasizes her bond with the land of South Africa. The whites and the blacks have to live together in South Africa.

*The Master of Petersburg, Elizabeth Costello, Slow Man, and Diary of a Bad Year* echo oppression by the dominant power structures born in the human context. They express Coetzee’s abiding convictions about violence and human suffering.

The violence in Coetzee’s novels reflects man’s psychological responses. A distressed and revengeful individual revolts and resorts to violence. In the same way greediness for power and superiority makes people violent. The violence inflicted on the blacks for power and the violence inflicted on the whites for revenge explain the nature and extent of violence in which humans can indulge mindlessly.

Silence in Coetzee is a metaphor to underline the awful effects of violence. Several of his characters speak very little. Friday, Vercueil, Michael, and the barbarian girl symbolize the voiceless sufferers as their voices have been silenced. Their silence is their tool to resist oppression. Though Vercueil, Michael, and the barbarian girl speak, they speak very less and become the exponents of the non-
violent resistance to oppression. Even Petrus speaks less but expresses his views very strongly. The white characters, Magda, Mrs. Curren, Lucy, David, and the Magistrate also silently submit themselves to the blacks’ power around them. It proves that peace will be achieved not by the bombs and murders but by the whites enlightening themselves to behave in a decent manner. It seems to be the only way of redeeming the grief-stricken past and even the painful present. It is also the way of dealing with the irreparable losses of the colonized.

Coetzee emphasizes the most essential principle of communication, namely the need to listen to the ‘other’ as human beings. His black characters are not at all human for the whites. In novel after novel Coetzee exposes and analyses violence and registers his sense of wrath, torment, antagonism, and loss; he questions the ultimate gain or validity of violence. The novels do not justify violence as natural or unnatural. They repeatedly ring a bell to ponder on the horrors of violence and learn lessons from the past.

Coetzee’s insight in metaphysical issues is an interesting topic for investigation. He refers repeatedly to paradise, purgatory, deliverance, guilt, and salvation. All these issues have great significance in Christianity. Coetzee does not refer to Christ or Christianity in his novels. However, if thought from the point of view of Christianity, it is obvious that Coetzee’s characters wish deliverance and are ready to suffer in purgatory in order to enter paradise. Dawn feels guilty and wants his deliverance by casting away from his mind the guilt of his involvement in the crime against the Vietnamese. Dawn, in a way, symbolically becomes the deliverer of his people by confessing the guilt of the Imperial power. Jacobus confesses that all are guilty including himself. Mrs. Curren thinks of her Nirvana and says that after death people like her will surely not be allowed in paradise. She wants her salvation but confesses that she can get it only if she loves children like John and people like Vercueil. Magda wants to acknowledge her own guilt and also her people’s sins. She accepts that she has to pass through a purgatory of fire and ice to a land of milk and honey. The Magistrate understands that it is not so easy to attain salvation. He dreams of the barbarian girl as a ‘saviour.’ It means that she should forgive the whites for their crimes against the barbarians and grant them a chance to build the earthly paradise again on her land. Anna suffers so much in the hospital that when she is discharged it is as if she is ‘escaping this purgatory.’ Michael comes from the Garden of Paradise. This paradise is lost to him as it is devastated by the cruel and powerful
military world. David goes to take shelter at Lucy’s home and she becomes his ‘second salvation’ in his disgrace. Lucy is ready to admit her rape as a penalty and obtain salvation. Elizabeth wishes to save her soul through her practice of vegetarianism. Coetzee’s metaphysical inclination implies the need to understand the human suffering and find out the spiritual ways to reduce it.

It is very important to note that as a rule all the black characters and even the exploited Vietnamese depicted by Coetzee are extremely poor and underprivileged while on the other hand his white characters are rich and dominating. It confirms that the suppression of the underprivileged is always easy in the dominating power structures.

The political philosophy that emerges from Coetzee’s novels is that politics must guard and groom one’s humanity for a happy, healthy, and honourable human existence. While accepting the Jerusalem Prize Coetzee said:

> The deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life. All expressions of that inner life, no matter how intense, no matter how pierced with exultation or despair, suffer from the same stuntedness and deformity. I make this observation with due deliberation, and in the fullest awareness that it applies to myself and my own writing as much as to anyone else.

This pronouncement confirms Coetzee’s aspiration. His observation of the dehumanizing impact of violence imposed on the fragile society compels him to stress the need of learning to love those offended by authority. It demonstrates his genuine urge to humanize the brutalized South Africa. He always opposed exploitation in his life. In 1971 he was denied permanent residence in the United States due to his involvement in anti-Vietnam War protests. Though his novels were rejected by South African publishers, he never discontinued his commitment to humanity.

It is easy to note that Coetzee has almost a Dickensian interest in children in almost all the novels except *Diary of a Bad Year*. Dickens was a champion of children, and so is Coetzee. Dawn’s child is made to witness the violence brought in his life by the war. The children who make fun of Jacobus learn the lesson of racial conflict. The children enjoy to the sight of Friday in his cellar as if he is a real cannibal. The little boy who comes to deliver a letter to Magda is horrified to see
Magda’s sexual obsession and depression. Bheki, John, and other black children are the victims of racial violence. The unnamed innocent boy is victimized by Colonel Joll. The Magistrate is worried about the children’s psychology when they see the inhuman punishment given to him by the Empire’s officials. Children make fun of Michael’s disfigurement. Dostoevsky’s sexual feelings for the child Matroyosha and the reference to one prostitute’s starving children throw light on their exploitation in the various societies in the world. The grand children of Elizabeth are not allowed by their parents to have supper with her because she is a vegetarian. Marijana’s children feel the interference of Paul in their family. But a completely new child is going to be born in *Disgrace*. Is this child is a symbol of the possible union of the blacks and the whites? Through the distressed and worried children, Coetzee stresses that if the elders do not behave sensibly and decently, their posterity will be emotionally and spiritually sterile. He warns that with their moral apathy the children will be the new social cannibals in the terror-stricken world.

It is needless to say that a good writer offers a whole universe of human sentiments and tries to touch the remotest corners of life, making one say what Dryden said about Chaucer’s poetry, namely, here’s God’s plenty. For instance, like the world of children Coetzee’s world of women is also a promising area of a detailed study. All the major women characters like Susan, Mrs. Curren, Magda, Lucy, and the barbarian girl are very sensitive and loving. They handle and understand the violent racial situations very keenly. It is interesting to critically examine the white women narrators, namely, Susan, Mrs. Curren, and Magda. The character of the barbarian girl can also be specially focused. It is possible to study the language used by women narrators. Even the role of a mother in Coetzee’s novels can be a subject of study. The other characters like Marilyn, Florence, Michael’s mother, Bev, Melanie, Rosalind, Anna, Matryosha, and Anya give the picture of women in various roles, all quite interesting and significant as well.

Coetzee’s characters are his spokesmen and women who manifest his approach to solve the racial problems. Confessor Dawn, guilty Jacobus, silent Friday, motherly Mrs. Curren, compromiser Magda, the compassionate Magistrate, cultivator Michael, and insightful Lucy symbolize Coetzee’s subtle answers to the violence. Contradictory Dostoevsky, novelist Elizabeth, dependent Paul, and strong opinion maker C symbolize meditations on the writing as an art along with other subjects.
Coetzee feels repeatedly drawn to the role of the writer and the art of storytelling. It shows his interest in and study of the creative process. Foe’s commercial view toward the art of writing, Dostoevsky’s responsibility as a writer, and Elizabeth’s evaluation of Paul West’s writing, and C’s responsibility of writing on various topics are all thoughts on a writer’s duties.

Colonialism was defended on the basis that the natives were not able to establish law and order for themselves and therefore they needed an external, superior controller in the form of colonizer, the notorious philosophy of the White Man’s Burden. Post-colonial literature mainly focuses on such colonial tendencies along with race relations, the effects of racism, apartheid, the genocides, mass executions of the natives, protest, displacement, exile, identity crisis, slavery, possession of land, and other subjects. Coetzee’s novels can be studied as post-colonial literary documents because almost all the features of post-colonial literature are found in them. They sustain Coetzee’s emphasis on ethnicity as an indisputable post-colonial area of dialogue. The colonial experiences of the people and their struggle for liberation are best expressed through the psychology of both the colonized and the colonizers. The opposition to the exploitation is expressed by concentrating on the interaction between the races. Though this study does not wholly concentrate on Coetzee as a post-colonial writer, such an approach can offer substantial evidence for a critical study of his novels.

All writing, whether creative or non-fictional, can be read as a political statement because it is a product of its time when extra-literary forces always keep operating even on a writer. One wonders if it is possible to read all the novels of Coetzee from the Marxist point of view though not intended so by him. This ideology is not overtly present in the writing. However, such a study will be a sizeable addition to the existing study. These novels focus on the clash between the dominant and repressed classes in the given age. They can be studied to see whether they imitate objective reality of the social structures as expected by the Marxism. It is possible to examine and understand the social events in his novels with reference to the material circumstances and the historical situation in which they occur. The society depicted in these novels mirrors its social, political, and ideological systems. It will be rewarding to study how Coetzee’s novels reflect the society that produced them.

Coetzee’s persistent engagement with violence can be compared to the Indian playwright Vijay Tendulkar, who is best known for his plays like *Silence! The Court*
is in Session, Ghashiram Kotwal, and Sakharam Binder. He depicts social, political, domestic, and sexual violence. Though Tendulkar’s subjects are a-political and not related to issues like apartheid or colonialism, the similarity between Tendulkar and Coetzee is that like Coetzee, Tendulkar’s work was inspired from life’s harsh realities and social upheavals. Like Coetzee, he courageously exposed political domination and the social hypocrisies. At the end of his plays the audience develops a deep understanding of the disturbing realities of the human situation. In the same way Coetzee succeeds in conveying the reality of human pain. Both Coetzee and Tendulkar received a wide praise as well as high censure from the established and the powerful.

Coetzee’s exploration of violence can also be compared to that of Doris Lessing, André Brink, Nadine Gordimer, and Alan Paton. These novelists highlight the moral and racial conflicts. They emphasize the need of the love between the blacks and the whites. They are South Africa’s most eminent writers struggling against apartheid.

Lessing pays attention in all her work toward human beings’ vicious weaknesses as well as latent power. Her stories and novels, set in Africa, depict the victimization of the natives by the whites and also expose the sterility of the white culture. She writes about the clash of cultures, racialism, and the fight between the individual beliefs and the collective good. Lessing was opposed by the political power. She was declared a persona non grata for her campaign against apartheid both in South Africa and Rhodesia.

Brink, an anti-apartheid activist is a key figure in the Afrikaans literary movement. He sought to use Afrikaans as a language to speak against the apartheid government. His novels deal with the racial themes. His novel Kennis van die Aand written in Afrikaans and later on translated in English as Looking on Darkness angered South African censors who banned it for its overt denunciation of apartheid and for its depiction of an inter-racial relationships. His writing is firmly set up within South African political context as a means for social change, and hence calls for a detailed comparative study.

Gordimer’s writing deals with racial and moral problems. All her writing depicts political problems as well as psychological consequences of apartheid. Like Coetzee she too faced opposition from the racial government. Her novels The Late Bourgeois World, A World of Strangers, Burger’s Daughter, and July’s People were
banned by the South African government. She is deeply committed to write about the African realities.

Paton, known for his keen interest in the racial and social problems fought against apartheid. He was harassed by the racial government which seized his passport for ten years. His first novel *Cry, the Beloved Country* received a great critical and popular acclaim. Paton emphasizes in this novel that careless disrespect toward the earth is the cause of the tragedy of not only Africa but of the whole mankind. Paton depicts the racial tensions in South African society.

Like Coetzee, the American writers Tony Morrison and Richard Wright also depict racial violence and its effects on humanity in their works. Morrison’s novels are known for their epic themes and finely drawn black characters. Her best known novels *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved* received mixed reviews. Her novels bear witness to the experiences of the black community. Wright’s writing also concerns racial relations. His best known novel *Native Son* established him as an author and spokesman of the conditions faced by African-Americans. The novel was criticized also for the violence depicted in it. Both Morrison and Wright depict violence inflicted on the blacks and condemn it as strongly as Coetzee.

Great writers employ their talents toward awakening and sensitizing the people to the human situation, to injustices. Along with most of the African writers like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ezekiel Mphalele, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Breyten Bretenbach, Gordimer, Lessing, Olave Shreiner, Peter Abrahams, Coetzee occupies a vital position as a writer of literature of protest. His novels manifest that he is motivated by radical humanism for all the victimized.

If we believe that a good writer embraces his age comprehensively and inclusively, then some of Coetzee’s omissions are enigmatic. There are examples of African leaders who spent their lives to end human misery and obtain basic human rights for all. For instance, Martin Luther King Jr. devoted his life for the eradication of racial discrimination and advancement of civil rights in the United States. He was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi’s belief in non-violence. King emphasized non-violent resistance as the potent weapon available to the oppressed people in their struggle for justice and human dignity. Similarly, Nelson Mandela spent twenty-seven long years of his life to end apartheid. He gave importance to reconciliation in South Africa. Mahatma Gandhi, who went to South Africa with the sole intention of making money as most of the Gujarati merchant communities did, pioneered *satyagraha*, offering
stiff resistance to tyranny through civil disobedience. It was a philosophy based on total non-violence. It inspired movements for civil rights across the world. He first employed civil-disobedience in South Africa for the Indian community’s struggle for civil rights, and eventually perfected the strategy in India. All these leaders were closely connected to the social and political reforms for the well-being and dignity of the victimized the world over. Coetzee is surprisingly silent about them and their work. An Indian reader expects a significant reference to them and also expects that there should have been some Indian characters in his novels because Indians made a large component of South African population since a long time as creators of wealth and employment. (An attempt was made by the present researcher to contact Coetzee in order to seek his reactions to these issues; however, he replied that he does not like to talk about his own work. The communication with him through e-mails is appended here. )

Good writers are masters of the language they use. They like to experiment with its use as also the different techniques in which a story can be told. Coetzee shows a great talent in this area also. Along with the first person and third person narrative methods he uses the reports and letters. The psychoanalytical discourses open for us a door into his characters’ minds. There is considerable innovation in the narrative techniques employed by Coetzee. For instance, an extended letter, use of three horizontal parts for story, diary entries, lessons, and randomly structured paragraphs throw interesting challenges before the reader and hence are a promising material for a separate study.

Coetzee’s novels can also be studied as allegories of political, social, psychological, and sexual oppression of the weak.

Good literature transcends temporal boundaries. Coetzee’s novels remain immeasurably relevant today as they vibrantly and vehemently expose and analyze primeval instincts of power structures. It would be narrowing down their suggestion if they are seen to mirror the violence in only a certain group secluded from the world. They tell human stories. His desire to adore the human race universalizes his novels and elevates them as good works of art. The most striking feature of Coetzee is that without becoming a propagandist and without fracturing the aesthetic, thematic or structural magnificence of the novels, he portrays the seamy side of people’s lives.

Although Coetzee’s novels sometimes pose formal and stylistic difficulties in understanding the plot and the sequence of ideas, he skillfully discusses the
complexity of a human experience. As a result, we are naturally attracted more to the content than to the techniques employed by him.

Coetzee encourages hope and love for human happiness. These ethics are the only remedies to heal the scars of violence. He is a promoter of tolerance and the fundamental freedoms that nature has granted to humanity. This message is not only for South Africa (as both colonial and apartheid are things of the past now) but for the whole world which is still vitiated with exploitation, power thirst and violence.

Violence is a reality all over the world. It exists in multiple forms. Every kind of violence is damaging. Though it is impossible to eliminate violence thoroughly from the human mind, it is necessary to find means to avoid it. Its best treatment is to expose its futility and protest against its perpetration without necessarily hating and punishing its perpetrators. Peace must be brought by peace alone and not by violence. Coetzee advocates this principle and proclaims that one’s happiness should never be other’s sorrow.

To read Coetzee is to be intimates of a compassionate human worldview.