CHAPTER TWO
Chapter 2

SILENCE IN COETZEE: OPPRESSION OR RESISTANCE, PRESENCE OR ABSENCE, POWER OR POWERLESSNESS

“Silence can be a plan rigorously executed
It is a presence
it has a history a form
Do not confuse it with any kind of Absence.”

~Adrienne Rich

In a world where everything is defined and understood dichotomously, ‘Silence’ has traditionally been equated with ‘absence’ – absence of voice, absence of power, absence of opportunity, absence of agency – as against the voice that has always been associated with power and agency and thus a recognizable ‘presence’. Hence, being silent is often looked as an expression of being powerless, passive, and, therefore, unnoticed and oppressed. As such, the solution traditionally given for the breakdown of such a situation is ‘to raise voice’. But “The lacuna within this formulation is that the burden of social change is placed upon those least empowered to intervene in the conditions of their oppression.”(Rowe and Malhotra 1). This approach holds silence as the main focus rather than the conditions responsible for generating that silence and demands efforts and responsibility to eliminate it only from those who are victims themselves, leaving the ‘privileged’ other side (that is actually responsible for silencing them) free of any burden or responsibility. The equation that can be drawn from this approach seems to be dictating that one suffers because one is silent, and, therefore, one can put an end to this suffering by breaking
the silence. Whereas the situation happens to be vice-versa, i.e. one suffers, therefore one is silent.

The problem actually lies not in the silence itself, but in seeing it as an absence, in our failure to read it out, for “the subaltern speaks, if those in positions of privilege could learn to listen – and learn to decode the silences that inscribe resistive meanings” (Rowe and Malhotra 9). What is required, thus, is to search for what is unsaid and the reasons behind its not being said, to regard silence also as a mode of expression, either imposed or chosen, to “decode the silences” so to say. Silence, in the light of this new approach, is emerging as a mode of expression powerful enough to resist the domination and subjugation, particularly in the writings of feminist scholars and cultural critics, and in postcolonial studies. Works by writers such as Gayatri Spivak, Cheryl Glenn, Krista Ratcliffe emphasize the importance and necessity (on the part of academics particularly) of learning to listen to the silences of the subaltern subjects.

Joanna Kadi in her essay “Speaking (About) Silence” says: “If you want to hear me, listen to my silences as well as my words” (541). Silence is, thus, as much a part of any communication as speech. Sometimes it gets dominated by the speech and sometimes it dominates the speech. But, either dominated or dominating, it always holds more meaning and substance than the speech. Words spoken out may be meaningless, mere babbling and gibbering, spoken just for the sake of speaking as is evident in a variety of Existential and Absurd writings such as Samuel Becket’s Waiting for Godot where the dialogue between characters is bereft of any meaning, purpose, or substance. But the words that are held back always possess deep meaning and purpose. Words delivered through speech may not have some specific reason for getting delivered but the words not delivered always have a reason for being held back. There may be no specific drives that force one to speak, but there are specific drives that force one to be silent, either willingly or unwillingly.

Silence in the works of J. M. Coetzee occurs more to be a matter of choice than compulsion, more to be a form of resistance and, thus, power than powerlessness, except in cases like that of Friday in Foe or where language is a bar. It is either adopted as a means of resistance against the powerful by the powerless or as an expression of unwillingness to enter into any relationship with the “other”.

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However, it is often a difficult task to distinguish between silences as being repressive or resistive because these are not two different types of silences, it is the same repressive silence that gets transformed into the resistive one in the absence of any other way to fight back. That is why silence is always the weapon of the powerless mostly in conditions of utter hopelessness and disgust, a mode/form of passive resistance. However, it sometimes becomes too ambiguous to be defined as power or powerlessness: “it is hard to know what gives me greater power—holding silence or breaking silence” (Margaret Montaya, quoted in Rowe and Malhotra 13). Coetzee seems to have undertaken the task of unraveling the hitherto neglected dimensions of silence since “Silence as a will not to say or a will to unsay and as a language of its own has barely been explored” (Trinh 373).

Coetzee’s colonized subjects do not indulge in the act of mimicking the colonizers, as Homi K. Bhabha’s ‘mimic man’, neither they have “Black skin, White masks” as in Frantz Fanon; they are rather withdrawn, hesitant to have any relation or communication with the colonizer, giving way to a silence that can be described as “a constant defiance than any sort of passivity.” (Ferguson 56). However the ‘silence’ in Coetzee’s works cannot be clubbed under a single heading. “Silence”, according to Kennan Ferguson, “functions as a negotiation of the disparate and the common, but like any true negotiation it takes more than one path and more than one meaning.” (63). This definition stands true for Coetzee’s use of silence as a multifaceted phenomenon. The present chapter endeavors to explore, in selected works of Coetzee, the various meanings and forms of silence employed by him to play a number of roles to show that it is not only the manifestation of powerlessness but can also be exercised as a powerful weapon, to render others as powerless. It may be the result of the lack of choices but it can also be the choice itself.

It would not be wrong to say that Coetzee’s novels are the articulation of the “silence” itself rather than the silent subjects. Silence has a dominant ‘presence’ throughout his oeuvre, generated inevitably under different sets of social and power relationships, without interpreting and understanding which one cannot adequately reach to the core of his characters’ existence amongst the web of relations categorized as those between the powerful and the powerless, the oppressor and the oppressed, the centre and the periphery (marginalized), the colonizer and the colonized; as the gaps,
absences, and silences invite the reader to participate in the creation of meaning. Coetzee does not give voice to the colonized or the marginalized ‘other’ to highlight their suffering and subjugation as is the trend in postcolonial writings like Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) by Jean Rhys in which she gives voice to the silenced “mad woman in the attic” of the Charlotte Bronte’s canonical work Jane Eyre (1847). He rather uses silence itself to show the extent of their oppression and irreversible loss. The more they are oppressed and marginalized, the more they are silent and withdrawn. However, this silence and withdrawal is handled by him as a strategy to assert their inevitable ‘presence’, instead of making them an ‘absence’. Coetzee’s novelty and credit lies in making such silent and vulnerable characters like Friday (in Foe) and Michael K (in Life and Times of Michael K) the central concern of a novel and in making others notice and acknowledge their powerful presence in spite of them being withdrawn to the extent of avoiding any contact and communication with anyone, and rejecting any advance in this regard.

However, there is no denying the fact that the one who is silent, whether the silence is self-chosen or imposed by others, is a sufferer and is the one who has to make a lot of compromises, as the one using the voice can define things and situations as per his convenience, imparting validity and urgency only to his interests and needs. It enables him to get ‘his point of view’ prevail over that of the other’s, and thus to protect his interests against those of the other. How we act or react about a situation “depends on what our definitions of the situation are”, (Hall 77), and this is where one takes advantage of being heard against those unheard. In Life and Times of Michael K, Coetzee’s narrator makes this point clear while commenting on the relationship between the town and the camp on its periphery established by the authorities where the ‘blacks’ are forced to live like prisoners and work against their will in order to provide cheap and essential labour force for the townspeople and the state and yet are called a parasite whereas it is the ‘others’ who live and depend on their labour: “Perhaps in truth whether the camp was declared a parasite on the town or the town a parasite on the camp depended on no more than who made his voice heard loudest.” (Life and times of Michael K 160).

Coetzee’s first novel Dusklands (1974) that consists of two separate novellas entitled ‘The Vietnam Project’ and ‘The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee’ juxtaposes
two different narratives belonging to two different eras separated by hundreds of years in the chronological order of the events, their only similarity being that both are the narratives of colonization. What both the narratives seem to emphasize is the inhumaness of those who hold power (the colonizers) articulated through exhibiting the tortures and violence perpetrated by them on the powerless other (the colonized), as well as the futility and effect of such inhumanity on both the sufferers and the perpetrators. Though the word silence does not appear as frequently in this novel as in others like In The Heart of the Country and Michael K, it is only here (in The Vietnam Project) that “silence” is most pointedly and explicitly shown as a mode of “resistance” against the enemy and, thus, as “power”, in the observations made by Eugene Dawn, the protagonist:

The brothers of men who stood out against proven tortures and died holding their silence are now broken down with drugs and a little clever confusion. They talk freely, holding their interrogators’ hands and opening their hearts like children. After they have talked they go to hospital, and then to rehabilitation. They are easily picked out in the camps. They are the ones who hide in corners or walk up and down the fences all day pattering to themselves. (17)

The above quote shows that holding silence in the face of tortures is an act of resistance and courage that can be accomplished only by the strong and powerful. Silence in such a situation means not yielding to the interrogators in spite of all tortures and sufferings mounted by them on their subjects, thus rendering them powerless to have any influence on them. The agents of torture can do as they please with their bodies, but cannot penetrate their minds. It is only the weak ones ‘who hide in the corners’ whom they can make succumb to their demands to cooperate and speak up. The purpose of torture is always to break down the subject and one who can beat out this purpose deserves to be considered more powerful than its defeated
seekers; and what gives them power to do so is the ‘choice’ to be silent, as one can be deprived of the power to speak but not of the power to remain silent.

Eugene Dawn’s narrative in The Vietnam Project revolves mainly around the twenty-four pictures of Vietnam War that he always carries around with him in his briefcase and the Propaganda Report that he is commissioned to prepare. Whatever we come to know about the Vietnam War is only through these photographs. These pictures tell the stories of brutalities carried out in the war by the American soldiers on the poor Vietnamese depicting scenes like that of a soldier lifting a tiny Vietnamese woman “possibly a child” (13) on his penis, smirkingly showing his strength while the woman is poised in the air with her hands stretched out to keep the balance; and of soldiers smilingly posing for the camera while holding the severed heads of the Vietnamese men. These photographs resonate with another such image mentioned by Robert J. C. Young in the Preface of his book Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction which shows four European men “standing in an open field, smiling and laughing at the camera” (ix) while holding up an Algerian man who is naked with his legs “held spread apart, raised high in the air, his circumcised genitals brazenly exposed” (ix)

Coetzee seems to be fond of highlighting things more through silence than words and what can speak more silently than photographs! These pictures spell the horrors of the war without saying a word and are capable of affecting the readers more deeply and profoundly than any words could have. Coetzee by exposing, depicting and probing into the scenes of tortures and violence “renders visible the places that the system would rather keep out of sight and mind.” (Barnard 36). These war torn pictures make such a powerful impression on the psyche of the narrator that his nervous system eventually breaks down to the extent that he stabs his own child in his fits. The ill, dehumanizing effect of the violent war scenes on one who is not even directly involved but is “one of Chomsky’s “backroom boys” is evident in the narrator’s comment about his wife that “She lives in the hope that what her friends call my psychic brutalization will end with the end of the war and the Vietnam Project, that reinsertion into civilization will tame and eventually humanize me.” (9-10). War is thus said to have deprived one of his civility and humanity; in other words, it is a barbaric act and “everyone who reaches the innermost mechanism of the
war suffers a vision of horror which depraves him utterly.” (10). His wife Marilyn associates the changes in his behavior and psyche to the ‘twenty four pictures of human bodies’ that he has in order to help him to frame his propaganda report on the Vietnam Project.

Silence may seem to have fascinated Coetzee as a language, but he is well aware of the power of voice and the advantage of being heard as well. Propaganda Report of Eugene dawn is what emphasizes this aspect. Propaganda is an strategy to get one’s voice prevail over others’ in order to define and describe things to one’s advantage and interests, aimed at marginalizing the voices and interests of the other side. It is employed to gain people’s support and consent for one’s cause against the ‘other’. In a war, propaganda is made to render the other side as wrong and barbaric, to mobilize people’s sentiments against that ‘other’ by playing as the ‘victim’, to get sanction to one’s agenda. Though propaganda can be used to promote some good cause as well, it has now come to be associated more with negative connotations as people often dismiss things, calling them ‘mere propaganda’, because the means through which it is carried out, i.e. the media (print or electronic), are always controlled by the powerful ones (the oppressors), and are used by them for their advantage often to distort the facts and to render the other (the powerless) as ‘invisible’ and marginalized by rendering his voice ‘ineffective’ and his point of view ‘unheard’. Propaganda is a means to establish hegemonies to serve and protect one’s colonial interests. The most glaring example of it from the contemporary world is that of Israel’s propaganda against Palestine which aims at making the world believe and regard the oppressor (Israel) as victim and the oppressed (Palestine) as the oppressor (the ‘terrorist’ so to say). While reading the Eugene Dawn’s Propaganda Report on Vietnam, one is likely to have constantly in mind the Israel-Palestine issue, particularly in the wake of the most recent “Operation Protective Edge” by Israel, with all its fake propaganda and the violence as it shows how “military value” is assigned to “terror operations”: “we have justified the elimination of enemy villages by calling them armed strongholds, when the true value of the operations lay in demonstrating to the absent VC menfolk just how vulnerable their homes and families were.” (22). This is how history repeats itself and draws parallels, and herein lies the success of any writing: to be relevant in all times. It also reminds Coetzee’s Waiting
for the Barbarians where the simple, displaced natives are termed as ‘barbarians’ by the empire while being subjected to the barbarism of the empire itself.

Propaganda is the ‘psychological warfare’ as explained in Dusklands by Eugene Dawn, which aims “to destroy the morale of the enemy” and is, thus, “the negative function of propaganda” (19). Dawn’s report on propaganda in the context of Vietnam War emphasizes the use of “father-voice” and the creation of “countermyths” to break the power and resistance of the enemy because “The myths of a tribe are the fictions it coins to maintain its powers.” (24). “Father-voice” is associated with the authority that commands obedience and subverts rebellion and resistance. Countermyths are needed to subvert “The myth of the father” which “is a justification of the rebellion of sons against a father who uses them as hinds. … Psychoanalytically the myth is self-affirming fantasy of the child powerless to take the mother he desires from his father-rival.” (25). Applying the myth to a colonial situation as in Vietnam, the father stands for the foreign colonial power or empire (i.e. U.S.), sons are the colonized natives (i.e. Vietnamese) in constant war and rebellion against the father, and the desired mother which they want to take from the father, the root of discord, is the land occupied by the colonizers. The myth gives people hope of winning against his authority as it believes that the power of the father will wither some day through resistance, armed or unarmed; that they can take over the control from the father who would grow weak with the time against the strength of the sons. The countermyths, thus, involve shattering this hope through “the attrition of plenty”, by using force to show them “the endless capacity to replace dead members” so that they will “lose faith, grow disheartened, surrender.” (25).

Hence Propaganda is nothing other than the use of voice loud enough to silence the ‘other’, Silence in this context can only be a form of powerlessness, with the voice acting as a counterforce. The one who is able to have himself heard loudest possesses and commands the power and authority over the situation. Moreover, distorting or modifying the truths to gain the control of the situation as is done by propaganda is also a form of silencing – of silencing the truth. The rejection of Eugene Dawn’s report that gives facts about the situation in Vietnam in a candid way by Coetzee (fictional one, Dawn’s senior and supervisor of his work in the novel) who asks him to modify it to make it more suitable for its audience shows the partial and
false nature of propaganda. The faking function of propaganda is exposed by Eugene himself while commenting about the effect of the photographs on him comparing it with what the print media could do: “I respond to pictures as I do not to print. Strange that I am not in the picture-faking side of propaganda.” (13). His Propaganda report shows how minutely Coetzee (the author) has observed the war tactics of U.S. in Vietnam. However, its parallelism with other war situations locating in different countries at different periods of time, such as those of the apartheid South Africa, the French Algeria, the Palestine-Israel conflict, makes it clear that all colonial wars are one-sided, nothing but the force and violence unleashed by the powerful on the powerless in order to break them physically as well as psychologically, dehumanizing both the sides: one, the dominated and powerless, is dehumanized by having rendered below-human, deprived of even the very basic human rights such as the sanctity of life and human dignity, by the powerful, dominating one, which is dehumanized by losing all human ethics and values in perpetrating terror and violence on the ‘other’ to achieve its political, social, or economic goals.

The use of disproportionate force and violence aims at silencing both those who are killed (silenced forever) and those who are left by terrorizing them. It is often used to tame them or to teach them a lesson for their disobedience and rebellion against the domination or occupation so that they would not again dare to stand against it, by breaking their morale in the face of huge destruction and death of their fellows. This is what the narrator in The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee points out while comparing the Dutch girls with the captured Bushman girl: “She may be alive but she is as good as dead. She has seen you kill the men who represented power to her, she has seen them shot down like dogs. You have become power itself now and she nothing,” (61). This is what the whole village of Namaquas along with the four slave Hottentots is killed for by Jacobus Coetzee in his second journey to their land which is undertaken only for this sole purpose: to teach them a lesson for their disobedience, for not treating him (the white, the colonizer) as a superior being.

In the Heart of the Country (1977), second novel by Coetzee, deals with the loneliness in the life of a white spinster Magda living on his father’s settler farm and her longing to have equal and reciprocal relations with the people around her to combat that loneliness and alienation. Silence in this work appears as a result of the
lack of a common language to establish such reciprocal relations between the masters and the slaves as well as the lack of willingness to communicate on the part of certain characters: “In the novel silence is the dominant theme, not because the few characters closed into the order of the farm have nothing to tell one another, but just because there is too much that cannot be spoken about, cannot be put into words and because there is no language in which they could be told.” (Vallasek107)

The novel is a monologue written like a journal with numbered paragraphs recording disjointed incidents experienced or imagined by Magda who has been “an absence” (2) for her father all her life and thus fighting “against becoming one of the forgotten ones of history.” (4) by imagining and re-imagining a number of things in order to give some meaning to her existence or simply to assert her presence. Her life on the lonely farm, neglected by her father and devoid of any other companionship is engulfed by silence. She craves to have someone to speak to and to be spoken to – “must have another human being, must hear another voice, even if it speaks only abuse” (17) – in order to come out of the monologue of her life, to be sure that she is “more than just the trace of these words passing through (her) head on their way from nowhere to nowhere” (61). Silence around her is mostly the result of the lack of words, lack of verbal communication, as she unfolds: “I am spoken to not in words, which come to me quaint and veiled, but in signs, in conformations of face and hands, in postures of shoulders and feet, in nuances of tune and tone, in gaps and absences whose grammar has never been recorded.” (8).

Servants are the only human presence on the farm besides her father but an equal, substantial social relationship is not possible with them because they belong to different hierarchical order and the language of communication that exists between them consists of only giving and taking orders, though they may have much to say to each other. Although, after her father’s (real or imagined) death, Magda tries to establish a reciprocal relationship with Hendrik (the servant) and his wife Klien Anna, she utterly fails in her endeavor because of the mistrust and alienation generated by the colonial occupation and exploitation among the natives (the black servants) towards the colonial race and because of the irreversible loss of an equal language as a result of Colonization that might have existed between them to facilitate a normal, smooth flow of communication:
The language that should pass between myself and these people was subverted by my father and cannot be recovered. What passes between us now is a parody. I was born into a language of hierarchy, of distance and perspective. It was my father-tongue. I do not say it is the language my heart wants to speak, I feel too much the pathos of its distances, but it is all we have. (106)

Magda calls this language of hierarchy ‘father-tongue’ instead of ‘mother tongue’ because mother-tongue is the tongue that facilitates easy, smooth, and desired communication, it connects rather than alienate as is the case with her ‘father-tongue’ that mars her communication with the people around her against her desire to be close to them.

Therefore what she is left to do is only to indulge in imaginations, where her life is not so static and silent (almost an absence) as it is in reality, because she fears to “dwindle and expire here in the heart of the country unless she has at least a thin porridge of event to live on.” (25). This is what compels her to conjure such scenes as her father’s remarriage with a black girl, his affair with Hendrik’s young wife, her double act of parricide, first by killing his father and his young wife by an axe after which she attempts to commit suicide by drowning herself, second by shooting his father by a rifle when he was sleeping with Hendrik’s child-wife, her attempt to bury her father with the help of Hendrik who dies having succumbed to his wound of rifle shot after having suffered a lot for a considerable period of time in the absence of any medical care and treatment, her rape by Hendrik after her father’s death, etc. Most probably all these incidents are a creation of her imaginative faculty because she is not certain about what she tells and keeps on modifying the narrative, telling the same incident a number of times with little variations. The thing that most effectively cast doubt on the credibility of her narrative is her attempt to bring her father back alive at the end of the novel after having lived in complete solitude on the farm for a long period of time, being abandoned by her servants (the only human society she has had) for fear of betrayal by her as the enquiries about her father’s absence from the farm are initiated and they, being the servants, black and powerless, are most likely to be blamed. The fact of her utter solitude is what justifies her mental breakdown towards
the end of the novel, drifting her into the state of madness in which she even tries to talk with the ‘sky-gods’ in order to have some sort of company.

In the absence of any meaningful relationship or communication, her life is just a ‘monologue’, and even if she has a dialogue with someone, it consists only of “question and answer, word and echo” (22), bereft of any human warmth and feeling that she needs utterly. She craves to talk in the common human language that has no hierarchy, the language of love and compassion, of nuances, of equality, that has been corrupted by her father. The hierarchy created by her colonist father isolates and alienates her. She wants to eliminate that hierarchy in order to have reciprocal relations with other human beings around her, to have a sense of belongingness, but that is beyond her power because of the mistrust generated by colonization in the hearts of those colonized. That’s what explains unwillingness on the part of Hendrik and Anna to treat Magda as a friend. She is only “Miss” to them and, therefore, cannot be treated as an equal fellow human being. It is their withdrawing attitude towards her, their hesitation to have communication with her on an equal footing that owes their silence.

Coetzee’s third novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) is a poignant narration of violence and torture inflicted by the colonizer on the colonized, by the powerful on the powerless, by the ‘civilized’ on the ‘barbarians’. The novel revolves around the rumour created by the Empire of an expected barbarians’ attack on the settlement town, and is narrated by the Magistrate of the town appointed by the Empire, through whose eyes we see the oppression and injustice done to the poor natives (termed as barbarians) by the people of Empire and come to know who is the real ‘barbarian’. The title of the novel owes to a poem written in 1898 (first published in Egypt in 1904) by an Alexandrian Greek poet C. P. Cavafy with the same title. The only similarity between the two works lies in the fact that the expected barbarians arrive neither here nor there, and, by the end, are declared as non-existent, just the figment of the minds of those who anticipate their arrival either as savior (in the poem) or as enemy (in the novel).

Silence in this novel comprises the silence of victims as well as of those who are complicit as a witness to their victimization. It appears simultaneously as the lack of power as well as the power itself. Colonel Joll in the novel represents the powerful
(the real barbarians) and the powerless are represented by the ‘barbarian girl’, with Magistrate holding an ambivalent position between the two. The action takes place at an unspecified location, named only as a ‘frontier town or settlement’ to give it a universal character. However, most of Coetzee’s works employ apartheid or post-apartheid South Africa as a background, either in specified or unspecified way. Coetzee writes: “once in every generation, without fail, there is an episode of hysteria about the barbarians.” (Waiting for the Barbarians 9). The novel Waiting for the Barbarians captures such an episode. What Coetzee emphasizes here is the complicity of those who are not directly involved in torture and violence carried out by the powerful upon the powerless, but witness it silently without questioning it or raising voice against it, such as the doctor who is called to treat the wounds of the prisoner boy. He puts ointment on his “hundred little stabs”, promises his speedy recovery and then “leaves in a hurry” without even asking “how the boy sustained his injuries.” (11). It is only the Magistrate who opposes the oppression and injustice carried out in the name of the security of the Empire and the settlement.

The most prominent silence in the novel is that of the ‘barbarian girl’ who refuses to speak about her experiences of the torture chamber which the Magistrate is intent to know. It is because of her silence that the Magistrate has to focus on her body to read out the signs of violence inscribed on it in order to know what went on in the torture room with the prisoners, the native folks caught by Colonel Joll under the pretext of gathering information about an anticipated (imaginary) barbarian uprising in the context of which Derek Wright writes: “The barbarians [. . .] are really a mental fiction born of colonial paranoia and a political convenience.” (115). This statement suggests that “the “war” or “offensive” taking place is only a fiction meant to create fear in the minds of people of the Empire, therefore securing their allegiance towards their nation.” (Pardick 45). In this novel, as in Dusklands, Coetzee has tried to capture the negative effects of Colonialism not only on its victims, the colonized, but on the psyche of those who play an instrumental role in the process and also on those who stand only as spectators to the brutalities carried out in their name but do not or cannot do anything to stop it. It is not actually taking part in the oppression or violence done to the ‘other’ that only matters to Coetzee, but having knowledge about it can also have lasting effects on one’s mind as the Magistrate says, “I know somewhat too much; and from this knowledge, once one has been infected, there seems to be no
recovering.” (22-23). Knowledge is what infects the mind and what one cannot escape as Coetzee says in *Doubling the Point* (1992) when, over his anxiety about the Vietnam war during his stay in America, someone asked him to go back if he did not approve the war: “The problem was with knowing what was being done. It was not obvious where one went to escape knowledge.” (51)

Whenever the Magistrate probes the girl to extract the knowledge of what actually she has gone through at the hands of Colonel Joll (the officer of Third Bureau sent by the Empire to do enquiries about and crush the rumoured barbarian uprising or rebellion) he is met with silence owing to the unwillingness on the part of the girl to impart anything to the one who also belongs to the same race and serves the same Empire. Bodies play a more important role in Coetzee’s works rather than the words or voice. The reason behind this is well explained by Coetzee himself that “… in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body.” (*Doubling the Point* 248). The postcolonial South African writings are marked by the scenes of violence and torture that leave their lasting imprints on the body in the form of scars or deformities. Hence, the body itself speaks about the atrocities committed on it despite the silence of its owner or possessor which is used by Coetzee not as something letting down the victim but rather to aggravate the seriousness of the crime and its effect, to attract the attention of the reader towards the mute sufferer, to make people feel the guilt of the crimes committed against humanity. Coetzee, instead of making his oppressed and marginalized characters speak up for themselves, make others (like the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Susan in *Foe*, the Medical Officer at the camp in *Life and Times of Michael K*, Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron*) learn to read their silence itself, make them intent to make efforts to understand the reasons behind their silence and the ways of silencing them.

It is by exploring the deformities and the marks on the body of the barbarian girl left behind in the town that Magistrate comes to know about the barbarities perpetrated in his (deliberately planned) absence on the prisoners in the name of getting truth out of them about the rumoured barbarian enterprise which finally proves only to be a paranoia created by Empire as it needs to convince people of some constantly lurking threat against which only Empire can protect them as it is only Empire that knows about it, so that the people would regard Empire as their savior
and keep their loyalty towards it without questioning its presence and its motives. “One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era.” (146), for which it deliberately creates enemies, real or imaginary. “…the Empire insists (and even depends) on the maintenance of absolute differences, and it employs men like Joll to sustain these differences through torture.” (Doubling the Point 143). Magistrate’s deliberate efforts to be away from the scene of torture so that he could not hear the screams of the victims show one of the ways of silencing the other by those who do not approve oppression but neither have power to stop it, because “of the screaming which people afterwards claim to have heard from the granary, … (he) hear(s) nothing.” (5). He sits in his rooms “with windows shut…, straining (his) ears to hear or not to hear sounds of violence.” (24). By avoiding to be a direct witness to such oppression, people try to believe it to be non-existent. Such act of avoidance to what is happening around is found in Coetzee’s Summertime as well (one of the his three books known as his fictional autobiography) when he writes about his father that “When his father picks up the newspaper, he takes care to skip straight to the sports pages, missing out the politics – the politics and the killings.” (4). That may be to avoid getting hurt, to avoid the pain incited by others’ sufferings, or to avoid the shame of it because “When some men suffer unjustly, it is the fate of those who witness their suffering to suffer the shame of it.” (Waiting for the Barbarians 152), or simply because one is fed up to have any more of it. However, it is the same Magistrate who later makes every effort to find out what happened during those hours when he was away from that spot and openly raises voice against the Empire when Colonel Joll brings a new group of captives and brutally tortures them.

The Magistrate is Coetzee’s voice of truth and justice against the injustices perpetrated by colonialism. His ambivalent position of belonging to the Empire yet asserting distance from it is Coetzee’s own ambivalence of belonging to the white colonizer race yet trying not to be one of them. He is sure that barbarians are only a fiction created by Empire as he asserts: “Show me a barbarian army and I will believe.” (9). He knows that “The people we call barbarians are nomads, they migrate between the lowlands and the uplands every year, that is their way of life. They will never permit themselves to be bottled up in the mountains.” (54) as the Empire was planning to do by undertaking a “general offensive” (53) against them in the wake of
its propaganda against the barbarians who are actually “the people being pushed off the planes into the mountains by the spread of Empire.” (78). He, like Coetzee, keenly suffers the shame and guilt of the barbarities, “the errors that have been committed by others in our name.” (157). He knows who actually the enemy of whom is and who the real barbarians are: “… we have no enemies. Unless I make a mistake. Unless we are the enemy.” (85). But by making him suffer like those for whom he raises voice, Coetzee shows that having or raising voice does not necessarily makes one “powerful” unless others are ready to listen. Coetzee shifts the responsibility of having suffered from the victims to the others, that if others are prepared to listen, even the ‘silence’ can work, but if they are not, even the ‘voice’ cannot make any difference.

Coetzee seems to regard silence more powerful than words. Silence for him does not mean an absence of words. It, in effect, comprises the ‘unsaid words’, the right to hold back, and in torture room, it is this right that is preyed upon by the oppressors: “They thrive on stubborn silence: it confirms to them that every soul is a lock they must patiently pick.” (141) as they demand you to “Bare yourself! Open your heart!” (141). If one is passionate to know the truth like the Magistrate, one try to probe even into the silence like he does in the case of barbarian girl, but the one who deliberately wants to obliterate the truth does not pay any heed to even one’s shouts and screams. Therefore: “to have voice is to possess both the opportunity to speak and the respect to be heard.” (Rakow and Wackwitz 9).

It is in his novel *Foe* (1986) that Coetzee gives ‘silence’ a solid existence in the form of Friday with his tongue being cut off most probably by the slave traders. *Foe* is the (postcolonial) rewriting of the famous colonial text *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) by Daniel Defoe. The plot also owes to Defoe’s another novel *Roxana* (1724) that relates the story of a woman in search of her lost daughter like Susan Barton (the narrator and protagonist of *Foe*) whose story begins when she comes to Bahia to search for her lost daughter, her only child, and having failed in her search begins her return journey to her home (Lisbon) on a ship but reaches an unknown island instead after getting shipwrecked where she meets Cruso and his servant Friday. Through *Foe*, Coetzee questions the authority and truth of colonial discourses and cast doubt on their authenticity and reliability. *Foe* shows how truth is fabricated to make it more
interesting and palpable. It deals with the questions of authorship and censorship over writers, which has been a matter of great concern for Coetzee while living in South Africa and one of the causes behind his diasporic flight to Australia.

Coetzee’s ‘Cruso’ is a lot different from Defoe’s ‘Crusoe’ in the sense that he is not the mighty figure of the colonizer – industrious, bountiful, self-dependent, self-sufficient (like Defoe’s Crusoe) – having absolute control over everything. He is rather seen in his old age symbolizing the decline of the power of Colonialism, all his time and strength being occupied and consumed in making barren terraces as he has nothing to grow, again symbolizing the futility of the colonial system. Preparing terraces for future cultivation is also symbolic of preparing or clearing ground for the new (postcolonial) system to replace the old (colonial) one. Unlike Crusoe, Coetzee’s “Cruso” has no tools ransacked from the shipwreck to carve some useful things for him, he does not have any grains to cultivate the wild island, neither he keeps any journal to keep the record of time while staying on the island, nor he make any efforts to give signals of his presence on the island by making a fire to attract some ship that might be passing through in order to get rescued. Coetzee has also subverted Defoe’s colonial text by shifting its central concern from Cruso to Friday (a mute figure here unlike Defoe’s Friday) and Susan Barton, the female presence introduced by Coetzee – a totally new thing in an otherwise male dominated colonial text. Foe can justly be called a postcolonial rewriting as Coetzee has fully transformed the story of Robinson Crusoe from being male-centered to female-centered as well as shifted the focus of the narrative from the master (the colonizer, i.e. Cruso) to the slave (the colonized, i.e. Friday).

Cruso’s monotonous life on the island with mute Friday is disturbed by the arrival of shipwrecked Susan Barton who is, by chance, washed ashore the same island inhabited by him. It is through the account given by her that we come to know about Cruso’s life on the island, about Friday and his mutilation and servitude. Susan, like Coetzee’s other white female characters, holds an ambivalent position between the colonizer and the colonized, the position held by Coetzee himself in a country like South Africa because of belonging to the white (colonizer’s) race, showing at times the colonist attitude (with Friday) as well as that of colonized (in relation with Cruso, and later with Foe) due to being a woman, whereas Friday is shown as the universal
symbol of oppression and subjugation as he stands for all colonized, “silenced” subjects.

Friday’s silence permeates the whole novel: the absence of his voice having the most powerful presence throughout. The incompleteness of Susan’s story without Friday’s voice in fact symbolizes the gaps, the absences in history created by the practice of colonialism, and the fruitlessness of her efforts to incorporate Friday’s story to make her narrative whole shows the irrecoverable loss caused by Colonialism and the inability of others to grasp this loss. Moreover, in the words of David Attwell: “The apparent inaccessibility of Friday’s world to the Europeans in this story is an artist’s devastating judgement of the crippling anti-humanist consequences of colonialism and racism on the self-confident white world.” (108). Narrator’s attempts to find out how it was that Friday lost his tongue implies, in a way, various ways of silencing the “other” as Susan draws different pictures depicting the scene of his tongue being cut off by the slave traders (the Moors) in various ways and the reasons told by Cruso for Friday having his tongue cut off also implies the variety of motives behind silencing the “other” as he explains: “Perhaps the slavers, who are Moors, hold the tongue to be a delicacy,… or perhaps they grew weary of listening to Friday’s wails of grief, that went on day and night. Perhaps they wanted to prevent him from ever telling his story… Perhaps they cut out the tongue of every cannibal they took, as a punishment. How will we ever know the truth?” (23). Friday’s lost tongue in fact stands for all the lost truth, the truth that existed before the colonial attack on indigenous people and cultures. It is only the lost voice that could be trusted and not the various interpretations given by others according to their own convenience, purpose, interests, and (mis)understanding.

Friday’s impenetrable silence casts a shadow on the whole story of Susan as she tells Mr. Foe, the author whom she is seeking to get her story told and published (fictional version of Daniel Defoe): “if the story seems stupid, that is only because it so doggedly holds its silence. The shadow whose lack you feel is there: it is the loss of Friday’s tongue.” (117). Foe wants her to incorporate in her story some more incidents (real or fictional) of her life before and after her stay on the island of Cruso to make it more lively and adventurous such as her search for her lost daughter (he even sends a girl to her claiming to be her daughter to provide his own climax to the story) making the story of island just an episode in it and thus neglecting the story of
Friday which Susan emphasizes over more than anything. According to her, “To tell my story and be silent on Friday’s tongue is no better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly left empty.” (67). She does not even pay heed to the girl who claims to be her lost daughter and regards her to be a part of Foe’s attempts to divert her attention from the story that she wants to tell in order to mould the story as he wants, a figment of Foe’s mind, a child of his imagination.

Foe is the typical European avoiding to face the truth of Friday’s oppression and subjugation represented through his mutilated self, brushing it off as an insignificant incident in a larger plot, whereas Susan, though belonging to the same race (white), represents those having conscience. She believes that “In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story.” (141). Hence she knows that without reaching to the core of Friday’s silence, her story will remain soulless. She chooses to remain silent on all other matters so that only Friday’s silence, a silence without choice, gets attended to, so that his story does not get marginalized by hers as: “to accept this narrative of loss and restitution (that of Roxana) would be to render her own narrative complete and thus to leave no room for the story of Friday’s silencing.” (Durrant 33). Coetzee is keen to highlight the differences between two silences – chosen (as power) and imposed (as powerlessness) – as he speaks through his mouthpiece Susan:

You err most tellingly in failing to distinguish between my silences and the silences of a being such as Friday. Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others. I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal, I say he is a laundryman and he becomes a laundryman …. what he is to the world is what I make of him. Therefore the silence of Friday is a helpless silence… Whereas the silence I keep regarding Bahia and other matters is chosen and purposeful: it is my own silence. (122).
Coetzee’s characters mostly seem to exercise silence as power (as a choice) except Friday whose silence is “helpless” that makes him vulnerable to (mis)interpretations by others regarding his desires and choices that might be in total contradiction with what they think they are. His silence gives them power over him to interpret his heart and mind according to their own thinking, desires, and interests in order to have what they want of him, or what they want to make of him, or they can just act as being naïve of what he really wants to use him as they like as Susan herself acknowledges: “We deplore the barbarism of whoever maimed him, yet have we, his later masters, not reason to be secretly grateful? For as long as he is dumb we can tell ourselves his desires are dark to us, and continue to use him as we wish.” (148). But despite being powerless to speak out his mind or heart, Friday still asserts his will by not yielding to others’ efforts to get him assimilated or to “civilize” him by keeping himself indifferent and withdrawn, indicating that he is well aware of his oppression, subjugation, and colonization and hence holds some grudge against them as observed by Susan: “… it might not be mere dullness that kept him shut up in himself, nor the accident of the loss of his tongue, nor even an incapacity to distinguish speech from babbling, but a disdain for intercourse with me.” (98).

Susan’s silence on certain matters that Foe wants her to tell about in her proposed story of island, on the other hand, is a manifestation of her power to withhold: “I am not, do you see, one of those thieves or highwaymen of yours who gabble a confession and are then whipped off to Tyburn and eternal silence, leaving you to make of their stories whatever you fancy. It is still in my power to guide and amend. Above all, to withhold.” (123). She does not allow him to make amendments to her story to mould it according to what he wants it to be. It’s being her story, it is her right to choose what to tell as well as what to “omit”, and somebody else cannot decide what is more important and what is less important. Through Susan’s untiring efforts to get her story told and Foe’s unwillingness to accept it as narrated by her (without amendments proposed by him), he trying to ignore her story and standpoint by thrusting his own, Coetzee emphasizes that one can be silenced in spite of speaking up long and loud if others are not willing to listen or choose not to believe him/her, if they are bent on muffling one’s voice with theirs or forcing to alter it in accordance with their own will. Susan seems to know this fact very well when she says: “As long as you close your ears to me, mistrusting every word I say as a word of
slavery, poisoned, do you serve me any better than the slavers served Friday when they robbed him of his tongue?” (150).

_Foe_ forcefully denies the authenticity of the stories told by someone about the other when Susan proclaims: “Who but Cruso, who is no more, could truly tell you Cruso’s story?” (51). The story does not belong to the teller but to the one whose story it relates and therefore no one else can do justice to it. It applies to all colonial discourses, such as the stories told by the colonizers about the colonized. Thus, the colonial accounts about the colonies and their natives cannot be trusted, particularly when the subjects of the (hi)story told by them are silenced under colonialism. Cruso’s death resulting in his absence and, thus, inability to tell his story (being silenced by death) is symbolic of the real as well as metaphoric death of those silenced by colonialism and could no more tell the “true” story. Mr. Foe’s efforts to mould Susan’s story as he wishes it to be told exhibits the colonizers’ practice of altering the “truth” to make it suit their own interests. Susan is suspicious of Cruso’s (colonizer’s) narrative about the island and Friday’s story from the very beginning as Cruso does not stick to a single version and she has no means to confirm it since Friday has no tongue and thus could not tell the other (true) side of the story. She is unable to decide from his account “what was truth, what was lies, and what was mere rambling.” (12), and thus invites others to develop the habit of critical reading/listening, not to believe any story after hearing only one side. She knows that every story has some “silences” that should be probed to reach its core.

_Coetzee’s_ _Disgrace_ (1999) deals with the silence existing mostly due to unwillingness to communicate certain things, silence exercised as resistance to protect the domain of one’s privacy, not allowing others to have their choices imposed or prevailed against one’s own. It relates the story of David Lurie, an English professor – how he gets disgraced by having an affair with one of his students and how he tries to get redemption in the end by learning to live for others by taking up the animals’ cause. Animal welfare is one of the main concerns of Coetzee reflected all over his oeuvre, he being an activist for the cause and having authored works like _The Lives of Animals_ to promote and propagate it. The work emphasizes the need to respect the dignity of life, be it human or animal. Coetzee is very much concerned about violence against humanity as well as animals.
Disgrace deals not only with the disgraced life of David Lurie, but with the disgrace that animals are subjected to in a human society, by depicting their (dogs' particularly in this novel) ill fate and what they have to undergo at Bev Shaw’s Animal Welfare clinic just because they are, in Thomas Hardy’s words, “too menny” (Jude the Obscure, 1895) and therefore “unwanted”. The welfare that they are provided at Bev’s clinic is just a “decent death”, and incineration that Lurie takes charge of afterwards in order to make it too a little “decent” to save them the disgrace of having their stiffened corpses beaten by the workmen there in order to facilitate their smooth passage through furnace as the rigid limbs often used to caught in the bars of the trolley. Thus, the novel attempts to vocalize the concerns of animals taking up their cause by speaking for their rights, honour and dignity which the animals, being devoid of speech, cannot themselves demand. Coetzee’s works speak on behalf of ‘silent’ animals as they do in case of other silent, marginalized, oppressed powerless subjects.

The novel asserts the need to respect the privacy of others’ lives by taking care of the limits of one’s right to influence or intrude into them, and not to violate it as Lurie does (or tries to do) not only once but thrice – with Soraya (the brothel woman), with Melanie (his student), and with Lucy (his daughter) – in different ways. He was almost about to ruin Soraya’s private family life by trying to contact her outside brothel at her home, though he clearly has the idea that her brothel life is a secret as well as a necessity to support her family, and its disclosure might affect her honour and dignity in her life outside the brothel. However, his attempts are met with a cold and harsh response, finally leading to Soraya’s disappearance from the brothel leaving no traces of her whereabouts so that he has no choice but to give up his efforts to follow her. But with Melanie, he has had his way though not completely forcefully but in spite of her being “passive throughout” (19), knowing and feeling her unwillingness and powerlessness as he himself describes the thing as: “Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, far way.” (25). But he could not escape its repercussions as it is the thing that disgraces him for the rest of his life.
Melanie’s silence in response to Lurie on almost all occasions when he tries to be frank and intimate with her, as “She does not reply” (20) him on any subject, is in fact a form of resistance to his unwanted advances but it could not serve its purpose as Lurie does not pay any heed to it and goes on exploiting her sexually. It is only after she raises voice against it that she gets rid of him and he is made accountable for his deeds before the public resulting in his termination from his post and irrecoverable loss of honour. It shows the vulnerability of “silence” as a ‘resistance weapon’ – it cannot be exercised as power if the other side is not sensible enough to respect and follow its meaning even after reading it accurately. Nevertheless, it can be a means to show one’s unwillingness in a certain matter, to make other realize the inappropriateness of his/her actions.

The silence that puts Lurie into his place teaching him to realize his limits and to respect others’ is that of Lucy, his daughter’s. She is a strong, independent woman, living alone on a farm in countryside where Lurie takes refuge to be away from the site of his disgrace i.e. Cape Town. A little after his taking up residence with her, Lucy’s farm is attacked by three strangers who besides robbing them of all their possessions rape Lucy as well (after shutting Lurie in bathroom and setting him on fire) who hitherto has been hinted as having lesbian orientation. It is after this incident that Lucy defines the sphere of Lurie’s authority to interfere in other’s private life by denying him the right to report on her behalf, to assimilate her experience with his own suffering, claiming it to be exclusively her ‘private matter’ as she asks him to keep silence regarding her matter: “David, when people ask, would you mind keeping to your own story, to what happened to you?” (99), because for her, “what happened to me is a purely private matter.” (112). However, they both are aware that it is not some personal crime derived by some personal suit or motif but the expression of the hatred accumulated over hundreds of years of subjugation, oppression and violence perpetrated by colonizers over the colonized as admitted by Lurie: “It was history speaking through them,… A history of wrong… It may have seemed personal, but it wasn’t. It came down from the ancestors.” (156)

Lucy is “forward looking” woman, ready to pay for the past crimes committed in her name by her white race upon the blacks of South Africa, in order to bring about justice and equilibrium. She represents the change, the new order against that of Lurie who belongs to the old order though he understands her stand that she wants “to make
up for the wrongs of the past but”, for him, “this is not the way to do it.” (133). But Lucy seems to clearly know the debt, the price that has to be paid: “what if that is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors.” (158). She completely abandons the role and identity of the white colonizer as she does not get outrageous like Lurie on seeing the boy (one of those three strangers who robbed and raped her) at the party at Petrus’s (her ex-slave and present neighbor) home. She is patient and considerate enough to “have heard Petrus’s side of the story.” (133) before taking any action against him or his guest (the boy), unlike her ancestors (the white colonists) who never cared to listen to the “other side”. She does not suspect or antagonize Petrus like Lurie for being absent for the time when she and her property were attacked who “as yet... has offered no explanation for his absence.” (116) and for which Lurie could not force him realizing that “Petrus has the right to come and go as he wishes; he has exercised that right; he is entitled to his silence.” (116).

The novel is set in post-apartheid era manifesting changing relationships between white and black, or colonizer and colonized bringing about power reversal or equilibrium: equal rights for all. Petrus has as much the right to hold silence as Lurie, right to remain silent being as essential as the right to speak as Lurie explains while discussing his behavior (his silence, or denial to admit what the investigation committee wanted him to declare) during his trial regarding his affair with Melanie, when questioned by his ex-wife Rosalind, that what he stood for and exercised there was his “Freedom of speech. Freedom to remain silent.” (188). That’s what lent stubbornness to his behavior and attitude. The silence exercised as a ‘freedom’, as a right is powerful enough to render others powerless because it gives one power to choose what to disclose and what not against others demanding to disclose everything, leaving no sphere for the personal or individual choice. Silence is employed in this novel as an indication of suspicion, danger and threat as well such as the silence that falls upon Lurie’s class in the presence of a stranger (Melanie’s boyfriend), the silence that he faces at his approach after his scandal, the silence on the farm that informs Lurie that something is wrong after Lucy goes inside with the strangers.
Thus, silence pervades the works of Coetzee: speaking through his words. Coetzee’s grasp on reality, his depiction of the minute details of human nature seems to be the outcome of his silent observation of life, he being a reserved person by nature. His obsession with silence also owes to his marginalized position in South Africa, marginalized from both sides – the black as well as the white: disowned by the blacks because he is white, and distanced from the whites because he does not share their colonial attitude and wants to get rid of his colonial legacy owing to his skin colour. His ambivalent position renders him incapable to belong completely to any side leading to his sense of loneliness and alienation reflected in his works through his characters most of whom are drawn as withdrawn from the society. This alienation leading to his silent, reserved disposition is clearly depicted in his trio known as his ‘fictionalized autobiography’ consisting of three independent books, namely Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life (1997), Youth: Scenes from Provincial Life II (2002), and Summertime (2009), each dealing with three different phases of (his) life. It is actually Coetzee speaking through his characters like the Magistrate, Lucy Lurie, Susan Barton, Mrs. Curren, Eugene Dawn, and many more because as Coetzee himself says: “in a larger sense all writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it.” (Doubling the Point, 17). His works and characters speak for those who are marginalized, displaced, oppressed – silenced above all. To Gayatri Spivak’s question “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Coetzee’s answer seems to be: ‘Subaltern’ cannot speak unless others are ‘willing to listen’ to her – not only to her words, but to her silence as well, otherwise even her shouts can go unheard.
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