Conclusion

J.M. Coetzee has carved a niche for himself on the international literary scene. Writing in a country where banning and exile was a common reality for writers till recently, Coetzee’s work unites the aesthetic and the political dimensions. His novels resonate with allusions from European literature and the writers he is fond of. He makes use of allegory and metafiction but at the same time the political is not lost sight of. His novels mirror the oppressive regime of South Africa and also point to the ‘universal’. His novels are a strong testimony to the fact how a novelist could achieve his political aims without sounding propagandist. Not only this, Coetzee has created a new literary tradition for others to follow. He is an iconoclast and his work epitomizes how a novel could be modern, post-modern, avant-garde, metafictional and at the same time political and historical.

Coetzee’s training as a linguist enables him to detect the working of power relations in society at all levels. His empathy for the marginalized figures is an outcome of his social marginality. He had an uneasy childhood and was a witness to racial and gender discrimination and exploitation. In his fiction he exposes the oppressiveness of social structures. In technique, Coetzee debunks the realist tradition of writing quite early in his career. He is not very happy with the role of a South African spokesman thrust on him. His work rises above narrow provincialism and belongs to the international tradition. His work has been translated in more than twenty languages in both Europe and Asia. He is the fourth African writer to be honoured with the Nobel Prize in literature in 2003. Inspite of his towering intellect, he is modest enough to ascribe his Booker Prize to a lucky conjunction of stars.

Coetzee’s work occupies a transitional place between Europe and Africa. He makes use of postmodern narrative modes to address postcolonial problems.
His novels do not have a neat closure and are intertextual. Moreover they make an attempt to demolish the existing hierarchies, thereby bringing margins to the centre. Use of metafiction and allegory allows him to address the South African situation in an oblique manner. The chief concern in his novels is whether it is possible to evade history? His characters resist being dominated by presenting themselves as inaccessible and inscrutable. There is a great variety in Coetzee's novels. His protagonists go on a downward spiraling journey but paradoxically they derive great strength in disgrace. In this way, Coetzee captures the divine spark in man.

Coetzee's work transcends immediate time and place but it also exposes the power politics operating at many levels in South African society. An important thematic concern is the politics of race. The legally institutionalized policy of apartheid bred many evils in South Africa. It has been very difficult to uproot because of its strong religious underpinnings. The unjust social, economic and political policies left a vast majority of population in abject poverty. The country is still grappling with the scars of racial policies in the post-apartheid phase. Coetzee's treatment of apartheid in his novels may be called either direct and forceful or muted and allegorical. The desert motif occurs repeatedly in Coetzee's work as it denotes the South African situation. In *Foe* a conspicuous concern is to make the black voice heard. The muted Friday represents the disenfranchised black community. Friday is a victim of colonialist violence and racial stereotypes. He is a marginalized character who refuses to be taught by the white woman. Black voices are loud and articulate in *Age of Iron*. The novel depicts educational protests, media censorship and barbarity against children had become the order of the day. It is set in the period of 1986-89 when black revolt was escalating. Similarly, in *Waiting for the Barbarians* the unjust police system is attacked under which a person of colour could be detained indefinitely without any cause. Many deaths in prison passed off as suicides. Coetzee depicts the use of torture as a political weapon. In *Life & Times of*
Michael K, the efforts of a coloured man to live his life are doomed to failure because of the civil war. The land is compartmentalized into camps and he cannot claim any area.

In Coetzee’s work race exists as an absent signifier. He does not present the binary division of black and white but focuses on the psyche of the oppressor as well as the oppressed. His novels repeatedly emphasize the physical and psychological trauma generated by apartheid. Its physical manifestation is the brutal maiming of the victimized. It could be Friday’s loss of his tongue in Foe, the barbarian girl’s handicap in Waiting for the Barbarians or Vercueil’s dysfunctional fingers in Age of Iron. These characters are denied a complete life as they do not even have proper names. They are alienated, silent characters who do not wish to enter into social discourse. Friday in Foe refuses to learn the language imposed on him. Vercueil in Age of Iron remains non-committal till the very end. Michael K evades social and political life. He makes no attempt to correct his wrong name and feigns dullness to avoid any participation in society.

Racial politics is instrumental in constructing the coloured /black as Other who is deprived of privileged existence. Vercueil in Age of Iron lives on the fringes of society. He is a homeless derelict whose life is a marked contrast to Mrs. Curren’s life of material comfort. The other is also the target of racial violence and hatred. Friday in Foe suffers mutilation and the barbarian girl becomes handicapped as a result of torture inflicted on her. Michael K has a harelip and his upbringing in a school for handicapped children ensures that he is cut off from the mainstream of life. Thus, Coetzee comments on the politics of exclusion.

Coetzee’s white protagonists feel an irresistible urge to do some good for the Other who is downtrodden and scarred. Susan Barton in Foe takes upon herself to ship Friday to Africa, the Magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians undertakes a perilous journey to restore the girl to her home and Mrs. Curren in
Age of Iron gives shelter to Vercueil, the homeless. But this gesture causes them a lot of hardships. Susan Barton has to live a hard life in London and take care of Friday. The Magistrate has to pay a heavy price for the journey across the desert and Mrs. Curren puts up with Vercueil’s misdemeanor. The Medical Officer does his best to make Michael K tell his story. The white characters get fed up with their benevolent attitude when they sense a lack of reciprocation. But nonetheless they persist in their quest. This gesture could be understood as an attempt to come to terms with the historical sense of guilt and complicity for being born white. In situations where the white person is victimized, they readily embrace the role of scapegoat. Lucy in Disgrace feels that she is paying a price for living in South Africa.

Gender politics is an important strain in Coetzee’s work. As a feminist his work provides the other side of black feminism. His concern is with the predicament of white women trapped in power hierarchy. The white women are trapped in a strange role. They are above black men and women but below white men. They feel alienated in the social world torn asunder by power struggles. They are full of compassion and the violence and greed makes them turn to nature. They have ecofeminist leanings. They respect animal and plant life and strive to preserve the delicate ecological balance.

Disgrace, set in post-apartheid South Africa, is a poignant tale of a white woman who lives an independent life. She rejects the conventional gender role by renouncing heterosexuality. But she becomes a victim of gang rape at the hands of three black men. As Lucy copes with her trauma, Coetzee underscores the vulnerability of women in the male-dominated society and in a country in transition. Lucy painfully realizes that she has to pay a price to live in a land where power equations are changing. She turns vegetarian after her violation. The flora and fauna are of great significance to her and she conserves nature’s meager resources. Similarly, Coetzee’s other women protagonists like Elizabeth
Curren in *Age of Iron*, Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals* embody ecofeminist faith. Costello is an aging novelist and her views alienate her in the personal as well as professional sphere.

Coetzee underscores the complex working of racial and gender politics that wreaks havoc in the lives of white women. Lucy and Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* feel frustrated in their effort to bond with the black men and women and they get victimized in the process. Rape is the stereotypical black man's revenge that leaves these women traumatized. Magda tries to create a bonding with the black woman but her well-intentioned desire backfires. The wheel comes full circle when the servants dress up in the garb of the master and victimize her. In his depiction of gender politics Coetzee highlights the vulnerability of white women but at the same time they are shown as strong women who emerge stronger from their ordeals. They are humane characters in the world gone topsy turvy with violence and greed.

Politics of writing is an issue that Coetzee takes up in his fiction and non-fiction. He delves into the harms of censorship and the difficulty of writing under a politically fraught regime. South Africa and Soviet Union have subjected their writers' books to ruthless scrutiny and created many problems for them. This is brought out vividly in *Giving Offense*. In *The Master of Petersburg*, Coetzee presents a fictionalized account of the life of Fyodor Dostoevsky. He talks about the events that led to his stepson's murder and his evasion from the police. The sickness of the time is reflected in the author's sickness. Dostoevsky painfully realizes that he cannot escape the madness of the age. The novel highlights the pulls and pressures faced by a writer in society. Dostoevsky feels trapped when he realizes that both the police as well as the revolutionaries want to exploit his popularity.

Coetzee refers to reading and writing as demon possession. This theme is developed at length in *Elizabeth Costello*. The protagonist of the novel is a
famous Australian writer who believes that reading and writing could work
damage to the soul. The writer might project evil as tempting and do more harm
than good. Her profession leaves her tired and alienated. Coetzee also highlights
the politics of award ceremonies and the tendency of some authors to benefit
from the ‘exotic’. The problems faced by postcolonial authors are also
highlighted.

The politics of writing is also conflated with the politics of gender. They
often work together to circumscribe women’s lives. Magda feels rich anger at
being confined in a text written by a male author. Her madness is the result of
patriarchal constraints. She wishes to create her own text. Susan Barton in Foe
finds her creativity stifled by Foe who does not allow her to find her voice.
Coetzee underscores the difficulties faced by a woman writer. Susan Barton has
to struggle to tell her story and fight against patriarchal stereotypes. She is not
allowed to articulate the truth as she is made to feel convinced that truth will not
sell. Thus, by presenting the woman’s point of view, Coetzee strives to give
voice to the woman who is usually the silenced minority.

Coetzee exposes the politics of representation in his work particularly in
In the Heart of the Country. He exposes what the characters feel on being
written into the text. Magda struggles to claim her autonomy in this power
game. Another thematic concern of Coetzee is the politics of canonization. He
looks back to landmark texts and presents revisionist version of them in his
work. Foe revises Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe and Roxana.

Coetzee’s work underscores how myths are constructed on the basis of
racial and gender difference and serve as a source of oppression. In his early
fiction, he reworks political myths in his discourse and reveals how each myth
contains the element of power struggle. In Dusklands, Coetzee responds to
twentieth century imperialism and eighteenth century colonialism. The first
section highlights how myth can be used to destroy the enemy’s culture. He
points out the role of technology in disseminating violence and cloaking barbarity in the veneer of heroism. The master-myth of history is the myth of male aggression that denigrates women and destroys the ecological balance. The result of this solipsism is mental breakdown and insanity. Thus, Coetzee exposes the myth of American rationality in the first novella and points out the need for an alternative myth.

The second section of *Dusklands* exposes the barbarity and cruelty that are at the core of a so-called civilizing mission. The eighteenth century Dutch explorer Jacobus Coetzee believes in the Afrikaner myth of Chosen People. He behaves like a God and perpetuates violence as a token of divine will. There is no remorse in him for committing genocide. Coetzee uses his name for four different persons in the novel, thereby drawing attention to his own complicity in the power game.

*In the Heart of the Country* can be described as the feminine counterpart of *Dusklands*. Coetzee revises the myth of the purity of Afrikaner woman by pointing out that the exalted place given to her is a cultural construct. Magda shatters this myth of purity by indulging in miscegenation and parricide. She is not the feminine centre of the family rather an angry spinster. She wishes to write her own story and her own history. She is constantly preoccupied by questions regarding her identity. She is the antithesis of the notion of loving wife and mother upheld by Afrikaner culture. Her feelings regarding motherhood are full of repugnance. Thus, the novel points out the need to write feminine myths of history.

In *Life & Times of Michael K* Coetzee underscores the need to construct myths that elevate black suffering. Michael K’s journey parodies the Great Trek and the Afrikaner’s sense of alienation from modernity. The various labour and incarceration camps are reminiscent of the British-run concentration camps in the Anglo-Boer War. The myth of the pastoral return to the land is also
parodied. Coetzee also depicts an ecological myth by emphasizing on the need to tend the earth with loving care.

Coetzee’s work is frequently compared with other white writers like Nadine Gordimer, Andre Brink and Breyten Breytenbach. He himself holds the tradition in high regard. He shows deep respect for authors who have written politically committed literature. His severance from the realist tradition is the culmination of a trend that started in the 1960s. As censorship became increasingly repressive, writers began to experiment with alternative forms of writing. For instance, the Sestigers were experimenting with metaphysical themes divorced from the harsh realities of the South African life.

Coetzee’s work is now being seen in a new light. It is now commended for its political significance. This re-evaluation is linked to the ascent of post-structuralist theoretical perspectives. His use of metafiction and revision of canonical texts was earlier dismissed as 'literary terrorism’ but now his work is recognized as belonging to an international tradition that transcends its immediate time and place.

Coetzee’s work is seen to infuse a new life in the politically saturated literature of South Africa. Gordimer’s work is considered to be weighed down by politics and Brink’s work is perceived as laying more emphasis on moral vision. In comparison Coetzee’s work has been lauded for its artistic qualities. Thus, Coetzee is an integral part of the tradition of anti-apartheid writing. At the same time his work is great ‘art’ too.

In my study, I have tried to assess Coetzee’s role in exposing the oppression of his country and his innovative role in giving a new shape to the South African novel. Though heavily influenced by European masters, Coetzee is firmly rooted in the South African landscape that acquires almost mythic dimensions in his works. The contemporary world is torn asunder by politics of power and the gap separating the oppressor and the oppressed is widening. We
need humane intellectuals like Coetzee to point a finger at this malaise. As Coetzee says in *Doubling the Point*, “I am someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations which are shadows themselves of people slipping their chains and turning their faces to light” (341). His novels emphatically point out that negative capability and empathy can establish a new order.