Chapter 1

Introduction

The importance of J.M.Coetzee's work in the development of twentieth century fiction is now widely recognized. His dense, allegorical novels strive to lay bare the anguish of South African people writhing under harsh regimes. Though written in an oblique style, the novels nonetheless have a deeply disturbing effect. Coetzee's writings reveal his abiding concern with power and hierarchy. My study focuses on the idea of marginality in his fiction as an outcome of the wielding of power by dominant groups. It studies the politics of race, gender and writing in his novels. My emphasis is on shifting power relations and how these are reflected in the gaps and absences in the texts and in the silence of the marginalized Other.

In the Introduction I touch upon Coetzee's literary affiliations and his place in the postcolonial world. Marginality is defined as an outcome of power politics. It also highlights the wide definition of politics as it has pervaded all spheres of human activity. The main thrust of the Introduction is the novel *Foe* in which Coetzee handles multiple issues like race, gender and writing. These are concerns that recur in his other novels too.

Chapter Two studies Coetzee's handling of racial politics in the light of a brief history of apartheid in South Africa. My approach is sociological, focusing on the silence of the marginalized characters, which is an eloquent expression of their repression. I analyse *Age of Iron*, making intertextual references to the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K*.

Chapter Three analyses gender politics in *Disgrace*, making intertextual references to the novel *In the Heart of the Country*. It underscores the alienation
of white women as they strive to form a bond with the black people and their sense of helplessness resulting from a painful awareness of their situation. Gender politics is analyzed as a corollary of racial politics.

Chapter Four studies the politics of writing as an important preoccupation of Coetzee. A writer in South Africa faces a precarious situation. He must struggle to articulate the truth and not side with the oppressor. This creates a paradoxical situation for the author who has to choose between complicity and silence. This theme is studied in the context of The Master of Petersburg and Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons.

Chapter Five explores the politics of history and mythology in Dusklands, Life & Times of Michael K and In the Heart of the Country. My emphasis is to point out how myths operate on the basis of race, gender and writing. I also highlight how in each myth there is the element of power and control, a dialectics of opposite forces at work.

The Conclusion is a summing up of the major arguments and observations. I conclude how Coetzee is able to wield the novel form to suit his aesthetic and political aims. His work shows how fiction writing can respond to and ultimately transcend its immediate context.

J.M. Coetzee is one of the most significant voices of our times. He is an academic, critic, novelist and translator. Born in Cape Town on February 9, 1940 Coetzee is descended from Dutch settlers who came to Africa in the seventeenth century. His mother was English so he grew up speaking English at home and Afrikaans to his relatives. Though conversant in many languages, Coetzee has a special fondness for English and he chose it as his medium of writing. He obtained his Masters degree from the University of Cape Town in the 1960’s and later a Ph.D. in linguistics in the United States in 1968. He returned to South Africa in 1972 and taught at the University of Cape Town till recently. At present, he is settled in the suburbs of Adelaide in Australia and lectures at prominent US
universities. His decision to leave South Africa is steeped in controversy. It is rumoured that bitter criticism of *Disgrace* provoked him to take this step. In the post-apartheid South Africa, Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up to address the social injustice. Its focus was on reconciliation, peace and forgiveness to secure the future. Coetzee’s depiction of blacks as seeking revenge came in for sharp criticism from people who believed that Coetzee had sent a wrong message at that time.

Coetzee has not been very happy with his role as South Africa’s spokesman. He has stated that it is not necessary to understand his thoughts to read his novels. Apart from Coetzee’s academic career, his creative work has been very well received. A number of literary awards have come his way, the prominent ones are the Man Booker (twice, 1983 and 1999), Prix Femina Etranger (1985), the Jerusalem Prize (1987) and to cap them all, the Nobel Prize for literature (2003). His popularity has overtaken that of Nadine Gordimer and Andre Brink not only in South Africa but in mainstream academic journals in America also. He is included among those writers who have played a crucial role in taking their country’s torment to distant audience.

A glance at the formative influences in Coetzee’s literary development reveals that European literature has played the most prominent role. Stephen Watson observes that “all of Europe’ has gone into the making of Coetzee” (25). He himself acknowledges the impact of several European modernist writers, specifically Rainer Maria Rilke, Robert Musil, Ezra Pound, William Faulkner, Ford Madox Ford and Samuel Beckett on his work. In his essay ‘Homage’, Coetzee candidly confesses, “This is about some of the writers without whom I would not be the person I am, writers without whom I would, in a certain sense, not exist. An acknowledgment, therefore, of literary paternity” (1). He further adds that these authors “taught me to hear, feel, write” (8). He accepts that when he was to begin his literary career in the 1960’s, he could find no South African
writer who could have served as a role model. In a similar vein he expresses his exasperation with Afrikaans as a medium of writing. He prefers the layered nature of English in contrast to the monologic Afrikaans. Coetzee considers Afrikaans as the language of oppression because an important feature of this language is the use of different pronouns for the master and the servant. Moreover, hierarchy is inbuilt in the language. The Afrikaners are afraid to say you to anyone older than themselves. In Boyhood, he makes fun of his father’s speech: “Mommy must put a blanket over Mommy’s knees, otherwise Mommy will get cold” (49).

Youth gives us an insight into the struggles of a young man as he recounts his desperate efforts to break free from South Africa. Though written in the third person, the persona is undoubtedly a mask for Coetzee himself. He works for more than a year as a computer programmer in IBM before calling it quits. His literary preference is for T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. “From Eliot he has learned that the test of the critic is his ability to make fine discriminations. From Pound he has learned that the critic must be able to pick out the voice of the authentic master amid the babble of mere fashion” (135). Reading Beckett opens his eyes to an altogether new experience and he concludes that Beckett is his true literary mentor. He develops a dislike for Shakespeare and Keats concluding that “poetry should be hard and clear like a flame” (21). Coetzee gets impatient with his job at IBM and resigns as he has a secret resolution to become a poet. He also toys with the idea of writing a verse drama but gives up after a futile effort.

The two authors whose profound influence shaped Coetzee’s work are Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett. He writes in Doubling the Point, “As a writer I am not worthy to loose the latchet of Kafka’s shoe” (199). Beckett has a special significance for Coetzee, as his doctoral thesis is entitled ‘The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett: An Essay in Stylistic Analysis’. Gilbert Yeoh finds Beckettian echoes in almost all the novels of Coetzee. “Specifically, a re-reading of Beckettian aesthetics as insulation from history provides Coetzee with the fantasy
of a utopian escape from the painful dilemmas he experiences as a writer in South Africa” (“Nothingness” 124). Coetzee describes Kafka and Beckett as “writers of the ordinary” and the same holds true for his own work. He foregrounds marginalized characters who do not even have proper names. Samuel Durrant reads a special significance in Coetzee’s decision not to give proper names to his figures of alterity. He describes his novels as “works of failed or inconsolable mourning” (437). It is an ethical refusal on Coetzee’s part to integrate these characters fully into his narratives.

Coetzee’s interest in language and his training as a linguist is related to his interest in power politics because those who have voice also have power. His grounding in structuralism and post-structuralism makes him detect the working of power relations at all levels. As pointed by Paul Cantor, “The relation of subject to object, of representation to reality, of word to thing- all are attempts at mastery” (99). Over the last few decades, the word ‘politics’ has acquired a wide variety of connotations. This idea became popular with the publication of Kate Millet’s Sexual Politics (1970) in which she employs the word ‘politics’ to refer to power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another. In a narrow sense, politics refers to political parties and their procedures to acquire Power in forming the State. But, in a wider sense, politics has come to signify a power struggle among the different groups of society to impose their interests and values on other groups and to resist their domination by other classes.

Coetzee’s depiction of marginality is rooted in his personal experience and background. Being an Afrikaner, he is painfully aware of his marginal position in South Africa. In the context of South Africa, African is the native inhabitant whereas Afrikaner means white settler. It is a loaded word in their cultural context. In Boyhood, the young Coetzee feels repelled from the Afrikaner culture. Speaking Afrikaans for him is like speaking like “a whipped slave” (49). When
there is a move by the authorities to put English and Afrikaan children in separate classes, he lives in nightmarish dread of that moment. In *Doubling the Point* he describes his social situation as someone who is able to express himself only from a position of radical alienation. “In the first half of this story—a story spoken in a wavering voice, for the speaker is not only blind but, written as he is as a white South African into the latter half of the twentieth century, disabled, disqualified—a man-who-writes reacts to the situation he finds himself in of being without authority, writing without authority” (392). In *White Writing*, he defines white writing as white “only insofar as it is generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African” (16). The awareness of his ambivalent colonial/settler status lends objectivity to his work. As Sue Kossew points out: “His insider/outsider status perhaps enables him to view the binary positions of white South African subjectivity (Afrikaner versus English speaking) with equal dispassion” (“Critical” 7). It also serves to heighten his sensitivity towards the marginalized strata of society. Right from childhood, Coetzee felt uncomfortable in hierarchies. He used to question himself if servants could work in his house then why it was embarrassing to visit them in their homes. *Boyhood* is replete with memories of racial prejudice witnessed at home and at school. He realizes that “what he would write if he could...would be something darker” (140).

The dominant force in any group-race, gender, class has exercised power in such a manner as to confine the subjugated to the margins. Thus, marginality has become an important concept in feminist and postcolonial studies. Feminists voice their concern over the way women’s experience is relegated to the margins, making male experience the dominating norm. Similarly, the dominant race (white) and class have created the subaltern in society. The experience of the marginalized characters forms the core in Coetzee’s oeuvre. In *White Writing* he says, “Our craft lies all in reading the other: gaps, inverses, undersides; the veiled, the dark, the buried, the feminine; alterities” (81). Coetzee’s chief concern in his fiction is not to give voice to these characters, rather to unravel their silencing. In
Doubling the Point, Coetzee underlines his own speechlessness by speaking of how he is “overwhelmed”, how his “thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world.” (248).

Coetzee’s work seeks to dismantle the hegemony of liberal aesthetics by writing sophisticated works of modernism. He tries to depict the forces of race, class and gender that shape the lives of the oppressor and the oppressed. In his non-fiction also, he has consistently talked about the perils of writing. Coetzee has vehemently opposed oppression of any sort. His anger knew no bounds when the South African Congress of writers withdrew their invitation to Salman Rushdie in the wake of threats following the publication of Satanic Verses. Exposing the history of censorship has been an important preoccupation of Coetzee.

Coetzee has created a special place for himself in the postcolonial world. Postcolonial theory has challenged and altered basic assumptions about literature. Traditionally, the liberal humanist approach has given a moral and transcendent dimension to literature. “Humanist literary studies have long been resistant to the idea that literature (or at least good literature) has anything to do with politics, on the grounds that the former is either too subjective, individual and personal or else too universal and transcendent to be thus tainted” (Loomba 69). Postcolonial writers and critics do not adhere to what they consider as the Eurocentric perspective. For them, literature is rooted in culture and is a weapon in the political struggle. Coetzee repeatedly contends that his work has nothing to do with politics, “…my allegiances lie with the discourse of the novels and not with the discourse of politics” (Kossew “Critical” 6). Inspite of his insistence to sever his novels from any political aims, his novels depict the struggle for survival under politically fraught conditions. Coetzee goes beyond the goodly talk to expose the simmering rage beneath. Thus, the texts become discursive events that are deeply embedded in the South African milieu.
Coetzee does not tread the familiar literary path. Commenting on Coetzee's place in the postcolonial world, Dominic Head remarks that his novels offer a dual challenge. They challenge the realist conventions on which South African novel relies a lot. He was the first South African novelist to break away from the predominant realist mode in favour of the postmodern allegorical style. Sue Kossew refers to an interview where Coetzee responds, "I don't have much interest in, or can't seriously engage myself with, the kind of realism that takes pride in copying the 'real' world" ("Critical" 7). Coetzee feels that responding to history is his fate. "On the other hand, I sometimes wonder whether it isn't simply that vast and wholly ideological superstructure constituted by publishing reviewing and criticism that is forcing on me the fate of being a South African novelist" (5). This has invited sharp criticism from critics like Paul Rich, Sarah Christie, Geoffrey Hutchings and Don Maclenan. His work has been seen as too 'cold' or cerebral. Critics have found fault with Coetzee for not emphasizing on the material factors of oppression and struggle in contemporary South Africa.

Secondly, the field of postcolonial writing needs to accommodate the intermediary position of Coetzee's work. His work occupies a transition site between Europe and Africa. His strength lies in transplanting the postmodern concepts to address the South African realities. Coetzee describes the writer's task as that of "adapting whatever models and theories lie to hand to make writing possible" (Dovey 19). Coetzee's novels do not have a neat closure, they are intertextual and self-reflexive, and deconstruct the binary oppositions thereby bringing margins to the center. Head further believes that Coetzee "represents in himself a new kind of author, in whom academic critic and writer, formerly regarded as distinct, are melded as never before" (25).

Coetzee's work has special relevance both for postmodern and postcolonial theory. The relation between the two has generated a lot of controversy. Some critics see them as similar movements. They argue that both
try to denounce the established tradition. But others consider them as divergent; postmodernism is an academic enterprise whereas postcolonialism is seen as a political activity. Coetzee's work shows a blending of both. "The postmodern enterprise—exploring the absences, the silences in art—becomes the postcolonial enterprise of exposing political acts of silencing, the imposition of an alien regime on a recalcitrant people" (Cantor 99). Coetzee's postmodern texts have been criticized on the grounds that they voice the concern of privileged, white intelligentsia. Richard Begam however defends him by arguing that he confounds his critics by adopting postmodern strategies and using them for postcolonial purposes.

Coetzee's work deserves special merit for indigenizing the narrative modes to address the painful reality of South Africa. In *White Writing*, he cautions about the application of wrong means of representation. He talks of the European painters who came to South Africa bringing the wrong palette with them. They had a variety of green shades that they had developed to paint the landscapes in Europe but not 'fawns, browns, greys' to paint the South African veld. Paul A. Cantor argues that Coetzee resolves the mismatch between representation and reality quite successfully.

For Coetzee the question to be posed in analyzing South African literature is: How can categories that were developed to deal with European experience be used to understand Africa and distinctively African experience? In particular, how can languages with roots in Europe be transposed to describe and narrate African experience? (Cantor 95)

Coetzee's work rises above narrow provincialism as he shows a marked disposition for contemporary literary studies.

Coetzee's artistic and intellectual choices have presumed that artistic endeavor and knowledge are international. As with his
theoretical models, many of his literary influences (Kafka, Beckett, Joyce, Nabokov, Borges) belong to no single national tradition but to a major, modern, deracinated, and difficult to classify international tradition. (Glenn 24)

His novels are replete with allusions and quotations from European literature. The title of *Waiting for the Barbarians* is taken from a poem by C.P. Cavafy. There are many buried quotations from William Blake, Kafka and Beckett in *In the Heart of the Country*.

Coetzee’s novels are characterized by intertextuality and the use of allegory. His oppositional discourse weaves the canonical texts in the narrative. Very often, he provides a new perspective on the canonized texts and authors. He reworks Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana* in *Foe* trying to unearth the woman’s voice. *The Master of Petersburg* takes on the life of Fyodor Dostoevsky, the great Russian novelist and one of Coetzee’s favourites. *In the Heart of the Country* also revises the famous genre of the pastoral novel and looks back to Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*. Kossew comments on this revisionary gesture:

The complicity between narrative mode and political oppression, specifically the cryptic associations of historicism and realism in European and South African white settler narratives, enables Coetzee to demonstrate the pernicious political role of texts in the continuing oppression of blacks and hence the importance of their dismantling. ("Critical" 10)

The intertextuality calls attention to the manner the texts are constructed. Thus, Coetzee questions the reliability of his fictions.

The allegorical mode is the most commonly employed narrative style in Coetzee. Allegory can be defined as a narrative mechanism in which “one text is read through another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their
relationship may be” (Korang 186). This mode enables the writer to speak at different levels. Critics have described it a political necessity. In *Doubling the Point* Coetzee himself describes his books as “too indirect in their approach, too rarefied, to be considered a threat to the order” (298). Almost all novels of Coetzee have allegorical dimensions. Magda’s spinsterhood in *In the Heart of the Country* is seen to mirror the isolation of South Africa. The nameless Empire in *Waiting for the Barbarians* has striking parallels with the South African regime. *Foe* is packed with dense allegory where Foe’s loss of tongue corresponds to the loss of black/colored voice. *Age of Iron* sees South Africa in the throes of illness, as a mother whose children have deserted her. *The Master of Petersburg* portrays the traps laid out by the State for a creative writer as it rewrites an important phase in the career of Fyodor Dostoevsky.

Coetzee’s use of allegory has not been received well by critics with Marxist leanings. His work has been accused of being ‘assimilationalist’ in the very regime it sets out to oppose. Some have accused him of pretentiousness and employing esoteric allusions. These critics fail to see that Coetzee presents his readers with a sophisticated challenge to read his scathing criticism.

Language is a very important concern for postcolonial writers. The decision to write in English is a political choice for most of them. Many writers like Gabriel Okara and George Lamming employ abrogation and appropriation of Standard English. Many practice code-switching and vernacular transcription to appropriate English as a culturally significant discourse. When postcolonial writers use English, “they often let the rhythms and idioms of their own language be heard because the defamiliarization that results from such a practice automatically draws our attention to the non-English linguistic and cultural context of their work” (Bertens 195). Coetzee chooses English over Afrikaans. His primary interest is in the linguistic rather than the literary aspect of language. He does not resort to any of these strategies, yet dexterously achieves his
postcolonial concerns. He rarely uses glossing but in some instances makes use of
the untranslatable words like kombi, boervrou etc. that helps to convey cultural
distinctiveness.

Coetzee problematises language as he questions its veracity as a means of
communication. Michael Vaughan is of the view that Coetzee forces the
modalities of fictional language- its conventions and artifices and its limitations
upon the reader’s notice. Language “can exemplify, but not explain, the crisis-
state of the agents of domination...Characters of other races, the victims of
domination are entirely enigmatic entities within the medium of this fiction.”
(60). An important trope in Coetzee’s oeuvre is the way language is the means to
construct identity. Characters like Magda, Mrs. Curren, Susan Barton, the
Magistrate strongly feel that they need to write in order to exist.

Foe (1986) is a landmark text in Coetzee’s corpus for many reasons. In
this text Coetzee handles the multiple issues of race, gender and writing—
concerns that surface in his other novels. This complex metafictional narrative
serves the fittest introduction to his delineation of power politics. Foe is a
postcolonial revision of Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, the heroic tale of
survival on a lonely island that has acquired a near-mythological status since its
publication in 1719. The novel was extremely successful and was followed by
many imitations which came to be called “Robinsonnnades”. Some of the
prominent ones were The Adventures of Philip Quarll (1727), The Life and
Adventures of Peter Wilkins, A Cornishman (1751) and The Swiss Family
Robinson (1812-13). This eighteenth century novel is a celebration of the spirit of
adventure in man. It catches the imperialistic fervour of the times when Great
Britain was expanding her colonies. Robinson Crusoe “is an embodiment of the
great myth of Western imperialism, an enthusiastic narrative project of
‘civilizing’ virgin territories and indigenous peoples, even against all odds” (Head
113). The eponymous hero displays a combination of systematic salvaging and
resourcefulness to exist on the island for more than 28 years. He adapts to an alien environment overcoming physical handicaps and loneliness. The novel celebrates the virtues of hard work, faith and reason. It glorifies the civilized man as opposed to the savage. Critics have detected the echoes of Jonah, Job, Everyman, the Prodigal Son, the colonial explorer and the proto-industrialist in this archetypal tale.

In *Foe*, Coetzee attempts to set right the story that Defoe might have got wrong. In the writing of history women and certain races have been excluded. Coetzee attempts to recover these silenced voices. He drops the ‘e’ in Crusoe and changes Defoe to Foe. Foe was Crusoe’s original name. Cruso was Defoe’s long-standing friend Timothy Cruso who was a dissenting minister. Thus, Coetzee evokes the historical associations in the text. He also introduces a woman protagonist named Susan Barton in the familiar story and presents it from a new angle. Susan is the female castaway who finds rescue on Cruso’s island and becomes his companion. Cruso is a strict authoritarian, almost imperial in demanding obedience. He keeps a black man Friday whom he has taught the barest language to carry out his instructions. In the original text, Friday is a tawny Carib and a garrulous fellow. Coetzee’s deviation from the original text has a special significance for his position in South Africa. As he comments in a 1987 interview with Tony Morphet: “*Foe* is a retreat from the South African situation, but only from that situation in a narrow temporal perspective. It is not a retreat from the subject of colonialism or from questions of power” (462). *Robinson Crusoe* was part of a process that excluded and fixed the colonized as Other. David Attwell remarks that “the novel develops a characterology of the relations of power between the metropolitan center and the settler-colonial and native sectors of colonial society” (“South Africa” 104). The importance of *Robinson Crusoe* for Coetzee is clear from the fact that in *Doubling the Point* he speaks of *Foe* as a tribute to the eighteenth century prose style. In his essay ‘Daniel Defoe’ anthologized in *Stranger Shores* Coetzee comments on the perennial interest in
Defoe: “Nothing he set down on paper is less than intelligent; the subjects he was led to in the novels of his old age-crime, conquest, ambition, loneliness-are as lively today as they were three centuries ago” (26).

Colonialism and racial violence forms an important thematic concern in the novel. In the depiction of racial politics, Coetzee’s focus is on the silencing of the black voice and the failure of the white person to recover it. He also describes the racial stereotypes and violent repression that distances and objectifies the black as Other. At the same time, Coetzee’s discourse envisions the time when black voice would be articulate and unmediated.

Racial stereotypes are firmly rooted in the white person’s imagination. In the beginning Susan does not give any importance to Friday who goes about the island doing odd jobs for his master. In *Stranger Shores* Coetzee comments on the lack of Friday’s autonomy: “All secondary characters in Defoe’s I–centered fictions tend to be ciphers” (25). He has homy feet, fuzzy hair and flat features. Susan thinks she might have landed on an island of cannibals. Even when Susan and Friday are struggling in London, she is afraid that he might turn cannibalistic. Small boys tease Friday in the street with jeers and call him a man-eater.

Friday is a marginalized, alienated character. At the core of the novel is his helpless silence. He is an embodiment of the white man’s cruelty. His tongue has been chopped off and there are suggestions that he might have been unmanned also. Hence, he cannot express himself through language. His story is “properly not a story but a puzzle or hole in the narrative”, “a buttonhole, carefully cross-stitched around, but empty, waiting for the button” (121). Cruso insists that Friday was mutilated by the slave-hunters. Throughout the narrative, there is an undercurrent that Cruso did the heinous act to complete Friday’s subjugation. Susan’s efforts to arrive at the real reason by showing different portraits to Friday come to a naught. In the last section of the novel, there is another instance of violence against Friday as it refers to “a scar like a necklace,
left by a rope or chain around Friday's neck” (155). How did it come about is a lacuna in the text. Chris Bongie argues that this violence is an outcome of Susan’s attempts to speak for him: “Barton has left a rope or chain of “emancipatory” signifiers around the neck of the colonized subject, and thereby scarred him” (265).

Friday’s oppression has been understood in the wider postcolonial context. His plight affirms Walter Benjamin’s view that every story of civilization is at the same time a story of barbarism. Friday’s silence is allegorically connected to the silencing of black voices. Graham Huggan finds an obvious connection between Friday’s mutilated tongue and the disenfranchisement of the black majority in South Africa (22). Dick Penner too reads Friday’s mutilation as a symbol of the violence absorbed by blacks under the racist regime (124). Cruso has also been demystified. Robert Post sees Cruso’s territorialism as emblematic of Afrikaner expansionism as he is shown obsessed with planting terraces and jealously guarding his empire. Post further suggests that since Cruso’s attitude appears to embody the recalcitrance of the Afrikaner government, so his fever may symbolize the ‘diseased’ nature of the administration (145-46). Cruso dies while being rescued from the island. Thus, Coetzee prophecies the dissolution of the unjust Afrikaner government. This allegorical interpretation sounds too simplistic.

Through Friday, Coetzee underscores the permanent damage inflicted under apartheid and its dehumanizing effect on the victim. “But the unnatural years Friday had spent with Cruso had deadened his heart, making him cold, incurious, like an animal wrapt entirely in itself” (70). Susan often wonders what makes Friday obey his master and why doesn’t he hit back? “Had the cutting out of his tongue taught him eternal obedience, or at least the outward form of obedience, as gelding takes the fire out of a stallion?” (98) Friday also develops a disdain for social intercourse. He scribbles on his slate but when Susan attempts to see it, he rubs it with his spittle. Thus, racial violence causes not only physical
violence but psychological violence also. In an interview with Philip Wood, Coetzee makes a pertinent remark, “...just because the erstwhile oppressor has had a change of heart and wishes to take sides with the oppressed, there is no guarantee that he will be welcomed by the oppressed” (187).

Friday defies the dominant discourse by constructing an alternative discourse. He resists all attempts to learn language but when unattended makes a design that looks like “open eyes, each set upon a human foot: row upon row of eyes upon feet” (147). Hena Maes-Jelinek speculates that the eyes might signify the stare of Friday’s victimized people (238). Thus Friday speaks in his own language. He plays on the flute the same tune again and again and dances in a reverie. Friday’s music is perceived as dull and jarring by Susan. But what is dull in the western discourse could well be the latter’s handicap in understanding the alternative discourse. Neville Alexander points out in this regard: “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” (38). Krzysztof Twarowski describes Friday in allegorical terms. He argues that: “the colonized’s heart sustains irreparable harm when he is torn out of his native context; the eye represents the knowledge of the “deep” to which Friday belongs, the natural, intuitive world he comes from and which the white story teller must penetrate if he wants to close up the gap in his story” (134). Coetzee shows how the white person’s efforts to open up the silenced mouth are negated.

Friday’s counter discourse arises as a consequence of repression. Graham Huggan employs the Philomela myth to describe Friday’s condition. He argues that like Philomela, Friday is forced to find an indirect way of accusing his oppressors. Huggan points out that deprived of speech; Friday turns his attention to subverting the language which has been imposed on him (18). The last section of the novel shows the bodies of Susan and Foe dead long ago, the only voice
heard is the sound of the island gushing forth from Friday’s open mouth. Thus, the subaltern speaks in a voice of its own, unhampered by any agency. David Attwell comments on the power of Friday’s discourse: “In the third and final sections of the novel Friday gains in stature as the site of a shimmering, indeterminate potency that has the power to overwhelm and cancel Susan’s narrative and, finally, Coetzee’s novel itself” (“South Africa” 112).

In *Foe*, the depiction of racial politics is interwoven with politics of writing. The crux of Friday’s story is how white writing should deal with black silence. This question has an important bearing on Coetzee’s position in the South African context. He is skeptical of white writing being an authentic representation of black silence. He is also concerned about the dangers of naming.

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. (121)

The depiction of politics of writing in the novel is characterized by ambivalence. As Richard Begam points out, from the point of view of white writing, what Friday writes is seen as a hole at the centre of Susan’s story. Friday exists merely as a narrative absence, a lacuna or a textual gap. But from the point of view of black writing,

the O represents not an empty cipher but a divine circle, and by repeating it, much as he would a mantra, Friday expresses not his own nullity, his sense of isolation and self-alienation, but a fundamental unity with all of creation; here achieved through the worship of Benamuckee. (124)

Moreover, Friday’s music, his dance and scattering of petals on the water surface might be seen as an expression of his harmony with the cosmos. Susan soon gets fed up of her efforts to teach Friday. She realizes the incongruity between her
perspective and that of Friday: “Somewhere in the deepest recesses of those black pupils was there a spark of mockery? I could not see it. But if it were there, would it not be an African spark, dark to my English eye?” (146).

Coetzee also dismantles the hierarchy of speech/writing in Foe. Traditionally speech has been associated with the ‘savage man’ and writing with the ‘civilized man’. Begam refers to Levi-Strauss’ analysis that writing has a corrupting influence and is linked to subjugation (116). Writing is not a harmless activity rather it is as perverse as other forms of oppression. Coetzee repeatedly employs the imagery of a parasite to convey its damaging effect. “I forgot you are a writer who knows above all how many words can be sucked from a cannibal feast, how few from a woman cowering from the wind” (94).

Friday has many parallels with Michael K. His deformity is a severe form of Michael K’s harelip. Like him, Friday is also the child of nature. Susan is sorry to see Friday moping around in the confines of the city. His feet yearn for soft mud and he would not wear shoes even in cold weather. He tends Foe’s garden just like Michael K who grows a bountiful crop to assuage his hunger. Michael K is also an alienated character. Apart from the physical handicap, his silence has a psychological dimension also. K has a tendency to fall silent when accosted by someone who wishes to exercise authority on him. This creates a feeling of stupidity in him. People find him dull but like Friday, this is only a veneer and a way to resist authority. “His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong” (110). Likewise Friday’s story is also a narrative with a hole.

Gender politics is another dimension of power politics in the novel. Coetzee problematises the feminine in his work. The relation of white woman with white man brings out the former’s inferiority in the power hierarchy. On the other hand, the relation of white woman and black man is characterized by ambiguity. The position of Coetzee’s white women can be described as half-
colonized or semi-marginal. An attempt is also made to recover the woman’s voice and her viewpoint.

In her relation with Cruso, Susan’s inferior status is reflected in the way she is subjugated on the island. She introduces herself as ‘his second subject’, the first being Friday. She realizes quite early that it is futile to argue with Cruso who has become indifferent and stubborn. She tries to convince him of the power of writing but is snubbed every time. Cruso expects slavish obedience from Susan, “While you live under my roof you will do as I instruct!” (20) Susan thinks that Cruso finds his supremacy threatened by a woman and that might account for his bitterness. “Cruso would brook no change on his island” (27).

_Foe_ is a feminist text that presents the woman’s point of view and her travails. She is the main narrative voice who tells the story of her shipwreck and rescue on Cruso’s island, her search for her missing daughter in Bahia and her arduous efforts to make her story known to the world through _Foe_. Denis Donoghue admires Coetzee for making up for the severities of _Robinson Crusoe_ because the world of the latter is “a man’s world” where women appear only as terrified anonymities or domestic servants (26). The novel also underscores the precarious existence of women and the powerless in the hostile world. The journey undertaken by Susan to ship Friday to Africa shows their vulnerability. They are mistaken as gypsies on the way and driven out of the inn. Two men accost them and they have to run to save their lives. Susan decides to dress up like a man to avoid being conspicuous.

Susan’s relation with Friday and the manner in which she tries to demolish the hierarchy is characterized by ambiguity. Their relation cannot be put in simple terms. She sympathizes with his plight and feels a maternal concern for him but at other times she gets fed up of her role of good Samaritan. She tells Cruso the story of a fellow who took pity on an old man and carried him across the river on his shoulders. But once they reached the other side the man refused to step down.
He tightened his grip around him and turned him into a beast of burden. Susan feels that Friday is becoming an albatross round her neck: “I am Sinbad of Persia and Friday is the tyrant riding on my shoulders. I walk with him, I eat with him, he watches me while I sleep. If I cannot be free of him I will stifle!” (148). She is also ready to exploit Friday’s story and fill his silence for her own purpose. She convinces Friday that their island story would make them “famous” and “rich”. Samuel Durrant observes that Susan attempts to appropriate Friday’s story: “…in becoming Friday’s self-appointed guardian, she merely takes over Cruso’s position as Friday’s owner” (440). Thus, she exploits Friday as cultural capital. Susan vehemently denies that she has any role in subordinating Friday. She has a placard put round his neck granting him freedom. Ironically, the last section of the novel has an image of Friday with a scar round his neck. Susan realizes that her attitude toward Friday is far from liberating. “If he was not a slave, was he nonetheless the helpless captive of my desire to have our story told?” (150). She concludes that somehow she is donning the role of an owner. Teresa Dovey comments on Susan’s story that gives a prominent role to Friday. She argues that Coetzee’s purpose is to show how the more prominent forms of Western feminism have appropriated the colonized subject to their own ends, using the native Other as a convenient figure for feminine difference. Thus, the resemblance of Susan’s role with Cruso and later with Foe makes her position paradoxical and ambivalent. Nonetheless, Coetzee reverses the hierarchy by giving voice to the woman who is usually the silenced majority.

Susan loses patience with Friday when her attempts to teach him language fail. At such moments she sympathizes with Cruso and the role of a slave-owner. Thus, Susan is caught in a double bind. The role of Susan Barton has been read at an allegorical level as representing white South African liberals. Graham Huggan comments on the helplessness of the white liberal: he wishes to side with Friday and dissociate himself from Foe but can not do so (22).
Susan is subjugated by Foe too. She desperately tries to exchange her role with Foe by attempting to become “father” to the story. She sits in his room and tries to appropriate his pen. She tries to break the sexual stereotypes when she tells Foe, “I think of you as a mistress, or even, if I dare speak the word, as a wife” (152). But the ultimate power lies with Foe as Sue Kossew points out: “...his masculine authority is asserted despite her attempts to subvert it and he retains his position as “master” (172). Thus, gender reversal is one of the ways Susan tries to appropriate some power for herself.

In *Foe* Coetzee conflates the politics of gender with that of writing. He exposes the oppressiveness in the act of writing. The author, the characters, the subject matter and publication - form a part of the power struggle. Coetzee addresses these issues from the point of view of a woman writer. He talks about the factors impeding women’s creativity and also addresses the politics of canonization. Thus, his depiction of politics of writing has special significance for *écriture feminine*.

Writing is a gesture of power and Susan’s ambition to wield the pen is expressive of her desire to acquire power. Coetzee takes on the persona of a woman to explore the difficulties of speaking from the margins. In an interview with Tony Morphet, Coetzee responds, “How can one question power (‘success’) from a position of power? One ought to question it from its antagonist position, namely the position of weakness” (462). Coetzee’s position strongly resembles that of Susan Barton. In an interview, he responds that his sympathies in the novel are with the unsuccessful author who is Foe’s foe i.e. Susan Barton.

The written word has a number of benefits. Susan dreams of becoming ‘rich’ and ‘famous’ once her story of the island is published. It is writing that can transform memories and experiences and guarantee immortality. Susan tries her best to convince Cruso that he should keep a journal. She thinks that Cruso rescued would be a deep disappointment to the world because he has no stories to
tell of his life before the shipwreck. But she also realizes that it is not so easy to achieve fame. She has to battle economic hardships and her dream of acquiring fame is shattered very soon.

Susan desperately tries to tell the truth in her writing. Foe argues that truth will not sell. He also advises her to pep up her narrative by introducing some exotic element in it like the story of cannibals. In the words of Foe, the island story “...is like a loaf of bread. It will keep us alive...but who will prefer it when there are tastier confections and pastries to be had?” (117) The Captain of the ship too tells Susan that booksellers trade in books, not in truth. They would hire a man “to put in a dash of colour, here and there” (42). Susan’s struggle to articulate the truth mirrors Coetzee’s struggle to write honestly. Coetzee also suggests that there is nothing called the autonomy of the author and the latter has to manipulate his creativity. Every creative person faces this dilemma and in a tumultuous environment like that of South Africa, it becomes even more difficult to write the truth. Foe’s advice to Susan to sensationalise her tale recalls the stories made up by Afrikaners about the white man’s arrival in South Africa. Foe wishes that she should invent the story of cannibals who threaten the white woman thus turning her account into popular mythology. “I ask myself what past historians of the castaway state have done- whether in despair they have not begun to make up lies” (88).

David Attwell reads a reflection of actual struggle of Olive Schreiner in the novel. She was a staunch feminist and anti-racialist who consistently attacked South Africa’s race relations in her work. Attwell points out that the incidents where Susan is struggling to get her work published are reminiscent of Schreiner’s situation in London in 1881-82, when she was looking for a publisher for The Story of an African Farm. (106). Like her, Susan has an ambivalent relation of distance and proximity with respect to the metropolis. She protects her version of the island but needs Foe to authorize it.
Susan thinks that story-telling is an art that she lacks. It requires “…the knack of seeing waves when there are fields before your eyes, and of feeling the tropic sun when it is cold; and at your fingertips the words with which to capture the vision before it fades” (52). Susan is aware of the factors that impede women’s writing. Anticipating Virginia Woolf in A Room of One's Own, Susan says, “I wrote my memoir by candle light in a windowless room, with the paper on my knee. Is this the reason….why my story was so dull- that my vision was blocked, that I could not see” (127).

Susan’s doubts about her artistic caliber result from the problem with language. As Carolyn Burke points out: “when a woman writes or speaks herself into existence, she is forced to speak in something like a foreign tongue, a language with which she may be uncomfortable” (844). Susan Gallagher argues that Susan’s lack of literary confidence represents the condition of many eighteenth century women- raised in a patriarchal society, denied the social and educational opportunities given to men, ridiculed as unnatural if they dared usurp the pen. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out that throughout the western culture, “the text’s author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis” (6). Thus, Susan’s story is seen to embody the voice of the woman that has been silenced in traditional literary history.

Foe’s efforts to manipulate Susan’s story are akin to the censor who acts as the watchdog by directing the writer’s work. Susan wishes to give an authentic account of her sojourn on the island to the world whereas Foe disappoints her by showing more interest in her life in Bahia. He further suggests that she could reshape her story as the loss of the daughter, the quest, the island and the reunion. Thus, Foe’s emphasis on the exotic and mother-daughter relationship are his attempts to put limits on her creativity. His attitude is a reflection of the chauvinistic, patriarchal set-up that refuses to take women’s writing seriously.
Susan realizes that the girl was sent to her by Foe to pep up her story and to put her in a ‘maze of doubting’. Dominic Head finds a striking parallel of the daughter episode with the end of *Roxana* where the eponymous heroine (whose first name is Susan) is dogged by one of her abandoned children (115). Roxana sets off on the path to fortune and independence but she is tormented with guilt when her daughter is murdered by the maid-servant Amy. Through the intertextuality of Susan Barton, Coetzee’s text foregrounds how a woman’s identity as a mother overwhelms her ambitious pursuits. As Head points out, *Roxana* can be read as a contradictory text which punishes its female protagonist for embodying paradoxical male desires for sexual freedom combined with material success and social stability (116). Thus, by juxtaposing the two texts, Coetzee highlights that Roxana might have been effaced from *Robinson Crusoe* making it a patriarchal text. Foe stealthily exercises his power over Susan. She is unable to solve the puzzle of the girl. “Nothing is left to me but doubt” (133). Susan finds her relations with Cruso and Foe equally oppressive. Foe truly emerges as Susan’s worst ‘foe’. Susan Gallagher rightly observes, “Susan demonstrates that social power can determine discourse, that in the politics of competing interpretations, the power given by gender, race, or class can determine what story is told” (180).

The title of the novel has sparked lot of interest among critics. Brian Macaskill and Jeanne Colleran define the “foe” as “those who design, uphold, live amidst, fail to dismantle or fail to detach themselves from systemic racial dominance” (432). They consider Coetzee as the foe. Benita Parry accuses Coetzee of feigning woman’s writing. She points out that his women narrators “resolutely position themselves as authors of their own narratives” (49). *Foe* is a non-linear, open-ended narrative. Kirsten Holst Peterson finds “an elaborate dead end” in *Foe* and concludes that “from the point of view of those of us who search for the place and role of a female view of literature and history the foe may well be Coetzee” (251). She also thinks that the feminist discourse seems to have
been constructed in order to be deconstructed. Josephine Dodd criticizes Coetzee for presenting tantalizing images of Susan in the narrative where she recounts her story. She points out that the very opening of the novel and hence of Susan’s narrative is packed with exotic imagery and sexual metaphor. “The reader becomes something of a voyeur as Susan sprawls on the sand” (159).

The last section of the novel complicates Coetzee’s feminist stance. Susan’s voice is completely silenced and the last section is narrated by an unnamed character whom many critics think to be Coetzee himself. Josephine Dodd argues that by appropriating Susan’s quest, Coetzee re-enacts the colonial intent that he sought to expose. Further, she points out that he vampirises Adrienne Rich’s poem ‘Diving into the Wreck’. Thus, Dodd feels that in the novels of J.M. Coetzee, “something sadly familiar and sadly predictable is happening in their textual production of “woman” (157).

Though Coetzee problematises the feminine, his reworking of Adrienne Rich’s poem is a positive gesture. The final chapter of the novel echoes this poem. In it, a poetic persona plunges into the sea and there she explores the wreck of civilization. As Gallagher points out: “The feminine imagination celebrated by Rich is able to make the silences of civilization speak, to rewrite the myths so that all of the names will appear” (190). Nina Auerbach however does not think that Coetzee has silenced his woman protagonist. She argues that the voice in the last section of the novel is that of Susan:

Susan relinquishes her compulsion to narrate herself to Foe...and, in a dream vision, she returns to the island that has become her source and solution of all human enigmas. But she no longer sleeps on the shore: she dives into the wreck...to immerse herself in the mystic stream that issues from the mutilated mouth of a visionary Friday. (37)
In *Foe* Coetzee addresses the politics of canonization. Certain literary texts have been glorified and they have acquired a mythical status over the passage of time. Coetzee demonstrates that mythology could be as oppressive as history. He attempts to dismantle the fixity of the canonical hierarchy by reworking a text that has a white, male protagonist as a colonial explorer. Defoe's protagonist is an intelligent and ambitious Crusoe who puts up a bold fight for survival. He works dexterously with tools, makes a boat to escape the island and keeps a journal. Coetzee's Cruso is a sullen and morose fellow who has no desire to keep any record or journal. The work that takes up most of his energy is that of planting terraces. Hanjo Beressem describes Cruso's work ethic as a "ludicrous spectacle" (225). Cruso is impervious to new ideas. "the desire to escape had dwindled within him" (13). Growing old on the island makes him complacent. The stories that he tells of his life are so disparate that it is difficult to know what is truth and what mere rambling.

In Dominic Head's opinion, Coetzee makes a strong association between the publication of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and the moment of colonialism. It was the time of early Dutch settlement in South Africa. Head further avers that the novel is also an ambivalent writing back to Ian Watt's classic work *The Rise of the Novel* that establishes Defoe's formative role in the history of the genre (113). *Foe* is truly a looking back to Defoe who is considered the father of the English novel. Thus, Coetzee underscores the oppression inherent in the recording of literary history. Though predominantly an enigmatic reworking of *Robinson Crusoe* it also alludes to *Roxana* and *The Apparition of One Mrs. Veal*. *Roxana* was based on the autobiography of Mlle Beleau, a beautiful courtesan. She parts company with her first husband and five children and becomes the wife of a wealthy Dutch merchant. Her past catches up with her and her life becomes one of penury and penitence. *The Apparition of One Mrs. Veal* is an embroidered account of a current ghost story. By interweaving the canonical texts in his narrative, Coetzee exposes the oppression behind canonization.
Foe illustrates the concept of “transtextuality”. Brian Macaskill and Jeanne Colleran apply Gerard Genette’s definition of transtextuality to Coetzee’s work. In his work Palimpsests, Genette defines transtextuality as a relationship that associates a text B (the hypertext) to a chronologically prior text A (the hypotext). The later text attaches itself to the former in a way other than a commentary (437-38). They argue that Foe responds hypertextually to the Crusoe narratives of Defoe and other writers. Infact, Robinson Crusoe spawned a new trend of adventure narratives. Foe also responds to Genette’s critical theory which it appropriates for its own ends. This metafictional discursiveness allows the text to be read at different levels.

The myth of Robinson Crusoe has sparked a lot of interest among other writers. Lewis Nkosi, the black South African novelist and critic finds Robinson Crusoe a central cultural text extolling a myth of civilization based on oppression. Nkosi’s essay Robinson Crusoe: Call Me Master reveals the hidden oppression of this landmark text. “In Robinson Crusoe the element of myth regarding the painstaking industry of building a civilization from nothing, ex nihilo, is inseparable from the story of colonization, of subjugation, exploitation, and finally christianisation.”(154)

Crusoe becomes the master by wielding the gun, the Bible, and the pen. Sue Kossew argues that the reason for Coetzee’s writing back to Defoe relates to Defoe’s tendency to exploit women’s stories. Susan even alludes to appropriating authorship when she tells Foe, “It is still in my power to guide and amend. Above all, to withhold. By such means do I still endeavour to be father to my story” (123). Derek Attridge argues that Coetzee exposes the ideological origin of canonization and its operations, and in doing so, addresses the position of marginality, and “the silence in which so many are caught” (“Oppressive” 171).

Another dimension of Coetzee’s politics of writing is a sophisticated mapping of different phases in the development of the genre of novel. Susan
Gallagher offers an excellent analysis of this self-reflexive mode as she points out that the four chapters of *Foe* represent four different narrative modes that suggest a new feminine literary history. Chapter one has a voice speaking in the first person, it suggests the origins of English literature in the oral tradition as it relates the story of Susan’s adventures on the island. In chapter Two, we see the epistolary narrative with echoes of Samuel Richardson. We also see Susan grappling with her destiny to assert her identity. Extending her analysis, Gallagher points out that in chapter Three, Susan has assumed more narrative control like a nineteenth century novelist. “Like the nineteenth century woman novelist, Susan remains trapped both economically in the house of Foe and artistically in the patriarchal house of fiction” (188). Hence the “anxiety of authorship” that she manifests throughout chapters two and three. Similarly chapter four embodies the feminine imagination. “The focus on the language of the body, the repetitive structure, and the obscurity and openness of the final chapter resemble the ecriture feminine that French feminists urge should replace male-dominated analytical discourse” (189). Thus the last chapter of *Foe* concludes the history of the novelistic discourse.

Coetzee’s sensitivity towards the working of power relations in society is born out of a painful sense of complicity in the ‘crime against humanity’ i.e. apartheid. In his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech (1987) recorded in *Doubling the Point*, he expresses his dilemma in these words,

The masters, in South Africa, form a closed hereditary caste. Everyone born with a white skin is born into the caste. Since there is no way of escaping the skin you are born with (can the leopard change its spots?), you can not resign from the caste. You can imagine resigning, you can perform a symbolic resignation, but, short of shaking the dust of the country off your feet, there is no way of actually doing it. (96)
Coetzee addresses this complicity and the guilt of being born in the privileged class in his fiction. He combines the aesthetic, the ethical and the political in his work. He shows the complex working of the politics of race, gender and writing that often work together to marginalize the Other. In the chapters that follow, these concerns will be analysed in depth. The exploration of power politics is a natural concern for any writer who has his roots in South Africa. The politics of race, gender and writing have been handled by many writers in South Africa, both black as well white. As a result, most of them have faced hardships in the form of censorship or exile. Mark Mathabane, Nadine Gordimer, Alan Paton and Athol Fugard raised their voice against apartheid and suffered dire consequences. Coetzee has not met with this kind of opposition though he has exposed the vicious policies of apartheid in his fiction and non-fiction. Beginning with politics of race, this study of J.M.Coetzee now turns to three specific works Age of Iron, Waiting for the Barbarians and Life & Times of Michael K.