Chapter 4

Politics of Writing: Self-Reflexive Textuality

By “politics of writing” I mean a writer’s struggle to articulate the truth in the oppressive environment. The politics of creativity includes a complex interaction between the creator (the author) and the created (text and characters). This chapter aims at studying the politics of writing as an important preoccupation in Coetzee’s work. It touches upon the tradition of writing in South Africa focusing on censorship and Coetzee’s special place in this tradition. The problems, expectations and responsibilities of black/coloured and white authors have been peculiar; nonetheless they have sought to expose the unjust social climate and fought for freedom of expression. The focus of this chapter is on the pulls and pressures faced by a white South African writer like Coetzee and the coping strategies evolved by him. Just as racial and gender politics are wrought together in Coetzee’s novels, the politics of writing too operates along these. His experiences as a writer are rooted in his Afrikaner descent and marginal position as a white settler. Further Coetzee takes on a woman’s persona to voice his authorial concerns. This chapter would study the politics of writing in The Master of Petersburg making intertextual references to the novel Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons.

Domination and subversion permeates every aspect of life in South Africa and writing is no exception. Literature being a complex manifestation of the socio-cultural ethos of a nation, writing in South Africa is a formidable challenge. The writer feels his creativity hemmed in by oppressive social and political factors. South African literature is characterized by a strange paradox:
the stifling and oppressive social fabric sometimes acts as a spur to creativity
and sometimes a stumbling block. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o aptly remarks

To hammer and hew a novel out of the monolithic social situation
of South Africa is to apprehend a reality in which man is beset by
fear, isolation, loneliness, is plagued by doubts and indecision.
For South Africa is a society whose members live under the
constant erosion of dehumanization and the possibility of swift
death. (Mehta and Narang 35)

It is no mean achievement that South African writers have transformed the
social and political ugliness of the times into substance for literature and won
numerous national and international prizes. Nadine Gordimer and J.M.Coetzee
have been applauded for their exposure of oppressiveness of South African life
and have been Nobel laureates.

Though the writers have played a significant role in depicting the lives of
the masses writhing under harsh regimes, they have their limitations. Black and
white writers live in a sort of cocoon. Their paths have rarely crossed. Nadine
Gordimer comments on their failure to understand each other’s experiences:

Both (black and white) can write of the considerable fringe
society in which the black and white are ‘known’ in a meaningful
sense to one another, but there are areas from which, by iron
circumstances, each in turn finds himself shut out, even
intuitively to their mutual loss as writers. (Mehta and Narang
46)

Paul Rich points out that the so-called renaissance of black writing ended by
about 1965 as writers like Peter Abrahams, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Can Temba,
Bloke Modisine, Todd Matshikiza and Mazise Kunun were silenced through
exile or death (“Tradition” 55). Nadine Gordiner points out that any-one under
a political ban could not be published or quoted. Thus, many books of black as
well as white writers in exile were automatically banned. Even when a ban is not imposed, an author’s writing is adversely affected. Coetzee has an uncanny insight into the limitations of his writing. In *Doubling the Point* he states:

> The deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life. All expressions of that inner life, no matter how intense, no matter how pierced with exultation or despair, suffer from the same stunted ness and deformity. I make this observation with due deliberation, and in the fullest awareness that it applies to myself and my own writing as much as to anyone else. (97-98)

It goes to Coetzee’s credit that he could sublimate the distortions of inner life to create aesthetic and political harmony in his fiction. In his Jerusalem Prize Speech in 1987 included in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee claims that South African literature is

> a less than fully human literature, unnaturally preoccupied with power and the torsions of power, unable to move from elementary relations of contestation, domination and subjugation… it is exactly the kind of literature one would expect people to write from a prison. (98)

But his own fiction succeeds in overcoming these power tussles and their immediate context and has echoes of universal themes. Censorship is not something new. John Milton in his work *Aeropagitica* championed the freedom of press and intellectual liberty. George Orwell notes in his essay ‘The Prevention of Literature’ that Milton could show a stronger resistance to force even though he wrote in times of civil war. Perhaps censor now works in a more subtle and damaging manner as pointed out by Coetzee.
Most African writers have faced the serious consequences of writing under a politically fraught regime. Some of them were banned, exiled or made to apologize for what they had written. Both black as well as white writers have been persecuted, the blacks somewhat more harshly than the whites. An aspect of repressive mechanism is “voluntary” exile. Wole Soyinka had to leave Nigeria and seek protection in America. Akwasi B. Assensoh argues that it leads to brain drain on the continent. “Such self-imposed exiles, who leave in order to thrive outside Africa as writers, undermine and subsequently improvish the continent’s literary growth” (353). He argues that once the talented writers leave Africa, no one would be able to fulfill the literary vacuum so created. Though these authors continue to address the ills of their motherland, yet they are not present in their respective countries to contribute to the production of scholarly articles and books. But many writers have paid a heavy price for not emigrating. The Guyanese writer Walter Rodney and Nigerian Dele Giwa lost their lives in tragic bombing incidents.

An outcome of the ruthlessness of the State is a proliferation in prison writings. Paul Gready points out that in a prison memoir, the axis of narrative power is relocated as a prisoner recreates, restores and makes visible a sense of self and world. Thus, an oppositional discourse is constructed. He points out that in his jail diary, Albie Sachs writes: “I have been extremely abstracted from the judicial process... I live in a little world of non-law. And it is the law that has done this! ...Time and again I am driven to conclude that law is a mere façade which hides tyranny. Tyranny is the reality, law the illusion” (494). Breyten Breytenbach writes about the censor in True Confessions: “they do not ask you any questions; they simply say, “Write”; and I’ve written volumes, volumes. My life is eaten up by words. Words have replaced my life” (28). Sexual terrorism has affected women writers deeply and they have found it more damaging as compared other forms of violence.
Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship (1996) contains Coetzee's observations on "the passion that plays itself out in acts of silencing and censoring" (VII). The censor tracks "the undesirable" that includes the subversive and the repugnant. The censor and its object are caught in a power struggle and the manner in which the authors have responded to the censor comprises the theme of the book. Coetzee discusses many prominent writers like D.H.Lawrence, Catherine Mackinnon, Desiderius Erasmus, Osip Mandelstam, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Zbigniew Herbert, Andre Brink and Breyten Breytenbach. He puts forth the argument that censorship diverts writers from their calling by imposing on them the need to be indirect and oblique in their approach. Many writers feel that this compulsion stifles their creativity. The power of the censor is so great that it pervades the inner psychic life of the writer and saps their energy like a parasite. The writers are doomed to live a paranoid existence. Censorship works like police and aims for the day when the writers would police themselves.

Coetzee points out that from early 1960s until about 1980, the Republic of South Africa functioned under one of the most comprehensive censorship systems in the world. Called in official parlance not censorship but "publications control", it sought to control the dissemination of signs in whatever form. The ratio of censors to writers in South Africa was higher than ten to one. "The institution of censorship puts power into the hands of persons with a judgmental, bureaucratic cast of mind that is bad for the cultural and even the spiritual life of the country" (10).

Coetzee traces the various phases of censorship in South Africa. It came into force with the Publications and Entertainments Act of 1963 and lapsed into disuse in 1990. An important name associated with it is of J.C.van Rooyen, professor of criminal law at the University of Pretoria. He was the Chairman of Publications Appeal Board (PAB) from 1980 to 1990. He wrote Censorship in
South Africa not out of desire but out of duty. Coetzee points out that Rooyen's vision of the PAB "is of a committee of technocrats in the field of morality and intergroup relations, their personalities wholly submerged in their work" (186). Van Rooyen's philosophy was the notion of the censor as an arbiter between contending social forces. The censor worked in an impersonal manner. He kept alive the notion that the interests of writers and public are at odds and it was the duty of the censor to safeguard public interests.

Coetzee exposes the perversity of these assumptions. He argues that no matter how well-intentioned the censor projects itself to be, it ultimately belongs to the realm of paranoia. The Censor suspects that the call for the end of censorship in the name of free speech is part of a plot to destroy order. The paranoia generated by the censor creates a rigid mode in which every argument presented by the other is seen as a mask for hostile intention.

One of the damaging effects of censorship is what Coetzee terms as introverted censorship or self-censorship. The writer perceives his work to be contaminated after a brush with the censor. For instance, the Greek writer George Mangakis records the experience of writing in prison under the eyes of his guards. The guards would search his cell and take away his papers after every few days. Mangakis experienced a sense of loathing when the guards handed the papers back to him. Thus, the censor succeeds in making the writer look at the things from his point of view. Danilo Kis also describes the lonely battle waged by the writer and his sense of helplessness. "The self-appointed censor is the alter ego of the writer, an alter ego who leans over his shoulder and sticks his nose into the text...It is impossible to win against this censor, for he is like God—he knows and sees all, he came out of your own mind, your own fears, your own nightmares..." (Giving 36). Self-censorship is more destructive in comparison to external censorship.
The relation between the writer and the censor involves a dialectics of power where the censor uses the author against his own self. Coetzee cites the case of Osip Mandelstam and Breyten Breytenbach. The Russian poet Mandelstam had composed a powerful poem about a tyrant who relishes the deaths of his victims like a Georgian munching raspberries. The poem was not written down but recited to a group of friends. Yet it provoked Stalin's wrath. He was arrested and made to compose an adulatory ode. “...he was mad when he wrote it, mad with fear, perhaps, but mad too with the madness of a person not only suffering the embrace of a body he detests, but having to take the initiative, day after day, line after line, to caress that body” (39).

Many writers had to bear the brunt for writing against the state. Breyten Breytenbach’s poem “Letter from Foreign Parts to Butcher” subtitled “For Balthazar” was banned in South Africa. In this poem the poet had listed the names of all men who had died under torture. The poet was arrested and made to accept that his poem was crass and insulting to the PM. Coetzee points out in Giving Offense that in his public sphere, Breytenbach expresses his attitude to censorship in these words, “Censorship is an act of shame...It has to do with manipulation, with power, with...repression.” For the writer to consent to being censored is fatal. “It takes root inside you as a kind of interiorized paternalism...You become your own castrator” (231). Breytenbach acknowledges the terror of oppressive state machinery in A Season in Paradise,

We South Africans, we will go on haunting the world forever. We are, all of us, slightly nuts, there is a bleeding crack running through each of us.... We are mad, all of us...We are maimed, we are only half human, but we know it, we are mad and realize that we are mad. (203)

A writer feels cramped and tortured when denied his creative space. In True Confessions, Breytenbach recalls his position as a prisoner vis-à-vis his censor:
A bizarre situation... when you write knowing that the enemy is reading over your shoulder..., knowing also that you are laying bare the most intimate and the most personal nerves and pulse beats in yourself to the barbarians, to the cynical ones who will gloat over this. (159)

The essentially sensitive psyche of the writer emerges scathed in its relation with the censor. This idea is echoed by the novelist Andre Brink whose name has become synonymous with dissident writers who see censorship and the repression of dissent, as inherent in the nature of state power. As Coetzee points out in *Giving Offense*, Brink describes South Africa as “a demented world...[a] swamp of violence and hysteria”, the Afrikaner is “a political and cultural schizophrenic” while the censorship apparatus is “[a] social organism in a state of excessive cancerous development” (211). Thus a writer’s personality is constantly at risk of getting distorted.

The censor acts like an Orwellian Big Brother. The environment has been more uncongenial in case of non-white writers. Ezekiel Mphahlele in his major critical work *The African Image* (1962) finds that the oppression in South African society no longer acts as a spur. Rather the social and political climate has been growing viciously difficult for a non-white writer to give expression to his creativity. Dennis Brutus, in his article ‘Protest Against Apartheid’, writes how he had met Alex La Guma’s wife recently who had told him that when La Guma was working on a novel under house arrest he would deposit every completed page under the linoleum so that if a raid was carried out while he was writing, the political police would find only one page in the typewriter and none else.

In *Giving Offense*, Coetzee contends that all writers under censorship are potentially affected by paranoia and not just those who have their work suppressed. The history of authorship and the history of censorship are
ultimately bound together. Coetzee detects a pathology in his writing as he has lived through "the hey-day of South African censorship, seen its consequences not only on the careers of fellow-writers but on the totality of public discourse, and felt within myself some of its more secret and shameful effects..." (37). He employs a sexual metaphor to describe the oppressiveness of censorship. "Working under censorship is like being intimate with someone who does not love you, with whom you want no intimacy, but who presses himself in upon you" (38). The 1980s were characterized by a tolerant and conciliatory attitude towards writers. Coetzee informs us that as white rule declined, mechanisms for control lost both credibility and power. A new constitution was negotiated, a bill of rights guaranteeing freedom of expression was passed, and banned books emerged in the market and got a lot of attention. But censorship does bring some oblique benefits. The disseminative power of writing ultimately makes way for itself. The degree of popularity enjoyed by a book increases manifold when the State imposes draconian laws. Moreover, the persecuted writer acquires the mythical status of a hero and a martyr.

The waning of apartheid has given rise to new challenges. Now the writer is free to explore new territories and experiment with new subject matters. However some critics are not that optimistic. Rob Nixon points out that the end of censorship; of political decline and exile "have cast doubt on the writer's social status, public role, motivation, and imaginative focus" (Attwell and Harlowe 3). He also feels that the writers are in a danger of losing their creative mainstays. David Attwell and Barbara Harlow too feel that "In post apartheid literature, the future has little future, whereas the future of the past is reasonably secure" (4). These assumptions do not seem quite substantial, as Coetzee has moved to Australia to concentrate full time on writing. His creative output is as prolific as ever. His most recent work *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (2003) was included in the Booker shortlist.
A writer’s role in South Africa is a complicated one. Writers have responded to the challenges in their unique ways. Many writers in South Africa found themselves in an agonizing dilemma, unable to decide whether they ought to fight for the nation or pursue their creative impulses. They considered writing as a luxury they could not afford. Alan Paton renounced fiction writing temporarily to pursue the cause of politics. He writes in his autobiography, “I was beginning to realize that, deep though my love of literature was and deep as was my love of writing, my love of country was unfortunately greater” (60).

Nadine Gordimer talks about the writer’s dilemma in her work *The Essential Gesture*, a collection of her essays and lectures over four decades. She contends that a writer’s choice always faces two directions—toward society and toward literature. Gordimer addresses herself to the problem of how to reconcile the demands from without to be socially responsible with demands from within concerning artistic integrity. She believes that black South African writers come closest to reconciling the outer and inner demands. She insists that the white writers must strive for the same but in their own way. Kelly Hewson applies John Berger’s concept of “screening” to South Africa. Berger defines the phenomenon of “screening” as a way of looking at the world that prevents seeing. As the screen isolates one from experience, it prolongs and makes absolute the state of inexperience, which is often accompanied by ruthlessness or sophistication.

In such a situation, a writer might consider it one of his or her responsibilities to attempt to break through the screen. Gordimer shows us one way in her commitment to critical realism and the reliance in her novels on actual history....that has been responsible for the fact that several of her books have been banned in South Africa. (154)
The roles and expectations of a black writer differ markedly from the white one. Most black writers started as journalists before taking up creative writing. In the words of the novelist Richard Rive, “The writer who cannot vote, who carries a pass and who lives in a ghetto, must necessarily write qualitatively differently from the writer who can vote, does not carry a pass and lives wherever he pleases” (92). Most black and coloured writers consider writing as a weapon. Writers like Alex La Guma have a deeply committed political vision. He gives importance to a writer’s associations with mass movements. In his words, “…whether we are European writers or African writers or American writers, all human activity which does not serve humanity must be a waste of time and effort” (Mehta and Narang 40). That was why the ‘Sestigers’ were bitterly criticized especially by black writers. These were a group of Afrikaan writers who were considered to be avant-garde. They found it strange that a group of writers was turning out fictions devoid of racial conflict.

Many writers feel that the cramping effect of repression has made their literature an impoverished one. This perception is common to black as well as white writers. Ezekiel Mphahlele puts it quite succinctly:

so long as the white man’s politics’ continue to impose on us a ghetto existence; so long shall the culture and therefore literature of South Africa continue to shrivel up, to sink lower; and for so long, shall we in our writing continue to reflect only a minute fraction of life.(109)

In South Africa, there are few takers for the autonomy of art, divested of its social and political relevance. In his foreword to a novel by Alex La Guma, Brian Bunting writes,

It is difficult to propound the cult of ‘art for art’s sake’ in South Africa... If art is to have any significance at all, it must reflect something of this national obsession, this passion which
consumes and sometimes corrodes the soul of the South African people. (9)

Irving Howe, too comments on the dangers inherent in writing under a brutal regime. A writer is haunted by the fears that his life is “mortgaged to a society gone rotten with hatred” and this may destroy his fiction. Both black as well as white writers have fought a tough battle against debilitating social forces. Their paths have been different but they have shared common goals. “While black authors tend to see the political dimension of literature as inescapable, white writers more often view themselves as having an ethical obligation to respond to the rampant injustice that characterizes their society.”(5)

Writing in this tradition, Coetzee has carved a firm niche for himself not only in the literary scene of South Africa but in the broader international context also. Nelson Mandela describes him as “an intellectual hero in the history of our country.”(Mandela 2003) He has been a prolific though reticent author who has been quite impatient with efforts to categorize or label or assign a role to him. Nonetheless in his essay on Alex La Guma, Coetzee suggests, “that the writer should not, so to speak, choose his tradition at random, but rather choose it with some sense of the social implications of his choice” (6). Coetzee also comments on the Janus-like nature of literature in his essay ‘The Novel Today.’ He contends that literature “supplements” history by reproducing those oppositions related to class, race and gender conflict “out of which history and historical disciplines erect themselves.” But it is also possible for literature to move away from “the relations of contestation, domination and subjugation to the vast and complex human world that lies beyond them” (3). Coetzee raises the issue of authority in his essay ‘Into the Dark Chamber: the Novelist and South Africa’ included in the collection Doubling the Point. He describes the novelist as a person who is camped before a closed door, facing an insufferable ban. He creates, in the place of the forbidden scene, a representation of that
scene. Coetzee warns that a writer should not replicate the forbidden, rather his true challenge is “how not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one’s own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one’s own terms” (364). Coetzee meets this challenge quite successfully in his *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

Coetzee accepts that the primary question asked by people in South Africa is, “Where does this book fit into the political struggle?” It goes to Coetzee’s credit that that he has been able to reconcile the aesthetic and the political. Dick Penner claims,

> Coetzee’s fictions maintain their significance apart from a South African context, because of their artistry and because they transform urgent societal concerns into more enduring questions regarding colonialism and the relationships of mastery and servitude between cultures and individuals. (XIII)

Penner draws a distinction between Coetzee “the ethical individual, the Afrikaner concerned with injustice,” and Coetzee “the teller of tales,” who “creates countries of the mind, where the imagination reigns and refuses to be subservient to history’s incessant voices” (20-21). Coetzee’s portrayal of his country’s turmoil is an expression of his conscientiousness. His sense of social commitment is evident from the fact that he questions his South African ancestry in *Dusklands* and also exposes the hypocrisy of American involvement in Vietnam War in *Dusklands*. Gordimer comments sympathetically on Coetzee’s choice of the allegorical method,

> ... out of a kind of opposing desire to hold himself clear of events and their daily, grubby, tragic consequences in which, like everybody else in South Africa, he is up to the neck, and about which he had an inner compulsion to write... (139)
Coetzee has acknowledged the overwhelming impact of history on his work. In a 1982 interview, Coetzee responded that, in a sense, he faced an easier task than a European writer since his dominating concern (that "situation of naked exploitation") requires a "much less massive effort of the imagination" than European concerns about nuclear annihilation or the meaningfulness of labor. "These comments on what he terms the "obscene" benefits of being a South African writer reveal Coetzee's basic assumptions that he speaks both from and to his historical situation" (Gallagher 17). At the same time in 'The Novel Today', Coetzee laments the stifling environment of South Africa and the fact that "in South Africa the colonization of the novel by the discourse of history is proceeding with alarming rapidity" (3). A glance at Coetzee's oeuvre shows that he succeeds in creating an alternative discourse that opposes history. He is consistently preoccupied in his fiction with giving expression to silenced, marginalized voices. He attempts to rescue these voices from getting lost.

Coetzee is keenly aware of the social handicaps. At the same time, he highlights the unreliability and deceptive nature of writing. He contends in Doubling the Point "... the self can not tell the truth of itself to itself without the possibility of self-deception" (291). He uses Dostoevsky's idea of "double thought" to reinforce the intrinsic failure of self-examination to transcend self-interest. Coetzee further opines, "All autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography" (391). Coetzee's skepticism of the confessional mode has a strong bearing on his role as a South African writer. Gilbert Yeoh is of the view that Coetzee transplants Beckett's metaphysical concern with writing and truth into South Africa and recasts it in more concretely ethical and sociopolitical terms. "In an even more contextualized manner, Coetzee translates the Beckettian failure of truthful self-narration into a critique of the failure of white South African writing to tell the truth"(339).
Coetzee's concerns with the politics of writing are deftly mirrored in *The Master of Petersburg* (1994). The novel is set in the autumn of 1869, and it opens with the great Russian novelist Dostoevsky's return to Petersburg. The text is self-reflexive as Coetzee narrates a crucial phase in the life of Dostoevsky from a different perspective. It is a fictionalized account of the murder of a young student, Ivanov, by a group of nihilists led by the revolutionary Sergei Nechaev. Coetzee departs from history by making the murdered student Ivanov Dostoevsky's stepson Pavel, and by fabricating Dostoevsky's return from exile to Petersburg following the murder. *The Master of Petersburg* is a moving account of Dostoevsky's personal odyssey as he tries to unearth the mystery surrounding Pavel's death. Dostoevsky's great personal anguish lends a poignant touch to the narrative. For sometime, he is too overwhelmed by grief to write anything. "Taking the place of the thought are galling memories of what he was doing in Dresden all the time that, here in Petersburg, the procedure of storing, numbering, encasing, transporting, burying was following its indifferent course" (9).

*The Master of Petersburg* is structured around the biblical story of the Gadarene swine. In this tale the unclean devils, having been exorcised from a sick man by Christ, enter a herd of swine. This story is exploited by Dostoevsky in his work *The Devils*. Through a series of analogies, he suggests that Russia is a "sick man" possessed by devils and the swine, which the devils enter upon being exorcised, are the revolutionaries. Creative and imaginative people are attracted towards the revolutionaries and they get entangled in a complex web. Mike Marais analyses the reworking of the story of the Gadarene swine in *The Master of Petersburg* as a comment on the implication of writer and literature in the power dynamics of society. Dostoevsky is depicted as a "sick man" possessed by devils. The external manifestation of his affliction is epilepsy. Dostoevsky and his writings are a part of the sickness of Russia, hence they are also sick. "I am required to live... a Russian life: a life inside Russia, or with
Russia inside me” (221). Dostoevsky’s identification with Russia is absolute. “The madness is in him and he is in the madness; they think each other; what they call each other, whether madness or epilepsy or vengeance or the spirit of the age, is of no consequence” (235). He also knows that he cannot escape the madness of the times and he has to wrestle with the darkness without that has taken possession of him. “To live in Russia and hear the voices of Russia murmuring within him” (235).

The blending of the personal and the political in this metafictional text enables Coetzee to emphasize that the destiny of a writer and the nation are intertwined. This idea is the central motif in Coetzee’s Age of Iron too. Mrs. Curren’s illness is symptomatic of the malaise gripping the South African society just as Dostoevsky’s illness is a barometer pointing to the rottenness of the Russian society. There have been striking parallels between the literary scene of Russia and South Africa. Both countries had repressive state apparatuses that subjected the work of creative writers to ruthless scrutiny. The works of many South African and Russian writers were banned and the latter were either jailed or exiled. Coetzee’s Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship delves into the lives of many Russian writers. Coetzee has a strong fascination with Russia as revealed in his memoir Boyhood. Thus, The Master of Petersburg becomes an allegorical narrative that points to the South African society.

The novel highlights the pulls and pressures faced by a writer in society. A writer’s life is essentially a hard one, full of pecuniary worries and the consequent humiliation. “He thinks of his own turned collars, of the holes in his socks. He thinks of the letters he has written year after year, exercises in self-abasement...begging for advances” (158). Anna Sergeyevna, the landlady, too hardens towards him and tells him emphatically that she doesn’t wish to belong to a long list of people he is indebted to. When Dostoevsky visits the police station to get his son’s personal papers back, he is accused of complicity with
the revolutionaries. Councillor Maximov is skeptical of his vociferous repudiation of revolutionaries, "Nechaev stands first and foremost for the violent overthrow of all the institutions of society, in the name of a principle of equality" (36). He shows the novelist a half-written story by Pavel and asks him whether a story is a private matter. Pavel’s creative output is put to merciless scrutiny and subjected to all sort of interpretations. Maximov hounds Dostoevsky by asking him why the writers get pulled towards revolutionaries. On the other hand, Dostoevsky is trapped by Nachaev who wishes to exploit the writer’s popularity by involving him in his camp. He resorts to clever rhetoric to impress Dostoevsky.

Cleverness is one of the things we are going to get rid of. The day of ordinary people is arriving. Ordinary people aren’t clever. Ordinary people just want the job done. And once the job is done, it is ordinary people who will decide what is going to be what, and whether any more cleverness is going to be allowed!

(104)

Nachaev blindfolds Dostoevsky and takes him to his cellar where he wants the writer to put his words on paper, "Whatever you choose to say we can distribute in a matter of hours, in thousands of copies. At a time like this, when we are on the brink of great things, a contribution from you can have an enormous effect" (179). He tries to exploit Dostoevsky’s personal anguish for his revolutionary purposes. Nechaev forces the novelist to address himself to imminent social problems. “How can you abandon Russia and return to a contemptible bourgeois existence? How can you ignore... a spectacle that can be multiplied a thousand fold, a million fold across this country? What has become of you? Is there no spark left in you? Don’t you see what is before your eyes?” (180) Nechaev attempts to instruct Dostevsky that he should address himself to champion the cause of the oppressed. He must not lead an ivory tower
existence. When Dostevsky is compelled to write he feels stifled, “Writers have their own rules. They can’t work with people looking over their shoulders” (198). It is a pointed reference to the censorship that paralyses creativity.

Nechaev is representative of the revolutionary force in society that meddles with the writer’s work. The argument given by Nechaev to Dostoevsky that a writer should fight for justice is evocative of the painful dilemma many writers found themselves in South Africa. Nechaev accuses Dostoevsky of being “an old, blinkered horse going round and round in a circle, rolling out the same old story day after day” (186). He shows the novelist glaring poverty and argues that the writer ought to address himself to the political demands rather than pursue his aesthetic inclinations. “You are nothing but a dry old man, a dry old work-horse near the end of its life. Isn’t it time you tried to share the existence of the oppressed instead of sitting at home and writing about them and counting your money?” (186)

Coetzee’s handling of the politics of writing is characterized by a marked ambivalence. He criticizes Nachaev and his policies but at one point of time it seems to him that all barriers between them are crumbling.

He takes a step forward and with what seems to him the strength of a giant folds Nachaev to his breast. Embracing the boy, trapping his arms at his sides, breathing in the sour smell of his carbuncular flesh, sobbing, laughing, he kisses him on the left cheek and on the right. Hip to hip, breast to breast, he stands locked against him. (190)

Dostoevsky’s affinity with Nachaev is an indicator of a writer’s complicity with the ruling regime that Coetzee has constantly alluded to in his fiction and non-fiction. In a 1992 interview with Philip Wood, Coetzee accepts that “I would be the last person in the world to claim that writing rids one of complicity” (189). In Dusklands he addresses this issue in a direct manner as he
uses his name for four different persons in the novel thereby highlighting that writing, translation, and recording of history all include power struggle.

Reading and writing are frequently referred to in the novel as demon possession. Dostoevsky feels that what he writes would be obscene and untameable and it would take complete possession of him. He frequently muses about the corrosive effect of writing.

He thinks of the madness as running through the artery of his right arm down to the fingertips and the pen and so to the page... What flows on to the paper is neither blood nor ink but an acid, black, with an unpleasing green sheen when the light glances off it. (18)

Reading can also be a destructive experience. "...reading is being the arm and being the axe and being the skull; reading is giving yourself up, not holding yourself at a distance and jeering" (47). This idea is developed in considerable detail in Elizabeth Costello. Coetzee associates Dostoevsky with devils repeatedly in the novel. In a surreal image, Dostoevsky feels that he is surrounded by a thousand petty devils. He feels overwhelmed and can't recollect memories of his son. This motif is also developed further as other characters in the novel feel something threatening about him. Councillor Maximov chuckles at Dostoevsky. "But you speak of reading as though it were demon-possession" (47). Maximov takes a dig at his susceptibility when he refuses to hand over Pavel's papers to him. "You supply me with the strongest, most benevolent of reasons not to give in to your request... in your present mood the spirit of Nachaev might leap from the page and take complete possession of you" (48). Anna Sergeyevna perceives something devilish about him in their moments of lovemaking. She utters the word 'devil' with a shriek. "You are in the grip of something quite beyond me. You seem to be here but you are not really here"
Through the metaphor of writer as devil and writing as devilry, Coetzee brings out the idea that writing has a destructive potential.

_The Master of Petersburg_ depicts a vicious cycle where the sickness of the nation and the writer permeates to his writing. At the end of the novel, Dostoevsky is shown working on a new novel. The novelist has an insight into his perversity. “I write perversions of the truth. I choose the crooked road and take children into dark places. I follow the dance of the pen” (236). Marais is of the view that the literary text which the character Dostoevsky settles down to write at the end of the novel is “less than fully human.” “By representing the deformed and stunted relations created by the state’s hegemonic strategies, it reinforces them and thus colludes with the state’s dehumanization of its citizens” (231). Marais also thinks that _The Master of Petersburg_ “supplements history” and endorses oppositional relations. So, it brutalizes its readers. However, the redeeming feature of the text is the poignant delineation of filial affection and sorrow. This allows the text to go beyond being merely a replica of history to explore the vast and complex world that lies beyond. In his tussle with the state, the writer does not admit defeat as he refuses to write what Nachaev dictates. This can be interpreted as a sign of affirmation that a writer can choose his own path. Like Faust, Dostoevsky feels that he has to give up his soul for pandering to prurient tastes and this betrayal tastes like gall.

Coetzee’s abiding interest in Dostoevsky is reflected in his essay, “Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, and Dostoevsky”. Rachel Lawlan finds the novel unmistakably autobiographical.

Coetzee conducts a dialogue with himself as a writer, one who also has lived in a time of political unrest, has been accused of being either reactionary or displaying complicity in the oppression of certain groups in society, and has rejected the violent and anti-intellectual revolutionary movements, choosing
instead to try find an authentic voice and narrative that can fully and self-critically explore fiction’s role in times of “intense ideological pressure. (136-37)

At the personal level also, the grief of the father for his son has a poignant autobiographical touch.

*Elizabeth Costello* (2003) addresses a host of problems related to the writer. Elizabeth Costello is an Australian writer, most famous for her novel *The House on Echeles Street*. Subtitled *Eight lessons*, the narrative reveals many aspects of her personality. Elizabeth Costello is selected for the Stowe Award, a prestigious literary prize in the United States. She feels a bit uncomfortable under the gaze of popularity. The elaborate ceremony puts her off but she realizes painfully that if a writer accepts the prize money, they can’t get away from the “show”. Her son tries to cheer her up. “He thinks of her as a seal, an old, tired circus seal. One more time she must heave herself up on to the tub, one more time show that she can balance the ball on her nose. Up to him to coax her, put heart in her, get her through the performance” (3).

In spite of her misgivings and apprehensions, Elizabeth Costello puts on a confident ‘persona’ in front of the audience. She talks about the transience of fame and the desire in every writer to “at least live on through my creations” (17). But she has no illusions,

...if we are being realistic, that it is only a matter of time before the books which you honour, and with whose genesis I have had something to do, will cease to be read and eventually cease to be remembered…There must be some limit to the burden of remembering that we impose on our children and grandchildren. They will have a world of their own, of which we should be less and less part. (20)
Coetzee also addresses the dilemma of a postcolonial writer in the novel. One aspect is the politics of literary awards. John Bernard, Mrs. Costello's son, doesn't want that his mother be treated as "a Mickey Mouse postcolonial writer" and he feels that his mother would be a bit disappointed if she learns that she's been presented the Stowe Award because the year has been decreed to be the year of the Australasian. Elizabeth Costello gets a wonderful opportunity to journey on a cruise ship, to join the education and entertainment staff. She feels disgusted at the mystique of orality and insistence on exoticism mentioned by Emmanuel Egudu, a fellow Nigerian writer. Egudu tells his audience that by working on the cruise, he is a dissident intellectual in his country. "He teaches in colleges in America, telling the youth of the New World about the exotic subject on which he is an expert in the same way that an elephant is an expert on elephants: the African novel" (43). She touches the heart of the matter when she talks about the typical problems faced by an African writer.

But the African novel is not written by Africans for Africans. African novelists may write about Africa, about African experiences, but they seem to me to be glancing over their shoulder all the time they write, at the foreigners who will read them. ... Yet how can you explore a world in all its depth if at the same time you are having to explain it to outsiders? (51)

Costello thinks that a writer is responsible for his choice of writing. "Emmanuel blames his western publishers and his western readers for driving him to exoticize Africa; but Emmanuel has a stake in exoticizing himself" (53). Coetzee wishes to emphasize that a writer cannot evade responsibility for his decisions.

In *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee delves into the harm of writing and reading. Certain kinds of reading and writing could be mutually damaging to
both the reader and the writer. "Specifically, she is no longer sure that people are always improved by what they read. Furthermore, she is not sure that writers who venture into the darker territories of the soul always return unscathed" (160). As in *The Master of Petersburg*, the act of writing and reading is associated with devilry. Writing is an act of authority, of power and this power can be exerted in a very subtle yet damaging manner. Elizabeth Costello chooses Paul West's novel *The Very Rich Hours of Count on Stauffenberg* for her discourse on the nature of evil. She conceives of the writer as "dupe of Satan". She thinks that West whom she learns is a part of the audience might not like what she suggests. The writer might project evil as more attractive and in the process, do more harm than good. She strongly contends that West should not have depicted the horrors of Nazi concentration camps. "We can put ourselves in peril by what we write, or so I believe. For if what we write has the power to make us better people then surely it has power to make us worse" (171).

Reading can also inflict permanent scars on the psyche. Costello realizes that reading about evil is like being possessed by demons.

Have the grand Lucifers of Dante and Milton been retired for good, their place taken by a pack of dusty little demons that perch on one's shoulder like parrots, giving off no fiery glow but on the contrary sucking light into themselves? (176)

She describes the experience of reading the book as being dragged by the devil into the act. The act of reading was a violence done to her in which she conspired. She finds Paul West's book obscene.

**Obscene because such things ought not to take place, and then obscene again because having taken place they ought not to be brought into the light but covered up and hidden for ever in
the bowels of the earth, like what goes on in the slaughterhouses of the world, if one wishes to save one's sanity. (159)

Costello realizes that her views regarding story-telling have changed remarkably over the years. She compares the story-telling business to a bottle with a genie in it. When the storyteller opens the bottle, the genie is released into the world, and it costs all hell to get him back in again. Her position, her revised position, her position in the twilight of life: better, on the whole, that the genie stay in the bottle. (167)

Coetzee seems to contend that if writing were akin to letting loose a monster it had better not be undertaken.

A writer usually feels alienated from the world and has troubled relationships. Costello's son has bitter memories of childhood when his mother locked herself up to write and he felt lonely and unloved. But as an adult, he reads her works and marvels that they have the power to shake him. Costello is a feeble tired woman who feels alienated. "She sees herself, a stick like figure on a public bench in a patch of sunlight scribbling away at her task, a task never to be completed"(215). Dostoevsky too has a love-hate relationship with his stepson Pavel and is a lonely, isolated figure.

Coetzee touches on the theme of the politics of writing in his earlier fiction also. Magda in In the Heart of the Country represents the woman writer who struggles to write against the stereotypical confines imposed by the society. She strives to write so as not to be forgotten by history. Magda feels rich anger against the confines of patriarchal discourse. Like Susan Barton in Foe she wishes to write her story. "I want my story to have a beginning, a middle, and an end, not the yawning middle without end…" (146) Her narrative does not follow a linear pattern; rather it is a fluid and open-ended feminist text. Coetzee thus inter-relates the politics of gender and of writing.
An analysis of Coetzee’s fiction reveals that he succeeds in striking a balance between a deeply political vision and artistic experimentation. His novels are deeply rooted in South Africa; at the same time they transcend the immediate social and political context. His strength lies in constructing alternative discourses to history. His narratives are self-reflexive; they question their own authenticity. His metafictional novels are the reworkings of landmark texts and genres. He revisits the familiar texts from different perspectives. *Foe* is a writing back to Daniel Defoe and *In the Heart of the Country* revises the genre of the pastoral novel especially Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*. In his Nobel lecture, Coetzee wryly remarks that there are “…a handful of stories in the world; and if the young are to be forbidden to prey upon the old then they must sit forever in silence.” (Coetzee 2003) Coetzee raises painful questions regarding the roles and responsibilities of a writer and he wields the novel form as rival to history. Susan Gallagher aptly remarks in this regard,

That ability to tell stories, stories that contain unheard voices and work on an emotional and evocative level, provides one way to battle the monophonic and autocratic discourses of history. In a world with few models of non-oppressive discourse, Coetzee struggles to reclaim language and story telling for responsible action. (48)

The experience of being a writer in South Africa has always been a precarious challenge and Coetzee has evolved his own coping strategies. He writes dense, allegorical metafictional novels in an oblique manner that allows him to address the South African situation and also go beyond it. The Nobel Prize Citation praises his work “for the surprising involvement of the outsider.” His critics accuse him of writing for the overseas, sensationalizing the violence of his country and then deserting South Africa. However, his prolific literary output, tendency to shun the realist mode and “consistent portrayal of the
violence and distortions of colonialism and apartheid" (Mandela 2003) have helped him to create a new literary tradition in South Africa. Coetzee's work is of significance not only in the literary arena but in the context of writing history also. He highlights the inconsistencies and recording of false historical facts. At the same time, his work points to the need to have a balanced version of history. This idea is taken up in the coming chapter.