

# An Introduction to the Works of J. M. Coetzee

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**Abstract – J. M. Coetzee is one of the youthful, dissident literary voices speaking against the apartheid regime in the 1970's and 1980's. Coetzee's distinctive prose was identified early as both elusive and as politically urgent. His work has been compared favorably with Nabokov, Kafka and Conrad. Most of Coetzee's Writings reflect either directly or indirectly on recent events unfolding within South African society, although critics have warned against straightforward allegorical readings of his work. This paper focuses on how Coetzee has problematized issues of writing, authority, power, race, patriarchy, gender, marginality, voice among others including authorial identity in unimaginable ways in his novels.**

**Key Words: Post Colonialism, Power, Apartheid, Marginalization, Othering.**

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## INTRODUCTION

The fiction of Coetzee is written in a spirit of revolt against the general tradition that pervaded South Africa and English literature in the 1950's. Coetzee is always praised for his dignified bleakness or carefulness of grim efficiency of his prose. Coetzee's first novel *Duskland* (1974) can be most accurately described as the first post- modern South African novel. In this novel he juxtaposes a parody of a project report on the Vietnam War and an early explorer's journal of wagon trip to South Africa's semi-desert Northern Cape. It is a critique of the violence inherent in the colonialist and imperialist mentality of the Western world.

*In the Heart of the Country* (1977) is a critique of colonial pastoral writing. It is written in the form of a diary kept by a young woman on a sheep farm. It is a work of irresistible power. *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) deals with contemporary political conditions in South Africa, although in a highly allegorical mode. In this novel colonialism is treated from both external and internal points of view. His text suggests an extremely curious understanding of the meaning of colonialism and the driving force behind it. It is surely a tale of imperial vicissitude and anxiety. It is a harrowing allegory of the war between the oppressors and the oppressed.

*Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) deals with one of the inarticulate victims of apartheid, a hare-lipped gardener who attempts to return his dying mother to Karoo as Civil War threatens Cape Town. In it Coetzee surrenders to the perpetual temptation of White South Africans to write about blacks.

*Foe* (1986) makes him move to an international arena as he tests the limits of the discourses of post-

modernism, post-colonialism and feminism and the possibilities of talking about the victims of colonization without speaking for them. *Age of Iron* (1990) is a self-reflexive narrative of another marginal woman. In it he gives a picture of social and political tragedy in a country ravaged by racism and violence. Through this he reacts against the tyrannies of his time and the cruelty of apartheid South Africa.

*The Master of Petersburg* (1994) is set in St. Petersburg and narrated by Dostoevsky. In it Coetzee dealt directly with circumstances in contemporary South Africa. Coetzee's strength as a novelist lies in his having concentrated on the juxtaposition of bodies in space. It is a well plotted literary thriller with lots of dramatic situations unfolding simultaneously like a murder mystery, an extra- marital affair and the death of a child.

J M Coetzee has awarded the Booker Prize twice, first for *Life & Times of Michael K* in 1983 and then for *Disgrace* in 1999. *Boyhood and Youth* is his autobiographical work. Among his many other literary and academic awards, including a nomination for the Nobel Prize for Literature, he established his reputation as one of the most accomplished contemporary writers worldwide. He was awarded the Jerusalem Prize for freedom in 1987. Scholar Isidore Diala states that J.M.Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer and Andre Brink are three of South Africa's most distinguished White writers all with definite antiapartheid commitment.

Coetzee's novels have been concerned with the ethics of reading and writing and have been informed by a strong theoretical frame of reference. This set his work apart from other "White" South African novelists whose over commitment to

apartheid became a measure of their literary success. Coetzee critiques the power relations inherent in textual itself. Thus, his novels can also be described as post-colonial in their emphasis on silencing "Othering", and the colonizing power of language.

As the narrative of his recent Man Booker Prize-winning novel *Disgrace* (1999) demonstrates with its metaphysical elements, its suspension in the present tense and its generation of critical veracity is something Coetzee seeks to problematise rather than produce. *Disgrace* illuminates two of the key concerns of Coetzee's work: the historical motivations behind colonialism and its legacies in the postcolonial era. For Coetzee, the postcolonial does not signal the formal disintegration of empire, but rather a new, and in many respects more insidious phase of colonization. It is a kind relationship between oppressors and oppressed as in the second part of *Duskland*.

Coetzee allows his fiction to float literally free of time and place even in the act of a seeming allusiveness to a time and place which is specifically South African. In this way, his novels seem to enter the realm of myth, of the archetypal. Coetzee's work is marked by a tendency to write about worlds of which he had little direct experience, notably the rural and semi-desert Afrikaner farming worlds that appear in his novel *In the Heart of the Country*.

Coetzee's assertion that all writing, criticism as well as fiction, is autobiography is not an expression of linguistic determinism. It is but recognition of the fact that writers can never simply represent the world. Consciously or unconsciously, they are always engaged in constructing a self as they write. His particular brand of metafiction contends to engage in the playful exposure of his own conventions. His writing is also a means of drawing attention to the question of postcoloniality, authority and agency. It is broadly a question of who takes up the position of power, pen in hand.

Early criticism of Coetzee's novels by both liberal and Marxist critics in South Africa was not favorable. They did not understand the radical self-reflexivity of his writings, and took him to task for failing to represent accurately the historical conditions of oppression under apartheid. Coetzee has consistently refused to comment on the meaning of his novels or to declare overtly his political affiliations.

## CONCLUSION

As a novelist J.M. Coetzee is difficult to classify and perhaps an author who has generated diverse critical responses on his works. As an author Coetzee brings to his work a unique combination of intellectual power, stylistic poise, historical vision and ethical penetration. He is unique among South

African novelists. Using a disembodied language with the sharpness and precision of a surgeon's knife and skill, the Nobel laureate has thermalized life and reality not only in South Africa as such but with a complex, often paradoxical in his own quest for a new humanism. His novels have a wider academic appeal in its allusive and multilayered referencing of such theoretical issues such as the politics of representation and the nature of discourse.

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