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**WRITING THE UNSPEAKABLE: SILENCE AND THE INARTICULATE  
OTHER IN THE FICTION OF J. M. COETZEE**

**Funda ÇANKAYA**

**114667001**

**Prof. Dr. Jale PARLA**

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**Writing the Unspeakable: Silence and the Inarticulate Other in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee**

**Söylenemeyeni Yazmak: J.M. Coetzee'nin Kurgularında Sessizlik ve Ötekinin Temsili**

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**114667001**

**Tez Danışmanı:** Prof. Dr. Jale Parla  
**Jüri Üyesi:** Prof. Dr. Murat Belge  
**Jüri Üyesi:**  
**Jüri Üyesi:** Prof. Dr. Sibel Irzık



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To the memory of my father



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## ABSTRACT

### **Writing the Unspeakable: Silence and the Inarticulate Other in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee**

This M.A. thesis aims to examine literature's possibilities of representing or bearing witness to the colonized other within postmodern and postcolonial discourse with a focus on three novels by John Maxwell Coetzee: *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Foe*. Each novel interrogates the problems of authority and representation by portraying the gaps of communication between the privileged narrators and the figures of silence. The narrative voices and the representations of the silent characters within the narratives are the focal points of this study. In the examination of the novels, it is probed whether silence can constitute a gap in the colonial discourse or subvert the authorial voice by creating new possibilities of representation in the literary text. In this scope, a comparative analysis of the novels is made in conjunction with relevant postmodern and postcolonial theoretical approaches and various critical responses to the fiction of Coetzee.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial literature, postmodernism, authorial voice, representation, South Africa



## ÖZET

### **Söylenemeyeni Yazmak: J.M. Coetzee'nin Kurgularında Sessizlik ve Ötekinin Temsili**

Bu yüksek lisans tezi, John Maxwell Coetzee'nin *Barbarları Beklerken*, *Michael K. Yaşamı ve Yaşadığı Dönem* ve *Düşman* adlı eserlerine odaklanarak sömürge sonrası ve postmodern yazında edebiyatın ezilenleri ve sömürülenleri temsil etme olanaklarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. İncelenen her üç roman, sömürgeci düzeni temsil eden anlatıcı ile sesini kaybetmiş karakterler arasındaki iletişim sorununu resmederek edebiyatın otorite ve temsiliyet sorunlarını görünür kılmaktadır. İncelenen metinlerde odaklanılan temel noktalar, anlatıcı sesler ile sessiz karakterlerin temsilleridir. Bu bağlamda, sessizliğin kolonyal bağlam içerisindeki otorite sorununu açık etmesinin ve edebi metinlerde yeni temsil olanakları yaratmasının olanaklılığı tartışılmaktadır. Romanların karşılaştırmalı ve yorumlayıcı birer incelemesi yapılırken, sömürge sonrası yazına odaklanan ilgili kuramsal yaklaşımlara ve Coetzee'nin kurgularına yapılmış çeşitli eleştirilere de yer verilmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Sömürge sonrası edebiyat, postmodernizm, anlatıcı ses, temsiliyet, Güney Afrika



## INTRODUCTION

South Africa, a country suffering from racial segregation throughout its history, has continued to experience discrimination even after the country's independence following the end of the colonization period. The people who were considered "non-white" were subjected to severe discriminatory practices during the apartheid, a system of institutionalized racial segregation in South Africa between 1948 and 1991. Yet, despite the turbulent atmosphere prevalent in the country over the past decades, South African literature has introduced a number of notable writers to the world, including Nadine Gordimer, Alan Paton and Andre Brink. Jean Maxwell Coetzee, awarded the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature, is among the prominent writers of South African literature with his distinct narrative strategies and critical standpoint. He is also one of the leading figures stirring controversy among South African literary critics in the context of the sociopolitical conditions of the country. Being a community confronting inequality, South African literary criticism of that period developed a kind of social realism that primarily aimed to reflect social injustices characterizing the life in South Africa. Due to these concerns, a South African writer was above all expected to be politically responsible to the community s/he writes in. In this respect, the main question asked within this cultural environment was how relevant the literary work is within the South African context.

Coetzee's novels, particularly his earlier ones, were regarded by a number of South African critics as failure since the novels have a tone of ambiguity and



seem irrelevant to the immediate historical context as viewed through the lens of social realist criticism in South Africa at the time. The early critiques of Coetzee's fiction, particularly the ones adopting a Marxist approach, charged him with an aestheticism, which was regarded as politically irresponsible in the presence of the aesthetics versus politics discussion in the country.

Among them, Peter Knox-Shaw points out regarding Coetzee's first novel *Dusklands*: "It is regrettable that a writer of such considerable and varied talents should play down the political and economic aspects of history in favor of a psychopathology of Western life" (qtd. in Kossew 3). Against Coetzee's dismissal within South Africa due to his supposed failure to represent the material conditions of the apartheid regime, several critics such as Teresa Dovey, Susan VanZanten Gallagher and David Attwell endeavored to assess his books from different theoretical perspectives. Dovey has been the first one reading Coetzee's works from a poststructuralist framework. In her seminal book *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories*, she describes his narrative style as "a strategy which deconstructs the position of mastery per se . . . a mode of writing which denies the critic the position of mastery" (50). Attwell and Gallagher, on the other hand, defended Coetzee by endeavoring to position his narratives within the South African socio-political discourse. Attwell recognizes that Coetzee's novels are "positioned within, and deconstructs, a particular sub-genre of discourse within the culture" of South Africa ("The Problem of History in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee." 595). To that end, Gallagher interrogates: "Is the primary responsibility of a writer living under apartheid to write or to fight, to produce works of art or to struggle to



eliminate injustice and oppression? Or are these false dichotomies?” (3) Combining the two conflicting approaches towards Coetzee that revolve around the aesthetic versus politics debate, Dick Penner recognizes what differs Coetzee from the other South African writers by stating that: “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” (qtd. in Gallagher 12).

In this political climate, the identity and socio-cultural belonging of the writer inevitably acted as one of the primary parameters while assessing the writer’s work. South African writer Richard Rive explicates how the race of the writer influence their writing: “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” (qtd. in Gallagher 5). According to this, black writers were expected to represent the difficulties they encountered during the apartheid regime while white writers were expected to question their positions in this order. In this scope, Nadine Gordimer, the first South African to be awarded Nobel Prize in Literature, upholds this kind of social realism. She points out: “My writing does not deal with my personal convictions; it deals with the society I live and write in. [...] My novels are anti-apartheid, not because of my personal abhorrence of apartheid, but because the society, that is the very stuff of my work reveals itself” (qtd. in Gallagher 7).



Coetzee's subject position is also ambivalent as much as his narratives. He is a white man not "of British ancestry" (*Doubling the Point* 342). Positioned in neither of the conflicting poles in the South African political context, Coetzee tells that his subject position is in a middle-ground that is "no longer European, not yet African" (*White Writing* 11). Sue Kossew stresses that Coetzee never defines himself as a South African spokesman or a South African writer (5). He refuses to take on the political responsibility prescribed to the writer in South African literary environment, which distinguishes him from other South African writers. Being against assigning certain political responsibilities to the writer, he contends in an interview: "As to the question of the role of the writer, there seems to be a model behind the question, a model of a social structure in which people are assigned roles to play, and I am not sure that I would agree with the model underlying the question" (qtd. in Gallagher 16).

Although censorship was a serious concern for the South African writers due to the ideological control of the apartheid regime, censorship board in the apartheid era never banned Coetzee's books as they were considered too allegorical to represent a threat to the state. The South African Board of Censors describes Coetzee's books "too indirect in their approach, too rarefied, to be considered a threat to the order" (*Doubling the Point* 298) since he has not included historical and political facts particularly in his earlier novels. Although Coetzee refuses to conform to the social realism that characterizes the works of most of his local peers, he employs distinct techniques to confront the issues of authority, injustice and power relations. Instead of directly referring to the problems in the immediate social



and political context, he chose to create a distinct style that provokes questions about the relationship between politics and ethics. So, rather than resorting to the standards prescribed by the Marxist critics, he self-reflexively posed questions regarding the writer's role in society and the authority inherent in the act of writing: In this sense, in an interview he gave to Tony Morphet in 1987, he expresses the main question he dealt with in most of his novels and critical works: "Who writes? Who takes up the position of power, pen in hand?" (qtd. in Kossew 6)

Attempting to address such questions, Coetzee translates the awareness of his own ambivalent position to his narrators' positionality in many of his novels, particularly in the three novels I intend to examine in this study: *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Foe*. The reason I chose these three novels among others is the fact that they interrogate the possibility of representation through portraying the privileged position of the narrator in the face of an oppressed and silenced Other. In my readings of the novels, I would like to probe whether literature can represent or give voice to the silenced by bearing witness to their stories.

Having wrote these three novels during the apartheid era, Coetzee seems to undertake the task of testifying to the atrocities of the regime by refusing to directly translate the suffering into the narrative. In doing so, he is apparently conscious of the untrustworthy nature of language and ethical inadequacy of literature. Regarding his motivations in writing, Coetzee remarks in another interview: "I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only



human suffering. These fictional constructions of mine are paltry, ludicrous defenses against that being-overwhelmed, and, to me, transparently so” (*Doubling the Point* 248).

In the novels I will analyze within this study, the characters such as the barbarian woman in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Michael K in *Life and Times of Michael K*, and Friday in *Foe* are the figures of alterity and radical silence while the privileged narrators confronting them, namely the magistrate, the medical officer and Susan Barton, endeavor to speak for them in a way that seeks to compensate for the colonial violence and heal the wounds of the silenced figures. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the magistrate tries to cure the wounds of the barbarian woman who is tortured by the empire’s officers. In *Life and Times of Michael K*, a medical officer tries to cure Michael K, who is hospitalized due to malnutrition while in a rehabilitation camp. In *Foe*, Susan Barton strives to give the slave Friday his freedom back and send him to his homeland Africa after his master dies.

Similarly, as if to emphasize their lack of agency, Coetzee’s silent characters have physical deformities that render their bodily presence more visible and obstruct their articulation, which makes for the reader impossible to have an access to their interior lives. Michael K has a harelip that impedes his speech and is considered slow-witted by his interlocutors, whereas Friday is completely silenced since his tongue was cut out. The barbarian woman, on the other hand, is maimed and blinded by the torturers, so her gaze does not bear any expression. The narrators’ attempts to give voice to the silenced seem futile since the stories they



look to tell are not theirs whereas the silenced cannot tell their stories since their capacity to do so are obliterated. All three novels portray the ethical quandary literature has found itself in over the past century: Is it possible to represent the Other without reducing them to the status of a mere object?

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, humanity has witnessed an unprecedented breaking point in the face of the world wars and inhumane obscenities they introduced. Due to these historical factors, literature has acquired a new awareness: the awareness of its own ethical inadequacy. In the face of the catastrophe, events have become detached from their meaning. As Hannah Arendt says in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the World War I has been a catastrophe that “is almost impossible to describe” (267), whereas Walter Benjamin expresses in “The Storyteller.” that the ability to exchange experiences is taken from people since experience falls in value (83-4). Benjamin states that at the end of the World War I, the men returning from the battlefield grew “silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience” (“The Storyteller.” 84).

In this framework, Theodor Adorno’s remarks on the World War II especially shed light on the problem of representation and literature’s role in bearing witness, which I intend to probe through Coetzee’s fiction in this study. Similar to Benjamin, Adorno points out that the World War II is totally divorced from experience. He states:

Just as the war lacks continuity, history, an “epic” element, but seems rather to start anew from the beginning in each phase, so it will leave behind no permanent, unconsciously preserved image in



the memory. Everywhere, with each explosion, it has breached the barrier against stimuli beneath which experience, the lag between healing oblivion and healing recollection, forms. (*Minima Moralia* 54)

In his essay “Cultural Criticism and Society”, Adorno contends that in an era during which events become detached from meaning, there is something obscene and unethical in creating art since art remains unable to represent the obscenities and breaking points of civilization:

Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation. (*Prisms* 34)

Adorno’s thinking implicates a paradox as his very statement speaks about the unspeakable doom. Although creating art is deemed impossible and unethical in the face of catastrophe since bearing witness to the suffering of the Other is defined as an impossible task, the obligation of writing still persists. One of the most seminal texts on the obligation of writing is found in the testimonies of Primo Levi, who survived Auschwitz and still wrote about it despite the impossibility of



the task. In the preface to *If This is a Man*, Levi states that: “The need to tell our story to ‘the rest’, to make ‘the rest’ participate in it, had taken on for us, before our liberation and after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse, to the point of competing with our elementary needs” (15). Despite this need to tell his story, he still underlines the impossibility of bearing witness in his writings. “We, the survivors, are not the true witnesses . . . We speak in their stead, by proxy” (*The Drowned and the Saved* 83-4) he says. For him, the true witnesses are the annihilated ones, who could only fully possess the truth.

Basing on his memories in the Lager, Levi narrates that the extraordinary conditions of the camp produce non-men from men, “who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer” (*If This is a Man* 96). Those men are called *Muselmann* (literally meaning Muslim in German), who are stripped from the ability to speak due to their experience. Forming a threshold between humanity and non-humanity, the *Muselmanner* are maybe the most explicit form of loss suffered by human beings in the face of the catastrophe, which silence the voice of the witness.

The *Muselmann*, a figure of ultimate alterity and silence, introduced an impossible task to the postcolonial and post-Auschwitz literature. Drawing on Levi’s testimonies on Auschwitz, Giorgio Agamben implies this task of literature in his essay entitled “Shame, or the Subject” as follows: “To speak, to bear witness, is . . . to enter into a vertiginous movement in which something sinks to the bottom, wholly desubjectified and silenced, and something subjectified speaks without truly having anything to say of its own” (*Remnants of Auschwitz* 120).



I do not intend to draw a parallelism between Auschwitz and the apartheid regime in which Coetzee formed his novels. Yet, I suggest that the points mentioned above with regard to the inadequacy of writing provides a crucial insight to understand the significance of the questions Coetzee addresses in his novels. Although he is often resented for being historically implausible, I contend that Coetzee's novels endeavor to address the problem of bearing witness to the suffering caused by the history of colonialism in a more general framework by addressing both aesthetic and ethical dilemmas literature has confronted over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hence, it can be argued that his novels seek to find a way of relating to the stories of the silenced through the figures of silence within his narratives. Just as Coetzee's silent characters, the stories of the desubjectified ones are in the center of the history of civilization despite their exclusion.

In this study, I will probe how Coetzee deals with the questions of agency and representation by focusing on the narrative voices and silenced figures in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Foe*. By looking at how the untold stories of the marginalized and silenced characters are told by the narrators, who are speaking from within the imperial discourse, I will seek to answer the question whether Friday, Michael K and the barbarian woman, who form gaps in the narrative with their silence, can dismantle the colonial discourse and its underlying discursive strategies. In this regard, the main aspects to be examined in this study are the narrative voice and the representations of the silent characters within the narrative.



All three novels also allude to a number of Western literary texts. While *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K* make allusions to several stories by Franz Kafka, *Foe* is a rewriting of a canon in European literature, namely *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe. These intertextual qualities will be briefly discussed in relation to their contributions to the narrative voice. Various critical responses to the novels and Coetzee's own critical works will also be considered alongside relevant theoretical approaches. Each novel will be examined in an individual chapter in order to pay regard to their distinct features and integrity. After discussing each novel in the framework of the above-stated points and their specific conditions, I will finally attempt to draw a comparative study in the conclusion part regarding whether Coetzee's narrative strategies can present new possibilities to find a new voice in the colonial discourse.



## CHAPTER I

### ***WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS: THE IMPENETRABLE GAZE OF THE BARBARIAN WOMAN***

First published in 1980, *Waiting for the Barbarians* is a pivotal work both in the context of South African literary conventions and in Coetzee's corpus. Compared to the other novels written by South African writers during this time period, the novel is quite different with its unspecified time and space and allegorical style.

In this novel, Coetzee focuses on how imperial power works while approaching to the question of torture through a postmodern lens. The novel problematizes the role of the author in the face of the inconceivable act of torture. In so doing, Coetzee unravels how torture and other oppressive state practices are at work to create the Other while attempting to deconstruct the binary opposition of self and other.

The narrative is located in an unnamed outpost of an unspecified Empire in an unspecified year and portrays activities of torture exercised by the oppressive state; which stirs shame, guilt and an effort of redemption in the first-person narrator. The novel depicts a state of suspension when an increasingly defensive Empire develops plans to annihilate its enemies.

The novel's narrator is a middle-aged man referred as "the magistrate", who is an officer at an outpost in a small frontier town. Living on the edge of the Empire



and leading a relatively quiet life, the magistrate faces the Empire's oppressive side for the first time with the appearance of Colonel Joll. This secret police, assigned by the Third Bureau, arrives in the town to receive information about the "barbarians" by imprisoning and torturing a group of locals comprising old men, women and children. Colonel Joll seems to be not interested in the fact that there is no threat from the prisoners, a group of nomads who only pay occasional visits to the town to engage in trade. It is obvious that Colonel Joll takes on the task of creating the enemy, which must exist so that the Empire could define itself by its others. When it is implied to Colonel Joll that the nomads could not give him any tangible information about the barbarians, he says, "Prisoners are prisoners" (*Barbarians* 22). As Colonel Joll tortures barbarians in detention, the magistrate starts sympathizing with the prisoners. Following this, the magistrate takes a barbarian woman, who is injured while being tortured, into his house. Later on, he embarks on a hazardous journey into the desert to return the woman to her people, upon which he is imprisoned and tortured for treason. But ultimately, the army releases the magistrate and leaves the town. However, the lethargy prevalent in the desolate town and the anxious anticipation of the barbarians persist even after the departure of the army. The novel concludes ambiguously, with no incident or situation marking a definite closure.

The arrival of the army in the town shows the magistrate the Empire's discourse and how distant he is from it. Challenged by moral dilemmas in the presence of the army's atrocity, the magistrate takes up a self-inquiry and endeavors to find the truth, but he cannot easily find solutions. Being neither a loyalist nor a



traitor, the magistrate gets stuck in an in-between state since both sides regard him as the enemy. He is in a middle position and thus suspect to everyone, including himself. Even though he honestly evaluates his motives and his intellectual and philosophical failures, he does not speak for one side or the other. After he is subjected to torture following his imprisonment, he begins to define himself through suffering, bodily pain and the stories he tells about himself. His first-person narrative, which clearly lacks an authority, traps him in an intellectual dilemma that is parallel to his in-betweenness. His inquiries always lead him to uncertainty.

In stark contrast to the magistrate's position, Colonel Joll and his understudy, Mandel, who come from the capital to investigate rumors of a barbarian uprising at the border, adopt the Empire's authoritative discourse and therefore stand out as unequivocal identities constructed by their military affiliations. Although the magistrate does not yield to the Empire's oppressive discourse unlike these men, he still considers himself guilty for being a component of the Empire. This feeling of guilt particularly surfaces in his relationship with the barbarian woman. As the magistrate sees how Joll and Mandel are deceived by the imperial discourse, he comes to see his own self-deceptions, turns inward and embarks on a journey of self-discovery.

According to Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* is "about the impact of the torture chamber on the life of a man of conscience" (*Doubling the Point* 363). Coetzee also points out that the writer attempting to depict the dark chamber of torture is confronted with several moral dilemmas. (*Doubling the Point* 363) According to him, the writer's duty is to represent the oppressive practices of the



state. But in so doing, they must abstain from depicting the obscenities in detail without completely ignoring them since he argues that realistic depictions of torture in fiction can indirectly help the oppressive state. So, the author is confronted with the question of “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” (*Doubling the Point* 364). Another moral dilemma Coetzee points at is the question of how to represent the torturer: “How is the writer to represent the torturer? If he intends to avoid the clichés of spy fiction - to make the torturer neither a figure of satanic evil, nor an actor in a black comedy, nor a faceless functionary, nor a tragically divided man doing a job he does not believe in - what openings are left?” (*Doubling the Point* 364). As I will show below, Coetzee also seems to offer answers to these questions in *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

Much of the critical discussion on Coetzee's novels focuses on the question whether they can be read as mere allegories. *Waiting for the Barbarians* stands out as one of Coetzee's leading novels spurring this discussion since it is indefinite both in time and place and comprises enigmatic characters like the barbarian woman.

Several critics regard Coetzee's novels as allegorical while justifying this choice as a means to express the truth in the South African context, where censorship would prevent making explicit references to social and political conditions. Some other critics, including Nadine Gordimer, regard Coetzee's employment of allegory as part of ahistorical universalism. In her article “The Idea of Gardening”, Gordimer describes Coetzee's allegory as “a stately fastidiousness; or a state of shock” (139). In this regard, she says: “He seemed able to deal with the



horror he saw written on the sun only – if brilliantly– if this were to be projected into another time and plane” (139).

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, allegory is not only the structuring component of the novel, but also dealt thematically within the text. Employment of allegory as a strategy is particularly visible in the magistrate’s attempt to decipher a hieroglyphic script written on pieces of wood he discovered in ancient ruins. He is drawn to the idea of writing a history of the ancient settlement and pays frequent visits to the ruins of the ancient town. Although he eventually fails to decipher the wooden slips, he makes a “reading” of them when he is asked by Colonel Joll to give an account of his actions (*Barbarians* 110-2). When the magistrate tries to interpret the wooden slips he got from the archaeological site to the imperial officials, he employs an explicit instance of allegory:

It is the same with the rest of these slips. I plunge my good hand into the chest and stir. “They form an allegory. They can be read in many orders. Further, each single slip can be read in many ways. Together they can be read as a domestic journal, or they can be read as a plan of war, or they can be turned on their sides and read as a history of the last years of the Empire – the old Empire, I mean. There is no agreement among scholars about how to interpret these relics of the ancient barbarians.” (*Barbarians* 112)

With these words of the magistrate, a view of allegory focusing on the act of interpretation by the reader is expressed. He turns to allegory which can have multiple interpretations. Being the imperial subjects, Colonel Joll and Mandel are



not familiar with the open-endedness suggested by the magistrate's reading, and the magistrate seems to satirize their persistence on final resolutions. So, allegory functions to negate the Empire by making use of the fractures in the master narrative, which is one of the distinct characteristics of postcolonial literature. It can also be argued that Coetzee takes on a similar task in the novel. Setting the narrative in an unspecified time and place, the writer constructs an explicitly allegoric realm that also addresses the South African condition, which will be further discussed in detail below.

The magistrate's reading of the wooden slips also makes an allusion to deconstructionist and postmodern theories on language and meaning. Unsure about their meaning, the magistrate says:

In the long evenings I spent poring over my collection I isolated over four hundred different characters in the script, perhaps as many as four hundred and fifty. I have no idea what they stand for. Does each stand for a single thing, a circle for the sun, a triangle for a woman, a wave for a lake; or does a circle merely stand for "circle", a triangle for "triangle", a wave for "wave"? Does each sign represent a different state of the tongue, the lips, the throat, the lungs, as they combine in the uttering of some multifarious unimaginable extinct barbarian language? (*Barbarians* 110)

This passage clearly alludes to the challenge of attributing a specific meaning to the text while addressing semiotic questions such as the link between the signifier and the signified. Lance Olsen suggests, "As Derrida would have it,



those wood slips form an absence which may be supplemented in an endless number of ways, cut off from responsibility, from authority, an emblem of orphaned language” (53). But later, when Colonel Joll asks him to read the slips, he reads some stories on Empire’s oppression, ascribing a certain meaning to the text.

Olsen also argues that the magistrate cannot resolve the moral dilemmas he confronts in the absence of a single and fixed meaning. He says:

We have arrived, as we often do in postmodern fiction, at a giving up, a frustration, a despair before the arbitrariness of language and its essential defectiveness for depicting the world. We have circled around again to the notion that language is a game, that the game is futile, that linguistic zero is ever-present. (55)

This suggestion, however, seems to overlook the fact that one of Coetzee’s priorities is hinting at the volatility of the language and the author’s paradoxical task of representing incomprehensible acts such as torture. It is noteworthy that with the gaps and ambiguities in the narrative voice, he makes room for different interpretations and voices with an aim to give voice to the Other. Parallel to this, Barbara Eckstein suggests: “The political implications in Coetzee’s analysis of body and voice are clear. Coetzee indicts colonial barbarity, indeed, all interpretation of ‘barbarians’ by barbarous authority and its ideology of otherness” (193).

Readers and critics of *Waiting for the Barbarians* tend to interpret the novel’s lack of specificity differently. Contrary to the views of some critics including Jean-Phillipe Wade, who regards allegory as a strategy to tell the truth about South African political conditions in his article “The Allegorical Text and



History: J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*", Irving Howe says: "One possible loss is the bite and pain, the urgency that a specified historical place and time may provide . . . such invocations of universal evil can deflect attention from the particular and at least partly remediable social wrongs Mr. Coetzee portrays" (qtd. in Gallagher 125). In reply to this, Rosemary Jolly says: "The geography of the fiction may not correspond to an identifiable geo-political entity, but its depiction is both detailed and comprehensible" (70).

While some critics suggest that Coetzee employs a form of ethical universalism, it is possible to see the reflections of the immediate context Coetzee is located in while writing the novel, that being South Africa in the late 1970s. Although *Waiting for the Barbarians* is specifically concerned with the issue of torture, which is a general phenomenon of the human condition, it still reflects some elements of the political situation in South Africa. Some events unfolded in South Africa during 1970s are especially noteworthy in this respect. In South Africa, the issue of torture came to spotlight with the shady death of Stephen Biko, who died in detention on September 12, 1977. Being the leader of the Black People's Convention, Biko's mysterious death led to a public outcry. As this controversy highlighted state-run violence, various fictional works aiming to give an insight into state oppression were published. Regarding this, Coetzee suggests: "Torture has exerted a dark fascination on many other South African writers" (*Doubling the Point* 363).

In this sense, the Empire in *Waiting for the Barbarians* can be recognized as a fictional construction of the anxieties and paranoia prevalent during the



apartheid regime. As already stated, the Empire in the novel begins to employ violent practices upon the arrival of the army to the outpost. Wade argues that there are similarities between the justification presented by Colonel Joll regarding the death of a man in custody and allegations on Biko's death during a police inquiry (281). Therefore, it can be argued that although Coetzee's allegorical style suggests a universality on the issue of torture and oppression, the novel's allusions to the political conditions and incidents in South Africa cannot be glossed over.

It is also suggested that the novel is linked to the South African context in that it offers a criticism to the liberal humanist discourse in South Africa. Teresa Dovey, for instance, argues that *Waiting for the Barbarians* constitutes an image of a particular discourse. Dovey says:

The Magistrate's autodiegetic narrative should be regarded as reported speech, enclosed, as it were, by quotation marks at the beginning and end. The discourse cited and subverted is liberal humanist discourse. More specifically, it is liberal humanist novelistic discourse (of, for example, Alan Paton, Dan Jacobson and the early Gordimer) as it arrives at a particular juncture in South African history: the phase of bureaucratized and increasingly militarized totalitarian control from 1948 onwards. ("Allegory of Allegories." 141)

Although *Waiting for the Barbarians* depicts an unidentified time and space, the protagonist's self-reflexive remarks and demeanors are reminiscent of the liberal humanist discourse that was particularly prevalent in South African literature



during the oppression of the Nationalist Party government.

According to Dovey, the magistrate's narrative addresses some of the main areas of failure in liberal humanist discourse, which include “its failure to interpret and offer resistance to the militarized totalitarian phase of colonization and, secondly, its failure to interpret and articulate the history of the colonized” (“Allegory of Allegories.” 141). Parallel to this, David Attwell suggests in *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* that the novel has a “parodic link with the moral framework of South African liberal humanism” (80). Particularly, the magistrate’s act of washing the barbarian woman’s feet displays “liberalism's festishization of victimhood” (80). Considering the suggestions of Dovey and Attwell, *Waiting for the Barbarians* can also be said to allegorize the ambivalent position of white resistance in South Africa.

As mentioned above, the second moral dilemma Coetzee highlights while referring to the writer’s task is representing the mindset of the torturer. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee abstains from depicting the details of the acts of torture, which seems to be a deliberate choice given the other narrative aspects of the novel and the concerns of the narrator. Also, giving the details of such despicable acts can be a kind of voyeurism while indirectly serving the interests of the oppressor.

Throughout the novel, the magistrate endeavors to understand the torturers, Joll and Mandel. While questioning Mandel, the magistrate suggests that he does not blame the torturer: “I am only trying to understand. I am trying to understand the zone in which you live. I am trying to imagine how you breathe and eat and live from day to day. But I cannot!” (*Barbarians* 126).



Although the novel does not give an insight into the minds of the torturers, it manages to enter the realm of the torturer through some actions of the magistrate. Notably, the magistrate's self-questioning and contemplations of the imperial discourse starts when he meets a barbarian woman who is tortured and blinded by Colonel Joll and left behind by her people. The magistrate's interest in the woman subsequently turns into an obsession after taking her to his residence, but this obsession is characterized as a self-indulgent one. He unremittingly asks her about her experiences as a tortured woman. He even stands in the room where the torture occurred and tries to imagine it. He also performs a strange nightly ritual of washing the woman and particularly focuses on her maimed feet while doing this. Jolly explains this as: "he treats her body as a surface, a map of a surface, a text" (72).

The magistrate repeatedly questions his motive underlying his wish to cure her. By endeavoring to bear witness to the suffering of the other, he tries to have redemption from his shame caused by being a subject of the oppressing regime. In his attempts to recover the woman, the magistrate also tries to put himself in the role of a blameless one who seeks and tells the truth. Despite that, he is motivated by a feeling of guilt in his attempts to cure her, a guilt perhaps caused by his passivity and silence in the face of the state's oppressive methods. Still, he does not escape from treating the woman as a site of torture and aligning his own treatment to the woman with the acts of torturers. Particularly the activity of washing feet, which is his way of showing intimacy and one of the reasons why he links his actions with Colonel Joll's, is clearly an act to compensate the damage caused by Colonel Joll.



After a while, he notices that his interest in the woman might be a different version of Colonel Joll's tortures and come to regard himself both as a rescuer and torturer, which consolidates his ambivalent position. At one point, the magistrate says that he and Colonel Joll are two sides of the same coin: "For I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of the imperial rule, no more, no less" (*Barbarians* 135).

Although the magistrate's attentions are explicitly eroticized, the relationship between the two does not have any kind of reciprocity. He has a difficulty in even remembering the woman's expression due to the woman's impaired vision and the absence of a reciprocal gaze. The magistrate remarks that no penetration ever occurs: "These bodies of hers and mine are diffuse, gaseous, centreless, at one moment spinning about a vortex here, at another curling, thickening elsewhere . . . I know what to do with her no more than one cloud in the sky knows what to do with another" (*Barbarians* 34).

The barbarian subject position is not represented in the novel in a large part due to the woman's silence and equivocalness. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak addresses this crisis of representing the other as follows: "No perspective critical of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self" ("Three Women's Texts" 253). Standing out as an enigmatic presence who retreats into silence, the




barbarian woman does not by any means answer to the magistrate's efforts to communicate while the magistrate fails to communicate with her otherness. Although the magistrate's motives in his relationship with the woman is clearly self-reflexive as part of his desire to construct his subject-position as opposed to her, the woman's silence hampers the magistrate's efforts of subject constitution. This absence of reciprocity increases the magistrate's frustration. His encounters with the woman always evokes a feeling of atemporality in him, creating yet another fracture in his endeavors to establish a continuity in his own narrative: "I am the same man I always was; but time has broken, something has fallen in upon me from the sky, at random, from nowhere: this body in my bed, for which I am responsible, or so it seems, otherwise why do I keep it?" (*Barbarians* 43).

Only after he himself is tortured, he comes to recognize that he was only obsessed with deciphering the torture marks on her body, highlighting the differences between him and her, and accentuating her otherness, which put him in the position of Colonel Joll: "From the moment my steps paused and I stood before her at the barracks gate she must have felt a miasma of deceit closing about her: envy, pity, cruelty all masquerading as desire" (*Barbarians* 166). The magistrate desires to communicate with her "old free state" (*Barbarians* 34) to consolidate his own subject-position. In this sense, reading the wooden slips and efforts to read the marks on the woman's body reflect the same concern: "It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this woman's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" (*Barbarians* 31). Attempting to read the marks of torture on the barbarian woman's body in the same way as his attempts to



decipher the script on wooden slips, the magistrate fails to ascribe a certain meaning to both, which points to a crisis of interpretation and the futility of the efforts to give a meaning to the suffering of the other.

In Foucauldian terms, the woman's body is the site where power manifests itself, regardless of whether it is Joll with his torture methods or the magistrate with his remedies to cure her. Thus the magistrate says:



With this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry. Is this how her torturers felt hunting their secret, whatever they thought it was? For the first time I feel a dry pity for them: how natural a mistake to believe that you can bum or tear or hack your way into the secret body of the other! The girl lies in my bed, but there is no good reason why it should be a bed. I behave in some ways like a lover – I undress her, I bathe her, I stroke her, I sleep beside her – but I might equally well tie her to a chair and beat her, it would be no less intimate.

*(Barbarians 43)*

The magistrate insists on learning her story as part of his quest to understand her pain: “‘Tell me,’ I want to say, ‘don't make a mystery of it, pain is only pain’; but words elude me” (*Barbarians* 32). He cannot understand until his imprisonment that he overlooked the woman's suffering with these words. Pain is not only pain, but a singular event which is unspeakable and unrepresentable. In conjunction with the impossible project of a post-Auschwitz literature Adorno states, literature has a paradoxical and impossible duty of representing the unrepresentable, and one of



Coetzee's motivations in characterizing the barbarian woman as an enigmatic presence, whose soul cannot be reached with the magistrate's discourse, seems to explore the paradox of writing about the unspeakable and inconceivable acts such as torture.

When the woman finally begins to tell her story, they are lying silent side by side and the magistrate thinks, "Is this the question I asked? I want to protest but listen on, chilled" (*Barbarians* 41). After she describes how the soldiers blinded her, the magistrate asks, "'What do you feel toward the men who did this?' She lies thinking a long time. Then she says, 'I am tired of talking'" (*Barbarians* 41). The barbarian woman does not subjectively describe her feelings in that she resists being incorporated into Empire's story, resists being crudely characterized as one of Empire's victims. Her choice of silence indicates that the Empire does not have absolute control on her body, her voice and her story contrary to what is supposed by the sovereign.

Another act of redemption is performed when the magistrate embarks on a hazardous journey to return the woman to her people. During the journey, his relationship with her is consummated. When they came across a group of barbarian soldiers in the mountains, he tells the woman that she could return to his settlement if she wishes, and she refuses his offer. With this gesture, the magistrate offers the woman a chance to make a free choice for the first time.

Following this journey, the magistrate's opposition and abhorrence towards the imperial regime and Colonel Joll is felt in an explicit way, upon which he is captured for "treasonously consorting with the enemy" (*Barbarians* 77). The



magistrate starts to see the Empire and its ironies from a different subject position: “‘We are at peace here,’ I say, ‘we have no enemies.’ There is silence. ‘Unless I made a mistake,’ I say. ‘Unless we are the enemy.’” (*Barbarians* 77). This remark tells why the Empire must establish and define itself in terms of its enemies. Declining the imperial discourse, the magistrate frees himself since his obligations to the Empire ended with his imprisonment: “I am aware of the source of my elation: my alliance with the guardians of Empire is over, I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken, I am a free man” (*Barbarians* 78). After his ties with the Empire are broken, he has a temporary elation. However, he can neither dismantle nor step outside of the imperial discourse due to his ambivalent position. Undoubtedly, he cannot be located in the barbarian subject position given his background and ties with the Empire. Ultimately, he ends up undergoing a series of tortures, experiencing unbearable physical pain while witnessing another group of people subjected to torture.

His dissidence to the Empire takes a more definite form when he protests against the soldiers beating their prisoners in the town square. When he witnesses the torture of another group of nomads by Joll, he feels an urge to resist. Before the spectacle of torture begins, he thinks:

I cannot save the prisoners, therefore let me save myself. Let it at the very least be said, if it ever comes to be said, if there is ever anyone in some remote future interested to know the way we lived, that in this farthest outpost of the Empire of light there existed one man who in his heart was not a barbarian. (*Barbarians* 104)



However, he is prompted to cry out when Joll shows the crowd a hammer with which he clearly plans to beat the prisoners. The magistrate narrates this incident:

“No!”... The soldier who blocks my way stumbles aside. I am in the arena holding up my hands to still the crowd: “No! No! No!” When I turn to Colonel Joll he is standing not five paces from me, his arms folded. I point a finger at him. “You!” I shout. Let it all be said. Let him be the one on whom the anger breaks. “You are depraving these people!” (*Barbarians* 106)

The magistrate also desperately exclaims a set of humanitarian values in the face of torture that resonate the liberal discourse that is argued to be criticized in the novel, yet they sound anachronistic in the presence of the ferocity: “‘Look!’ I shout. ‘We are the great miracle of creation! But from some blows this miraculous body cannot repair itself! How--!’ Words fail me. ‘Look at these men!’ I recommence. ‘Men!’” (*Barbarians* 107).

Although the novel does not depict the abuse of the prisoners in detail for the aforementioned concerns, the magistrate gives a first-person account of his own torture. He describes his suffering at the hands of Joll with a new authority caused by physical pain. The magistrate develops sympathy toward the barbarian woman while learning how much pain and humiliation he can endure. The body that once granted him pleasure is now agonizing him through physical pain. In the presence of physical pain, he questions and examines his beliefs and fears in a more profound way while confronting his self-deceptions. He reports his torture, the hardships of



prison life and Mandel's assaults that have "no elaborated system of pain and deprivation" (*Barbarians* 115). He describes his psychological breakdown as "agonies of shame" when is brought to the yard naked and forced to exercise in a woman's shirt (*Barbarians* 117).

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that the torture aims to get to the soul, which is the last remnant of self. Citing 18<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Gabriel Bonnot de Mably's words: "Punishment, if I may so put it, should strike the soul rather than the body" (qtd. in Foucault 16), Foucault argues that the penalty in its most severe forms no longer addresses the body, but the soul, adding that "the expiation that once rained down upon the body must be replaced by a punishment that acts in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations" (16). So, through torture, selfhood is constructed to be destroyed. The magistrate's remarks following his subjection to torture resonate what Foucault says: "He [Mandel] deals with my soul: every day he folds the flesh aside and exposes my soul to the light" (*Barbarians* 118).

The humanitarian values the magistrate shouts while objecting to the torture of the prisoners do not find any room in these practices. The practices lack reason, meaning and justice. Subjected to torture without a reason, prisoners are marched on to the square with a wire looped through their cheeks and hands that "makes them meek as lambs" (*Barbarians* 108). Joll writes on their backs with charcoal the word "ENEMY". The magistrate thinks, "The game, I see, is to beat them till their backs are washed clean" (*Barbarians* 105).

The magistrate provides a thorough description of his swollen cheek, broken



hand and the feeling of choking, yet he fell short of describing a moment of unbearable pain and only reported that he shrieked out an inhumane cry at one point. Hanging by a rope and tied on his wrists behind his back, the magistrate reports:

As my feet leave the ground I feel a terrible tearing in my shoulders as though whole sheets of muscle are giving way. From my throat comes the first mournful dry bellow I bellow again and again, there is nothing I can do to stop it, the noise comes out of a body that knows itself damaged perhaps beyond repair and roars its fright . . . “He is calling his barbarian friends,” someone observes. “That is barbarian language you hear.” There is laughter. (*Barbarians* 121)

The body “knows itself damaged perhaps beyond repair” and expresses its suffering with a bellow which is outside of language. Language falls short of describing the hanging, only expressing that “whole sheets of muscle are giving way.” Reminiscent of the barbarian woman’s refusal to answer the magistrate’s question about her torture, ““What do you feel toward the men who did this?”” (*Barbarians* 41), the magistrate’s first-person account cannot reflect his feelings. The reader is not told how the magistrate feels either physically or emotionally.

Readers are left with their own imagination to understand the unbearable pain in this scene which cannot be possibly conceived by the intellect but stands out as an experience only the body can perceive. So, *Waiting for the Barbarians* creates an aesthetics in which the first person narrative of the magistrate remains short of describing unbearable physical and emotional pain. The suffering described in the novel through the experiences of the magistrate and the barbarian woman is



accessible only to the victims of torture, who understand that language and body are frail and volatile. This pain is regardless of class, race, sex, age or social status, as shown by Joll's victims: the grandfather and young boy, the woman and her father, and the middle-aged magistrate who is not a "barbarian".

Furthermore, certain aspects of this spectacle of torture in the novel echo "In the Penal Colony" by Franz Kafka. Portraying the conflict between old and new regimes, the old regime in Kafka's story invents the Harrow as a torturous method of execution, which uses a needle to write an illegible script on the condemned man's back. The new regime, on the other hand, does not favor this method. The officer who operates the Harrow says:

Enlightenment comes to the most dull-witted. It begins around the eyes. From there it radiates. A moment that might tempt one to get under the Harrow oneself. Nothing more happens than that the man begins to understand the inscription, he purses his mouth as if he were listening. You have seen how difficult it is to decipher the script with one's eyes; but our man deciphers it with his wounds. ("In the Penal Colony." 150)

The positions of the victim, the torturer and the witness in Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" are reminiscent of Coetzee's Colonel Joll as torturer, the barbarian woman as victim, and the magistrate who witnesses the woman's suffering. Like Kafka's explorer who tries to interpret the script on the man's back, the magistrate endeavors to interpret the scars on the tortured woman's body. Also, both in Kafka's and Coetzee's texts, the torture methods strike the reader with their literalness. Pain



does not appear as a metaphor standing for something else in both texts, but stands out as a direct knowledge learned only through the body. In Kafka's story, no one but the victim can read the sentence on the victim's back. But the victim reads it only through bodily pain until the moment he dies.

The colonizer's identity construction, which is based on a self-definition by negation, is a common practice undertaken by many societies. In *Tropics of Discourse*, Hayden White suggests: "if we do not know what we think 'civilization' is we can always find an example of what it is not" (152). This practice constructs the "Other" as primitive by assuming that the other is below the level achieved by civilization. The need to make up an imagined other and shape identities basing on false dichotomies is presented in the poem "Waiting for the Barbarians" by the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy, which may have lent its title to the novel. The poem begins:

What is it that we are waiting for, gathered in the square?

The barbarians are supposed to arrive today.

Why is there such great idleness inside the Senate house?

Why are the Senators sitting there, without passing any laws?

Because the barbarians will arrive today. (Cavafy 192)

The Roman rulers make glorious preparations, put on amethyst bracelets and emerald rings, and posture in their finest clothes as they wait to welcome the barbarians in what they expect will be a peaceful exchange of power. The "civilization" in the opening reverses wants the barbarians to cross its borders, expecting them to submit to their rule without any objection. But eventually, the



long-awaited barbarians do not appear, and the townspeople learn that perhaps they do not exist at all.

Why has this uneasiness arisen all at once,

(. . .)

Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come.

And some people have arrived from the borderlands,

and said there are no barbarians anymore.

And now what's to become of us without barbarians.

Those people were a solution of a sort. (Cavafy 193)

When the enemy does not show up at the city gates, the Empire succumbs to a great despair and confusion. The barbarians were “a solution of a sort” because they gave the imperialists a reason to believe in their power. The emperor and the members of his court deceive themselves by thinking that their civilization is a worthy prize to the barbarians without realizing the empire's corruption and decay.

Reminiscent of this poem, the novel shows that the barbarians do not actually pose a threat to the Empire. The only barbarism or brutality in the novel is displayed by the Empire, which undermines the term “civilization”. In so doing, the novel impels the question who the real barbarians are. As the magistrate stands against public torture, he says the future should be left at least “one man who in his heart was not a barbarian” (*Barbarians* 104). The Empire in the novel gets stuck in a seemingly endless suspension that led to nowhere due to the material absence of the barbarians. With this state of waiting, Coetzee displays the volatility of the colonial state, hinting that the colonialism's image of the barbarians is deceptive



and stems from its need to self-identification. Accordingly, the novel clarifies that the construction of the barbarians is only a fiction and dismantles the binary opposition of “civilized/barbarian” in the embodiment of the magistrate, who ends up as both oppressor and oppressed.

Towards the end of the novel, the Empire is confronted with a threat of dissolution as the army fails to find the barbarians who are essential for the existence of the imperial order. While referring to this threat, the magistrate problematizes the notion of history as an *a priori* structure by saying that this is the dissolution of the entire imperial history:

What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of Empire! Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history. One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era. (*Barbarians* 133)

As the magistrate tries to write “a record of settlement to be left for posterity” (*Barbarians* 154) or “an account of how the people of that outpost spent their last year composing their souls as they waited for the barbarians” (*Barbarians* 154), he starts to think: “I think: ‘I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon



them. How can I believe that that is cause for shame?’’ (*Barbarians* 154).

Arguing that “history becomes objectified as History” (*South Africa and the Politics of Writing* 72) in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Attwell contends that history stands out as a construction in the novel that constitutes the narrative of Empire while also legitimizing Empire’s terrorism (72). Lacking continuity, the magistrate’s narrative in the novel shows parallelism with Walter Benjamin’s critique of history as continuity. In “Theses on the Philosophy of History.”, Benjamin contends:

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. (263)

Quoting Foucault, Attwell also argues:

Historical continuity is both a “guarantee that everything that has eluded [the subject] may be restored,” and a promise “that one day the subject – in the form of historical consciousness – will once again be able to appropriate, to bring back under his sway, all those things that are kept at a distance by difference”. (*South Africa and the Politics of Writing* 78)



Defying historical continuity, *Waiting for the Barbarians* presents a narrative full of gaps and uncertainties. Instead of using an authoritative omniscient narrator, Coetzee narrates the novel through a weak character, the magistrate, who cannot form a fixed meaning, finding that words elude him. The indeterminacy in the magistrate's actions and remarks culminates in a disappointment caused by his ultimate failure to give a meaning to the Other. He says: "It would be disappointing to know that the poplar slips I have spent so much time on contain a message as devious, as equivocal, as reprehensible as this" (*Barbarians* 154).

Throughout the novel, the magistrate's endeavors to find the truth always come to an impasse with his self-absorbed meditations. He cannot reach a final resolution neither in his efforts to witness the suffering of the barbarian woman nor in his objections to the Empire's oppression. On the other hand, it can be argued that the Third Bureau adopts a discourse that can be aligned with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "authoritative discourse". In "Discourse in the Novel", Bakhtin contends:

It is not a free appropriation and assimilation of the word itself that authoritative discourse seeks to elicit from us; rather, it demands our unconditional allegiance. Therefore, authoritative discourse permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing variants on it. It enters our verbal consciousness as a compact and indivisible mass; one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it. It is indissolubly fused with its authority – with political power, an



institution, a person – and it stands and falls together with that authority. One cannot divide it up – agree with one part, accept but not completely another part, reject utterly a third part (343).

Since the authoritative discourse cannot be questioned or changed, it precludes the search for truth, which the magistrate tries to engage in. Instead, it imposes one prescribed truth, constructed in the context of historical continuity embedded in the need to preserve the sovereignty of the subject, which is a lie the Empire tells itself, to recall Cavafy's verses.

The magistrate is portrayed as an impotent man with explicit pen/penis metaphor. He aligns his sexual interests with his efforts to write a story: "It seems appropriate that a man who does not know what to do with the woman in his bed should not know what to write" (*Barbarians* 58), and "there were unsettling occasions when in the middle of the sexual act I felt myself losing my way like a storyteller losing the thread of his story" (*Barbarians* 45).

The magistrate's failures in both subjects constitute a considerable part of his lack of authority as a narrator. Throughout the novel, the magistrate unremittingly tries to find meaning, yet he comes up against blankness in all his attempts, while his narrative remains incomplete and ambiguous. As he tries to remember the barbarian woman's face, he only sees "a space, a blankness" (*Barbarians* 47). After he returns the woman to her people, he cannot remember her face. His recurring dream ends when he sees the "blank, featureless" (*Barbarians* 37) face of a child. Lois Zamora argues that "if the resistance of the magistrate's dreams to interpretation and translation is due in part to their



indeterminacy, it is also due to the magistrate's own blindness" (qtd. in Gallagher 122).

The recurring dream the magistrate sees throughout the novel also consolidates this ambivalence and inability to make a final resolution. In his dreams he repeatedly sees a group of children playing and building a castle of snow. The dream's central image is a young girl who sits with her back to the magistrate. As the magistrate approaches to the girl, he sees a face "blank, featureless; it is the face of an embryo or a tiny whale; it is not a face at all but another part of the human body" (*Barbarians* 37). As dreams follow, the girl's features gradually gain definition and in one dream "she is herself, herself as I have never seen her, a smiling child, the light sparkling on her teeth and glancing from her jet-black eyes" (*Barbarians* 53). Similar to this dream, the magistrate can never grasp the individuality in the barbarian woman and vaguely remembers her face to his surprise. Attwell suggests that the dreams mark "two great sites of lack in the magistrate's discourse" (*South Africa and the Politics of Writing* 81), namely continuity and reciprocity.

As the magistrate breaks the duality of self and other after being subjected to torture, his recurring dream starts changing. He finally sees the face of the barbarian woman in the place of the blank face of the child he sees before.

His last remarks in the novel clearly mark the frustration stemming from the failure of presenting a definite and final closure. He thinks, "There has been something staring me in the face, and still I do not see it" (*Barbarians* 155) and "Like much else nowadays I leave it feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way



long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere” (*Barbarians* 156). Yet, although the magistrate seems to be discouraged by the evasive nature of final answers, the novel presents a hopeful closure, in which the magistrate’s dream seems to come true. He crosses the square and comes across a group of children making a snowman.

They have completed the great round body, now they are rolling a ball for the head. “Someone fetch things for the mouth and nose and eyes,” says the child who is their leader. It strikes me that the snowman will need arms too, but I do not want to interfere. They settle the heed on the shoulders and fill it out with pebbles for eyes, ears, nose and mouth. One of them crowns it with his cap. It is not a bad snowman. (*Barbarians* 155-6)

Despite the absences and uncertainties in the narrative, and the magistrate’s lack of authority and inability to reach a final meaning, the novel concludes with a glimmer of hope. As Attwell suggests, the children may “represent a future community, creating the conditions for a reconstructed subject” (*South Africa and the Politics of Writing* 87).

In conclusion, although Coetzee employs allegorical mode in many of his novels, *Waiting for the Barbarians* particularly invites a critical discussion of Coetzee’s use of allegory since allegory is both thematized and used as a device within the novel to draw attention to the act of writing and the processes underlying the politics of representation. Consequently, it is possible to read the novel as an allegorical one implicating historical conditions although allegorizing the novel



specifically in conjunction with the South African context will be a reductive approach since the novel also reflects universal concerns on humanity and power relations. Nevertheless, the magistrate's awareness of his own complicity reflects Coetzee's own awareness of the way author/ity can function as potentially colonizing. This self-consciousness precludes viewing the act of writing as a mere instrument that mirrors the extratextual discourses and surely resists a straightforward allegorical reading that tends to find alignments between the narrative discourse and the discourse of history.



## CHAPTER II

### ***LIFE AND TIMES OF MICHAEL K: A FIGURE OF SILENCE ON THE THRESHOLD OF POTENTIALITIES***

Coetzee's fourth novel, *Life and Times of Michael K*, continues problematizing the quandary of giving voice to the Other. As the title suggests, the novel presents us with the story of Michael K, who has an original and naive consciousness that marks a new point in the representations of the silenced other in Coetzee's fiction by focusing on K's distinct mind that remains unaffected by the norms of modernity.

Michael K, the harelippped son of a cleaning woman in Cape Town, works as a gardener in the Parks and Gardens department of Cape Town after growing up in a children's home. The novel opens in K's thirty-first year as Cape Town is in the midst of a civil war and K's mother suffers from serious health problems. In an attempt to escape the turmoil of the war, K undertakes a journey from Cape Town to the Karoo farm where his mother allegedly spent her childhood. Although she dies on the road, K continues his journey and brings her cremated ashes to the farm and begins planting seeds and working as a gardener in complete isolation at this abandoned farm. After suffering from hunger and exhaustion, he is eventually found and transferred to a labor camp. After a few weeks, he escapes and returns to the farm and takes up gardening again. He digs a burrow in the earth to hide but he is found again by a group of soldiers, who sends him to a rehabilitation camp. He



escapes again and finally returns to where he lives with his mother before they embarked on their journey.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Foe*, the Other remains completely unknown as the narrative cannot penetrate the consciousness of the barbarian girl or Friday. *Michael K*, on the other hand, positions the Other as subject through a more direct representation of its consciousness. The narrative reveals who K is to a certain extent by reflecting his thoughts and emotions.

Set in an undetermined future during which South Africa is ravaged by civil war, *Michael K* also differs from *Waiting for the Barbarians* in that the latter is indefinite both temporally and spatially. Furthermore, while *Waiting for the Barbarians* revolves around a protagonist who comes to realize his position of power and privileges in the context of an oppressive empire and endeavors to escape this position, *Michael K* focuses on a protagonist situated on the other side of the oppressive/oppressed relation. However, Coetzee's portrayal of the power relations in the novel is not based on the formula of resisting against power that is typically resorted to in postcolonial discourse. As Geoffrey Harpham argues, a typical politics of resistance develops a conception of "ethics that names the obligation to empower the hitherto deprivileged, silenced, or colonized other" (1). Coetzee; however, chooses to form a politics of elusion parallel to the elusive identity of Michael K rather than engaging in a typical power struggle undertaken by the silenced other. In so doing, Coetzee nevertheless employs certain concepts elaborated by poststructuralist theory, particularly by creating gaps and absences in the narrative and the protagonist's mind.



Unlike the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* who speaks in the first person and in present tense narrative, K's thought-processes are portrayed in *Michael K* by means of a narrative style that employs past tense in its primary narrative (although it is set in an unknown future) and avoids first person except for Part II, when the medical officer takes over the narrative voice. The novel makes use of free indirect discourse, a technique that conveys the individual's inner world while remaining in the third person. The narrator in Part I and Part III is seemingly omniscient, but actually distancing since thought-processes of K are not mimicked. Instead, phrases like "He thought" are often used in a way that distances the reader from K's mind, such as: "He thought of himself not as something heavy that left tracks behind it, but if anything as a speck upon the surface of an earth too deeply asleep to notice the scratch of ant-feet, the rasp of butterfly teeth, the tumbling of dust" (*Michael K* 97).

Wavering between the third-person narrative voice and the inner consciousness of the character, such phrases make it ambiguous whom the sentences belong to. This peculiar technique employed by Coetzee allows only a limited access to K's thoughts and emotions, which certainly accentuates K's elusiveness and makes it for the reader hardly possible to identify with K.

Similarly, K's very presence constitutes a puzzle in the narrative since his identity seems to be impermeable, which is partly due to the narrative style described above. At one point, the narrator observes: "Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which



his understanding balked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained” (*Michael K* 110).

The identities attributed to K constantly change throughout the novel. He is defined as a son, an idiot, a prisoner, a child, a runaway, a gardener. In the medical officer’s account of K that constitutes the Part II of the novel, he calls K a “stone,” “pebble,” “parasite,” and “insect.” Nevertheless, K manages to escape all these identities applied to him just as he escapes all the camps he is committed to. Accordingly, Leon de Kock argues: “Michael K, a South African Houdini, seems to be an escape artist from meaning . . . The terms of meaning, the interpretation, are put upon Michael, just as the camps enclose him, yet he slips away every time an attempt is made to pin him down” (45).

As de Kock indicates, there is an element of escapism in K’s quest for staying outside of temporality and historical reality. In a vast empty land, he imagines himself living in a state of nothingness for the rest of his life: “Sometimes the only sound he could hear was that of his trousers whipping together. From horizon to horizon the landscape was empty . . . I could live here forever, he thought, or till I die. Nothing would happen, everyday would be the same as the day before, there would be nothing to say” (*Michael K* 46). Also, after fleeing from the Visagie farm to the mountains, K again experiences a similar state. “Now, in front of his cave, he sometimes locked his fingers behind his head, closed his eyes, and emptied his mind, wanting nothing, looking forward to nothing” (*Michael K* 69).

In such moments of the novel, Michael K can fulfill his escapist desires and embraces isolation amid the chaos and troubled political conditions surrounding



him. In the face of the oppression of the institutions, his consciousness turns to silence and isolation for expression. After physically escaping from bureaucracies and institutions, he starts to ascribe a material quality to silence and establishes his own notion of temporality that is different from the historical time. During his first stay on the Visagie farm, K imagines that he is finally living “in a pocket outside time. Cape Town and the war slipped further and further into forgetfulness” (*Michael K* 60). During his second stay, K sees himself “living beyond the reach of calendar and clock in a blessedly neglected corner” (*Michael K* 116).

In his isolation, K transforms silence into an absolute, material being. In complete silence out in the open land, K buries himself into a mental absence. For instance, on his way to Prince Albert, “he climbed a hill and lay on his back listening to the silence, feeling the warmth of the sun soak into his bones” (*Michael K* 46). In a cave he took shelter while hiding on the mountain, “instead of listening to the crying of his body he tried to listen to the great silence about him” (*Michael K* 66), and while a group of rebels camp at his dam, K thinks: “I am like a woman whose children have left the house . . . all that remains is to tidy up and listen to the silence” (*Michael K* 111). He ascribes a positive value to silence that does not bear any relation to the oppressive silence imposed on him in the children’s home, namely Huis Norenius:

He could understand that people should have retreated here and fenced themselves in with miles and miles of silence; he could understand that they should have wanted to bequeath the privilege of so much silence to their children and grandchildren in perpetuity



(though by what right he was not sure); he wondered whether there were not forgotten comers and angles and corridors between the fences, land that belonged to no one yet. (*Michael K* 47)

Accordingly, one of the main aspects creating gaps both in K's identity and the narrative is K's depiction as a figure of silence. This silence was imposed on K beginning from his childhood, but K transforms it as a means to evade the socio-historical conditions surrounding him. He learnt about silence in the children's home both as a rule and a form of punishment. In the novel, K recalls his memories of keeping silent at the dorm and the classroom: "The posture grew to lose its meaning as punishment and became an avenue of reverie; he remembered sitting, hands on head, through hot afternoons with doves cooing in the gum trees and the chant of the tables coming from other classrooms, struggling with a delicious drowsiness" (*Michael K* 68-9).

K's silence has various explanations. His harelip distorts his speech, which marginalizes him even more. He is reticent in his encounters with others, which leads people around him, even the reader to a certain extent, to assume that he is simple-minded. He has been silenced as from his childhood. When he is young, his mother takes him to work with her: "Year after year Michael K sat on a blanket watching his mother polish other people's floors, learning to be quiet" (*Michael K* 3-4). Also, the first rule at the dormitory of the Huis Norenus was "there will be silence in dormitories at all times" (*Michael K* 105). At the Huis Norenus, he learns to sit with his "lips pressed tightly together" (*Michael K* 68).



K's reticence in the novel does not only stem from his feeling of shame or intimidation around other people. His silence denotes his peculiar state of being. For many times in the novel, K's behaviors are likened to an animal. Through the end of the novel, even K likens himself to a mole: "I am more like an earthworm, he thought. Which is also a kind of gardener. Or a mole, also a gardener, that does not tell stories because it lives in silence" (*Michael K* 182). Also, while he was at the farm in Karoo, K thinks: "What a pity that to live in times like these a man must be ready to live like a beast" (*Michael K* 99). K hints that the times force people, including himself, into an inarticulate bestiality positioned between human and nonhuman which evokes the *Muselmann* figure Primo Levi describes in his testimonies. Therefore, it can be asserted that K's silence also bears witness to the systematic violence of the structures in the novel.

This idea shows parallelism with Susan VanZanten Gallagher's contention that Coetzee portrays the institutional violence in *Michael K*. Gallagher argues that the novel depicts "the war of the bureaucracy against the individual" (146) and focuses on structural injustice. The sulky face of bureaucracy is visible throughout the novel as the authoritarian institutions are clearly portrayed, particularly in K's attempt to leave Cape Town legally. After applying for a permit to leave the town by running in a Kafkaesque bureaucratic maze, K and his mother cannot receive an answer for a time that seems endless to them. In one of K's attempts to ask about his permit, the policewoman at the desk simply refuses to talk to him after he waits in line for a long time. He eventually determines to leave, telling her mother that



they are “wasting their time waiting” (*Michael K* 18). Also, most of K’s interlocutors are identified by their social roles instead of proper names.

K’s struggle with the institutions is reminiscent of a literary precedent, namely Kafka’s *The Trial*. Many critics have noted that the initial K alludes to Kafka’s Josef K. As Attwell points out: “There are obvious links between the state of civil anomie through which South Africa is passing in *Michael K* and the nightmarish world of *The Trial* and *The Castle*” (*South Africa and the Politics of Writing* 101). Like Michael K, the third person narrator of *The Trial* depicts Josef K’s life at the mercy of legal institutions, which eventually led to his death for an unspecified crime. However, the tone of *Michael K*’s narrator differs substantially from the narrator in *The Trial*. The narrative voice in Kafka’s novel adopts a detached and disinterested point of view mimicking the institutional forces in the novel. The narrator of *Michael K*, on the other hand, has a more sympathetic tone since it portrays the thought-processes of Michael K and reveals that he is not as simple-minded as his interlocutors assume since he displays craftiness and persistence especially in his efforts to be a dutiful son and a gardener. In this sense, it can be argued that Coetzee alludes to society’s underlying power dynamics in *Michael K* by depicting the times during which “individual identity is far less important than one’s social role and place in the power structure” (Gallagher 147).

Despite the novel’s allusion to the structural injustices, many of the initial responses to *Michael K* stressed that the novel does not pay homage to the resistance of the oppressed and fails to offer a clear picture of colonialism or apartheid. Most of these readings are symbolic ones that draw parallelisms between the novel and



the political conditions of South Africa during the time when the novel was written. Among all, in her 1984 review of the novel entitled “The Idea of Gardening”, which was first published in the *New York Review of Books*, Nadine Gordimer regards K as historically implausible. Although Gordimer acknowledges the novel’s ability to represent some dilemmas of the political atmosphere in South Africa by writing that Coetzee “won (or lost?) his inner struggle and now writes, from among the smell of weary flesh, a work of the closest and deepest engagement with the victimized people of Michael K’s life and times” (141), she complains that he does not go into the details of the political struggle and fails to offer a solution since K remains unable to take sides in the fight, contending that the novel “denies the energy of the will to resist evil” (142) and develops “a revulsion against all political and revolutionary solutions” (143). She argues that *Michael K* “does not recognize what the victims, seeing themselves as victims no longer, have done, are doing, and believe they must do for themselves” (143). Gordimer approaches the novel through a prescriptive lens that is reminiscent of Georg Lukacs’s critical writings on modernist literature. Echoing Lukacs, she seemingly strives to answer the question what literature should be in her review. To that end, Gordimer even cites Lukacs to corroborate her argument although it is obvious that Coetzee’s approach to textuality and literature does barely have anything in common with Lukacs or the Marxist aesthetic Lukacs employs:

Coetzee . . . does not believe in the possibility of blacks establishing a new regime that will do much better. [...] The organicism that Georg Lukacs defines as the integral relation between private and



social destiny is distorted here more than is allowed for by the subjectivity that is in every writer. The exclusion is a central one that may eat out the heart of the work's unity of art and life. (143)

Gordimer's analysis highly depends on the realities of the apartheid regime in South Africa, pointing to two conflicting poles in society: the oppressed black and the oppressor white. In her review, she misses the subtlety of Coetzee's novel and his concerns about agency. Problematizing the oppression inherent in writing during the times of crisis and the impossibility of overcoming it, Coetzee echoes Adorno's idea of "the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz" in many of his novels, including *Michael K*. Given the quandaries Coetzee addresses in his body of work, his belief or lack of belief in "the possibility of blacks establishing a new regime" is not the most applicable parameter to evaluate the success of his writing. As his protagonists speak for the unreliability of their speaking positions, it is more relevant to ask whether Coetzee believes in the possibility of representing apartheid regime or colonialism in literary texts, and this very question forms the aporia lying in the center of Coetzee's oeuvre.

With regard to Gordimer's criticism, another question that seems relevant to the plot arises: What is K's race? As the context in which the novel is written is considered, it draws the attention that the issue of race is absent from the novel. This might be a stylistic choice since free indirect discourse employed in the narrative mainly reflects K's thoughts and emotions although to a limited extent, and the question of race is seemingly irrelevant to K since he does not seem to think of himself in terms of his color, although the reader can infer his race in



consideration of his position in society. So, while Gordimer defines K as a victim, it does not seem that K defines himself as one. K's race is incidentally mentioned only once, as "CM" (Colored Male) on a charge sheet (*Michael K* 70), but this identification does not necessarily have to be true and its accuracy does not seem to matter since it is merely an official perception on K. As I intend to explore below, Part II of the novel where the Medical Officer takes over the narrative voice casts doubt on the reliability of the official account of K.

Michael Valdez Moses addresses Gordimer's charge of political irresponsibility in his study that strives to draw parallelism with *Michael K* and Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*. Moses points that the narrative of the novel as a whole depicts "the ultimate power of the political world" and how "its very oppressiveness may provoke a quest for an alternative realm of radical freedom and autonomous solitude" (153). He argues:

Like Rousseau, Coetzee is interested in exploring a territory free of political and social commitments in which a truly radical form of freedom is possible. Such a freedom is incompatible not only with apartheid, but also with a liberal democratic or socialist regime. For Gordimer to find in Michael K an unheroic and politically irresponsible character is both perfectly correct and also beside the point, since what is at issue is the unsatisfactory character of social life in general. (140-1)

In an interview he gave to David Attwell, Coetzee himself responds to Gordimer's criticism by remarking: "One writes the books one wants to write. One



doesn't write the books one doesn't want to write. The emphasis falls not on *one* but on the word *want* in all its own resistance to being known" (*Doubling the Point* 207). Coetzee also argues that *Michael K* is "about a time when it is too late for politics" (qtd. in *South Africa and the Politics of Writing* 89), hinting that that the state of war and chaos cannot solely be viewed within the boundaries of politics, but is subject to a general ethical consideration. So, the primary concern of *Michael K* is, in Coetzee's words, the "bigger game" (qtd. in Hewson 63) beyond politics.

K is unable to tell his story neither in the narrative nor in his encounters with others while his interlocutors tell many stories. Her mother narrates her childhood in the Visagie farm; Robert, a fellow intern at Jakkalsdrif who tries to educate K in political matters, tells about his life and family. The guerillas he encounters at the farm narrate many stories about their adventures. Michael envies the stories he heard from the guerillas and thinks:

The stories they tell will be different from the stories I heard in the camp, because the camp was for those left behind . . . people who have nothing to tell but stories of how they have endured. Whereas these young men have had adventures, victories and defeats and escapes. They will have stories to tell long after the war is over, stories for a lifetime, stories for their grandchildren to listen to open-mouthed. (*Michael K* 109)

Among all the people K encounters throughout the novel, the medical officer who tries to cure K's malnutrition in the hospital stands out as the most effusive talker who also encourages K to tell his story. Becoming obsessed with K's



silence, the officer insists: “Give yourself some substance, man, otherwise you are going to slide through life absolutely unnoticed . . . Well then, *talk*, make your voice heard, tell your story!” (*Michael K* 140).

As stated above, the medical officer, an effusive talker obsessed with Michael’s silence, takes over the narrative voice in the Part II of the novel. The medical officer’s account of K in first-person monologue echoes the Magistrate’s narrative in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Like the Magistrate’s narrative, his account is highly self-reflexive and therefore fails to give a coherent meaning to the silence of the Other. The discrepancies between the medical officer’s first-person narrative and the third person narratives in Part I and Part III demonstrate the officer’s failure in depicting K accurately. Like the Magistrate, the officer is well-meaning and sincere in his desire to get to know K. But due to his assumptions about K, he does not really listen to K although he is obsessed with hearing his story. He even gets K’s first name wrong, as Michaels, although K corrects him. He desires to speak to K as a friend, yet he patronizingly thinks of himself as K’s only savior: “Listen to me, Michaels. I am the only one who can save you. I am the only one who sees you for the original soul you are. I am the only one who cares for you” (*Michael K* 151).

The official account of Michael K in Part II is incorrect in almost every aspect, including his name. The medical officer’s superior, Major Noel van Rensburg, remarks: “Michaels is an arsonist. He is also an escapee from a labour camp. He was running a flourishing garden on an abandoned farm and feeding the local guerrilla population when he was captured. That is the story of Michaels” (*Michael K* 131). Noel tries to convince the medical officer to release K, but the



officer insists that his health will not allow it. Despite his benevolence, the medical officer's objection to Noel is also assuming: "Michaels is an idiot. . . [who] doesn't know how to strike a match" (*Michael K* 131), he is "otherworldly" (*Michael K* 142).

At the beginning, the medical officer is impatient with K. When he and his superior Noel interrogate K about the insurgents in Prince Albert and get no answers from him, he threatens: "Time is running out" (*Michael K* 138), although how time can run out is incomprehensible to Michael since he develops a different understanding of temporality from the historical time of modernity. The officer continues: "The silence lengthened. Noel did not speak, passing the whole burden to me. 'Come on, Michaels,' I said, 'we haven't got all day, there is a war on!'" (*Michael K* 138). K responds: "I am not in the war" (*Michael K* 138), frustrating the officer and Noel. Then, after a few words that do not form any kind of story, K falls completely silent: "There was a silence so dense that I heard it as a ringing in my ears, a silence of the kind one experiences in mine shafts, cellars, bomb shelters, airless places" (*Michael K* 140), the medical officer observes. Annoyed and perplexed by K's silence, they end the interrogation without being able to give a meaning to K's silence.

After K escapes from the hospital, the medical officer creates a final story for him. Regarding him as a mysterious figure of transcendence who lives outside history, he infers: "Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory . . . of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it" (*Michael K* 166). Michael, on the other hand, finds



the officer's insistence debasing. He thinks: "Everywhere I go, they want me to open my heart and tell them the story of a life lived in cages. They want to hear about all the cages I have lived in, as if I were a budgie or a white mouse or a monkey" (*Michael K* 181).

Despite his limited understanding of K, the medical officer is not completely wrong. He recognizes the inaccuracy of the official account of K and his position as a misfit in the system, but he jumps at crudely reductive conclusions on him. He first thinks of K as a stone (*Michael K* 135), ascribing a passivity to K's identity and dehumanizing him. Later, he likens K to a stick insect (*Michael K* 149), emphasizing his deformities and continuing to distance him from a human context. And finally, after his escape, he thinks of K as an ethereal, transcendent figure, again dehumanizing him through a different lens.

By including the medical officer's narrative in the novel, Coetzee ostensibly intends more than providing an outside account of K since various outside accounts of K are already provided in the novel through the reactions of his interlocutors and the omniscient yet distancing narrative voice in Part I and Part III. It seems that Coetzee aims to demonstrate the futility of speaking on behalf of the Other by means of the limited and faulty interpretation of the medical officer, who is a benevolent colonial representative suffering from a bad conscience, which clearly echoes the Magistrate in the *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

As Coetzee is known to deal with textuality and its relation to authority in his novels, it is safe to argue that the medical officer in *Michael K* serves as another Coetzean figure of the writer that assumes authority. In this respect, the Part II



makes it possible to ask who has the right to speak for whom, and what are the constraints of such speaking. In so doing, Coetzee explores the violence and appropriation implicit in the will to narrate the Other.

Nevertheless, the Part II of the novel has sparked a number of negative criticisms. Cynthia Ozick argues: “the doctor’s commentary is superfluous, he thickens the clear tongue of the novel by naming its ‘message’ and thumping out ironies. For one thing, he spells out what we have long ago taken in with the immediacy of intuition and possession” (qtd. in Gallagher 164). Also, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt says: “The problem here is that this meaning the doctor detect is evident without his pointing it out” (qtd. in Gallagher 164).

Offering a symbolic reading of the novel in *Countries of the Mind: The Fiction of J.M. Coetzee*, Penner reads *Michael K* as an adaptation of the literary tradition of the Plaasroman and the agrarian protest novel. He celebrates the novel for “revealing the awakening consciousness of a primitive mind” (94), adding that the novel is “an almost unqualified artistic success . . . an unforgettable portrait of war-torn South Africa and Michael’s evolving consciousness and sense of being” (111). Nevertheless, Penner is also among the ones finding the Part II disruptive. He suggests: “This segment is perhaps best viewed as an aesthetic choice which did not work as well as it might have, one which is a consequence of Coetzee’s feeling a necessity to include a point of view other than Michael K’s” (110). However, as I suggested, it can be asserted that Coetzee’s primary concern while adding the medical officer’s account is not merely to include another point of view. This part rather demonstrates what is at stake while speaking for the Other.



In her article entitled “Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J. M. Coetzee”, Benita Parry suggests that Coetzee’s novels “circumvent, or rather confirm, that quandary of white writing’s insecurity or dislocation in South Africa” (39), and Coetzee’s “narrative strategies both enact a critique of dominant discourses and preempt dialogue with non-canonical knowledges through representing these as ineffable” (52). Parry implicates that Coetzee fails in his efforts to subvert colonial discourse since the oppressed figures in his novels “are muted by those who have the power to name and depict them” (41). According to her, Coetzee’s failure stems from his reliance on the West as the culture of reference, which precludes non-canonical discourses and therefore does not speak for the South African oppressed. As Parry puts it: “My hypothesis about Coetzee’s figures of silence . . . is that although they are disentitled, and are therefore available to be read as manifesting subordination to, and retreat from, a subjugated condition, the potential critique of political oppression is diverted by the conjuring and endorsing of a non-verbal signifying system” (44).

As far as *Michael K* is concerned, Parry criticizes the frequent use of sentences beginning with “he thought,” and “he said,” since such phrases speak for the character. She argues:

[Michael K], who is written as a being without an identity, outside the writ where the Law of the Father runs, and as the exemplar of a mind turned inward. Spoken for in the narrative – his representation depends on “he thought,” “he found”, “he said” – Michael K is interpreted as being too busy with fantasy “to listen to the wheels of



history” (217); he is “a soul blessedly untouched by doctrine, untouched by history” (207) who lives in “a pocket outside time” (82), has access to a numinous condition when he “emptied his mind, wanting nothing, looking forward to nothing” (74), and attains an ineffable state of bliss on eating a pumpkin he had reared in a parodic act of parental nurturing. (46)

As can be seen, the examples Parry takes from the novel are either from the medical officer’s narrative or from the parts when K is in a mental absence caused by hunger. So, Parry’s argument is highly disputable since she did not say anything with regard to the parts reflecting K as a complex consciousness. Parry also did not seem to consider that the medical officer’s narrative in Part II and limited access to K’s mind in Part I and III might aim to demonstrate the authorial voice’s inability to speak for the Other. So, what Parry misses in her criticism is that Coetzee is concerned about the author’s inevitable failure in their implications of the colonial enterprise as the author is situated in the gap between the impossibility of writing and the impossibility of not writing, a postcolonial and post-Auschwitz paradox addressed in Adorno’s views on writing after Auschwitz.

Many critics tie K’s elusion and the medical officer’s reductive account of K to poststructuralist theory while some even regard the novel as a fictional allegorization of certain poststructuralist concepts. For instance, as for the medical officer’s narrative, David Attwell argues:

[The medical officer’s] interpretation of K is quite correct; indeed, it is the novel’s most direct statement of what K represents . . . It is



not the interpretation itself that ultimately matters, however; what is presented here is the capacity of the novel to “get behind” itself and displace the power of interpretation in such a way that K is left uncontained at the point of closure. This is how one might speak of K as the narratological figure of the Derridean trace. Coetzee’s metafictional frame produces the deconstructive gesture of erasure. K’s “essence” is allowed to slip back into the open-endedness of textuality from which it comes and to which it returns. (*South Africa and the Politics of Writing* 99)

According to Attwell, “K could be the element within textualization that is beyond calculation or control, that continually eludes textualization” (*Doubling the Point* 204). He also notes that K’s elusion denotes Coetzee’s engagement with the politically charged South African context:

In a frenzied culture such as South Africa’s . . . every sign, no matter how innocent, becomes a signifier at another level, pointing to the larger conflict. Within such a context there is no such thing as an irreducible element. This is the context that makes the phenomenon of K – to use the Medical Officer’s terminology – “scandalous” and “outrageous.” K is not a representative figure who models certain forms of behavior or capacities for change; rather, he is an idea floated into a discursive environment that is unprepared to receive it. (*South Africa and the Politics of Writing* 100)



Developing a politics of elusion based on poststructuralist concepts, Attwell reads the holes and absences in K's story in terms of South Africa's discursive environment unlike Gordimer and the others who contend that the novel is historically implausible in view of the South African context.

### **Out of All Camps**

Within the narrative, camps provide a background to various stages of K's life. Thus, K thinks:

There is nothing to be ashamed of in being simple. They were locking up simpletons before they locked up anyone else. Now they have camps for children whose parents run away, camps for people who kick and foam at the mouth, camps for people with big heads and people with little heads, camps for people with no visible means of support, camps for people chased off the land, camps for people they find living in storm-water drains, camps for street girls, camps for people who can't add two and two, camps for people who forget their papers at home, camps for people who live in the mountains and blow up bridges in the night. (*Michael K* 182)

Noting the importance of the camps in the novel. Dominic Head reads the passage quoted above in terms of Foucault's notion of disciplinary power, arguing that "the Jakkalsdrif labour camp is obviously Foucauldian, an antinomadic device to harness the unity of a homeless multiplicity" (103). Head underscores that all the institutions K has been through his life, such as the hospitals and the children's home, are also associated with the camps that evidently aim to produce docile



bodies. According to this Foucauldian view, K can be read as a biopolitical body as his status as a subject before the law is considered.

Exploring the notion of biopolitics that was initially introduced by Foucault, Agamben questions the status of the biopolitical body before the law by claiming that sovereign power functions to produce the biopolitical body. Departing from the Aristotelian distinction between *bios*, which indicates “the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (*Homo Sacer* 1), and *zoe*, “which expresses the mere fact of living common to all living beings” (*Homo Sacer* 1), Agamben argues that Western politics has excluded natural life from the political sphere. But according to his formulation, this exclusion is not a simple elimination of natural life from the political sphere; instead, it includes biological life in politics through excluding it with a process called “inclusive exclusion”.

Deriving from Carl Schmitt’s definition of the sovereign as the one who decides on the state of exception and Walter Benjamin’s view that the state of emergency in which we live has become the norm, Agamben argues that the inclusive exclusion of natural life has become the rule in contemporary politics, stating that:

[T]ogether with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life ... gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoe*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction . . . modern democracy presents itself from the beginning as a vindication and liberation of *zoe* . . . and is



constantly trying to transform its own bare life into a way of life and to find, so to speak, the *bios* of *zoe*. (*Homo Sacer* 9)

According to this, bare life, which “remains included in politics in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion” (*Homo Sacer* 11), is not *zoe* as opposed to *bios*, but a politicized form of natural life exposed to sovereign power.

*Michael K* can be read in the context of Agamben’s conception of bare life, a being abandoned through camps and marginalization as part of inclusive exclusion. The camps and other institutions K is sent in the novel appear as the spaces of inclusive exclusion within the context of the civil war and martial law that form the setting of the story. Abandoned by the law but exposed to the sovereign at the same time, Michael K stands as a figure of bare life. Despite that, K challenges the idea of bare life by creating spaces for living within the ban of the law. The times he spends on the mountain and in the burrow he digs as part of his desire to find a space that is outside the war and history in which there is “time enough for everything” (*Michael K* 183) portray the possibility of escaping the force of the law. K thinks: “Perhaps the truth is that it is enough to be out of the camps, out of all the camps at the same time. Perhaps that is enough of an achievement, for the time being. How many people are there left who are neither locked up nor standing guard at the gate?” (*Michael K* 182). As he escapes from all the institutions of modern politics and evades all the definitions and boundaries throughout the novel, it would be more accurate to say that he is not subjected to inclusive exclusion in the Agambenian sense. Although K neither takes sides in the police-guerilla war nor



reaches a political consciousness, which is one of the main aspects criticized in the novel, his elusiveness is still politically charged in the more general framework of modernity and gives rise to hope as he quests for a possibility of survival in-between natural and political.

### **Kafka Effect**

As argued above, it is possible to find considerable similarities between *Michael K* and Kafka's *The Trial* in many respects. Many critics of Coetzee has frequently compared Coetzee with Kafka for various reasons. It is hard to deny that Kafka has a remarkable effect on Coetzee's writing. Coetzee also admits Kafka's influence on him by stating in an interview: "[I] have been reading Kafka since I was an adolescent . . . in German; so it would be even more foolish for me to deny that Kafka has left his traces on me" (Sévry 5).

Among Coetzee's novels, *Michael K* is perhaps the leading one inviting intertextual readings in relation to Kafka. Besides the initial K, the peculiar relation of K to food that has motifs of "hunger artist", and the Kafkaesque bureaucratic structures K encounters, Coetzee's nod to Kafka in *Michael K* is even more specific at the end of the first farm scene when K digs a burrow with "the business of making a dwelling" (*Michael K* 99). K's process of building the burrow is detailed in a way reminiscent of Kafka's story "The Burrow". In Kafka's story, the burrower, who is supposedly an animal, strives to hide from an imagined enemy by manifesting paranoid traits: "I must have a way of leaving at a moment's notice, for, despite all my vigilance, may I not be attacked from some quite unexpected quarter? I live in peace in the inmost chamber of my house, and meanwhile the enemy may be



burrowing his way slowly and stealthily straight toward me” (“The Burrow” 325-6). Like Kafka’s burrower, Michael K anxiously learns in his burrow to “rest by day and stay up at night to protect his land” (*Michael K* 103) and always anticipates a voice “coming from all sides” (*Michael K* 69), staying alert against an unknown enemy. As Kafka’s burrower passes his time choosing between “dozing and unconscious sleep” (“The Burrow” 327), K spends most of his time in his cave in a mental absence close to hibernation.

The narrative temporality in “The Burrow” is the primary aspect reflecting the character’s paranoia. The story begins at the moment when the animal has dug the burrow, with a transition from the perfect tense to the present tense: “I have completed the construction of my burrow and it seems to be great successful” (“The Burrow” 325). After this sentence, the narrator changes into the iterative present tense and goes on to depict the measures s/he takes to protect the burrow against enemies.

Accordingly, Coetzee wrote a linguistic study titled “Time, Tense and Aspect in Kafka’s ‘The Burrow’” in 1981, two years before *Michael K* was published. In this study, Coetzee examines the use of the iterative present in “The Burrow”. Pointing out that separating the time of the events from the time of narration is syntactically impossible, he argues regarding Kafka’s concern with a breakdown in the experience of time:

By its nature narrative must create an altered experience of time.

That experience can be heady for both writer and reader. For the reader, the experience of time bunching and becoming dense at



points of significant action in the story, or thinning out and skipping or glancing through nonsignificant periods of clock time or calendar time, can be exhilarating – in fact, it may be at the heart of narrative pleasure. As for writing and the experience of writing, there is a definite thrill of mastery – perhaps even omnipotence – that comes with making time bend and buckle, and generally with being present when signification, or the will to signification, takes control over time. (*Doubling the Point*, 203-4)

The thinning out of narrative time in *Michael K* occurs when K spends much of his time sleeping or dozing when the seeds he planted are growing. The third-person narrative voice continues the story when K is in a mental absence. Contrarily, the narrative time becomes dense when troops eventually find K in the farm and ruin the land. For Coetzee, the narrative creates its own category of time by taking the place of chronological time. This argument is parallel to my abovementioned suggestion that K establishes his own conception of temporality that is separate from the historical time. The contrast between historical temporality and narrative temporality is apparent in *Michael K*. As an alternative to historical time, K experiences a conception of time that seems like an endless present. After escaping camps, thus historical time, he celebrates the first time he spends alone away from society: “Since time was poured out upon him in such an unending stream, there were whole mornings he could spend lying on his belly over an ant-nest picking out the larvae one by one with a grass-stalk and putting them in his mouth” (*Michael K* 102). And, at one point, the third-person narrator reflects:



But most of all . . . he was learning to love idleness . . . as a yielding up of himself to time, to a time flowing slowly like oil from horizon to horizon over the face of the world . . . all that was moving was time, bearing him onward in its flow. Once or twice the other time in which the war had its existence reminded itself to him as the jet fighters whistled high overhead. But for the rest he was living beyond the reach of calendar and clock in a blessedly neglected comer, half awake, half asleep. Like a parasite dozing in the gut, he thought; like a lizard under a stone. (*Michael K* 115-6)

As stated above, the third-person narrator carries on telling the story during most of Part I while K is in a mental absence and the medical officer takes over the narrative voice in Part II. In Part III; nevertheless, the third-person narrator restores K's voice to him, and K ends up reaching self-knowledge through inner speech and fills the holes in his story. For instance, when rebels camp at the dam, K considers joining them, but then decides against it so as to continue tending his garden. The narrative reports his reasoning: "he even knew the reason why: because enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children. That was why" (*Michael K* 109). K finally reflects on the truth about himself while lying on a cardboard in his mother's abandoned apartment in Cape Town, the place where the novel starts: "The truth is that I have been a



gardener” (*Michael K* 181), “I was mute and stupid in the beginning, I will be mute and stupid in the end” (*Michael K* 182).

Finally arriving at the place where he starts, K brings the story to an end by imagining himself returning to the farm in the company of a fictive companion:

He, Michael K, would produce a teaspoon from his pocket, a teaspoon and a long roll of string. He would clear the rubble from the mouth of the shaft, he would bend the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and tie the string to it, he would lower it down the shaft deep into the earth, and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live. (*Michael K* 250)

Although K is described with images of negativity such as silence and absence, it can still be argued, especially in consideration of this final reflection that has a hopeful tone, that Michael K is a life-affirming figure, an “escape artist” who presents us the possibility of living in the times of chaos by discovering a space between the natural and political. Evading all the definitions ascribed to him, he embodies a radical freedom restricted neither by the sovereign nor by the constraints of textuality. With K’s eloquent silence and the medical officer’s account of K, Coetzee manifests in a heavily politicized atmosphere the obscenity of representing the suffering of those who cannot speak.



### CHAPTER III

#### ***FOE: THE UNTOLD STORY OF FRIDAY***

*Foe*, J. M. Coetzee's fifth novel, is similar to his previous novels with its problematization of textuality and the role of fiction in historic and political discourse. Just as *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *the Life and Times of Michael K.*, *Foe* is engaged with the question of how the colonized other is silenced through discursive mechanisms, including language. Reminiscent of the barbarian girl and Michael K in these novels, *Foe* has a mute character, namely Friday, whose silence constitutes a gap in the heart of the narrative. However, in *Foe*, Coetzee scrutinizes the authority of textualization in a more explicit way than his previous novels. With its overt allusions and intertextual aspects, it can be regarded as a subversive rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, one of the founding novels of the colonial discourse and the myths of the civilizing mission.

In the corpus of studies on Coetzee, *Foe* is frequently read as a post-colonial and feminist allegory. Through his successfully mastered narrative strategies, *Foe* can be said to have an allegorical engagement with history. Besides, with its auto-referential aspects, *Foe* hints that language lies behind every sovereign political and historical discourse and encompasses the ways in which a text can convey the unreliability of signification. According to the semiotic approach suggesting that all literature is allegorical, this constitutes "a network of deferments of meaning, of all allusions to (and substitutions for) an unattainable referent" (Head 21). Aside



from revealing various mechanisms of power relations by referring to racial, sexual and textual power relations, *Foe* also alludes to the gaps between what is represented and the forms of representation. Through the gaps formed in the representation of mute Friday throughout the narrative, the literary text's possibility of representing history is problematized.

Coetzee's novel delves into the issues of representation, author/authority, power relations, and silence/speech and oppressor/oppressed relations. It also acquires a new dimension in that it is narrated by a female voice, who gradually gains control over the male voice throughout the novel.

*Foe* can be described as a postcolonial and/or postmodern rewriting of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. It can also be considered a text where postmodern and postcolonial elements intermingle. Marni Gauthier argues with regard to postmodernism and postcolonialism that "[T]he pith of the intersection of the postmodern and the postcolonial is their mutual concern with historiography, or the investigation of how events and people are represented, and who does the representing." (55) The questions pertinent to representation and history comprise the primary concerns of *Foe*.

Unlike *Robinson Crusoe*, *Foe* has a female perspective on its focus, narrated by Susan Barton, the female castaway on Cruso's (Coetzee omits the "e") island, except the final chapter where an ambiguous and unidentified first-person narrator intervenes. Coetzee's novel does not tell the story of Cruso but of Susan Barton and partly Friday, the African slave on the island. Throughout the novel, the reader bears witness to Susan's landing on the island, their rescue and then their life in England



through the narrative of Barton. Susan's narrative surely adds a feminist dimension to *Foe* while the presence of Friday adds a postcolonial dimension. The changing narrative styles throughout the novel constitute a tension between these two marginalized characters in that who seizes control over the narrative. The novel reveals the impossibility of representation of the oppressed by the oppressor. The presence of a female narrator as both the oppressor and the narrator has a dual characteristic at that point. Susan Barton finds a chance to speak up on behalf of herself and Friday, both of whom are marginalized through different mechanisms.

Returning from Bahia, where she has been searching for a lost daughter, Susan Barton is put off the ship after a mutiny with the dead body of the captain, whose mistress she was. She swims ashore and finds herself on the island with Crusoe and Friday. She finds out that Friday has been mutilated. But through the narrative the reader cannot learn when or how it happened. On the onset of their rescue from the island, Coetzee's Crusoe ironically dies on the ship on their way to England and the reader is only left with what Susan is to tell about their lives on the island. Since Friday is unable to tell his own experience due to his cutout tongue, Susan takes over the role of narrator for both of them as well as Crusoe. After arriving in England, she writes a memoir titled "The Female Castaway," and contacts Foe, a renowned author, to have her story told.

In the light of all the discussions and controversies around the place and role of Coetzee's work in the South African context, it is possible to assert that Coetzee's choice of *Robinson Crusoe* as a backbone for *Foe* can be considered a political choice. While Coetzee remarks that *Foe* is a tribute to eighteenth-century prose



style (*Doubling the Point* 146), the novel attracts attention to the place of this novel in literary history. Defoe is considered the father of the English novel, while *Robinson Crusoe* is accepted as one of the first novels and essential pieces of the established literary canon. The novel valorizes the individual as a separate entity, leading to the development of the figure of bourgeois resourcefulness. Also, the protagonist Crusoe's adventures depicted in the novel can be read as colonialist efforts on a basic level. In *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe highlights the power of the individual who is represented as someone who can master his life in the face of an unknown geography and unknown native.

In his work of journalism and science reporting entitled *The Storm*, Defoe valorizes the capacity of writing as "the greatest improvement of its Kind in the World", conveying its contents "for Ages to come, to the Eternity of mortal Time." (23). In *Robinson Crusoe*, writing plays a key role in Crusoe's colonization of the island. Language enters the realm of representation and forms the basis of modernity, and silence is disruptive in this context. However, with *Foe*, Coetzee draws the reader's attention to the implausibility of Crusoe narrated in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Unlike Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Cruso in Coetzee's version is not a dominant figure. The original Crusoe often pays visits to the wrecked ship to build tools and guns, collect food and so on. However, contrary to Crusoe we are familiar with in Defoe's novel, Coetzee's Cruso hardly exerts any effort to improve his quality of life on the island and keeps no journal, either. The sole activity Cruso seems to engage with is leveling the island's hill into terraces, which can be read as a parody of the colonial struggle to tame nature. In addition to that, Susan Barton



depicts him as someone who does not have a sense of distinction between truth and fiction. Barton writes about Cruso:

I would gladly now recount to you the history of this singular Cruso, as I heard it from his own lips. But the stories he told me were so various, and so hard to reconcile one with another, that I was more and more driven to conclude age and isolation had taken their toll on his memory, and he no longer knew for sure what was truth, what fancy. (*Foe* 11-2)

By representing Cruso's lethargy and reluctance to keep a journal, Coetzee reveals that writing is one of the most significant features of colonial discourse. Disrupting the colonial forces at play by subverting narrative focus in the novel, Coetzee also manifests silence as an absence which refuses the authority of text through the figure of Friday. Therefore, it is possible to argue that Friday's silence overshadowing the novel does not only act as a signifier of the tormenting processes the colonized or oppressed is subjected to, but also acts as a kind of power in subverting colonizing practices.

According to Dominic Head, the differences also reveal Coetzee's Cruso to be a postcolonial figure:

If Defoe's Crusoe is the archetypal colonialist, enamoured of the project of taming a new world, Cruso is emblematic of exhausted imperialism. Unlike his literary model, he makes no table or chair, no lamp or candle; he does not keep a journal, or build a boat. Neither



does he have any seed to sow; but he does occupy himself with building barren terraces ready for planting. (63)

In addition to Friday's muteness, Coetzee's *Foe* has some other forms of "absences" that are missing in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. These absences include the presence of a female perspective and a woman's presence on the island, Crusoe's lethargy, and the text of *Foe* itself, which somehow remains elusive and absent with its changing narrative forms and ambiguous final.

With regard to this discursive relation between writing and colonial discourse, or authorship and authority, it is important to seek answers for the questions "Who writes for whom?" and "Who writes whose history?". Attempting to answer this question, most of Coetzee's novels do display a self-reflexivity and self-consciousness that is expressed through narrative voice and techniques. In doing so, Coetzee addresses to the more general problems outside the text and problematizes even his own position as a white male writer in the South African context.

Allegorizing the problems of representation, Coetzee displays the distance between the story and the author's story by employing a different narrative technique in each part of the novel. *Foe* consists of four parts and according to Susan V. Gallagher, these four parts represent four different narrative modes that can be parallelized with the historical development of the novel (186). The first part is Susan Barton's story written directly by her to hand over to Foe. It has a first-person narrative that seems to speak to the reader. Each paragraph begins with a quotation mark, but paragraphs are not closed by quotation marks. She makes the



reader realize that she is aware of the fact that she has an audience listening to her: “I have told you how Crusoe was dressed; now let me tell you of his habitation” (*Foe* 9). Until she mentions the name “Mr. Foe”, the reader continues to assume herself as her audience. But the end of Part I reveals that she is speaking to Mr. Foe, “Do you think of me, Mr. Foe, as Mrs. Crusoe or as a bold adventuress?” (*Foe* 45). Unlike other paragraphs in this part, the last paragraph ends with a quotation mark, closing her story.

The second part is the record of Susan’s letters to the absent author while she and Friday moved to his house left empty when he fled from the bailiffs. Letters appear with dates on them through the first half of Part II. After the appearance of the girl named Susan Barton, who claims to be Susan’s daughter, letters do not have dates. At this point, another allusion is made to another novel by Defoe, namely *Roxana*, in which the female character’s name is also Susan. With the absence of dates on the letters, Susan starts to have concerns about her substantiality and lose control over the events, remaining unable to distinguish between fiction and reality. She feels that Mr. Foe invented the story of the daughter to silence her own version of events and exclude her from the focus of the narrative.

The third part contains the encounter of Susan with Foe and their disagreements in terms of defining the truth in Barton’s story. For the first time, Mr. Foe appears as a substantial being and their conversations on writing, representation and authority become visible to the reader not as a monologue but a dialogue. Susan’s self-confidence is much more evident than before in that she is often involved in debates on writing with Mr. Foe.



In Samuel Beckett's *Unnameable*, it is said that all art must inevitably end in failure. "In the silence you don't know, you must go on," ... "I can't go on, I will go on." (382). And *Foe* goes on and sinks into silence in the fourth and final part. A new and anonymous narrator is introduced in the final part. This narrator enters Foe's house and finds there the opening lines of Susan Barton's story across a pile of papers: "At last I could row no further..." Then the narrator dives into a shipwreck. Swimming among the dead bodies of Barton and Foe, the narrator eventually comes across Friday and attempts to open his mouth. But what comes out from Friday's mouth is only a breathless stream with no sound, which goes beyond the wreck and "runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth" (*Foe* 157).

Before going into the details of the final part, it would be useful to examine Susan's effort to establish her own voice over the narrative. After the death of Cruso, Susan finds an opportunity to speak up although the problem of Friday's silence remains unresolved throughout the text.

In her article entitled "'Women's Words': A Reading of J. M. Coetzee's Women Narrators" Sue Kossew argues that Susan's narrative represents the operation of power and authority, hinting that the woman is silenced by both history and fictions written by men. According to Kossew, "both Susan and Friday are colonized Others whose silence is filled by the male, patriarchal, colonizing voice of the author, in this case, Foe (Defoe), the enemy" (171).

As mentioned before, the first part is in the form of a memoir while the second part consists of letters written by Susan to Mr. Foe. This factor constantly



reminds the reader that the narrative is a representation of writing rather than directly reporting speeches. Although Susan's narrative has an aura of insubstantiality through the narrative modes chosen, Susan does still have the capacity to tell her story in contrast to Friday. While she encounters many problems and complexities in narrating her own story, she also endeavors to speak up for Friday, but this turns out as an impossible task throughout the novel. The story of how Friday becomes mute is the onset of the problems regarding his representation.

Gripping Friday by the hair, he brought his face close to mine. 'Do you see?' he said. 'It is too dark,' said I. 'La-la-la,' said Cruso. 'Ha-ha-ha' said Friday. I drew away, and Cruso released Friday's hair. 'He has no tongue,' he said. 'That is why he does not speak. They cut out his tongue.' 'I stared in amazement. Who cut out his tongue?' 'The slavers.' (Foe 22-3)

So, according to Cruso, Friday's tongue was cut out by slavers. But considering the implausibility of Cruso, even the reality of this gets highly dubious. So, Barton wonders whether Cruso himself mutilated Friday. Friday can neither talk nor learn the language and the presence of Friday problematizes Barton's process of narrating her story to Foe. With his muteness, Friday cannot be incorporated into the story. He remains silent, he engages in an incomprehensible ritual of scattering petals on the water at the site where Susan assumes he was shipwrecked. The difficulty underlies in that Friday is portrayed solely through Susan Barton's subjectivity through the novel, excluding the final part. However, he is still completely inaccessible to Susan. Susan says to Foe, "If the story seems stupid, that



is only because it so doggedly holds its silence. The shadow whose lack you feel is there: it is the loss of Friday's tongue" (*Foe* 117). The impossibility of hearing Friday's story from his mouth challenges Susan. She often expresses her wish to hear Friday's voice despite knowing its impossibility. The gap in Susan's narrative, caused by Friday's silence, is one of the causes of Susan's feeling of insubstantiality.

On the island I accepted that I should never learn how Friday lost his tongue, as I accepted that I should never learn how the apes crossed the sea. But what we accept in life we cannot accept in history. To tell my story and be silent on Friday's tongue is no better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly left empty. Yet the only tongue that can tell Friday's secret is the tongue he has lost! (*Foe* 67)

Richard Begam argues that Friday's inability to tell his story is the point where the postmodern and the postcolonial converge (119). For him, the true story of an African slave can only be heard through the writings of the white and the oppressed can only be represented through the oppressor. This renders the complete representation of Friday impossible.

As Susan sees that Crusoe does not show any attempt to keep any written record, she feels a need to write about the details of what they have gone through on the island. But she is firstly encouraged by someone else to write her story following their rescue. The Captain who saves them from the island encourages her to have the story published: "It is a story you should set down in writing and offer



to the booksellers,' he urged – 'There has never before, to my knowledge, been a female castaway of our nation.'" (Foe 40)

Susan Barton feels that until her story is written down, she will not find peace and lack substance as an individual. But she seeks help from Mr. Foe, a professional writer, to make her story told as part of a legitimated narrative since she is excluded from the domain of authorship by her gender and social status. Gallagher argues that Susan needs her story to be told so that she can gain the substance she lacks (175). "Return to me the substance I have lost, Mr. Foe: that is my entreaty. For though my story gives the truth, it does not give the substance of the truth (I see that clearly, we need not pretend it is otherwise)" (Foe 51).

Susan's anxiety about finding her reality, or "substance" in her own terms, becomes the center of her narrative. Since Cruso is deceased and Friday is mute, she finds no one who can bear witness to the events on the island and takes on the task of narrating the events with an aim to form her substance.

Susan's anxiety and confusion reaches to its climax when the girl claiming to be her daughter appears. Susan refused the girl as Foe's own invention. Her endeavor to find her reality and substance takes a different direction than what happens in *Roxana*; the relation between the mother and daughter yields no result and goes nowhere. The daughter also causes a dispute between Susan and Foe in terms of their different approaches to the narrative. Foe seeks to center his narrative on the story of Susan's lost daughter. According to the plot suggested by Foe, after Susan returns to England, the daughter sets out tracing her mother Susan and eventually finds her. However, Susan insists on the centrality of the island and



rejects to add the quest to the story. What matters at this dispute is not the truthful representation of the events but the struggle for control over the narrative and Susan's contention.

Susan also juxtaposes gender roles with several gestures through the novel. For instance, she explains to her so-called daughter that she actually has no mother, that she is "father-born" (*Foe* 91). When she and Foe couple, she calls him the Muse, both "goddess and begetter" (*Foe* 126) of her story, reversing gender roles. Also, Foe imagines himself as Susan's "old whore" and Susan also thinks that Foe turned into her "mistress" and her "wife" (*Foe* 152). She also talks about how the Muse is always a woman, so the task of writing is always allowed only to the men. She asks for a man-Muse, "I wished that there were such a being as a man-Muse, a youthful god who visited authoresses in the night and made their pens flow" (*Foe* 126).

Despite her disadvantaged position against Foe in the struggle to take over the narrative, Susan does not completely leave her story to the hands of Mr. Foe. At a certain point in the novel, she takes over the role of Mr. Foe as a writer.

I sat at your bureau this morning (it is afternoon now, I sit at the same bureau, I have sat here all day) and took out a clean sheet of paper and dipped pen in ink – your pen, your ink, I know, but somehow the pen becomes mine while I write with it, as though growing out of my hand – and wrote at the head: "The Female Castaway. Being a True Account of a Year Spent on a Desert Island. With Many Strange Circumstances Never Hitherto Related." [W]ill the day ever arrive



when we can make a story without strange circumstances? (*Foe* 66-7)

Through the end of the novel, Susan starts to lose her hope that the narrative would bring any redemption. She says:

In the beginning I thought I would tell you the story of the island, and, being done with that return to my former life. But now all my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left to me. I thought I was myself and this girl a creature from another order speaking words you made up for her. But now I am full of doubt. Nothing is left to me but doubt. I am doubt itself. Who is speaking me? (*Foe* 133).

Doubting her identity, Susan ceases to trust her storytelling capacities. And in the final part her narrative voice is completely supplanted in the presence of a new voice.

In *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories*, Teresa Dovey points out that feminist and postcolonial discourses intersect in *Foe*, arguing that Coetzee aspires to demonstrate that the prominent forms of Western feminism as part of the colonial discourse seek to incorporate the colonized subject to the advantage of their own, using the native Other as a convenient figure for feminine difference (356-66). Gayatri Spivak, meanwhile, argues in “Theory in the Margin” that Coetzee wants to demonstrate “the impossibility of restoring the history of empire and recovering the lost text of mothering in the same register of language” (10-1).



As the story unfolds in *Foe*, Friday gradually gains the power to overwhelm and supplant Susan's narrative and in the final part the new narrative voice represents his body as a self-referential and substantial being. For Attwell, when the final part is considered, *Foe* "is not a story with an end; furthermore, it is a story in which Friday will always remain the silent, subverting Other" (*South Africa and the Politics of Writing* 113).

The first section of the final part seemingly takes place within the time of the novel, while the second section takes place in our time. Wandering in the house of Daniel Defoe, the narrator discovers the bodies of Susan, Mr. Foe and Friday as well as the text written by Susan, which begins with "Dear Mr. Foe, At last I could row no further" (*Foe* 155). The narrator dives into the wreck, meeting Susan, the Captain and Friday. This attempt can be read as an emblem of Susan and Mr. Foe's desire giving voice to Friday. "... [W]ho will dive into the wreck? On the island I told Crusoe it should be Friday ... [B]ut if Friday cannot tell what he sees, is Friday in my story any more than a figuring (or prefiguring) of another diver?" (*Foe* 142). The new narrative voices seemingly search for the lacking voice in the story. But paradoxically, the narrator remarks that this symbolic wreck is not "a place for words but a place where bodies are their own signs" (*Foe* 157). Like the final part is also preoccupied with communicating Friday despite its impossibility.

His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends



of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face. (*Foe* 157)

At the end of this narrative, Friday's "voice" arrives to the outer ends of the earth. Brenda Marshall describes this as "a postmodern openness" (78). The narrator does not intervene in Friday's home but only observes it. So, the novel does not have a closure but presents the potentiality of representing silence.

The final part is undoubtedly the most ambiguous and elusive part of the novel, in which the silence as an absence is embodied in Friday's mouth and bodies come to be their own signs. The dreamlike atmosphere of the last part appears as a postmodern approach to the impossibility of Friday's speech. In displacing the voices of Barton and Foe, Coetzee dissolves all the previously established authorities and offers silence as a substance. As a substantial being, Friday enters the realm of both representation and resistance.

There is considerable body of arguments asserting that Friday's silence is a form of resistance to various forms of mastery. It is pointed out that the final part of the novel unravels the truth about Friday's world, which eludes all the dimensions of the sovereign discourse, including the novel that is invested in the literary canon. As Brian Macaskill and Jeanne Colleran argue:

Resisting all that threatens to steal his (and Friday's) text, Coetzee in the final section of the novel undermines, even as he participates within, a deconstructionist analytics of presence within textual representation. Confirming his characters as the discursive texts they have been all along —their "skin, dry as paper, is stretched tight over



their bones” (153) — Coetzee nevertheless insists on their substantial presence as corporeal signs in his text, “the home of Friday” (157). The anonymous speaker of this final section, the ‘I’ who on Coetzee’s behalf seeks entry into the silent house, gains access through ‘a hole’ in the sunken wreck; the reader gains access through the interstices between the four parts of the novel, those gaps between what has been represented and the structural means of its representation. This hole and these gaps, together with the figural representation of the mute Friday, ultimately constitute the unrepresentable presence of the text’s historical moment and suggest—again—one last resonance for the identity of the novel’s titular foe: silence. (454)

So, Friday's home is the body. His being, his existence is auto-referential, untouched by the history or colonial discourse just like Michael K. The narrative neutralizes itself in such a way in the final part that the question of authority/authorial power does not touch Friday. Annamaria Carusi explains this realm of neutralization where bodies are their own signs as follows: “Where a body has no possibility of splitting off into a representation... where there is no possibility...of grasping it within a subject-object relation, and therefore of signifying it by means of a signifying and signified unit...that body is totally outside of our intelligibility: it is for us, nothing other than the void of death” (142).

Friday’s silent presence, which constitutes a puzzle in the midst of the narrative throughout the novel, finally overwhelms the narrator at the end. As Ina



Gräbe points out, in paying more attention to the telling of the story than the story itself, the novel participates in postmodernism's favoring of the signifier over the signified by paying more attention to the telling of the story than the story itself. (147-8)

Regarding the final part, Attwell argues that an unnamed narrator appears whose addressee is not specified: "we are now in the realm of narration per se, and the addressee is simply the reader, the one who holds the book. This moment represents the last phase of the gradual process of 'getting behind' the voice of narration that is staged from beginning to end" (*South Africa and the Politics of Writing* 115).

This dreamlike atmosphere also creates the possibility of an abject identification with the other. Julia Kristeva describes abjection as the experience of being thrown out of oneself, a "descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct" which renders self and other "inseparable" (18). According to Kristeva, abjection is the reduction of the self to the body. Free of cultural codes, the abject body is auto-referential. "Significance is indeed inherent in the human body" Kristeva contends (10). For Kristeva, abjection is the communication of a non-verbal speech: "[a] sad analytic silence hover[s] above a strange foreign discourse, which strictly speaking shatters verbal communication . . . it is necessary that the analyst's interpretative speech . . . be affected by it in order to be analytical" (30).

Reminiscent of Kristeva's notion of abjection, Coetzee depicts the extra-historical and dreamlike shipwreck in the final part of *Foe* as "a place where bodies are their own signs" (*Foe* 155). Following the narrative's failure to give voice to



Friday, Friday's body reduces the narrative to silence. The release of this untold story that "runs northward and southward to the end of the earth" (*Foe* 157) hints at the [im]possibilities offered by literature. By abstaining from articulating the story of the "other" and only bearing witness to it from the limited perspective of the colonizer, Coetzee discloses to the reader the paradox of representing the unrepresentable in *Foe*.

According to Head, Friday's silence represents a duality. He states that this silence is both a product of the dominant discourse and a resistance to it. (121) Benita Parry remarks that Friday's silence is "an exemplary instance of a postcolonial writing where it is not an absence of or an incapacity of speech" (44). Due to the colonial discourse, Friday becomes mute. But this can also be read as an attempt to stay outside of the dominant discourse according to Parry's reading. So, in the narrative, Friday is a victim of the dominant discourse while simultaneously resisting to it by avoiding participating in it. Through his silence, Friday manages to remain outside of the white domain. Any attempt to tell Friday's story will be an act of appropriation and misrepresentation.

Derek Attridge, on the other hand, describes Friday's tonguelessness as an impenetrable silence; it is "the sign of his oppression by which he appears to his oppressors, and by which their dominance is sustained" (86). Throughout the narrative, Friday is only represented through the subjectivity of Susan. His silence enables Susan to have control over his existence.

Friday has no command of words and therefore no defense against  
being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others.



I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal; I say he is a laundryman and he becomes a laundryman. What is the truth of Friday? You will respond: he is neither cannibal nor laundryman, these are mere names ... [t]he silence of Friday is a helpless silence. He is the child of his silence, a child unborn, a child waiting to be born that cannot be born. (*Foe* 121-2)

Among all these different approaches, it must be emphasized that *Foe* differs from other postcolonial texts since it does not attempt to give voice to the colonized other but rather seeks to highlight the silencing of this other with a motivation to question the forces at work in colonial history and the dimensions of power constituting it. The mutilation of Friday does not occur in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*; however, it has figuratively occurred during the history of colonialism.

Coetzee does not directly confront the material history. He rather strives to question how it is possible to write a novel like *Robinson Crusoe*. In "Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse," Helen Tiffin touches upon this point by remarking that the novel is a writing back not only to the canonical Robinson Crusoe "but to the whole of the discursive field within which [Defoe's novel] operated and continues to operate in the post-colonial worlds" (23).

The complexity Friday constitutes in the narrative also stems from that he is completely unknown to the reader as his interior life is not depicted at all. This makes it difficult or nearly impossible for the reader to develop any kind of moral sympathy towards Friday. Despite all the unemphatic characterization of Friday in the novel, there is a crucial moment in the text which shows Friday more than a



passive object while he is involved in an obscure activity, which is open to interpretation and might hint at the presence of a hidden agency. Susan witnesses Friday floating near the shore on a log. She initially assumes he is fishing, but then sees him scattering petals on the surface of the water and thinks that Friday is “making an offering to the god of the waves . . . or performing some other such superstitious observance” (*Foe* 31). But later she remarks that Friday must have visited the site of the shipwreck “in memory of some person who perished in the wreck, perhaps a father or a mother or a sister or a brother, or perhaps a whole family, or perhaps a dear friend” (*Foe* 87). She believes Friday possesses some memories and honors them. But this interpretation and effort to make sense of Friday’s behavior is only presented through Susan Barton’s subjectivity, opening another gap in the narrative and indicating the impossibility of bearing witness to the experience of the other through the narrative tools of the dominant discourse. Parallel to this, Parry claims that in *Foe*, Coetzee attempts to demythologize the history (37). According to this view, Coetzee subverts history with the fiction to give power to those who are oppressed or excluded from history. When looked from this perspective, it can be inferred that the novel emphasizes the point that the colonizing class cannot have the narrative tools to represent Friday.

With *Foe*, Coetzee shows the possibility of writing “other” stories that challenge the literary canon. His subversive reworking of a canonical colonial myth makes the reader question the discursive practices and power relations constituting material history. Since power is the leading determinant of how history is written, silences and gaps render the possibility of “other” stories visible and make the



reader think about the stories of those who are silenced by those in power. It can be concluded that with *Foe*, Coetzee reveals the equivocal nature of representation and how material history and the established literary canon can be written by power and authority. In this sense, speaking for or in the name of the other is not possible and does not present an opportunity to reveal the voice of the other. Consequently, Friday must remain silent while his story must remain untold so as not to be touched by the colonial discourse.





## CONCLUSION

Artworks are archaic in the age in which they are falling silent. But when they no longer speak, their muteness itself speaks.

Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

In his seventh thesis on the philosophy of history, Walter Benjamin underscores the inevitable link between history and art. For him, cultural production has a dual quality as artworks equivocally encompass the fate of those who were forgotten by history as opposed to the triumphant. He suggests:

Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. (“Theses on the Philosophy of History.” 256)



Considering the link between literature and colonial system, I have scrutinized in this study whether the authorial voice can leave its place to the figures of silence in order to render the marginalized and colonized visible through Coetzee's selected novels. *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Foe* are outstanding novels that portray the problems of authority and representation with the gaps of silence that remain unresolved by the narrative voice. In these texts, Coetzee seems to probe literature's (im)possibility of giving voice to the Other in an era in which events are divorced from meaning. Coetzee, who is also a linguist, is ostensibly aware that language is not just an instrument enabling communication, but a product laden with meanings pointing to the colonial discourse and power relations. In this regard, silence appears as a potentiality that constitutes a gap in the master narrative, which subverts the authorial voice while inviting new possibilities of representation. Within this framework, it can be contended that the role of literature is to open in-between spaces to give the untold and unrepresented stories an opportunity to speak. Gesturing towards the challenges of this task, Coetzee's protagonists and first-person narrators; the magistrate, the medical officer and Susan Barton, do above all speak for the unreliability of their own narratives.

Chapter I focuses on *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which tells the story of the magistrate, an officer at an outpost in a small frontier town. The novel revolves around the magistrate's efforts to confront the obscenities of the authoritarian Empire he serves to. He strives to have redemption by healing the wounds of the barbarian woman who is tortured by the military officers. The magistrate is also the



narrator of the novel, so the barbarian woman is represented throughout the novel only from the magistrate's perspective and therefore her story remains untold. The magistrate's guilt and redemption efforts only result in emphasizing the woman's otherness as he treats the woman as a site, a text to be read during his ritual of cleaning her wounds, which shows parallelism with his obsession to interpret the unknown signs on the wooden slips. Nevertheless, although the magistrate cannot penetrate the thoughts and emotions of the barbarian woman, the gap between the oppressor and the oppressed becomes much narrower throughout the novel as the magistrate undergoes the experience of torture same as the "barbarians" in the novel. As a result, he starts regarding his self as other despite his ambivalent subject position. As allegory is both thematized and dealt structurally in the novel particularly through the magistrate's interpretation efforts, Coetzee's use of allegory is also discussed in this chapter with regard to both authorial power and the South African context. With his thematizations of issues of allegory in the novel, Coetzee exposes the paradox of writing about the unspeakable and inconceivable acts such as torture.

Chapter II looks at the story of Michael K, whose distinct consciousness marks a new point in the representation of the other in Coetzee's fiction. Unlike the barbarian girl and Friday, who remain completely untouched by the narrative voice, the seemingly omniscient but actually distancing narrative voice in the Part I and III of the novel has an access to K's mind, reflecting his thoughts and emotions to a certain extent. Still, K remains elusive throughout the novel due to his silence, which is systematically imposed on him by the institutions beginning from his



childhood. Despite that, he attributes a material quality to silence and isolation as he strives to escape the camps he is sent to. In this sense, K's silence can be read as an endeavor to resist the colonial discourse. This resistance is particularly explicit in Part II of the novel, where the medical officer, a person belonging to the colonizing class, takes over the narrative voice. K refuses to answer the medical officer's questions whereas the medical officer's reductive account of K parodies the authorial voice's futile efforts to speak for the other. Although the medical officer is preoccupied with the thought that K's existence stands out as an allegory, he cannot figure out what this existence stands for within his own reasoning. As the third-person narrator resumes in Part III, the reader can follow K's escape from the camp and return to his mother's room. Although the protagonist of the novel is defined negatively with his lacks and silences, the novel's closing lines still have a hopeful tone, presenting a formula of how "one can live" as K dreams about returning to the farm where he buried his mother's ashes.

Chapter III focuses on *Foe*, which tells the story of Susan Barton and Friday. *Foe* is a subversive rewriting of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* with a female perspective on its focus. In the novel, one of the founding novels of the Western colonial discourse is rewritten from a female perspective. The narrator is Susan Barton, the female castaway on Cruso's island, except the last chapter where an unidentified first-person narrator takes over the narrative. Endeavoring to find her own voice and self-representation through the novel, Susan finally obtains the power to tell her own story and finds a chance to speak up on behalf of herself. But despite Susan's endeavors, the story of Friday remains untold. With his cutout tongue, his



ability to tell his own story is obliterated. Therefore, it remains impossible for Susan to represent the silenced other. The final part of the novel appears as a postmodern approach to the impossibility of Friday's speech. In this part, Coetzee dissolves the narrative voice of Susan and offers silence as a substance. As a substantial being, Friday enters the realm of both representation and resistance, refusing the authority of text. The allusions to a British novel of colonial period make the novel remain within the colonial discourse and therefore emphasize the impossibility of getting away from this discourse entirely.

The common characteristic of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Foe* is their attempt to show the narrator's inability to relate to the other rather than allowing the reader to identify with the marginalized or colonized. The texts allow identification with the oppressor rather than the oppressed, whereas the silences of the marginalized characters constitute the primary impediment to the reader's identification with the victim. In so doing, Coetzee hints that the experience of the Other remains non-verbalized in the very materiality of oppression within the colonial discourse. This is the main feature that distinguishes Coetzee from the social realist tradition in South African literature, which is addressed in the introduction part. In social realist works of fiction, the reader is generally provided with an opportunity to identify with the oppressed and is distanced from the oppressor to invite the reader to actively take sides. This is not provided in Coetzee's fiction. In this framework, I argue that Coetzee does not openly address the history of apartheid in the novels examined in this study in order to underline that the socio-historical realities impede the process of verbalization.



He emphasizes this aspect of colonial discourse by placing gaps between the silencer and the silenced in his narratives.

*Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Foe* endeavor to subvert the colonial discourse and draw attention to the untold stories of the marginalized other by resisting appropriation and refusing to speak on behalf of them. Nevertheless, Coetzee implies the impossibility of this task since the traits of colonial history are visible in his narratives. In all three novels, the endeavor to represent and give voice to the silenced is impeded by the authorial voice's embeddedness in the colonial discourse. Accordingly, silence enables the barbarian woman, Michael K and Friday to escape the authorial voice's urge to thematize and interpret them in line with their cultural presuppositions.



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