



## Subjugation and Compliance abidance in J.M. Coetzee's Select Novels

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Research Guide

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**Purpose:** *South African literature is a literature in bondage. It is less than fully human literature, unnaturally preoccupied with power and the crookedness of power, unable to move from elementary relations of contestation, domination, and subjugation to the vast and complex human world that lies beyond them. This paper holds a realistic though gloomy narrative of human condition. It is the scene of the individuals struggling for survival amidst existential and social forces in post- apartheid culture. Apartheid represented the era of victimization and pathological attachments. It distorted intersubjective relations, turned human interactions into power struggles and produced deformed, stunted subjects. This paper analyses that Coetzee's works stage the tendency of the humanizing discourses to produce gendered and racialized subaltern bodies. The novels also dramatize the resistance of the subalterns to the epistemic violence of these narratives, resulting in the eventual failure of the intellectual to grant voice to them.*

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** *The researcher has studied research articles, books, authored by J.M.Coetzee. Also, peer reviewed journals, original research papers, National and International Publications. The researcher has referred and followed APA Manuel for the analyses of the research paper.*

**Findings/Result:** *The apartheid era represented victimization, subjugation and pathological attachments. It has distorted intersubjective relations, turned human interactions into power struggles and produced deformed, stunted subjects.*

**Originality/Value:** *This paper examines the residual presence of character deformity and pathological intersubjectivity- a social reality that diminishes the prospect of the promised sane society of post-apartheid era.*

**Paper Type:** *It's analytical research.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The diminutive and injured relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and intensified and worsened under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representation in a contorted and stunted inner life. South African literature is a literature in bondage. It is less than fully human literature, unnaturally preoccupied with power and the crookedness of power, unable to move from elementary relations of contestation, domination, and subjugation to the vast and complex human world that lies beyond them [1]. It is exactly the kind of literature one would expect people to write from a prison. J.M.Coetzee's novels *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), the novel of the middle

phase *Foe* (1986), and the later novel *Disgrace* (1999), cover his entire oeuvre. In the words of J.M.Coetzee, in a society of masters and slaves, no one is free. The slave is not free, because he is not his own master; the master is not free, because he cannot do without the slave [2].

### Coetzee and the apartheid South Africa

Referring to Coetzee's choice of writing experimental fiction in the context of apartheid South Africa, Attwell states, "If we are to speak of a lonely poetics in South Africa, Coetzee's of the 1970s and 80s was perhaps the loneliest of all." After the Sharpeville massacre of blacks protesting pass laws (1960), and after the banning of African National Congress (1960) and Pan Africanist Congress (1960), and the Rivonia Trials (1963-64) resulting in the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela on the infamous Robben Island, South Africa witnessed, from mid-1960s to mid-1970s, the emergence of radical anti-apartheid ideas, movements, and organizations [3]. Influenced by the American civil rights and Black Power movements, South Africa's Black Consciousness movement, under the charismatic leadership of the medical student, Steve Biko, who was influenced by such intellectuals as W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon and whose slogan "Black man, you are on your own" became the rallying cry, emphasized the restoration of African consciousness through psychological and physical liberation from racism. The members of the movement also engaged in direct conflict with the apartheid security state, which resulted in the confrontation with the police on 16 June 1976 during the Soweto Uprising, when students protested the use of Afrikaans language in schools [6]. This led to the banning of the movement and the murder of Biko during police custody in 1977. The massacre of approximately two hundred students led to numerous school boycotts in the early 1980s. After the Soweto Uprising, the banned ANC aimed to make black townships ungovernable. As political violence grew and anti-apartheid struggles intensified, the South African government imposed a State of Emergency in the mid-1980s (1985-86). This brief history of South Africa of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s highlights the 12 political contexts in which Coetzee's major works were produced that brought him to world attention. In the above quote, Attwell is reminding us that Coetzee's novels of the 1970s and 1980s—*Dusklands* (1974), *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), and *Foe* (1986)—, written during the periods when the South African political landscape was undergoing great upheavals, were some of his most abstruse, self-reflexive metafictional novels [7], [8].

The form of tragedy has remained important in South African writing, both during and after apartheid. But it is the fate of realism that has generated intense debate among members of the South African intelligentsia, involving such august figures as J. M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, Njabulo Ndebele, and Lewis Nkosi. During the political exigencies of apartheid, the dominant view was that fiction should "realistically" document the horrors of apartheid. Attwell says, "Both the white liberal tradition since Olive Schreiner, continuing down to the radicalism of Nadine Gordimer today, and contemporary black prose narrative since the era of *Drum* magazine in the 1950s have adopted the various forms of realism as the unquestioned means of bearing witness to, and telling the truth about, South Africa."<sup>19</sup> Various forms of realism—naturalism, critical and social realism—have been adopted by black and white writers to bear witness to the historical truth in fiction. In his essay, "The Novel Today," Coetzee narrates in caustic tone the tendency among South African writers to adopt the realist aesthetic mode of witness writing [9], [11].

Coetzee's experimentalism was often criticized for its oblique rather than direct engagement with the injustices of South African reality. Referring to Coetzee's choice of writing experimental fiction in the context of apartheid South Africa, Attwell states, "If we are to speak of a lonely poetics in South Africa, Coetzee's of the 1970s and 80s was perhaps the loneliest of all.

## 2. OBJECTIVES:

The paper is based on concept analysis identifying the purpose of the literary technique, subjugation and compliance abundance in the select works of J.M.Coetzee especially from the point of view of the colonised and the Afrikaners. The study brings forth the unexplored aspects of society in the Apartheid South Africa, reviewed logically to support the research proposition. Hence, it engages itself to:

- 1) Define subjugation and compliance in the contemporary literary context
- 2) Identify the dominant theme of subjugation and compliance abundance found in the early works of J.M.Coetzee that are optimistic in nature and people can go on with life with a sense of decency and conscience despite troubled, stressed circumstances.
- 3) Illustrate the role of certain motifs employed only to reinforce the theme of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized
- 4) Explore the colonial discourse and identify the dominant theme of subjugation and compliance abundance that displays power politics

### 3. METHODOLOGY:

The above-stated research problem is analysed, discussed and interpreted in the spirit of investigation. The discourse has collected and described the recent information in the related research area to establish the research problem. An adequate attempt of the descriptive research has been made to identify the nature of literary motifs, the dominant motifs and the motifs used particularly by J.M.Coetzee to unearth the colonised and the colonizer divide deeply rooted during the Apartheid South Africa.

### 4. COLONIAL DISCOURSE:

The analysis of these works clearly reveals the underlying colonial discourse that plays as a major motif to suggest the power of the coloniser over the colonised. The native people of South Africa were forced to be mute under the worst condition of the lack of communication. The colonial authority also imposed their Eurocentric power by marginalizing the life and the culture of the native 'Others' through their Western education, culture, language and religion. In the South African, people were marginalized by the white colonial and the capitalist power on the basis of race, class, creed, civilization, wealth, status and labour. These kinds of enforcement became the painful reasons for the violent outburst of the native 'Others' in order to stabilize their life and culture. Colonial authority also became the root cause of the existence and continuation of the poverty in South Africa and the other colonized countries. Naturally, South Africa suffered the gruesome effect of poverty and that condition of poverty got its growth with roots, rootlets, stems and branches through the arrival and the rise of the dominant power of the colonizers. [14]

Universal colouring of the ruler and the ruled proved that the experiences of sufferings and tortures are common to all the people of the world, wherever the hierarchical power structure exists. In such structures there exist wars, violence, struggles, deaths, dislocation, non-location, dismemberment, sufferings and depression [15]. The struggles and domination of the ruler sometimes forced the ruled to remain unspoken and unspeakable. The Native South Africans underwent many hardships and hurdles in their struggle for freedom, equality, liberty, fraternity and rights to rule their country by themselves as a new nation. Therefore, it is clear that these kinds of struggles for full freedom were common in all over the world, under the existence of hierarchical power structure of the society. It is proved that the stories and the experiences of the South Africans were real but they were fictionalized by the ruling authority through their reflective or interpretative attitudes. The social reality of South Africa is considered as the universal condition. The white imperial authoritative people failed to maintain a good and convergent relationship with the native people, because of their unconscious desires of self over the colonized 'Others'. Coetzee's protagonists and other white people, not only read themselves through the life of 'Others', but write and construct their self through their interpretations of the life of colonized 'Others'. So, there is no limit for the sympathetic imagination, because of the divergent relationship between the colonizers and the colonized [16].

The native South Africans were primarily considered as the barbarians by the white authority. Basically, the South Africans were not the real barbarians but it is imposed upon them by the white authority. Ironically, it is clear that, the white colonizers got all the barbarous qualities within themselves to colonize the 'Others' by their ruling and Eurocentric power. The capitalist and the colonial authority tried to extract the truth about the life of the natives through their own interpretations. The truth which is extracted by the authority about the natives is projected and enforced upon them by imposing physical and mental tortures. The life of Coetzee's characters such as the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Michael K in *Life & Times of Michael K*, Bheki and John in *Age of Iron* proved the truth of truthfulness, that is, the truth of pain is the truth of reality. Thus, the native people expected that, the truth of pain and the reality of colonial domination should come to an end. Coetzee is conscious of the fact that, it is the colonial discourse which builds and establishes the binary structures such as self and 'Others'. Colonial discourse also created the consciousness of blacks and whites [17]. The blacks are blacks as far as the whites assume and construct themselves as whites. In his novels, J.M. Coetzee visualizes the vision of the attitudes of the colonial and the capitalist authoritative power and their exercise of tortures on the bodies of native [18], [20].

### 5. SUBJUGATION AND COMPLIANCE ABIDANCE IN J.M. COETZEE'S SELECT NOVELS:

#### 5.1 J.M. Coetzee's Select Novel Disgrace

"Disgrace" is one of those enriching books which repay re-reading, and definitely might stay with the readers for a longer duration. It works on various levels. It is a fascinating study of South Africa's morning after, from the point of view of the white liberal minority who must make political and psychological accommodations to the seismic change which followed the release of Mandela. There is a sly depiction of academic attitudes; the professors are keeping the ramparts of the establishment in good order. The story, already dramatic, has a brilliant central character, David Lurie, whom Coetzee contrives to make objectionable but compelling. He is an abuser, an arrogant sex-pest, whose position as a professor of literature has been eroded and 'rationalised' with the universal dilution of tertiary education. The studies



of The Romantics he has published have been received with indifference, his students are uninspired, but his arrogance transcends the disappointments of his life. He is a despicable man who does vile things, and his attitudes are appalling; he shows signs of having a personality disorder. But this is not the all of him. After leaving his post in the disgrace of the title, he goes to stay with his daughter, and it is at this point we realise that he has vulnerabilities. He loves his daughter. And later we find that he can empathise; he feels for the unfortunate animals which he has to deal in the harsh environment of rural South Africa. Circumstances punish him for his misdeeds, but in some respects, he fails to learn important lessons. The essay I had to write on his character allowed something over 2000 words, and I could have spent double – easily – on him. There is no easy summing-up possible; no classic redemption. But his flawed character is unforgettable and its complexity challenging.

### 5.1 J.M. Coetzee's Select Novel *Dusklands*

J. M. Coetzee's two-part novel *Dusklands* (1974) namely *The Vietnam War* and *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee* are set in twentieth century and eighteenth century respectively. The protagonist Eugene Dawn unfolds the first part *The Vietnam War* which is a self-examination and requires tactfulness. Eugene is a professional in psychological warfare working for United States military during the Vietnam War. As the novel gains ground, Eugene under the pressurized circumstance of his work stabs his son Martin, summing up the narrative. The second part *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee* is narrated Jacobus Coetzee, a Boer who goes on a hunting excursion into the forests of South Africa, conquers the lands of Hottentot tribe, who had once saved his life. "Coetzee through his first-person narratives succeeds in portraying the imperialism and power thirsty nature of men that's being megalomaniac." (Thamarana S. & Kallepalli Mounika 58). Both the narrators of the novel, even though belonging to two different generations, evade the humanity within them and knock back the feeling of guilt within them. The narrator unconsciously indicates in his narration a sense of limits and a definition of his self. Dawn's remark about the prejudice formed by Americans towards the Vietnamese illustrates it, "Our nightmare was that since whatever we reached for slipped like smoke through our fingers, we did not exist. . . We landed on the shores of Vietnam clutching our arms and pleading for someone to stand up without flinching to these probes of reality . . . but like everything else they withered before us." (*Dusklands* 17). The main focus of the novel is about interrelations between the coloniser and the colonized. There could be many motifs in *Dusklands* like power conflict, racial supremacy and marital discord. Ultimately it is the coloniser and the colonised that overpowers the rest of the minor motifs.

### 5.2 J.M. Coetzee's Select Novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*

Along with the theme of isolation and hostile environment resulting in mental imbalance of the characters, it is the motif of power that gets explored in the novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). The novel centres on the life of the Magistrate, who works for the Third Empire. The third Empire is an imaginary entity and the novel is set in an undefined historical period showing the racism and the horror and fear of colonisation. The Magistrate acts as a mediator between the Colonel Joll from the Third Empire and the barbarians or the natives. As the Empire tries to invade the land of Barbarians by waging a war, the Magistrate begins to sympathise with the Barbarians. Ahmad has rightly said "The power and skill of the Empire, its art, lie in its capacity to generate and then interpret its own signs" (148). The reader can identify, connect and compare the motif of power here as the Magistrate plunges from the man of power to that of an oppressed man. The novel contains another image to express the author's motif, the image that haunts the magistrate's dreams: children playing in the snow in the town square. The children make a snowman not to indicate a model of the empty town but the faceless girl being not among them. The magistrate realizes the meaning of an arduous journey wherein the magistrate and his small party come face-to-face with the barbarians in the mountains and eventually he gives the girl back to them, since she expresses her willingness to leave him and civilization.[4], [10]

The evolution of Coetzee's treatment of violence in *Waiting for the Barbarians* may be described as progression from his examination of the perpetrators and torturers, to his concentration on the oppressed with their suffering and resistance to his projection of meaningful relations based on ethical values. However, it differs from one another. Therefore, the problems which are experienced by the native South Africans (barbarians) are enforced upon them by the imperial authority of the Empire. Thus, Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* clarified that the South Africans or the 'barbarians' were controlled by the dominant-power of the white imperial authority over them.

### 5.3 J.M. Coetzee's Select Novel *Life and Times of Michael K*

The motif of optimism gets explored in the novel, *Life & Times of Michael K* that has earned Booker Prize for J. M. Coetzee. If a person actively works to recognise the positive aspects of life, the person naturally starts to see positive energy in challenging times. This novel concerns the predicament of a simple man beset by conditions, he can neither comprehend nor control during a civil war in a future South Africa. The novel is set in Cape Town from where Michael launches into his journey during a fictitious Civil War that takes place in Apartheid era. The theme is the investigation of South African history through the inner narrative of a young gardener, Michael K. This gardener embarks on a journey

to set foot on the village where his mother had lived her girlhood and gets the better of all the hurdles of war to set foot on his destination. "Furthermore, not only is race the absent signifier in the novel, but the eponymous 'hero' of this novel is a singularly passive figure" (Barnett 295). As Leon de Kock observed: "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" (de Kock 45). Thus, optimistic individuals have been portrayed as more prone to adaptive behaviour to have good expectations about future achievements and to personal efficiency. Accordingly, the novel ends with the motif of hope and confidence that people can live with a sense of morality standards even under the dire compulsion and severe circumstances of life. [5], [21]

According to Nadine Gordimer in her review entitled 'The Idea of Gardening' "...the hurried homelessness of Michael K and his mother..." (2) is the metaphor of the agony of the collective under apartheid. The indefinability regarding Michael K's race as he is simply listed as, "Michael Visagie-CM-40-NFA- unemployed" (LTMK 70) and his impotence to convey himself created a sort of void in the narrative. Although Michael K is the centre of the novel, there is a cavity in the centre that created a perforation between him and the world as it is noticeable. In Coetzee's words, between this reason and the truth that he would never announce himself, however, lay a gap wider than the distance separating him from the firelight. Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a breach, a cavity, a gloominess before which his understanding balked, it had nothing to do with, it eschewed, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the breach remained. His was always a story with a cavity in it: a wrong story, always wrong (L.T.M.K. 109-110).

*Life & Times of Michael K* is further viewed as an allegory of persecution, abuse, suppression, torture and exploitation. Set against the background of the South African police state, it strives, it ventures to preserve apartheid by any means; the plot unfolds as a relentless, persistent dissection of the logic of exploitation and suppression. It could be observed as an attempt to convey, to address and resolve the social and political injustice, in the tradition of realism. Indeed, the tension between realism and metafiction came to light, as the novel gestures toward the metafictional reflection on the nature of the textuality, the complexity, the ambiguity of authority, and the ethics of representing the 'Other'. The very title of the novel indicates the life time of Michael K as the oppressed South African. He was born with hare-lipped and disfigured condition as a son of the South African parents. Michael K and his community also represented the sufferings, struggles, displacement, dismemberment, oppression and repression of the South Africans during apartheid movement. The presence of the white in this novel represents the ruling of the South African country with domination, oppression, force, and assaults of 'Others' through their power. The authoritative power is represented in this novel through the presence of the State Police, the Doctor and the Medical Officer. [12], [19]

#### 5.4 J.M. Coetzee's Select Novel *Foe*

Language is of no good when it fails to reveal the truth of history, its violence and horror, its brutality and ferocity, but only spins, revolves, yarns about paradise, has narratives of islands where cannibals learn to become good Christians. This might be one of the most serious questions in Coetzee's novel, *Foe* (1986). Further, "...it is in *Foe* that Coetzee has made canonical intertextuality a fundamental principle: the novel's manner of proceeding is to rewrite, and fuse together, the biography of Daniel Defoe and those of several of Defoe's fictional characters" (Attridge 169). Friday in *Foe* is tongueless, castrated, scarred and more importantly the victim of a broader historical trauma. The problem is that he is ineffectual to tell his own story. The narrative suppression of the violence and horror of slavery however is contestably one of the central experiences of slavery. This meta-fictional work of Coetzee becomes a historical novel, indirectly exemplifying and illustrating one of the most significant aspects of slavery - the silencing of its victims. *Foe* also explores, inspects and delves into the post-colonial theme. Susan Barton, the female protagonist is marooned on an island and finds Crusoe and Friday which reminds us *Robinson Crusoe*. The issues of relationship between colonizer and colonised, relation of gender to power and race are explored in this novel. [13]

Cannibalism could be cited as one of the examples for the motif intended by the author to reinforce the theme of the colonizer and the colonized. Friday along with many others is suspected to be a cannibal. The idea has been established by Crusoe. Hence, Susan is engulfed with the idea that these cannibals would last with the taste of human flesh. She even imagines that Friday possesses a covert cannibal mentality. The concept of cannibalism has been employed as a motif to reveal the fearful mind set of the colonizer towards the colonized. Susan further justifies her stand of taming the suspected cannibal, despite the fact that she never experiences the aggressive behaviour of Friday.

#### 6. CONCLUSION:

In the politically charged milieu of South Africa, the essential role of the writer has been to bear witness to, and to narrate, the crimes of apartheid and colonialism, and those who have failed to fulfil their social responsibility of bearing witness have often been accused of being politically and historically deaf. Witness writing does not end with the fall of the apartheid regime in South Africa, but only resurges in the context of the re-enactments of the confessional mode of

witness accounts during the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission trials. Speaking of South Africa's most prominent writer of "witness literature," Nadine Gordimer, David Atwell summarizes the dominant view of the role of a writer in South Africa (as propounded by Gordimer and others): "For Gordimer, the essence of the writer's role lies in the social responsibility, and responsibility is treated primarily as a form of witness."

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