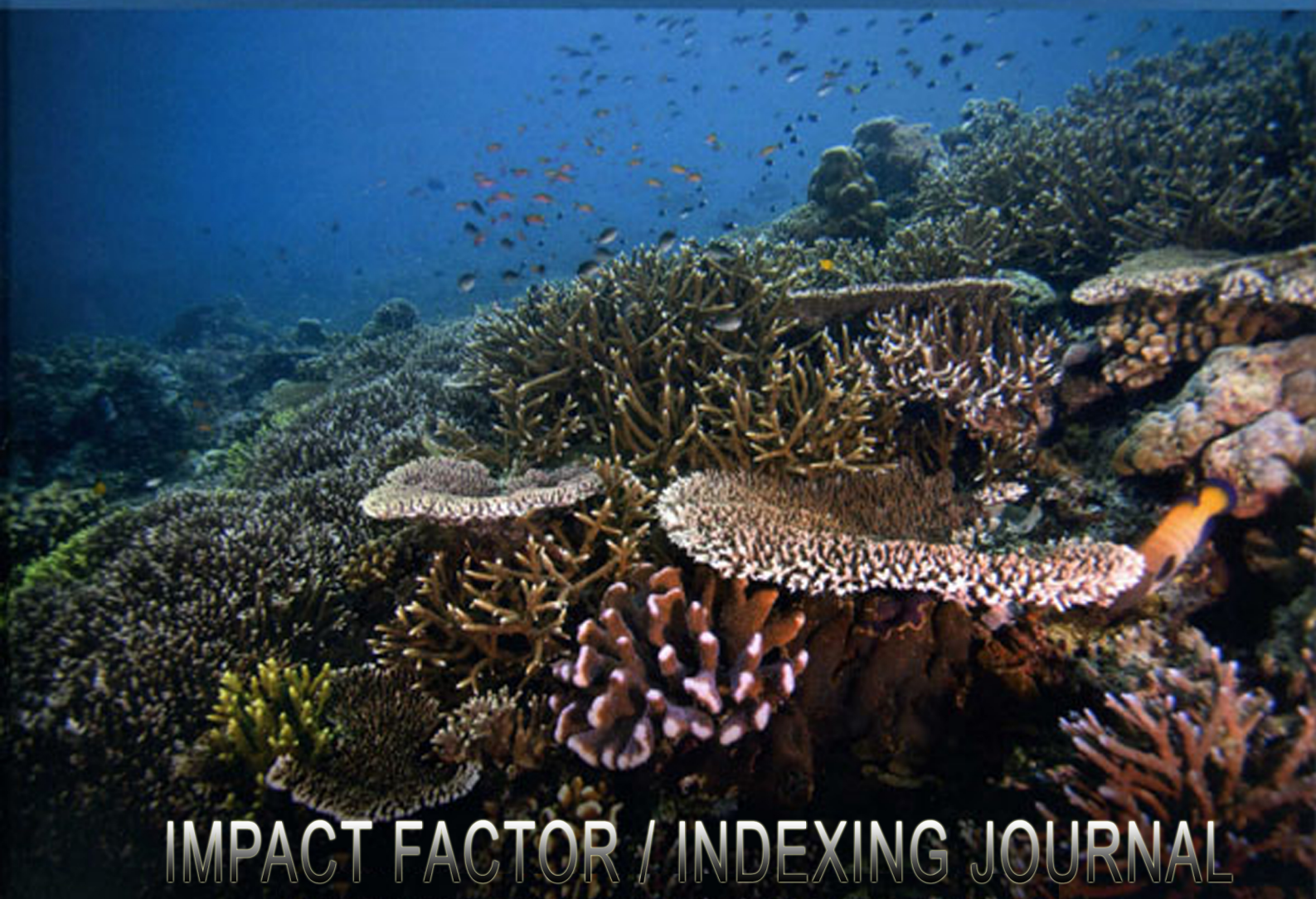


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EXPLORING PATTERNS OF VIOLENCE IN J. M. COETZEE'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research paper is to explore patterns of violence in J. M. Coetzee's fiction particularly with reference to his four major novels *Summertime* (2009), *The Slow Man* (2005), *Age of Iron* (1990) and *Foe* (1986). As a representative of the post-colonial Afro American psyche, his fiction documents the multiple facets to socio-political, ethno-racial, and linguistic violence. The objective is to discern the textual representation of cruelties and their response; also to critique the role of the perpetrators of violence. The emerging patterns will be analyzed against theories of discourse, culture and psycho analysis. Research findings endorse the fact that violence gets perpetrated through active and passive agents who not merely depict the historical reality but also the experiential evolution of individuals, communities and institutions. Born in Cape Town, South Africa, educated in the U.S as a computer scientist and linguist, J.M Coetzee brings his searing insight and masterful control of language to reflect on "the new kind of negative in which we begin to see what used to lie outside the frame, occulted" (*Age of Iron*, 1990. pg: 112). As a representative narrator of the new consciousness, Coetzee's works attempt to document not-soevident patterns of violence.

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INTRODUCTION

Violence is a term not easy to define because of its complex hybridity. Oxford dictionary delineates it as the physical exercising of force with the intention to hurt damage or kill. The Czech sociologist, Mihalio Markovic, however proclaims it as a legitimate force, naturally practiced and translated through power relations. Positioned between these two, the literal and the ideological manifestation, Franc Fanon's version unravels the post-colonial aspect to violence through its reciprocal generative nature. In Roberta La Roches words, "When unilateral, violence appears in lynching, rioting, vigilantism and terrorism. Each distinguished by its system of liability and degree of organization". In other words, the relational distance and functional inequality establishes a distorted ontology which in Sartrean terms would lead to violence as an attempt to assign meaning to one's life. Grounded in literary tradition of Achebe, Okri, Ngugi, and Fanon, Coetzee's characters and contexts deconstruct the perpetrators of violence through language, patterns of

memory and visible landscapes. As an existentialist experience, violence permeates the social the psychological, physical and the collective consciousness of the oppressor and the oppressed which the agencies of violence then censor, expropriate and obliterate to transform the biological structure into a new cultural identity. Bhabba and Said's theories strongly endorse this transition. In one of his essays Coetzee states, "relations in the torture room provide a metaphor... for relations between authoritarianism and its victims." (Coetzee1992:363). The implication is that the powerless gets destroyed by the brute force as in the case of Friday in Coetzee's novel *Foe* (1986). Friday as the manservant, becomes a metaphor for the several colonized nations whose language, culture and history are all wiped out forcefully by the colonizers. Deprived of his tongue and deprived of his rights, Friday is utterly at the mercy of his master, Crusoe. Coetzee's fictionalized world creates a horror, a kind of authorial fantasy which creates both mystery and a sense of humanity in the reader. The rendering of fictionalized horror however, jolts the reader's sensitivity. The way Susan Barton, the lady who is shipwrecked on the same island with Friday and Crusoe and who becomes the narrator of the story, responds to

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Friday's plight represents the questioning conscience of an informed society. She wishes to amend the situation or at least share the burden of responsibility to rectify it. One knows nothing of Friday's background and hears nothing from him as he is tongueless. Was the tongue cut to render him a mere tool to complete the spiritless project of the master, the hauling of stones and digging of earth to build sterile terraces without thought, without protest. Nations are deprived of their language and rendered speechless; as such none of their grief comes to light. The expression is prohibited, leaving them and their tales violently sidelined. Coetzee's depiction of the master/slave relation not only highlights the actual historical experience but also challenges the dive into the psyche of the perpetrators of violence. Crusoe's reticence and inapproachability offers no rational explanation. His failure to respond to Susan's relentless questioning oftentimes, leaves the reader feeling that Crusoe is himself a captive to circumstances. Throughout the novel *Foe*, tongue or language and silence are insistently read as a metaphor for power and powerlessness. Susan's insistence upon writing her story is connected to her desire for life. Subsequently, the journal and those who have the capacity to record, live on.

This emerges as triumph over time. The written word becomes a weapon, a tool of authority and presence. Crusoe is cast in the role of the master but the historic reality of his situation and his impenetrability leaves him as vulnerable as Friday. His presence is commanding but there is no romance attached to it either. Coetzee does not pretend "...to justify a concern with morally dubious people involved in a contemptible activity; how to find an appropriately minor place for the petty secrets of the security system." (Coetzee 1992:366). Coetzee feels his moral duty to document oppression and to sympathize with its victims; the real force of his writings must go beyond the present moment of aggression. He feels a moral commitment to point towards a sane moral order. The writer must express hope for change and the dawning of a new era. J.M. Coetzee senses an undeniable relationship between suffering and truth. Pain, he says is a truth and establishes an authority over the body. It is "... not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body. It is not possible not for logical reasons, not for ethical reasons...; the suffering body takes this authority: that is its power. (Coetzee 1992:248) In South Africa the problem of violence is intense and the ethical and political dimensions confronted by the writers cannot be ignored.

Coetzee speaks of the need to resist conditions imposed by the political dilemma, "...The true challenge is how not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one's own authority. (Coetzee 1992:364) Related to this is Coetzee's revulsion of violence "Why that revulsion? I can only say that violence and death, my own death, are to me, intuitively, the same thing. Violence, as soon as I sense its presence within me, becomes introverted as violence against myself: I cannot project it outward. [...] or to explain myself in another way: I understand the crucifixion as a refusal and an introversion of retributive violence, a refusal so deliberate, so conscious, and so powerful that it overwhelms any reinterpretation, Freudian, Marxian, or whatever that one can give it. (Coetzee 1992:337) Coetzee's novel *Age of Iron*

(1990) documents the personal turmoil of a guilt ridden consciousness of an elderly generation that somehow fails to safeguard the "native iron resource" against "men in boots and caps and camouflaged uniforms transpiring through" the houses earmarked as indigenous hideouts along main African in lands and outskirts. Penned as a confessional letter from Mrs. Curren, the dying mother to her younger daughter who opts for "orange jacketed life off shore" against the rudimentary life at site C. Guguletu, the narrative struggles to absolve the classical professor of pooling into the "cruciform logic" responsible for making the native "unlovable". The oppressor has killed "care: the true root of charity" and employed lies, threats and promises in the name of politics, economic uplifting, social security and new learning. Collectively have these heavily weighed upon both-the signifier and the signified; the mother and the distanced self.

The thought of "those abandoned farmhouses she drove past in the Karoo. A land in the process of being repossessed... by force, used, despoiled and abandoned in its barren late years" (pg 25) not merely redefines the post-colonial ownership, but also predicates the violent act of strangling the art of parenting itself. The cultural schemata of the colonized are exposed to the violence at the hands of the colonizer. In other word, the dislocating of the local self is pronounced against the colonial need to suck on the "bloom time of resources" (pg 26) which works contrary to the classic biblical dictum of "giving from one's fullness". It breeds ingratitude and superimposes a violence that works against "the scavengers of Cape town who go bare, dry winged, glazen-eyed, pitless" (pg 5). The gory depiction of the marginalizing of the natives announces the predicament that awaits the "children of iron" who no longer can be claimed as "mine" but "termed as white man's child, the monster made by the white man" (pg 50). How easy it is to love a child, how hard to love what a child turns into! "My existence" from day to day has become a matter of averting my eyes, of cringing. Death is the only truth left". (pg 29)

The accumulated shame of the mother gets triggered off at the adieu junction when the daughter forbids her mother not to call her back because the daughter plans "never to return". The departure makes the life-giver more "vulnerable to a hundred years of misery nailed down. Somewhere a crime has been committed". Will Mrs. Curren, the mother, the classical professor be able to live through this "primordial scaling, the inheritance of the ghosts with dexterity and nerves lost, a 5stick in an empty field" self-loathing and malignant (pg 6). To gain atonement she must like the Chinese mother, give birth to death "without anesthetic". The choice of the epistolary genre thereby justifies the confessional pain of Mrs. Curren's. In the wake of existentialist angst unleashed at the very opening of the novel "amidst dead alley, waste without use where windblown leaves pile up and rot" (pg 3), the language itself flounders between men and children; between mothers and sons, between native Florence and non-native Mrs. Curren. Together the two represent the parallel sides to the art of mothering. The former endorses the innate quality of the soil: "I do not turn back on my children. They are good children they are like iron we are proud of them" (pg 50); the latter cautions against the terror of life itself which sucks and

drains, "life is not following a stick, a pole, a flag's staff with clear cut destinations... There aren't any play bullets. Discipline holds them back not shooting". (pg 52) The finality of the linguistic discourse pounces upon the reader's consciousness as violently as does the collateralization of "militants conditioning and instinctive choice". Forces of violence are not held back by compassion rather the mechanical discipline inculcated through the colonists' deceptive strategies to killing the African childhood. It subjugates and explores. Tapped, dozed, raided and set to fire native children are caught transfixed at their parent's bed posts declaring innocently, "Father, I am burning, as he slept through". The native bodies of the murdered children are then displayed as glorified monuments. The colonizer treats these as contested spaces. The dichotomy between Mrs. Curren's and her daughter's worlds gets intensified through the contrast between their topographical positioning. The former's world boasts of desolate flats and smoke in the air where children like Bheki's, Beauty and Hope are employed as fodder to war biting the dust between the toes; versus the latter's world of "tamed lakes and forests wherein the children are safe and secure, sealed and inflated".

The violence doesn't regret its targeting nor does it repent the "shooting which will make another notch on their gunstocks". In the form of young Bhekis, and ever enlarging number of the African Boys, the legacy of violence continues. "In Africa they open your fingers after the event to make sure you are not trying to take something with you. A pebble. A feather. A mustard seed under your finger nail". (pg 26) Colonial market forces work as pragmatic logic and assign material value and new id to natives now termed as enemies, threats, hateful objects to be violently shot wherever discovered. In the process of civilizing the uncivilized, the cultural archetypes get transformed. The classic Aphrodite emerges as a figure of urgency amidst cries and pains (pg 178) feeding upon their resources, both natural and human. Shakespeare's locust fairies with their whip stock of crickets' bones are seen sighing like a forest of leaves; dead eyes by the million and the crabs moving among them, clutching, grinding (pg 189) Centers of learning work even more subtly. Structured into rendering Gramscian mutability, schools claim to induce social attributes and ideological sophistication that is, a discrete tuning in of the raw primitive self which is stinking, clawed, disfigured, impotent, faceless and voiceless. (pg 9, 11, 17)

This works as a strategy to injecting slow death by instilling a self-derogatory stance. Death according to Coetzee happens when we stop thinking well of ourselves. Death emerges as another perpetrator of violence in the novel. It owes its sustainability to the violent act of snatching away the mustard seeds and dreams of hope. The relationship between Mrs. Curren and Vercueli further elaborates the cultural paradox and its violence. Both serve as counterfoils to each other, rather as alter egos. Vercueli bears the cross for Mrs. Curren and becomes a mode through which her redemption seems assured. He agrees to deliver Mrs. Curren's letter to the daughter. Both complement each other: she as the old classical self, rooted in discipline's rules and precepts; he as the floating, unharnessed, untamed, unprincipled self, moving in and out of the prescribed routines and norms. Coetzee employs Vercueli

as a metaphor for unconscious self that is capable of driving through moments of reckoning and surviving. He serves as a testing ground to the colonial patterns of violence itself. Vercueli's free floating self that permeates in and out of Curren's rational and irrational selves adds a psychological dimension to violence which is easy to deflate, difficult to conquer. The physical mutilation and the existentialist fears and doubts described by Coetzee as a reality "trapped on a field of slaughter, scorched, with a stench of sulphur and blood hell", transform Mrs. Curren's confessional letter into a liminal space. If interpreted against the two models of identity: the conventional environmentalists and the new constructive, Mrs. Curren and Vercueli represent the constitutive unit to self-preferentiality. Vercueli as the "Other" authenticates Curren's "Real self" so that her post-colonial identity emerges as a process in a flux rather than a stable finished product. Such fluidity leaves room for Curren's confessional memory which intersects discourses. While the pain may bring forth the mutability of language itself, the genre permits the two (that is, mother and daughter; past and present, colonizer and colonized, not to forget the gender distinction) to negotiate contexts.

Within these, confession is framed and the process of domination and subordination spelt out. "Both have tumbled and risen in mutual elections". Violence doesn't function in isolation. Information technology works as its ally. The reference to "men behind pictures who make people sick and put them into sleep without dream", endorse the post-colonial theory that Id is not a neat division rather a doubling. No wonder Mrs. Curren's Africa and the cultural consciousness is seen as a potential threat to hegemonic powers. The trilogy of patience, Hope, and Faith may win a strong foothold to reclaiming the iron soul provided one is weaned away the media intoxication. "Television. Why do I watch it? The parade of politicians every evening: I have only to see the heavy, blank faces so familiar since childhood to feel gloom and nausea. (pg 28) The locust family is the truth of South Africa, and the truth is what makes me sick? What absorbs them is power and the stupor of power. (pg 29) I say to myself that I am watching not the lie but the space behind the lie where the truth ought to be". (pg 30)

Contrary to the real world, "of trouble in the schools the radio says nothing, the television says nothing, and the newspapers say nothing. In the world they project all the children of the land are sitting happily at their desks learning about the square on the hypotenuse and the parrots of the Amazonian jungle. (pg 39) The radio squawked like a parrot behind. (pg 53) Despite the fact that miracles may not seem an immediate viability, the stamina to believe in "dolphins appearing to save if tipped or walking on water and getting rescued" may atone the iron-willed. The text herein is signposting an evolution backward which makes Mrs. Curren's confession more valid. Words may lose their essential meaning beyond care and caring, yet false etymologies may work. Textual volatility becomes digestible at the authorial intervention forecasting the right to reality. The natives can learn to overcome the violence of the colonizer by swallowing in and complying with their rules: "such as simulacrum of sleep, hallucinations and prescriptions to diurnal and mandragora pills that will serve

as a license to tracing an ascent into the final reaches of tiredness". It may also enhance Mrs. Curren's ability to "encounter the white moths of history, the pigs iron under the skin, the ghostly passages of the museum where bullies, thugs, torturers and killers reside". The legacy of Socrates transforms Mrs. Curren's letter metamorphosis into soul-searching; confession into an existentialist exercise, a mechanism for reconnecting with the self. 8 The novel *Slow Man* (2005), explores the threshold dilemmas of an old age that accidentally gets amputated and circumscribed. "The blow catches him from the right, sharp and surprising and painful". (pg 1) The narrative opens with Paul Rayment encased in a cocoon of dead air around him, "a graining whiteness unrelieved like old tooth paste in which his mind could not think straight". (pg 4) The only violence that consciously oppresses him is of the need to find his way home, against Dr. Hansen's announcement, "we don't have a choice". (pg 5) The physical facts however determine a course of action that "by passes" the "reconstruction". At a younger age, the body might have pulled through, but at Rayment's age, it has to bear the violence of being rehabilitated through amputations.

Step one: amputations, step two: prosthesis and artificial limb. Step three: cedemea and swelling. Step four: whiteness setting in or could be a recurring pattern of "violation and then a consent to violation" raising questions about one's "insurance" in term of family, memories and dreams. "Feeling a shovelful of ash, almost weightless", the implications of being single, solitary and alone press upon Rayment's consciousness. Time corrodes like "quicklime" imposing a sense of being "disowned". Even the brisk efficiency of the regularized "nursing" at hospital doesn't hide a "final indifference to his fate". Though the rational self may consider "physical" pain just a warning signal from the body to the brain (pg 12), it miserably fails to deny that pain is no more real than an x-ray photograph. "Losing a leg" may be an indirect training in to losing everything from the past to future. Hence, the psychological turmoil of the slow man, which becomes reflective of the existentialist violence itself. Mrs. Curren's reference to a platonic caring in the Age of iron merges into maintaining the duty to devote to Rayment's welfare. "Welfare means caring for people who can't care for themselves in other words to protect them from their own incompetence.

"What's so special about losing a leg?" (pg 26) Coetzee raises the question only to endorse the fact that history is replete with one-armed sailors and chairs bound investors; of blind poets and mad king too. (Ibid) It's what the novelist through Marijana's motherly instinct scripts as the "generational protocol" to which Mrs. Curren's letter in the Age of iron had subtly referred to or confessed. In Rayment's case, Coetzee does not want to answer these questions because of the tyranny of complying to one's mood-frames at a level far below the play and flicker of the intellect (pg 29): "sometimes He, sometimes You, sometimes I all too ready to embrace stillness and extinction as if gusts of left lover anesthetic coming up from his lungs to overwhelm him (pg 11) Does it leave Rayment any different to Wayne or the boy who presses the accelerator outside school to knock another Rayment, flat "on the road". Modern technology in the form of bicycles, cars and utility prams takes over and imposes its own pattern

of dependency and communal violence. It serves as a dividing line between the physical need and the spirit to invent. Moving along the same lines, the textual narrative itself imposes a parallel enquiry into the magnetic force of bipolar identity: writer versus reader, male versus female, located versus dislocated one. The arrival of the fiction writer sets the textual mood in motion. As the plot progresses, the violence gets perpetuated through the introduction of new characters and a stepping aside of the familiar ones. Rayment's ability to exist on his own terms thereby determines his stature. Perhaps, a viable strategy to overcoming different forms of violence namely the physical, the spatial and the colonial. Coetzee's novel *Summer Time* (2009), opens with the news of killings and their 'bland denials'. The narrator feels 'soiled' and questions as to how he can escape the filth while his father has nothing but disdain for the continent north of them'(ST,p.4). The reader is able to discern a concern similar to Mrs. Curren's in the Age of Iron. Presented with a consciousness which is gentle, cultivated, urbane and secular, the reader also responds to a sense of emptiness and estrangement. Is it an estrangement from the land, the place, or a yearning for inner spiritual fulfilment? Though Coetzee denies a relationship with the land, he considers the bond as something deeper often with a longing for a sense of belonging.

"Once upon a time he used to think that the men who dreamed of the South African version of public order, who brought into being the vast system of labour reserves ...had based their vision on a tragic misreading of history.....to say this was itself misleading. For they read no history at all....." (p.5). The mystery of torture for Coetzee is that it seems to trespass against something inherently moral or sacred within man. Torture is a violation of humanity therefore a sacrilege of human dignity. Akin to Mrs. Curren's guilt in the Age of Iron, one recognizes one's failure to accept another as truly human. The narrator refers to the resistance, bad governance, law and order situation against political lies, and wonders as to how life must be lived according to Jesus. Time and again Coetzee's reflections about Jesus, bible, and the welfare schemes in the four books, point to his inner search for a spiritual anchor without which he feels rudderless in this chaotic world. Although Coetzee does not regard himself as a religious person nor does he want to be considered as "not a Christian, or not yet" (Coetzee: 1992 pg 250), certain aspects of his work do foreground just such a tendency.

Coetzee's sense of encountering violence seems to grow out of his socio-political context that favors a secular ideal and draws its moral strength from liberal humanism. In *Summer Time*, Julia feels that she has wronged her father by not looking after him when he needed her, and feels replete with "plenty of sorries to 10 say."(ST: p.49) Infidelity in marriage, abandoning an old parent, disappointing loved ones, shirking ones responsibilities are all examples of the violence that is inflicted and borne by the characters which Coetzee employs as a technique to gaining an understanding about one's real self. Julia's recapturing of the past points towards a long tradition in Christian spirituality where sexuality signals a connection between God and the soul. The rapture of fulfilment foreshadows the ecstasy of meeting the Divine. Julia critiques *Dusklands*, another of Coetzee's works as "a

book about cruelty, an expose of the cruelty involved in various forms of conquest". She traces the actual source and locus of cruelty to lie within the author himself. "The writing was a project in self-administered therapy." (ST: p.58) These lines best explain Coetzee's intention and sensitivity towards violence. It is his way of exorcising the brutality within and without referred to as the cleansing role of poetry and prose. Unlike the post-modernist tradition, Coetzee does not conclude rather deliberately leaves the narrative open ended. The reader is left to surmise the future. In *Foe* (1986), the damaged female body becomes the text, just as the crippled self in *Slow Man*, the stinking appearance and charred bodies in the *Age of Iron* become the discourse. The open ended-ness and the lack of visible closure to Coetzee's texts show his rejection of violence. The reader is free to imagine, confess, evolve, resist, or comply with the textual inwardness. His texts like his protagonists refuse to be categorized under any socio-political label. No wonder the reader is left engrossed in a live sense of compassionate understanding and textual mystery functioning parallel to each other.

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