



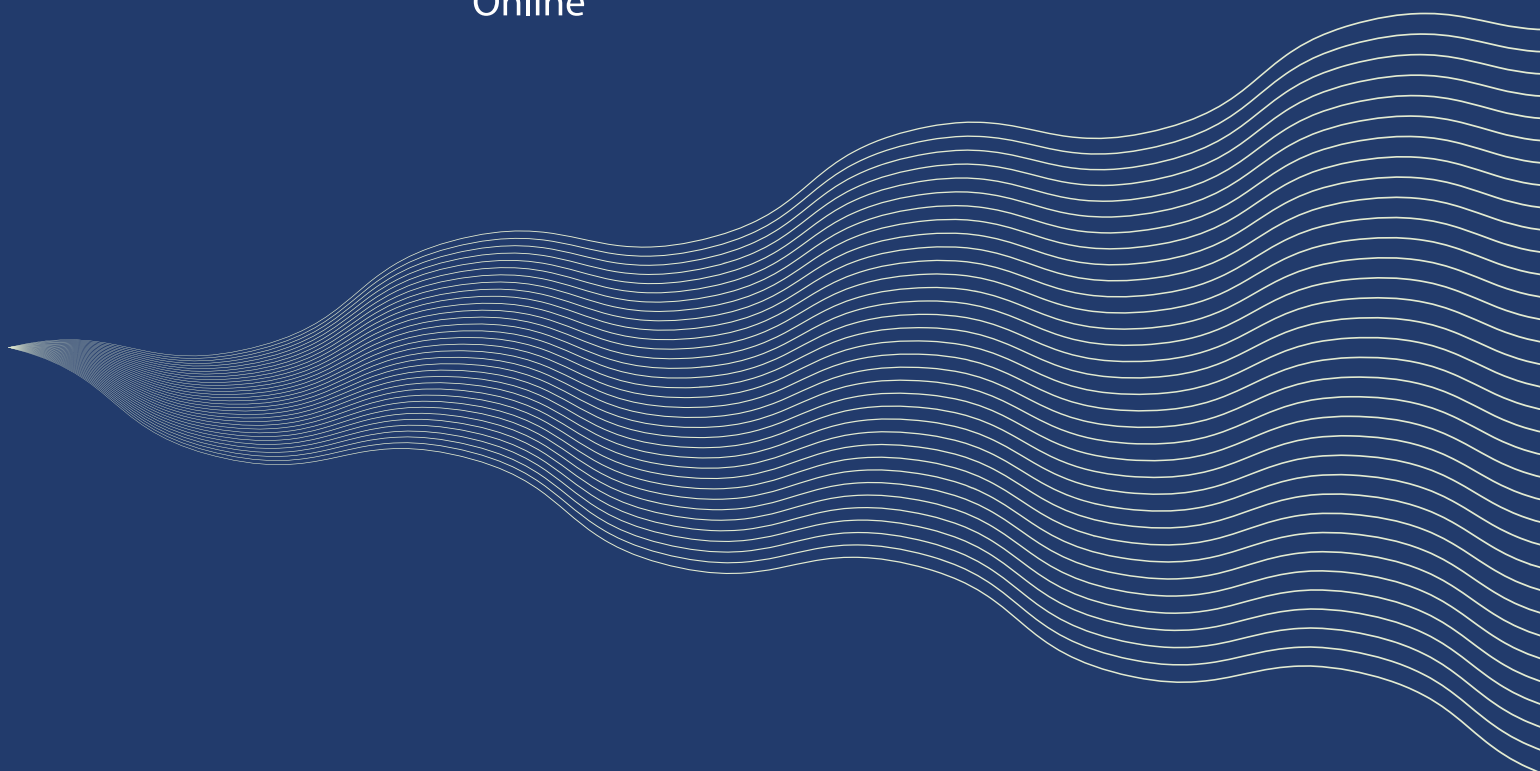
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# TANULMÁNYKÖTET CONFERENCE BOOK

XI. INTERDISZCIPLINÁRIS  
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## Locating Literary Identity in J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) and *Foe* (1986) : A Critical Study

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Abstract: J. M. Coetzee, a widely acclaimed South African novelist, has often used his country's apartheid system as well as silence to mirror the bleakness of the human condition. The very process of writing anti-apartheid literature during that period brought world recognition to the African situation as well as his works. However, this writing resulted in danger, disdain, and persecution to these authors whose government struggled to conceal the truth and prevent these voices from telling their stories. Although Coetzee's oeuvre is widely considered as a milestone in postcolonial anti-apartheid literature, his works were perceived as 'too oblique with insufficient political charge'. In this paper, I will try to refute early criticisms of Coetzee's fiction that his works failed to take a definitive stance on the politics of apartheid. The central focus is the way in which Coetzee chooses his diction to arouse powerful imagery and symbolism correlating the conflicts, both internal and external, of his characters with the real ideological and physical conflicts that enveloped the apartheid.

*Keywords: Apartheid; conflict; identity; postcolonialism; resistance*

## I. Introduction

The ideological oppression of the liberal white South Africans is extensively projected in the works of the South African Noble Prize winner, J.M. Coetzee as the majority of his novels explicitly symbolize or allegorize the different types of apartheid oppression. Born in 1940 in Cape Town, the boyhood of John Maxwell Coetzee was dominated by cultural conflicts, consequent to his color and language use, as an English-speaking white South African, or more precisely, Afrikaner. The question whether Coetzee would consider himself an Afrikaner or not, has been evident in establishing his literary identity. As John Gamgee observes, “Coetzee has always been suspicious or skeptical of belonging to a certain group that would limit his individual freedom” (69). Further, in an interview with David Atwell, Coetzee describes the complex situation of his literary identity, suggesting that:

No Afrikaner would consider me an Afrikaner. That, it seems to me, is the acid test for group membership, and I don't pass it. Why not? In the first place, because English is my first language, and has been since childhood. [...] In the second place, because I am not embedded in the culture of the Afrikaner [...] and have been shaped by that culture only in a perverse way. ( Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 341)

What is remarkable in Coetzee's words here is the double sense of rejection and complicity, the state of being 'within' and 'without'. His desire to be completely detached from the Afrikaner community is evident in his denial of being “embedded” in the Afrikaner culture. However, his sense of complicity, the sense that he always attempts, or wishes to, dismiss, is evident in the “perverse way” that Afrikaner culture has shaped his life.

In his work, *The Cambridge Introduction to J. M. Coetzee*, Dominic Head suggests that “Coetzee's ethnicity- in the South African context- has had a crucial bearing on his literary identity” (22). What Head suggests here is the difficulties and challenges that faced Coetzee in his oeuvre, as his reliance on English language placed him in an ambivalent or transitional position between two poles; the white South Africans and the black South Africans. Coetzee was criticized by both parties for not addressing the contexts they desired to be addressed or, more precisely, to be historicized. Moreover, his use of English language and “his reliance on European theoretical and literary models put him at the far end of the spectrum from those writers seeking to develop a ‘pan-Africanist’ model for South African writing” ( Head 24). However, Coetzee was aware of his ‘ambivalent’ or ‘marginal’ position since his background distances him from English, as well as Afrikaner affiliations. His use of English language was very intentional rather than being accidental, and the adherence to the European literary genealogy is considered to be his major weapon in opposing the ideological force of history and the hegemony of realism in the South African fiction.

To further understand Coetzee's position and literary identity, it is essential to mention Simon During's distinction between “the ‘post-colonized’, those who identify with the culture overlaid by imperialism, and by the language of the colonizer, and the ‘post-colonizers’, those who are embroiled in the culture and language of colonialism, even while they reject imperialism” (127). Coetzee's ambivalent position as an English-speaking South African was the reason for this dispute. However, in recent history, Afrikaans has been viewed as the imperialist language not English and as Head suggests: “With this qualification, it seems appropriate to consider Coetzee



as a ‘post-colonizer’ in During’s sense, occupying that margin of postcolonial writing in which complicity is the necessary focus” (28).

## II. Discussion and Results

### II.1. *Foe*

Coetzee’s *Foe* is a highly ‘literary’ work, a postcolonial reworking of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, containing important allusions to other works by Defoe. The novel is written from the perspective of Susan Barton, a castaway who landed on the same island inhabited by "Cruso" and Friday as their adventures were already underway. Like *Robinson Crusoe*, it is a frame story, unfolded as Barton’s narrative while in England attempting to convince the writer Daniel Foe to help transform her tale into popular fiction. Focused primarily on themes of language and power, the novel was the subject of criticism in South Africa, where it was regarded as politically irrelevant on its release. While Coetzee’s *Foe* was criticized for not directly addressing the apartheid and allegorizing the conflict in a fictional setting, reading the work of J.M Coetzee as essentially uninvolved, disconnected, and too abstract to represent the South African politics would undervalue the significance of intellectual thought and literary symbolism, and would in turn depreciate the cultural role that literature plays in politics. Although Derik Attridge believes that Coetzee’s abstract involvement in the South African politics excludes him from joining the canon of eminent authors(219), Coetzee underscores his political message evidently in *Foe*. Coetzee projects the idea of oppression in nontraditional terms through interactions between Susan, Cruso, Foe, and the most vehemently debated character, Friday. Although critics have different sayings in determining who oppresses Friday, the omnipresent theme remains stable: Friday, as a "colored" man, intensely represents the oppressed, without taking into consideration the various factors that oppress the other characters, most notably, Susan Barton. However, a closer reading of the novel reveals an entirely different story. Rather than contributing to his oppression, Friday employs his silence as a manner of resistance and insubordination. The power of Friday’s silence oppresses Susan by not allowing her story of the island to obtain "the substance it has lost" (Coetzee, *Foe* 51). Throughout the novel, Susan speaks of losing her "substance" regularly, "substance" in this situation is something which can exist independently, the basis that underlies the existence of other things. As a result of Friday’s silence, Susan Barton loses her substance because without Friday’s story, her story cannot exist independently. The oppression that Susan experiences is representative of the perceived oppression of liberal white South Africans during the apartheid. Coetzee’s exquisiteness in presenting these ideas enables the reader to recognize the huge responsibility liberal white South Africans shouldered for assisting black South Africans.

Returning back to During’s distinction of ‘post-colonizers’, those who are embroiled in the culture and language of colonialism, even while they reject imperialism” (127), there is one passage in *Foe*, in which Susan Barton entreats Foe to give her back the substance she has lost, she describes herself as a "ghost" beside the "body" of Cruso. Interestingly, a ghost finds itself bound to the same location, haunting in the same place forever, much like Susan’s soul is bound to the island. Susan depends on imprisonment to achieve her freedom; she must depend on her captivity on the island to free herself from her past and her oppressor, Friday. Implicitly, this passage symbolizes the liberal white South Africans’ desire to dissociate themselves from the oppressors with whom they share the same color of skin by designating their pasts as altruistic and sympathetic to the black South Africans. However, being a part of a group defined simply by

skin color, liberal white's struggle against the apartheid remains diaphanous, making them insubstantial entities in that struggle.

Following Cruso's death, Friday unwillingly leaves the island with Susan Barton. Susan sends a group of men from the rescue ship back on the island to retrieve Friday, because, according to her, "Friday is a slave and a child, it is our duty to care for him in all things, and not abandon him to a solitude worse than death" (Coetzee, *Foe* 39). Susan believes that Friday stands a better chance in a country he has never stepped foot in rather than staying on the island surrounded by solitude and thus, in utter freedom. Through her actions, Susan presents two important notions. First, she views Friday as an inferior barbaric being who cannot care for himself and second, she proclaims the duty of those in power to take care for "lower" people in their authority. Although these notions appear contradictory, they both seem interrelated when viewed in the scope of political arena of apartheid in South Africa. Since Susan Barton is representative of liberal white South Africans, Coetzee demonstrates that the liberal whites are the ones being oppressed as they are entrapped between two opposing sides: the black South Africans whom they sympathize with yet fear, and the reactionary ruling whites whom they share the color of their skin but not the color of social or political beliefs. However, although liberal white South Africans want to free and protect blacks from the apartheid, the type of freedom they wish to give the blacks is a freedom of their own design, not necessarily the extent or type of freedom desired by black South Africans.

Coetzee's achievement in *Foe* represents the mind of an author well accustomed to the political struggle in South Africa. Although his abstractness and the subtlety in presenting ideas may have caused some critics to disregard the relevance of his metaphors, Coetzee has certainly made a harsh political statement that transcends the field of literature into the realm of real life politics. At the time of this novel's publication, the apartheid era neared its worst stages of oppression and violence against the black South Africans.. Through the dilemma of Susan Barton, Coetzee passes on the senses of helplessness, anger, and oppression felt by liberal whites. However, through Friday, Coetzee successfully reverses the roles of the colonizer and the colonized, creating a spotlight of hope to a very real oppressed community.

## II. 2. *Life and Times of Michael K*

Coetzee's 1983 novel, *Life and Times of Michael K*, a story of a man named Michael K, who makes an arduous journey from Cape Town to his mother's rural birthplace, amid a fictitious civil war during the apartheid era in the 1970-80s, delves into the politics of South Africa by immersing the reader in the fictionalized events of a very real human tragedy. Coetzee depicts the South African apartheid through the lens of a man completely uninvolved in the war. However, as the title character's experiences prove, it is impossible to escape the apartheid. Through this novel, Coetzee erases the doubt and ambiguity about his firm place as a voice of the apartheid by placing the narrative in the heart of South Africa. Coetzee's political scope in the novel offers two confounding and disturbing choices for reacting to the apartheid. Either to remain completely uninvolved with the result of living in homelessness, lethargy, and starvation, or to become involved in the war and risking self-freedom. Needless to say, neither option looks appetizing, but that is the point. Coetzee understands the bitter truth of the apartheid: no one can escape it and its effects are devastating. As evidenced throughout the novel, while potentially more difficult and harmful during the journey, silent resistance allows the achievement of an

ideological freedom so sorely sought after by liberal white South Africans instead of failing in attempts to grasp an empathetic understanding of victims of the apartheid.

As the narrative shifts between first and third person narrators throughout the novel's three sections, questions of narrative point of view arise. As in *Foe*, Coetzee's interest in Michael K centers around a character whose "story... had never been an interesting one," (Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K* 68), and also similar to *Foe*, the story told depends on the work of an outside narrator. In both novels, Coetzee's discussion of storytelling and authorship suggests that the process of narration requires "interesting" stories, without which publication is impossible. But, if Coetzee's main characters in both novels have very little to offer in the way of persuasive stories, why does Coetzee dedicate two entire novels to these "uninteresting" stories? As in *Foe*, Coetzee assigns the narration duties to certain characters who can, and willingly do, communicate in *Life and Times of Michael K*. Since Michael K and Friday refrain from telling their own stories for lack of interest or otherwise, their would-be oppressors, Susan Barton and the medical officer, serve the role of creating these stories for the reader. Both imperial narrators sense some importance lies in the stories of the "other" or the "native" characters they encounter in the course of the narrative. However, both recognize that only through these "natives" this importance could be discovered. In their constant attempts to acquire these stories, both Susan Barton in *Foe* and the medical officer in *Life and Times of Michael K* become so dependent on obtaining these accounts for their own personal benefit that the silence they receive instead serves to oppress them. In both novels, each narrator describes the silence they encounter in similar terms. The medical officer describes Michael K's silence in expressions that elicit images of suffocation, "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" (Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K* 140). The density of Michael K's silence creates images of the "black smoke" of Friday in *Foe*, but in this passage the medical officer uses terms and expressions that apply more directly to South Africa and to the apartheid.

Through his novels, *Foe* and *Life and Times of Michael K*, Coetzee presents a perception of silence that differs greatly from the perception which emerges from the work of most postcolonial writers. In general, the postcolonial discourse recognizes the relation of language to power and oppression and the crucial role that language plays in hindering the ability of the "other" to express self. However, this is not the case in Coetzee's fiction, where the "other", uses silence as a weapon to oppress the oppressor and to grasp a sense of self-freedom. In this representation of the silent "other", Coetzee invests silence with a power that undermines the hegemony of speech. The very idea of using silence as a weapon to defy one's own oppression and to cause the oppression of another is revolutionary and almost wholly neglected by critics of Coetzee. Most focus on the oppression of Friday and Michael K in their close readings of the texts, however, Coetzee's minute attention to diction allows for different interpretations. Thus, the importance Coetzee places on silence as a double-edged weapon and the results of this action on characters (particularly white characters) is too great to be ignored. This importance lies in the literature's way of spreading ideas, emotions and stories across continents and cultures.

### III. Conclusion

To conclude, J.M. Coetzee is not the first South African to win the Nobel Prize in Literature for work concerning the apartheid. However, like Nadine Gordimer's but more explicitly, Coetzee's fiction addresses both black oppression and white guilt as its own form of oppression. Coetzee's

achievement lies in his ability to create an association between silence and resistance. Silence in fact becomes the means through which the “other”, represented by Friday and Michael K, resist the languages of imperialism. Since the imperialists, Barton and the medical officer, position of dominance hinges on a recognition of them as masters, the silence of Friday and Michael K denies them this position. The South African apartheid was one of the greatest human tragedies in history; however, it existed as back-page news outside the African context. Through his fiction, Coetzee enlightens the western world to the horrors of the apartheid and the idea that the conflict was not so simple as merely black versus white. It also allows for different reflections and considerations on history’s most evil oppressions.

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