

# *Language and Liberation: A Study of J.M. Coetzee's Postcolonial Writing*

Yilin Liu<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Southampton University, Highfield Road, Southampton, UK

a. yl8c23@soton.ac.uk

\*corresponding author

**Abstract:** This paper explores postcolonialism in the works of J.M. Coetzee, analyzing his critique of imperial discourse, narrative multiculturalism, and the pursuit of individual liberation. As a South African author profoundly influenced by apartheid and multiculturalism, Coetzee's major works—*Disgrace*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and *Life & Times of Michael K*—illustrate the lingering trauma of colonial history and resist the authority of imperial discourse. Through an examination of Coetzee's writings, this study analyzes his critique of imperial centrism and proposes the possibility of reexamining human dignity and freedom within a postcolonial context. By approaching the interplay between discourse and power, this paper investigates how Coetzee deconstructs grand narratives and constructs pluralistic discourses to challenge authority. Through allegorical storytelling and classical rewritings, Coetzee blurs the boundaries between history and fiction, exposing the hypocrisy and oppression embedded in colonial history. Furthermore, Coetzee amplifies marginalized voices through polyphonic and multiperspectival narratives. His liberal ideology and diasporic aesthetics explore individual resistance in postcolonial societies. By decentralizing narratives and embracing multicultural perspectives, Coetzee rejects monolithic collective authority and advocates for true freedom beyond power systems. As a diasporic intellectual, Coetzee constructs globally conscious literary narratives that transcend racial and regional boundaries, offering significant insights into cultural diversity and human dignity within the context of globalization.

**Keywords:** Coetzee, Postcolonialism, Liberation

## 1. Introduction

John Maxwell Coetzee is a globally renowned contemporary writer, widely recognized for his profound insights into postcolonial issues. Born in South Africa, Coetzee's writing is deeply influenced by apartheid policies and multicultural environments. His representative works, including *Disgrace*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and *Life & Times of Michael K*, explore the enduring legacies of colonialism and issues of identity. Awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2003, Coetzee's works not only analyze the historical trauma of the colonial period but also question the authority of modern imperial discourse. "Coetzee's novels can be read as a powerful and incisive statement about human nature and the way it is determined and molded by language.[1]"

Coetzee recurrently interrogates and challenges the authority of imperial discourse in his works. Zhang argues that Coetzee reshapes colonial narratives through allegorical storytelling and classical

rewriting, challenging the historical authority of imperial centers while questioning the legitimacy of imperial language. In both colonial and postcolonial contexts, empires use discourse as a tool to shape the image of the colonized, suppress multicultural expressions, and establish centralized power structures.[2] *Waiting for the Barbarians* reveals the process by which the empire manufactures concepts of the “Other” and “barbarian” to legitimize power. Coetzee’s works also highlight the tensions and integrations between different cultures, races, and genders in colonial and postcolonial societies. His exploration not only focuses on the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, but also reveals the multilayered oppressions of race, gender, and class. These multidimensional investigations make the postcolonial themes in Coetzee’s works more profound and diverse. Individual liberation and resistance to imperial centrism are also central in Coetzee’s works. By depicting individuals’ resistance to imperial oppression, Coetzee explores the possibilities of freedom and humanity in postcolonial societies. Wang emphasizes that Coetzee’s “liberal centrist position” offers a critical perspective on power structures, while showing the pursuit of individual agency within multicultural and transitional societies. Through these narratives, Coetzee accentuates the tensions between individual liberation and imperial centrism, proposing the necessity of rethinking human dignity and freedom in the postcolonial context.[3]

In summary, Coetzee’s postcolonial works present a complex historical and realistic context of colonial societies, focusing on critiques of imperial discourse, the fusion of multiculturalism, and the exploration of individual liberation. This paper will further investigate the profound implications of postcolonial themes in Coetzee’s works, analyzing his critique of imperial centrism and his pursuit of individual freedom.

## **2. Discourse and Power**

### **2.1. Deconstructing Grand Narratives**

Grand narratives, formed since the Enlightenment, are a kind of rationalist myth that constructs coherent, unified histories and realities to legitimize specific worldviews. Postmodernist theories critique grand narratives and advocate for decentralization and the deconstruction of totality. They emphasize individuality, difference, and uncertainty. Lyotard’s definition of “postmodern” as “unbelief in grand narratives” reinforces this critique. The history of colonial oppression worldwide combines military conquest with ideological control, with grand narratives playing a crucial role. History, like literature, is a form of discourse whose form and content are deeply tied to the historian’s ideology, often diverging from so-called objective truth. During South Africa’s colonial rule, rulers manipulated history and literary discourse to construct the “South African myth,” claiming whites as divinely chosen and Blacks as natural slaves, thereby establishing white dominance and legitimizing colonial rule.[2]

Coetzee argues that even realist creations risk becoming accomplices to history. Both history and realist fiction claim to be based on “real life,” but when linked with ideology, such “reality” becomes dubious. Coetzee’s works eschew the methods demanded by South African realists, using allegorical storytelling, classical rewriting, and fictional narratives to deconstruct the grand narratives of colonial historical discourse and challenge the authority of historical discourse. He transforms colonial history into symbolic allegorical tales, blurring the boundaries between history and fiction. *Waiting for the Barbarians* exemplifies this approach by metaphorically portraying colonial violence and the corruption of power in an unspecified colonial context, questioning the authenticity and legitimacy of grand narratives. This writing style not only diminishes the influence of traditional colonial narratives but also provides space for marginalized voices to reinterpret history, challenging rulers’ monopolization of history.

In *Foe*, Coetzee parodies and critiques Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, engaging in a dialogue with classical colonial narratives. By constructing an open-ended textual structure, Coetzee presents diverse historical perspectives and cultural views, thereby fully challenging the monotony and exclusivity of colonial narratives. By redefining the relationship between Robinson and Friday, Coetzee deconstructs the binary opposition between colonizer and colonized, exposing the limitations of the colonialist ideology underlying *Robinson Crusoe*. [4]

Coetzee's narrative further adopts the perspectives of the colonized, minorities, and gendered margins, challenging the exclusivity of "center" positions in traditional colonial narratives. The author amplifies the voices of the excluded and oppressed "Others" and brings them to the forefront of history, dismantling the binary oppositions of "center" and "periphery" in classical texts. For instance, in *Foe*, the island story is rewritten from the first-person perspective of the female narrator, Susan Barton. This not only reshapes the power dynamics of the narrative but also endows women with subjectivity. The inclusion of female voices reconstructs the logic of the story's narrative by decentralizing the authority of the classic text and questioning the male-centered historiographical approach. Similarly, Friday's "silence" becomes a powerful narrative force, embodying the implicit resistance of the oppressed against colonial discourse. Robinson's image is downgraded to that of a failing figure striving to maintain control but gradually losing authority, undermining his symbolism as a "civilized colonizer." By diversifying character relationships, Coetzee reveals the complexity and contradictions of colonial logic. He endows characters like Susan Barton and the Black character Friday with greater subjectivity, transforming them from oppressed Others to central figures in the narrative. This strategy reflects on the colonial logic and power dynamics inherent in classical texts, allowing for a critical reexamination of these relationships. [5]

## 2.2. Pluralistic Construction of Discourse

Coetzee's postcolonial writing is distinguished by a unique narrative philosophy that rejects authoritative literary practices. In the South African colonial context, Black writers opposed white rule with Western languages, while leftist white writers attempted to speak for Black people but relied on Western literary and political traditions. Such writers inadvertently became "political spokespersons," reinforcing authority. Coetzee challenges this literary authority by deconstructing it through the lens of marginalized identities. For instance, in *Life & Times of Michael K*, the medical officer's well-meaning efforts to speak on Michael's behalf reveal the inherent problems of representation and reinforce structures of authority. Coetzee rejects such literary missions, questioning even the value of literary writing itself. This resistance to authority and the construction of pluralistic discourses defines his postcolonial narrative practices. [2]

Coetzee employs intertextuality to construct diverse discourses. By engaging in dialogue between texts and between the author and his characters, he dismantles traditional monolithic narratives, creating open, pluralistic spaces for discourse. In *Foe*, Coetzee dialogues with Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. While Defoe's *Crusoe* symbolizes the "civilized colonizer" who controls the island's space and order, Coetzee overturns this power dynamic by making Susan Barton the narrative core. By reimagining the relationship between Robinson and Friday, Coetzee deconstructs the binary opposition between master and servant, exposing the limitations of the colonialist ideology embedded in *Robinson Crusoe*. Through intertextual dialogues, Coetzee critiques and redefines the classics, dismantling blind adherence to the canon and questioning authority. Intertextual dialogues also reveal the relationship between language and power. The colonial manipulation of discourse underscores how language serves as a tool of authority, a principle that extends to literary language. Traditional novel writing often positions characters as instruments of the author's ideas, reflecting a controlling dynamic. In contrast, Coetzee allows his characters to serve as conduits for his voice, adopting a dialogic approach to writing that interrogates the presence of power in literary narratives. By

emphasizing dialogue over monologue and openness over closure, Coetzee enables a multiplicity of voices to coexist. This dialogic method alters the authoritative narrative of traditional historical writing. By diversifying language, Coetzee's characters become independent and vibrant, granting the oppressed an opportunity for expression.[6]

Coetzee's use of polyphonic and multiperspectival narration breaks the monologic nature of colonial discourse, presenting a plurality of voices in history and reality. In *Foe*, the author's shifting perspectives expose the intricate power dynamics between colonizer and colonized, bringing diverse identities and cultural voices to the narrative core. In *Dusklands*, dual narrators, Dawn and Jacobus, from different temporal and spatial backgrounds, collectively reveal the continuity of colonialism's language and violence, broadening the space for diverse discourses. Additionally, Coetzee disrupts linear time logic, deconstructing progressive temporal narratives inherent in colonial discourse. For example, in *In the Heart of the Country*, Magda's fragmented and non-linear storytelling reflects the structural contradictions of colonial power. Moreover, Coetzee grants narrative authority to non-dominant characters, deconstructing colonial myths. Marginalized figures like Magda and Michael, through their unique perspectives, challenge the legitimacy of authoritative discourses. In *Life & Times of Michael K*, Michael's silent and nearly imperceptible presence becomes a potent symbol of anti-colonial resistance. By refusing to participate in any colonial discourse—whether the imperial regime's authoritative language or revolutionary rhetoric—Michael's silence itself becomes an act of defiance against power. Through Michael's non-authoritative narration, Coetzee reveals the absurdity and oppression of colonial discourse.[7]

### **3. Individual Freedom and Resistance**

#### **3.1. Liberalism and Resistance**

Liberal thought has a long tradition in Western philosophy, but J.M. Coetzee's liberalism is not a mere extension of Enlightenment values. Rather, it is profoundly shaped by his upbringing and the unique historical context of South Africa. Coetzee's personal values began to manifest early; for instance, as a child, when asked about his religious beliefs at school, he felt perplexed because his family was "nothing." Educated in traditional Western literature and philosophy, Coetzee's intellectual development was influenced by the liberal values of the Enlightenment. However, he did not wholly embrace Western-centric narratives. During his studies abroad, he critically reflected on the expansionism and cultural hegemony of colonialism through a multicultural lens. Growing up under the apartheid system in South Africa, although being white, Coetzee maintained a keen awareness of oppressive power structures and racial inequality, demonstrating a deep commitment to individual freedom. Coetzee pays particular attention to the dual role of language in power and liberty, asserting that language can serve both as a tool of oppression and as a medium for individual expression and freedom. Coetzee creates opportunities for the oppressed to express themselves through the fragmentation and diversity of language. In his works, language is always anti-authoritarian, rejecting the singularity and linear logic of traditional narratives. [3]

Coetzee's works underscore the importance of individual freedom, emphasizing resistance in oppressive systems. This liberal stance permeates much of his writing, particularly in *Life & Times of Michael K*. In the novel, Michael chooses to distance himself from colonial authority while rejecting revolutionary movements. He aligns neither with colonial power nor with the opposition guerrillas. Instead, Michael chooses silence and solitude as forms of self-expression. Through this approach, Michael refuses to become a tool within any power discourse, countering dominant oppressive narratives in his own way. Coetzee expresses a central theme: freedom must be sought outside power structures and ideologies rather than within them. In the story, Michael integrates with nature, distancing himself from political revolutions and relying on the land and its nourishment. This

represents a reconstruction of freedom centered on the individual. By narrating Michael's pastoral existence, Coetzee removes him from historical and political contexts, creating a space for individual liberty. Coetzee's writing also exhibits a unique cosmopolitan perspective that transcends nationalist boundaries and emphasizes universal values. Through de-nationalized narrative strategies, Coetzee critiques the authority of nationalist discourses. In *Life & Times of Michael K*, Coetzee deliberately blurs Michael's racial and class attributes, diminishing the emphasis on traditional racial conflict. For example, Michael's identity is not explicitly tied to any ethnic or class group but is hinted at with the ambiguous "CM" designation. This lack of specificity dissolves the labels of national belonging, transforming Michael into a symbol of universal relevance. Coetzee also defuses racial and class significance through character language and identity generalization. Policemen, soldiers, and medical officers in the novel lack explicit cultural or racial markers. By employing this narrative strategy, Coetzee emphasizes the hybridity of social identity.

Coetzee critiques nationalist discourse, which often consolidates collective identity by erasing differences—a process that can exacerbate power concentration and racial conflict. Within the context of South African independence, nationalist narratives failed to resolve racial tensions and, in some cases, heightened opposition to white colonialists, hindering reconciliation. Through de-nationalized and de-historicized narrative approaches, Coetzee transcends nationalist frameworks, offering an ethical vision grounded in universal values. [8]

### 3.2. Liberation Politics and Diasporic Aesthetics

Diasporic aesthetics, emerging as a key concept in postcolonial literature, focuses on the histories, cultures, and identities of marginalized and displaced communities. These communities often find themselves in states of cultural hybridity, disconnected from their original identities. Diasporic aesthetics examines how these groups locate themselves within foreign cultures while interacting with dominant narratives. Homi Bhabha's "third space" theory highlights cultural hybridity, asserting that in the interplay of cultural exchange and power dynamics, marginal cultures disrupt colonial power's singular logic and generate new subjectivities. Similarly, Spivak emphasizes the problem of the "silence" of the subaltern, cautioning against using "representation" to further oppress marginalized voices while advocating for open discourse.

Coetzee incorporates these diasporic aesthetic theories into his literary works. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee narrates from the perspective of marginalized groups, placing colonial power's legitimacy under scrutiny. Through silence and ambiguous identities, he reveals the absurdity of dominant power discourses, echoing Bhabha's notions of cultural hybridity. In *Foe*, Coetzee portrays the voicelessness of the oppressed through Friday, illustrating how colonial systems deprive marginalized groups of their agency. However, through non-verbal forms like body language and music, Friday is afforded an implicit form of expression, challenging the dominance of language and resonating with Spivak's call for the representation of the marginalized. [9]

Colonial histories often narrate the colonizer's system as "civilization" and dismiss the cultures and lives of colonized people as "barbarism." This dichotomy was particularly pronounced in South Africa. Colonizers used tools such as missionary work, education, and language to impose Western religion, economic models, and linguistic dominance on indigenous populations, while simultaneously leveraging local tribal systems and traditional values to reinforce their rule. This form of modernization inherently served colonial interests.

Coetzee deconstructs the "civilized versus barbarian" binary in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The empire's conquest of the "barbarians" is revealed as a false form of justice, sustained by fabricated threats and the demonization of indigenous groups to legitimize colonial power. Through narrative reversals, Coetzee portrays the complexities of the "barbarians." The modernizing progress imposed by colonizers is often predicated on a singular value system that disregards the world's diversity. For

instance, industrialization and urbanization are considered as "help" by the colonizers. But these actions frequently disrupted traditional lifestyles and exacerbated societal inequalities and cultural imbalances. In his novels, Coetzee employs defamiliarization strategies. "The Other" is not a monolithic, passive object but a complex entity with agency and diverse values. This approach dismantles the Western-centric absolutism that defines "the Other," fostering richer cultural expressions and perspectives. [10]

Coetzee's novels reflect a cosmopolitan vision that transcends regional and racial boundaries, challenging the homogenizing framework of colonial narratives. In *Life & Times of Michael K*, Coetzee uses a de-racialized strategy to create dialogues that span cultures and identities. Homi Bhabha's "third space" theory asserting cultural hybridity effectively resists colonial logic resonates with Coetzee's methodology. Through this cosmopolitan lens, Coetzee reminds readers that the world cannot be reduced to a singular narrative but is instead composed of countless local experiences and individual stories.

This cosmopolitan stance not only critiques colonial power but also offers a new direction for postcolonial literature, highlighting the interplay of global diversity and individual dignity.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study deeply analyzes the postcolonial issues portrayed in J.M. Coetzee's novels. Coetzee deconstructs grand narratives to dismantle the authority of colonial discourse, reflecting the oppressive nature of imperial ideologies. He emphasizes the importance of individual freedom, employing a polyphonic and multiperspectival method to critically examine the relationships between power and liberty. In the context of globalization, Coetzee's cosmopolitanism transcends racial and regional boundaries, embodying a pursuit of cultural diversity and individual dignity. This study offers a fresh perspective on understanding postcolonial literature, revealing the complex interplay between power and humanity in a postcolonial context.

As a diasporic intellectual, Coetzee finds himself in a dilemma: he cannot fully inherit European literary traditions yet remains detached from local cultures. This dual perspective allows him to present the intricacies of postcolonial societies with exceptional depth. Through his "island consciousness," Coetzee unveils the precarious state of diasporic groups in their resistance to power, reflecting intellectual contemplation of cultural dissent. [11] His insights provide new approaches for postcolonial studies, not only exposing imperial oppression but also advocating for a reassessment of cultural diversity and liberty in a globalized world. Coetzee's works remain vital references for comprehending postcolonial society and its enduring challenges.

#### References

- [1] Canepari-Labib, M. (2000). *Language and identity in the narrative of J. M. Coetzee*. *English in Africa*, 27(1), 105–130.
- [2] Zhang, Y. (2013). *Discourse, Gender, and Body: A Study of Coetzee's Postcolonial Writing*. Dissertation of Shandong University.
- [3] Wang, X. (2009). *Liberation Politics and Postcolonial Literature: Naipaul, Coetzee, and Gordimer*. Dissertation of Nankai University.
- [4] Zhu, C. (2022). *Speaking for the Marginalized: A Postcolonial Rewriting of Robinson Crusoe in Coetzee's Foe*. Dissertation of Xi'an international Studies University.
- [5] Yue, F., & Kong, J. (2018). *The Reconstruction of Time and Space in Classical Colonial Narratives: A Comparative Reading of Robinson Crusoe and Foe*. *Chinese Comparative Literature*, (1), 581–691.
- [6] Cao, S. (2023). *The Identity, Agency, and Counter-discourse of the "Stranger": An Interpretation of Coetzee's Autofiction Trilogy*. Dissertation of Shandong University.
- [7] Jin, H. M. (2023). *The subversion of colonial myths in J. M. Coetzee's Dusklands*. *Foreign Literature Studies*, 45(1), 165–174.

- [8] Lin, P. (2024). *A study of Coetzee's African writing of cosmopolitanism: Taking Life & Times of Michael K as a typical case*. *Contemporary Foreign Literature Studies*, (1), 110–117.
- [9] Zhang, B. (2013). *Towards a Diasporic Aesthetics: The Global Critique in J.M. Coetzee's Novels*. Dissertation of Beijing Foreign Studies University.
- [10] Wu, L. L. (2019). *A historical research of the relationship between English literature and modernization in South Africa*. *Journal of School of Chinese Language and Culture, Nanjing Normal University*, 4, 124–131.
- [11] Cai, S. Q. (2008). *Island Consciousness: The Writing Situation of Imperial Diaspora Intellectuals*. Dissertation of Central China Normal University.