

## SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

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### **Authorship and Authority in J.M. Coetzee's Fictional Works**

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#### **Abstract**

This article intends to explore the themes of authorship and authority in J.M. Coetzee's fiction. It is argued that the motifs are not only allied but cumulatively shape the structural and thematic core of Coetzee's oeuvre – necessitating a full length study on the given topic. Coetzee's work reflects a nuanced engagement with these issues. Existing scholarship has addressed these themes, however, sporadically, often focusing on individual works in isolated pattern. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding Coetzee's persistent preoccupation in discoursing authorship and authority across his fictional works. It adopts an analytical framework to explore the feasibility, scope, and critical approaches necessary for a deeper analysis by highlighting the gaps existing in Coetzee scholarship as on date.

**Keywords:** Authorship, Authority, J.M. Coetzee.

**Introduction:**

John Maxwell Coetzee (1940–) is an illustrious South African born author and most notably a Nobel laureate (2003) who won Booker’s prize twice apart from other prestigious awards and accolades. Albeit, his fictional works are often repulsive, uncomfortable and lack the stimuli for a reader who expects to explore contemporary South African history and reality in his works. Indeed, a Coetzee reader must be prepared to be taken over by intertextual resonance and swayed by alternative current of textuality outside the text. An additional layer of historicity and/or historical reality outside the commonly known history and politics that South Africa has got to offer – is always functional in works. His self-reflexive fictioneering style, his narrative strategies coupled with ethics and politics of writing constitute the difficulties for a reader. Unlike other white South African writers such as Athol Fugard, Alan Paton, Breyten Breytenbach, André Brink, and Nadine Gordimer—who directly addressed apartheid’s racial violence—Coetzee did not align himself with this established literary tradition. Instead, he carved out a distinct narrative space, engaging with South African realities in a reflexive and interrogative manner. While Coetzee acknowledges history, he resists its dominance as a narrative force, advocating instead for a more complex interplay between history and fiction. His works encourage readers to move beyond historical representation, promoting a deconstructive approach that both engages and liberates the reader in search for meaning/meanings. This method allows positioning Coetzee’s fiction within a space between historical context and narrative autonomy.

**Ideas of Authorship and Authority in Coetzee Oeuvre:**

Coetzee never felt at home in South Africa (his grandfather was a migrant from Europe), neither in America (Coetzee’s application for citizenship in the USA was rejected for his alleged involvement in the protest against the USA’s Vietnam policy) nor truly in Australia as well.

He was aware that he was an immigrant in Australia where he began to live since 2002. In the fictional works starting from *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and onward, published during Australian phase of his career, Coetzee was strategically developing a philosophical landscape that was built on a complex critical foundation that investigated the legitimacy of authorship in terms of cultural, ethnic, epistemological and ontological sensibilities.

A crucial objective to approach and understand Coetzee's dealing with the issue of authorship and the question of authority may be double fold: first, to explore and explain Coetzee's concept of authorship and (authorial) authority and the virtues and degrees by which they are different in concept, if at all, from the concepts expounded down the ages prior to Coetzee's literary presence (since Coetzee's ideas are theoretically rooted in Eliot, Barthes, Derrida and Foucault); secondly, to find out what possible factors Coetzee takes into consideration as the determining and functional forces for the legitimacy of authorship in his own fiction.

Coetzee's whole gamut of writing may be broadly classified into two distinct groups for the facility of the development of a researcher's study in the stated topic: the first group includes those which were produced during Coetzee's South African days i.e. his early novels starting from *Dusklands* (1974) and ending with *Disgrace* (1999), or arguably with *Youth* which was published in 2002, the year in which Coetzee leaves South Africa for Australia; the second group includes all works produced during his Australian days, i.e. *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and all onward publications, the latest being *The Death of Jesus* (2019). The rationale behind this grouping is that Coetzee had commuted to Australian setting by rejecting the South African ever since 2003, i.e. with the publication of *Elizabeth Costello*.

The objectives of the study may be rationalised on the ground that Coetzee's writing gradually shifted towards ethico-philosophical foundations in exploring and expanding meanings and limitations of authority while setting varying parameters to study the

“legitimacy” (a term used by Lyotard) of the authorship in terms of nationality, culture, socio-political ground etc. in different texts.

Coetzee is found to equate the concept of authority with the concept of identity. As identity is constructed culturally and politically within the state, so the authority is constructed within the text. The study, therefore, may be broached by raising the question, if in terms of Foucault a discourse is invested with power, then what power is invested with Friday, the silent character in *Foe* (an African black slave and a cannibal as well) who is tongueless and cannot speak? Coetzee tries to define that silence itself has its own discourse, therefore it exercises its own power. Hence, whether a character is either voiced or voiceless, his national, ethnic, racial or cultural identity may also be the sole cause of exerting authority to formidably influence the discourse of others. Therefore, a research on authorship should also be aimed at exploring Coetzee’s politics of writing with the question of exercise of authority which may be influenced by either a dominant or a latent discourse already prevalent and functional within the given text.

### **Addressing Authorship and Authority in Coetzee’s Works:**

Let us consider the following facts related to Coetzee, the author before proceeding further:

First, Coetzee (1940 –) was born in a white South African family speaking Afrikaans both at home and outside. His grandfather was a European migrant (specifically a Dutch migrant) who had settled in South Africa.

Secondly, after getting his BA degree from the University of Cape Town (UCT), Coetzee moved to England for working with IBM as a Computer Programmer and also enrolling for MA in UCT. Coetzee enrolled at the University of Texas in the USA in linguistics and literature and wrote his thesis on Ford Madox Ford. Coetzee joined the University of New York as an Assistant Professor and applied for a citizenship which was eventually denied and

he moved back to South Africa in 1971. In the following year, he joined as Lecturer in the UCT and thereafter devoted his life in writing.

Thirdly, as an author, Coetzee avoids public appearances and refrains from giving any sort of interview. He did not appear personally in both the ceremonies for receiving the Booker prizes. In some rare public meetings where Coetzee appeared personally, he refused to take any question.

Fourthly, Coetzee does not refer to his authorship in first person, rather addresses it in third person as “one-who-writes.” In his notorious Nobel prize acceptance lecture (2003), Coetzee assumed the literary persona of Robinson Crusoe and read out a piece of story entitled *He and His Man*. Not only that Coetzee resorts to anonymity with respect to his own authorship but also rejects any pseudonymity in characters such as Jacobus Coetzee, John Coetzee, JC, John, Signor C etc. who are surely the characters after his own image. Coetzee prefers to call his writing *autre*-biographical, and distinguishes it from the autobiographical. This may be read a deliberate attempt to discourage his readers from peeping into his life rather encouraging him to derive out meaning from text.

Fifthly, it has been often criticized that Coetzee writes within a Western European tradition (Canonicity) and that both Coetzee and his writing suffer a displacement from the genuine South African history and context and also that Coetzee lacks the cultural authority as a South African author.

Last but not the least, Coetzee’s depth of knowledge in linguistics in line with the Chomskyan revolution in the field, coupled with his studies in the development of regional structuralism to Eurocentric poststructuralism, however, trained him to write reflexively and enabled him opposing the Western metanarratives.

Critics like Benita Parry and none other than Nadine Gordimer criticised J.M. Coetzee as a philosophical idealist, detached from the socio-political realities of the contemporary South

Africa. This perception arose largely from his first two novels namely *Dusklands* (1974) and *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) both of which conspicuously avoid direct engagement with the pressing issues of racism and apartheid. *Dusklands*, for example, comprises two novellas – *The Vietnam Project* and *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee* – which chiefly explore certain issues regarding authorship and debate over exercising authority. The former novella, in particular, critiques the censorship acts in South Africa and advocates for writers' freedom, suggesting Coetzee's early contemplation over these pressing concerns. The novel titled *In the Heart of the Country* discourses the psychological impacts of colonialism on the white South Africans directly involved in perpetuating torture. In this novel, the internal fantasies of the character of Magda reflect broader socio-political tensions at the same time. However, Coetzee's subsequent works namely, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) and *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) largely disappoint the readers seeking the grim historical accounts of South Africa. *Waiting for the Barbarians*, set in an unnamed empire, addresses themes of colonization and imperialism but in allegories. The narrative juxtaposes the empire's constructed notion of "barbarians" with its real barbaric actions, suggesting that the colonizers, not the colonized, embody true barbarity. This spatial setting invited criticism from critics like Nadine Gordimer who challenged Coetzee's reluctance to confront South Africa's historical realities explicitly. Nevertheless, Coetzee's portrayal subverts conventional identities, emphasizing the moral complexities of imperialism and the constructed nature of colonial ideologies.

Coetzee's fifth fiction *Foe* (1986) exhibits a complete departure from the South African setting. It is, as Coetzee himself says, all about authorship and the author's engagement with the act of writing. In this fiction, Coetzee puts textuality and historicity in dialectical terms, experiments with self-reflexive narratives, interrogates the Western and/or European canonicity which is essentially androcentric and the mainstream Western scholarly practice of putting Eurocentric epistemology as the parameter in verifying the legitimacy of such

historicism and the authority of such cultural representation. In this novel, Coetzee presents a story that imagines events preceding Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). He explores the untold narratives from a female perspective, highlighting the absence of this voice in Defoe's classic where the story is dominated by a male narrator. Coetzee reimagines Defoe as "Foe," portraying him as an authoritative figure who manipulates and distorts the female experience, alternatively creating a version that excludes female perspectives. The novel examines the struggles of a female narrator who seeks to share her unique experience as a castaway but cannot write the story herself. In this novel, Coetzee chiefly explore themes of authorship, authorial authority, and most significantly the marginalization of women's voices as well as the alterity (represented by Friday).

Coetzee's sixth novel *Age of Iron* (1990) serves as a powerful literary response to the invectives directed at him for his alleged detachment from the South African socio-political landscape as a white South African author. The novel narrates the shame and guilt of the protagonist named Prof. Curren, an old retired professor, in her own words for the complicity she shares in perpetuating torture against a section of her countrymen, the black populace. In *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), Coetzee returned again to the issue of authorship and the question of authority, using a complex Russian socio-political setting. It is often regarded as the bleakest among all Coetzee narratives. It exhibits a narrative continuity that started in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. *Boyhood* (1997) gives a complete different exposure to a Coetzee reader. *Boyhood* along with other two fictions – *Youth* (2002) and *Summertime* (2009), 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> works respectively, comprising the omnibus entitled *Scenes from Provincial Life* (2011), are Coetzee's fictionalized memoirs which he prefers to call *autre*-biographies instead of autobiographies. Coetzee once more returns to the South African setting, for the last time, in *Disgrace* (1999), his ninth novel. Coetzee started writing this novel immediately following the end of apartheid era in 1994. The novel stands as a milestone in Coetzee's literary career. The

novel provoked intense debates, even reaching the South African Human Rights Commission and the parliamentary Cabinet for discussion. It poses some serious questions regarding authority of individuals as well as institutions.

In 2003, Coetzee receives the Nobel Prize for Literature. In the same year *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee's 11<sup>th</sup> fiction and one of the most critically acclaimed books, is published, followed by *Slow Man* (2005) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) back to back, the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> fictions respectively. With this series of fictions, Coetzee uses a pure Australian setting and engages in philosophical exploration into what it means to be a writer with ethical responsibilities vis-a-vis socio-political and cultural liabilities. The "national-identity business" is one major preoccupation in *Slow Man*. All major characters of the novel are emigrants to Australia and either have passed or are passing through the "immigrant experience" - the tenuous experience that involves adapting as well as mimicking the "Australianness" alternatively the nationness, in the sense Bhabha used the term. The novel features Elizabeth Costello as a seminal character once more, transported from the earlier fiction in the same capacity of an author. Issues of authorship are once recounted in Mrs. Costello's search for characters for her next fiction. *Diary of a Bad Year* captures the life of an author at his senility but with his deep rooted speculations on recent world affairs and other multiple topics including themes of authorship and authority.

### **Existing Critiques on Coetzee:**

As a white South African author, J.M. Coetzee's initial reception even within South Africa was marked by ambivalence and slow acceptance. His early works failed to garner significant critical acclaim in South Africa, though he gradually gained recognition in Western literary circles, particularly following the publication of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). However,



it was not until the publication of *Foe* (1986) and his first nomination for the Nobel Prize in 1988 that Coetzee truly captured the attention of the global academic community.

The first comprehensive scholarly examination of Coetzee's fiction came with Teresa Dovey's critical treatise *Novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* (1988) where Dovey defended Coetzee's narrative artistry against critiques of cultural authority and alleged detachment from South African realities. Employing Lacanian psychoanalysis, Dovey explored Coetzee's narratives as allegories of South African society, highlighting their autobiographical elements. Although some critics considered her psychological interpretations overextended, yet, it may be said, her insights into the allegorical and autobiographical dimensions of Coetzee's fictional oeuvre opened new avenues for critical inquiry. Another seminal contribution to Coetzee studies is Susan VanZanten Gallagher's *A Story of South Africa: J.M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context* (1991). Gallagher approached Coetzee's work through a historical lens, arguing that Coetzee neither replicates nor represents history, instead he interrogates its underlying structures. Her analysis underscored Coetzee's nuanced engagement with the "historicity of history," positioning his narratives as reflective yet critical engagements with South Africa's socio-political landscape. Coetzee's own collection of essays *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1989), remains an essential text for understanding his critical perspectives. Here, Coetzee examines South African history and landscapes not through a conventional nationalistic lens but from a Western vantage point. This cross-cultural perspective provides a critical framework for understanding Coetzee's complex positioning and ethical engagements with history and identity. David Attwell who co-authored with Coetzee in writing *Doubling the Points* (1992) is another most important critic who also contributed in shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> century approach to Coetzee. Attwell's two successive publications are also very significant works: first, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (1993) which is a painstaking research on Coetzee's novelistic art as encompassing

three different wings of critical approaches, namely postmodern, postcolonial and post-structural; and the second *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* (2016) which analyses how Coetzee engages his narrative agency (the alternative self of the functional authorship) into the act of writing.

Several scholars and critics have made significant contributions offering diverse spectrum to the discourse surrounding J.M. Coetzee's fiction. Notably, Chris Danta provides a compelling analysis by drawing parallels between Coetzee's views on authorship and those of the 19th-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Danta references Kierkegaard's assertion: "As a writer, I am a peculiar sort of genius—neither more nor less—absolutely without authority and therefore completely dependent on his own liquidation so as never to become, for anyone, an authority." Coetzee also explicitly invokes Kierkegaard in *Diary of a Bad Year*, where the protagonist JC (John Coetzee) cites Kierkegaard's dictum: "Learn to speak without authority." JC interprets this as a paradox: an author gains authority by renouncing it, as demonstrated when he invests authority upon Kierkegaard simply by quoting him. This self-reflexive inquiry into the nature of authorial authority is a recurrent theme in Coetzee's work, suggesting that true authority cannot be acquired through traditional means but must be earned through an implicit contract with the reader. This assertion invites recounting the Reader-Response criticism in re-reading Coetzee oeuvre. Again, it is implicitly critical of the theoretical assertions held by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault concerning the "death of the author" and the power dynamics inherent in the discourse. Coetzee's fictional explorations in *Foe* and *Diary of a Bad Year* engage with and challenge these poststructuralist paradigms, particularly Foucault's notion of discourse as a mechanism of power and control. Consequently, any thorough analysis of Coetzee's interrogation of authorship and authority would necessitate a poststructuralist framework, incorporating the critical legacies of Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida.

**Conclusion:**

Coetzee's engagement with the notion of authority is closely linked to the concept of the "man-who-writes without authority" – a phrase that Coetzee used to describe himself. As a white South African author, now an Australian national, Coetzee consciously positions his authorship beyond the complex national politics of his origin. His positionality has frequently been scrutinized, often for valid reasons. However, Coetzee restrains in making overt declarations regarding his positionality. He maintains a deliberate reticence. This approach aligns his situatedness with T.S. Eliot's theory of impersonality, where the author separates personal authority from the text. Coetzee extends this principle beyond Eliot's modernism, engaging with postmodern reflexivity and the linguistic innovations of poststructuralism in matters such as limited communicability of lexis and problematic in fixity of meaning/meanings, as well as Western metanarratives and methods for depiction of truth. However, to conclude this article, the entire discussion held above is convincing enough that a full length study in Coetzee's persistent engagement with issues of authorship and authority is still pending. The proposed study may engage with questions such as why and how Coetzee explores multiple dimensions of authorship and raises questions regarding the authority of the author. The study may further aim to investigate Coetzee's intellectual landscape vis-a-vis his transnational mobility, his conspicuous confessional and ethico-philosophical turn in later works, his ideas on the ethics of reading, so on and so forth.

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