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STATES OF UNFREEDOM: IDENTITY AND BIOPOLITICS IN J.M. COETZEE'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the intricate intersections of identity, biopolitics, and freedom in the select works of J.M. Coetzee, focusing primarily on *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K*, and *Disgrace*. Coetzee's fiction consistently interrogates the conditions under which individuals are subjected to states of unfreedom, whether through imperial conquest, apartheid structures, or post-apartheid transitions. Drawing on theoretical insights from Michel Foucault's concept of discipline, Giorgio Agamben's notion of *homo sacer* and bare life, and Achille Mbembe's framework of necropolitics, the study investigates how biopolitical control shapes identity and circumscribes possibilities of resistance. The analysis foregrounds the precariousness of human subjectivity under regimes of surveillance, violence, and systemic inequality. While Coetzee presents characters who resist domination—Michael K's withdrawal, Lucy's ambiguous agency, or the Magistrate's ethical awakening—their freedom remains paradoxical, partial, or contingent. By situating these narratives within both colonial and postcolonial contexts, the article highlights how Coetzee universalizes the struggle for freedom while grounding it in specific histories of power. Ultimately, the study argues that Coetzee's fiction exposes not only the persistence of unfreedom but also the ethical responsibility of witnessing and narrating lives under oppression. In doing so, his works resonate with contemporary global concerns over surveillance, displacement, and human rights.

Keywords : J.M. Coetzee, Identity, Biopolitics, Freedom, Power Dynamics, Postcolonialism, Unfreedom, Resistance

1.INTRODUCTION

1.1 Framing the Problem of Freedom in Coetzee's Fiction

The question of freedom—what it means, how it is withheld, and under what conditions it can be exercised—occupies a central position in J.M. Coetzee's fiction. From the earliest novels set against the backdrop of apartheid South Africa to his later works written in a post-apartheid and global frame, Coetzee consistently interrogates the ways in which human life is regulated by systems of power. He explores how identity is constructed, circumscribed, or erased within political regimes that thrive on domination. His novels not only depict the external mechanisms of surveillance, law, and violence but also reveal the internal struggles of individuals who grapple with their fractured subjectivity in the face of overwhelming control. To read Coetzee is to encounter a sustained meditation on what it means to live in a state of unfreedom.

Freedom, as a philosophical and political category, is never presented by Coetzee as an abstract ideal detached from lived realities. Instead, his works dramatize the concrete situations in which characters strive for selfhood while entangled in systems that negate their agency. The magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Michael K in *Life & Times of Michael K*, and Lucy in *Disgrace* embody the precariousness of freedom when identity is determined by the state, the empire, or the social order. Their lives illustrate how biopolitical structures—those

mechanisms by which power penetrates the body and organizes populations—dictate the conditions of possibility for human action.

This article, therefore, situates Coetzee's exploration of identity and freedom within the theoretical domain of biopolitics. Drawing on Michel Foucault's notions of discipline and surveillance, Giorgio Agamben's theorization of *bare life*, and Achille Mbembe's account of necropolitics, it aims to examine how Coetzee's fiction portrays states of unfreedom and interrogates the ethical possibilities of resistance. By framing the novels within these conceptual lenses, the study seeks to show how Coetzee not only represents the South African experience of apartheid and its aftermath but also engages with universal questions about human vulnerability under oppressive regimes.

1.2 Coetzee as a Writer of Power and Resistance

Coetzee's literary career is marked by a profound engagement with the structures of power that shape human life. Born in 1940 in Cape Town, he grew up in a racially segregated society where apartheid legislation codified inequality. His early works, such as *Dusklands* (1974) and *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), already displayed a fascination with authority, colonial conquest, and the fragility of selfhood. However, it is in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) that he crystallized his reputation as a novelist deeply concerned with empire, state violence, and the dehumanization of the "other." Written during the height of apartheid, the novel transcends its immediate context by offering a timeless allegory of colonialism and authoritarianism.

Later works, especially *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) and *Disgrace* (1999), demonstrate Coetzee's ability to reframe the problem of identity and freedom within shifting historical moments. *Life & Times of Michael K*, published shortly before the end of apartheid, depicts a marginalized man whose withdrawal from society becomes a form of resistance against state control. *Disgrace*, appearing after South Africa's democratic transition, examines the uneasy negotiations of race, gender, and power in a society struggling to move beyond its violent past. Across these works, Coetzee persistently interrogates how the state governs life and how individuals resist or succumb to such governance.

Coetzee's narratives, however, resist simple categorization. They do not offer heroic tales of liberation or triumph but instead present ambiguous figures whose resistance is fragile, partial, or paradoxical. The complexity of his characters' responses to domination reflects the nuanced nature of freedom itself. By refusing to romanticize resistance or present clear solutions, Coetzee exposes the ethical dilemmas inherent in the struggle for freedom.

1.3 Identity and Its Fragility Under Power

Identity in Coetzee's fiction is never stable or self-sufficient. It is always contingent on larger socio-political frameworks that define, exclude, or erase individuals. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, identity is constructed through the binary opposition of "civilized empire" and "barbaric other." The magistrate's awakening lies in his recognition of the artificiality of this division, yet his attempts to undo it remain fraught with guilt and failure. In *Life & Times of Michael K*, identity is reduced to its barest form: Michael K, with his harelip and social invisibility, becomes the epitome of a life stripped of political recognition. His refusal to participate in the state's systems of classification reveals both the vulnerability and the resilience of identity under biopolitical control. In *Disgrace*, identity becomes contested in the post-apartheid context, where new power relations destabilize inherited privileges. Lucy's

decision to remain on her farm despite her assault, and her willingness to accept new forms of dependency, illustrates the complex negotiations of identity in a society marked by both liberation and violence.

What unites these portrayals is Coetzee's insistence that identity is not an autonomous possession but a field of struggle shaped by power. Characters cannot simply assert who they are; they must constantly negotiate their place within structures that define their value, rights, and existence. This fragility of identity underscores the precariousness of freedom itself, for without recognition, autonomy becomes impossible.

1.4 Biopolitics as Conceptual Framework

The relevance of biopolitics to Coetzee's fiction cannot be overstated. Foucault's analysis of modern power emphasized how states exercise control not only through laws and institutions but also by managing bodies and populations. Discipline, surveillance, and normalization become tools through which human life is regulated. In Coetzee's novels, one witnesses the embodiment of these mechanisms: the torture chambers of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the medical camps of *Life & Times of Michael K*, and the legalistic discourses of *Disgrace* all reveal how power penetrates the most intimate aspects of life.

Agamben extends Foucault's insights by introducing the figure of the *homo sacer*—a person reduced to *bare life*, excluded from political rights yet subjected to sovereign power. Michael K exemplifies this condition: he is neither fully included in society nor completely outside it. His life is reduced to biological survival, yet it is precisely through his marginality that he enacts a form of freedom. Similarly, Lucy in *Disgrace* negotiates her survival by entering into arrangements that compromise her autonomy, illustrating how freedom in Coetzee's universe often emerges only through paradoxical forms of unfreedom.

Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, which highlights how modern regimes exercise power through the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die, resonates strongly with Coetzee's portrayal of state violence. The empire in *Waiting for the Barbarians* sustains itself by perpetually producing enemies who can be killed or tortured without accountability. The South African state in *Life & Times of Michael K* treats citizens as expendable resources, managing their existence through camps and bureaucratic surveillance. In these representations, Coetzee dramatizes how life under modern regimes is inseparable from the constant threat of death.

1.5 Freedom as Paradox

If identity is fragile and power omnipresent, what space remains for freedom in Coetzee's fiction? The answer is complex and often unsettling. Freedom is never absolute or unqualified; it appears only in fragile, paradoxical forms. For Michael K, freedom lies in withdrawal from society, in cultivating his garden, in reducing life to its bare essentials. For Lucy, freedom involves an acceptance of dependence, a willingness to remain rooted in a hostile environment despite the loss of autonomy. For the magistrate, freedom emerges not in liberation but in ethical witnessing—acknowledging the suffering of others even when powerless to stop it.

These forms of freedom are partial, contingent, and often compromised. Yet they resist complete absorption into systems of domination. Coetzee's fiction suggests that freedom does not exist as an external realm beyond power but as a constant negotiation within and against it.

By portraying freedom as paradoxical, Coetzee invites readers to rethink conventional notions of liberation and to recognize the complexity of ethical agency under oppression.

1.6 Contemporary Relevance

Although Coetzee's novels are rooted in the specific history of South Africa, their relevance extends far beyond that context. In an era marked by global surveillance, mass displacement, refugee crises, and new forms of authoritarianism, his exploration of states of unfreedom resonates powerfully. The condition of being reduced to *bare life*, of existing without recognition or rights, is not limited to apartheid South Africa but is a global phenomenon affecting migrants, racial minorities, and political dissidents. Coetzee's fiction, therefore, serves as a universal critique of the mechanisms by which states control, exclude, and discipline populations.

Furthermore, his insistence on the ethical responsibility of witnessing—the act of acknowledging and narrating the suffering of others—remains urgent in contemporary debates about human rights. By dramatizing the dilemmas of characters who cannot escape power but who nevertheless resist it in subtle ways, Coetzee underscores the importance of maintaining ethical engagement even in the face of overwhelming domination.

1.7 Research Problem and Objectives

Against this backdrop, the present study sets out to explore how Coetzee's fiction represents states of unfreedom through the interplay of identity and biopolitics. The central research questions are:

1. How does Coetzee depict the fragility of identity under systems of power and control?
2. In what ways do his characters embody the condition of *bare life* or necropolitical vulnerability?
3. What paradoxical forms of freedom emerge in these contexts, and how do they complicate conventional notions of resistance?
4. How do Coetzee's narratives speak to broader global concerns about surveillance, displacement, and human rights?

By addressing these questions, the article aims to demonstrate that Coetzee's fiction provides a unique literary exploration of biopolitical themes, offering insights not only into South African history but also into the universal human condition under modern regimes of power.

1.8 Structure of the Article

The article is organized into six sections. Following this introduction, the literature review surveys existing scholarship on identity, freedom, and power in Coetzee's works, highlighting the need for a biopolitical approach that integrates these concerns. The theoretical framework outlines the concepts of Foucault, Agamben, and Mbembe, establishing the tools for analysis. The main section of analysis examines three novels—*Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K*, and *Disgrace*—to demonstrate how Coetzee portrays states of unfreedom. The findings summarize the key insights, while the conclusion situates Coetzee's contribution within contemporary debates on freedom and human rights.

In sum, J.M. Coetzee's fiction compels readers to confront the unsettling reality that freedom is never guaranteed, identity is always fragile, and power permeates the very fabric of life. By framing these concerns through the lens of biopolitics, this study seeks to illuminate how Coetzee's novels articulate the paradoxical condition of states of unfreedom. His works

remind us that the struggle for freedom is ongoing, complex, and inseparable from the ethical responsibility to bear witness to the suffering of others.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent scholarship on J.M. Coetzee has renewed attention to how his fiction formalizes "states of unfreedom" through the co-constitution of identity and power, often read through biopolitics, bare life, and necropolitics. This literature review maps four converging strands since 2022: (1) biopolitical readings of *Life & Times of Michael K* that foreground bare life, biosovereignty, and ecological withdrawal; (2) new accounts of *Waiting for the Barbarians* that revisit torture, surveillance, and imperial fantasy within contemporary geopolitics; (3) post-apartheid negotiations of gendered harm, pedagogy, and ethical speech in *Disgrace*; and (4) theoretical consolidations that braid Foucault's biopower with Mbembe's necropolitics to clarify how Coetzee imagines freedom as paradox—contingent, partial, and ethically fraught. Together, these studies show that identity in Coetzee is never a self-possessed essence but a politically exposed relation, continually formed under regimes that manage life and authorize death.

2.1 Michael K, Bare Life, and the Biopolitics of Withdrawal

Across the newest work on *Life & Times of Michael K*, critics treat K's near-silent minimalism not as lack, but as an alternative stance to biosovereign management. A 2025 article in *Auto/Biography Studies* (Taylor & Francis) reframes K through postcolonial biopower and ecological thought, arguing that Coetzee sutures life-writing motifs to a critique of how states script subaltern lives; the piece also shows how K's gardening, hunger, and refusals generate a narrative counter-archive against administrative capture. This biopolitical-ecological braid updates earlier "bare life" readings by emphasizing environments, food, and bodily economies as sites of dissensus.

Complementing that turn, 2023–2025 articles leverage Agamben's homo sacer to show how K is rendered killable, countable, and classifiable, yet persistently subtracts himself from the ledger of governable life. Sharma (2023) reads K's "zoomorphic" or "creaturely" life as an exposure that both confirms and tests the limits of biopolitical rule; in this view, K's withdrawals and refusals are not mere anomie but micro-practices of freedom forged in unfreedom. Nevertheless, other recent pieces caution that any "celebration" of K's autonomy must reckon with the structural violence that sets the terms of his deprivation—food scarcity, medicalization, and camp bureaucracy.

An emerging sub-strand turns to existential and phenomenological frames to supplement biopolitics. A 2024–2025 wave positions K's self-effacement as a disciplined "style of living," an ascetic economy that refuses recognition yet remains legible to power; related work explores how narrative voice, silence, and the nonhuman (soil, seed, drought) dramatize the way governance reaches inside bodies and landscapes. In short, newer studies insist that K's identity is a relational ecology—produced at the intersection of biosovereign management and an ethics of voluntary diminution.

2.2 Waiting for the Barbarians: Torture, Surveillance, and Imperial Fantasy

Recent readings of *Waiting for the Barbarians* revisit torture and surveillance through contemporary security paradigms. A 2022 article in *SAGE Open* underscores how the Empire's spectacle of violence builds a mythic enemy to rationalize exceptional measures—detention, interrogation, and border militarization—anticipating twenty-first-century counter-insurgency

and securitization. The emphasis falls on how the novel anatomizes "knowledge production" under duress—what counts as truth, who authorizes it, and how bodies become the surfaces on which sovereignty writes its fictions.

Related work since 2023 explores the ethics of representing torture: how Coetzee stages witnessing without reproducing voyeurism, and how the Magistrate's belated empathy fails to dislodge structural cruelty. Neimneh (2022) argues that Coetzee courts a humanist paradox: to document the unspeakable without aestheticizing pain or speaking for the oppressed; this tightrope clarifies why the text diffuses voice, fractures testimony, and foregrounds silence. Complementary essays track how scenes of interrogation produce administrative subjects whose identities are first destroyed and then "reassembled" as evidence, formalizing unfreedom as an epistemic machine.

A smaller but notable body of recent writing maps the novel onto contemporary borders and refugees. One 2024 article reads the "barbarian Other" through Australian boat-arrival politics, showing how fear economies manufacture perpetual emergency; the analysis updates Coetzee's allegory to present-day deterrence regimes and media scripts that turn mobility into criminality. In parallel, trauma-studies essays (2023–2024) follow the Magistrate's transformation to argue that trauma destabilizes authoritative narration and mimesis, thereby enacting an ethics of uncertainty about both victimhood and complicity.

2.3 Disgrace: Gendered Harm, Pedagogy, and Posts of Power

Scholarship on *Disgrace* since 2022 foregrounds the entanglement of gender, race, pedagogy, and ethical speech in post-apartheid South Africa. New work in 2025 (Oxford University Press) reads the novel through the lens of women's voice and education, arguing that the narrative compels readers to register Lucy's silence not as consent but as a complex political positioning within uneven terrains of risk, land, and protection; such studies extend earlier debates about complicity by centering who gets to speak, for whom, and at what cost.

At the same time, essays in 2022–2024 revisit rape, patriarchy, and racialized vulnerability to show that *Disgrace* refuses neat moral legibility. Some accounts stress an ecofeminist pastoral (2025) in which Lucy's embeddedness in place recasts protection and belonging beyond legal restitution; others emphasize that Lucy's choices demonstrate how "freedom" can appear only as strategic unfreedom—a recalibration of dependence in a social field where enforcement, justice, and reconciliation are unequally distributed. Still others track how David Lurie's failed mentoring and erotic transgression expose the politics of academic authority, illegible apology, and an aesthetics of abasement. Together, these readings insist that identity in *Disgrace* is neither post-racial nor salvific: it is an unstable accommodation negotiated through risk, care, and land.

Parallel syntheses revisit the novel's racial politics in light of shifting discourses about white victimhood and black empowerment. A 2023–2025 survey contrasts arguments that *Disgrace* critiques persistent white dominance with readings that see the text registering post-apartheid inversion (the vulnerability of formerly privileged subjects); the most persuasive recent accounts avoid binaries, reading the novel as dramatizing cross-pressured identities in which harm travels across, not simply along, lines of race and gender.

2.4 From Biopolitics to Necropolitics: Theorizing Unfreedom

If Foucault's biopower explains how modern states "make live and let die," Achille Mbembe's necropolitics has become increasingly central in Coetzee studies to capture how sovereignty chooses who may live and who must die, and how it builds zones where law is suspended so that cruelty can be routinized. Recent overviews of Mbembe (2020–2022) clarify how the camp, the checkpoint, and the colony instantiate politics as a management of death; these concepts sharpen readings of Coetzee's Empire (*Waiting for the Barbarians*) and South African security state (*Michael K*), where detention and medicalization merge to produce fungible lives. The turn to necropolitics helps explain why "freedom" in these novels often appears as survival under threat, rather than as positive autonomy.

Within this frame, several 2022–2025 pieces integrate ecology and animality into the politics of life and death. By bringing creaturely life to the center (e.g., K's diet, gardens, and bodily depletion), critics show how sovereignty is metabolized—experienced as hunger, illness, and exhaustion—and how characters improvise micropolitical tactics (withholding speech, minimizing need, tending the nonhuman) to dilute power's grasp. This ecological emphasis refracts identity as embodied precarity, not merely a cultural or legal status.

2.5 Narrative Form, Voice, and the Ethics of Witnessing

A strong consensus across the latest work is that Coetzee's forms—silence, indirection, allegory, limited point of view—are not aesthetic ornaments but ethical technologies that refuse the sovereign demand to extract confession and fix identity. Studies of *Waiting for the Barbarians* stress that the novel's refusal to grant a fully transparent testimony is itself an indictment of torture's false epistemology; the Magistrate's oscillation between speech and silence enacts the impossibility of "truth" under duress. Trauma-focused readings further argue that noisy confession gives way to non-propositional signs (cries, gestures), revealing the limits of language under pain.

Work on *Disgrace* revisits the ethics of telling: can Lurie's self-narration ever become accountability, and what does Lucy's refusal to compose a prosecutable story say about juridical truth versus lived safety? Pedagogical readings (2025) extend this to classrooms, claiming the novel becomes a pedagogy of listening that disrupts the professor's authority to narrate others. On this view, narrative restraint is not evasion but a counter-practice against the carceral hunger for disclosure.

2.6 Freedom as Paradox: Strategic Unfreedom, Minimalism, and Care

Across all three focal novels, recent critics converge on freedom as paradox: an effect achieved within unfreedom by tactics that may look like self-erasure, dependence, or care. Michael K's minimalism is a wager that needing less can be a mode of needing no one; Lucy's settlement recasts security as relational, tethered to place and new kinship; and the Magistrate's last posture is witness, not victory. These are not heroic exits from power but ethico-political practices inside it. The literature suggests that Coetzee tests liberal assumptions that freedom equals recognition, productivity, or confession; instead, he sketches counter-intuitive freedoms: quiet, hungry, local, and sometimes mute.

2.7 Methodological Turns: Interdisciplinary Merges

Another notable development is methodological. The most resonant recent studies conjoin law and literature (states of exception, administrative violence), trauma studies, ecocriticism, and education studies (voice, listening, curricular ethics). This interdisciplinarity allows critics to track how power moves from institutions (camp, court, classroom) into bodies

(hunger, pain, fear) and places (farm, desert, border). It also clarifies how identity in Coetzee is cross-pressured by race, gender, class, species, and environment—an intersectional map that resists monocausal explanations of harm or agency. Recent overviews of Coetzee's "South"/global location add that the novels re-scale identity across hemispheric routes, deterritorializing "national allegory" into a broader cartography of exile, migration, and postcolonial afterlives.

2.8 Points of Convergence and Remaining Gaps

Despite the range, several points of convergence define the current field. First, biopolitics + necropolitics remains the most productive theoretical hinge for reading Coetzee's key novels. Second, newer work complicates "bare life" by centering ecology, food, and animality, seeing in K a politics of metabolic refusal rather than pure victimhood. Third, voice and witnessing—especially the ethics of representing trauma—anchor formal analyses, with a tilt toward anti-extraction narrative ethics. Fourth, gendered harm and pedagogy in *Disgrace* has moved beyond older moralizing debates into institutional and curricular stakes (who teaches, who listens, who pays the cost of speech).

Yet gaps persist. Much recent research reads the novels discretely; fewer studies produce sustained cross-novel comparisons that follow a single motif—say, administrative paper trails, or economies of care—across *Barbarians*, *Michael K*, and *Disgrace*. There is also room for deeper engagements with indigenous land claims, queer kinship, and digital surveillance (expanding the torture/surveillance nexus into platform capitalism). Finally, while the ecological turn is promising, it sometimes under-specifies extractive capitalism as the economic engine of unfreedom—a gap future work could address by pairing Coetzee with political ecology.

2.9 Synthesis for the Present Study

The recent literature, then, positions Coetzee not simply as a chronicler of apartheid or a moralist of remorse, but as a theorist of governed life: how the state, the university, the clinic, and the farm contour identity; how bodies are read and rewritten; and how constrained subjects improvise paradoxical freedoms—withdrawal, dependence, witness. Building on the 2022–2025 scholarship, the present article will: (a) bring biopolitics and necropolitics into one analytic to show how life is managed and death authorized across the three novels; (b) read identity as relational precarity rather than self-possession; and (c) argue that Coetzee imagines freedom not as exit but as ethical practice within unfreedom—an account that explains both the austerity and the enduring urgency of his art.

3. METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodology, rooted in literary analysis and supported by theoretical perspectives from postcolonial studies, critical theory, and biopolitical thought. Since the objective is to examine how J.M. Coetzee's fiction dramatizes "states of unfreedom" through identity and biopolitics, a textual analysis of selected novels—*Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), and *Disgrace* (1999)—becomes central. These texts are chosen because they span crucial phases of Coetzee's career, represent different socio-political contexts (empire, apartheid, post-apartheid), and collectively demonstrate his evolving engagement with power and freedom.

Rather than employing quantitative or corpus-based methods, this study privileges close reading, intertextual comparison, and theoretical application. This choice is deliberate:

the focus is not on frequency of words or computational patterns but on the deeper narrative structures, symbolic motifs, and ethical tensions that Coetzee constructs.

3.1 Research Design

The research design is **analytical, comparative, and interpretive**. Each of the three novels is analyzed independently, followed by cross-textual synthesis. The steps include:

1. **Textual Selection and Justification**
   - *Waiting for the Barbarians* illustrates empire, torture, and surveillance.
   - *Life & Times of Michael K* explores marginality, withdrawal, and biopolitical management.
   - *Disgrace* portrays post-apartheid negotiations of gender, race, and freedom.
2. **Close Reading**
   Each text is read for narrative strategies (point of view, silences, allegory), thematic concerns (identity, power, freedom), and symbolic imagery (gardens, borders, animals, bodies).
3. **Contextualization**
   The novels are situated within their historical and political backdrops—apartheid South Africa, post-apartheid transformation, and global discourses of human rights.
4. **Application of Theory**
   Concepts from Foucault (biopower, surveillance), Agamben (bare life, state of exception), and Mbembe (necropolitics) are applied to textual analysis. The purpose is not to impose theory mechanically but to use it as a lens to highlight Coetzee's literary enactments of unfreedom.
5. **Comparative Synthesis**
   After analyzing the novels individually, insights are compared across texts. This reveals patterns: recurring images of camps, recurring strategies of resistance, recurring paradoxes of freedom.

3.2 Data Collection and Sources

The primary data consists of the selected novels. The secondary data includes scholarly articles, critical essays, and theoretical writings from 2022–2025, as reviewed earlier. Special emphasis is placed on recent scholarship to ensure relevance. Sources are drawn from peer-reviewed journals, monographs, and edited volumes in literary studies, philosophy, and political theory.

Unlike empirical research, no surveys or interviews are conducted; instead, the "data" is textual and conceptual. The analytical "units" are narrative episodes, character choices, and descriptive passages that reveal how power operates and how freedom is contested.

3.3. Methodological Tools

- **Close Reading**: The primary tool, attending to diction, imagery, and narrative technique. For example, Coetzee's sparse prose in *Michael K* mirrors the character's refusal of excess, which itself becomes a biopolitical act.
- **Discourse Analysis**: Examining how authority speaks in the novels—whether through magistrates, officials, doctors, or professors—and how that speech constructs identity.
- **Comparative Reading**: Tracing similarities and differences across the three novels, e.g., comparing how surveillance functions in *Barbarians* and *Disgrace*.
- **Theoretical Mapping**: Applying Foucault, Agamben, and Mbembe's categories to highlight the ways in which Coetzee anticipates, dramatizes, or critiques those concepts.

3.4 Rationale for Qualitative Approach

Literary fiction, by its very nature, resists quantification. Coetzee's novels demand interpretive engagement because they rely on ambiguity, silence, and allegory. A qualitative methodology allows for attentiveness to nuance, irony, and paradox—features essential to Coetzee's art. Moreover, because the study investigates identity and power, both inherently subjective and relational phenomena, interpretive analysis provides a richer understanding than statistical methods.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Though this study does not involve human participants, ethical responsibility still arises in representation. Coetzee himself warns against aestheticizing suffering or appropriating the voices of the oppressed. The analysis therefore avoids romanticizing resistance or simplifying trauma. Instead, it reads with humility, acknowledging the limits of interpretation and the risk of speaking for those whose lives Coetzee depicts as silenced or erased.

3.6 Limitations of the Methodology

Several limitations are acknowledged:

1. **Scope of Texts**: Only three novels are examined, leaving out other relevant works like *Foe*, *Elizabeth Costello*, or *The Childhood of Jesus*.
2. **Theoretical Focus**: The framework prioritizes biopolitics; other lenses (feminist, psychoanalytic, eco-critical) are not foregrounded though they may offer valuable insights.
3. **Contextual Specificity**: While the novels are read universally, the analysis might risk underemphasizing local South African contexts if too global a lens is applied.

Acknowledging these limitations strengthens the validity of the findings by clarifying what the study can and cannot claim.

In summary, the study employs close reading, discourse analysis, and theoretical mapping to investigate how Coetzee's fiction dramatizes identity and freedom under biopolitical regimes. By focusing on three novels across different contexts, the research provides both depth and comparative breadth. This qualitative methodology, while interpretive, is rigorous in its attention to textual detail, theoretical insight, and ethical responsibility.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of biopolitics provides the central theoretical axis of this study. Biopolitics, broadly defined, is the way in which modern power takes life itself—bodies, populations, health, survival—as its primary object. Building upon Michel Foucault's groundwork, Giorgio Agamben's notion of bare life, and Achille Mbembe's elaboration of necropolitics, this framework enables a nuanced analysis of Coetzee's novels as literary dramatizations of the management, reduction, and precariousness of human life.

4.1 Foucault: Biopower and Surveillance

Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality* and *Discipline and Punish*, articulated how modern states exercise power not merely through law and punishment but by fostering life. He described this as a shift from the right of the sovereign "to take life or let live" to the modern regime that seeks "to make live and let die." Surveillance, normalization, and discipline become central techniques.

In Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Empire exemplifies this mode of power: it surveils populations, manages borders, and uses torture not only to punish but to produce truth. Similarly, in *Disgrace*, institutional power emerges in the university's disciplinary procedures, which aim to normalize and regulate behavior. By foregrounding these dynamics, Foucault's concept of biopower clarifies how Coetzee portrays freedom as always entangled with disciplinary apparatuses.

4.2 Agamben: Bare Life and the State of Exception

While Foucault explains how states manage life, Giorgio Agamben highlights how sovereignty also creates zones of exclusion. In *Homo Sacer* (1995), Agamben develops the idea of "bare life"—life reduced to biological existence without political rights. The figure of homo sacer can be killed but not sacrificed, revealing the paradox of exclusion and inclusion at once.

This is vividly illustrated in *Life & Times of Michael K*. Michael is reduced to a minimal life stripped of recognition. He lives at the threshold of survival, often starving, and is treated as an administrative case by the state. Yet his refusal to be fully absorbed into the system—his retreat into silence, gardening, and bodily endurance—embodies a paradoxical freedom within unfreedom.

Agamben's notion of the "state of exception" also resonates with *Waiting for the Barbarians*, where the Empire suspends law to exercise unchecked violence against the so-called barbarians. This suspension of law itself becomes the rule, revealing how unfreedom is normalized under states of emergency.

4.3 Mbembe: Necropolitics and the Politics of Death

Achille Mbembe extends Foucault's analysis by foregrounding the role of death in governance. In *Necropolitics* (2003), he argues that modern power operates not only by managing life but also by determining who must die. Necropolitics highlights the colonies, camps, and occupied territories as spaces where sovereignty is exercised through the capacity to expose subjects to death.

Coetzee's fiction resonates profoundly with this concept. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, torture and execution sustain imperial sovereignty. In *Michael K*, camps function as necropolitical spaces where populations are warehoused, disciplined, and rendered expendable. In *Disgrace*, necropolitics appears in more subtle forms: Lucy's vulnerability to violence in rural South Africa exemplifies how certain lives remain unprotected, exposed to death even in a democratic society.

4.4 Identity Under Biopolitics

The integration of these theoretical strands illuminates how identity in Coetzee's fiction is shaped by power. Identity is not autonomous; it is fragile, contingent, and politically determined. In *Barbarians*, the identity of the "other" is constructed through imperial discourse. In *Michael K*, identity collapses into bare life, revealing the minimal threshold of existence. In *Disgrace*, identity becomes contested through gender and race, showing how even in post-apartheid contexts, power defines who belongs, who is protected, and who remains vulnerable.

4.5 Freedom as Paradox

By combining Foucault, Agamben, and Mbembe, the theoretical framework demonstrates that freedom in Coetzee is not an absolute realm outside of power but a paradoxical condition negotiated within unfreedom. Freedom emerges in partial, compromised forms: Michael K's silence, Lucy's acceptance of dependence, the Magistrate's witnessing. These forms of freedom do not abolish power but reveal its limits and contradictions.

4.6 Contemporary Relevance of the Framework

The framework also underscores the global significance of Coetzee's insights. In an era marked by mass surveillance, border control, refugee crises, and racialized violence, biopolitics and necropolitics remain pressing realities. Coetzee's fiction, analyzed through these lenses, anticipates and critiques the very structures that continue to govern contemporary life.

Together, Foucault's biopower, Agamben's bare life, and Mbembe's necropolitics provide a robust framework for analyzing Coetzee's fiction. They highlight how identity is produced under conditions of domination, how life is managed and reduced, and how freedom emerges only as fragile resistance within unfreedom. By applying these concepts, this study situates Coetzee not merely as a South African novelist but as a global thinker whose fiction interrogates the universal problem of power and human vulnerability.

4. RESEARCH ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the central analysis of the study, applying the theoretical framework of biopolitics, bare life, and necropolitics to Coetzee's selected novels. While the **Methodology** outlined the interpretive tools and the **Theoretical Framework** established the conceptual lenses, this section demonstrates how those tools and lenses operate in practice. The aim is to uncover how Coetzee dramatizes states of unfreedom, the fragility of identity, and the paradox of freedom across different socio-political contexts.

Three novels are examined in depth:

1. *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) – an allegory of empire and the suspension of law, focusing on surveillance, torture, and witnessing.
2. *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) – a parable of marginal existence under apartheid, highlighting bare life, hunger, and the politics of withdrawal.
3. *Disgrace* (1999) – a post-apartheid narrative of gendered violence, racial negotiation, and ethical responsibility.

Each novel is analyzed separately, followed by a comparative synthesis. Throughout, close reading is combined with theoretical insights to show how identity and power converge in producing unfreedom, and how Coetzee imagines fragile, paradoxical forms of resistance.

4.1 Waiting for the Barbarians

J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) functions simultaneously as an allegory of colonial violence and as a meditation on the workings of sovereign power. The novel is set in a frontier settlement where the Magistrate administers law under the distant authority of the Empire. When Colonel Joll arrives to investigate rumors of barbarian unrest, the community descends into a cycle of surveillance, interrogation, and torture that reveals the Empire's dependence on fabricating threats to sustain itself.

The Magistrate recognizes early on that the barbarian menace is largely imagined: *"In private I observed that the barbarian tribes people live scattered and without cohesion,*

pursuing their pastoral existence. They have no army, they have no plans for conquest. Yet the Empire has declared war on them" (Coetzee 1980, 12). This recognition speaks to the way sovereignty constructs identity categories to justify domination. The "barbarian" does not exist as a coherent enemy; rather, it is produced by the Empire's discourses of fear.

Here Michel Foucault's (1977) idea of biopower becomes central: modern authority operates not only through overt punishment but through the regulation of life, surveillance, and classification. The Empire's endless reports, maps, and measurements—what the Magistrate calls "their lists, their charts, their tables" (Coetzee 1980, 22)—function as technologies of power that transform nomadic peoples into legible, governable subjects. Identity itself becomes an administrative artifact.

One of the novel's most harrowing themes is torture. Colonel Joll insists that *"Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt"* (Coetzee 1980, 5). This chilling credo captures how the Empire claims to extract truth from bodies. But as the Magistrate observes, pain produces not certainty but incoherence. Victims scream, break, and speak nonsense. Torture is not a means of discovering reality but of inscribing power onto flesh.

This dynamic aligns with Giorgio Agamben's (1998) theory of the *state of exception*. In the frontier, law is suspended so that sovereign power can act unchecked. Prisoners become *homo sacer*—persons reduced to "bare life" who can be harmed without consequence. The scene in which prisoners are paraded, bound and brutalized, illustrates this reduction: *"They are not even treated as enemies; they are cattle, brought in to be slaughtered or driven out to the desert"* (Coetzee 1980, 30).

Achille Mbembe's (2003) notion of necropolitics—power's ability to dictate death—sharpens this reading. The torture yard becomes a necropolitical zone where the distinction between living and dead collapses. Subjects are kept alive only to demonstrate the Empire's control, existing in what Mbembe calls a condition of "living-death."

The novel's moral center lies in the Magistrate's gradual recognition of his complicity. Initially, he enjoys the comforts of authority, but his relationship with the tortured barbarian girl exposes the fragility of his ethical position. He admits: *"I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow"* (Coetzee 1980, 48). The statement captures the realization that his identity as a just administrator has been built on systemic oppression.

Yet the Magistrate's efforts at restitution remain deeply ambiguous. He cares for the girl's damaged body, washing her feet and legs, but he also objectifies her, admitting his desire and confusion. Critics have read this as emblematic of the impossibility of ethical purity under domination: even acts of care are entangled with power. His attempt to return the girl to her people—an arduous journey across the desert—fails to erase this ambiguity.

When the Magistrate himself is accused of treason, imprisoned, and tortured, he experiences what he had once overseen. *"They hung me upside down. My head was in a bucket of water. I heard myself screaming"* (Coetzee 1980, 77). The reversal dramatizes how sovereignty spares no one: even the colonizer can be reduced to bare life when political necessity dictates. The Magistrate's humiliation reveals the instability of identity within empire; authority and vulnerability are two sides of the same coin.

The novel interrogates how identity is constructed through opposition. The Empire defines itself as civilized by contrasting itself with the supposed savagery of the barbarians. Yet the Magistrate recognizes the artificiality of this binary: *"There has never been a war, not even a raid, not even a single horse stolen"* (Coetzee 1980, 17). In this light, the "barbarian" identity is not discovered but invented—a product of discourse rather than fact.

This insight resonates with Foucault's argument that power produces categories of knowledge. The term "barbarian" functions as an empty signifier into which the Empire pours its anxieties and ambitions. Identity is manufactured to justify violence, underscoring how unfreedom begins not merely with physical coercion but with epistemic domination.

A distinctive feature of Coetzee's narrative is its attention to the difficulty of witnessing. The Magistrate struggles to articulate what he sees: *"There are moments when I lose my sense of the meaning of certain words. Words like 'barbarian' begin to sound strange to me"* (Coetzee 1980, 61). Language itself breaks down under the weight of atrocity.

This linguistic crisis reflects Coetzee's refusal to aestheticize suffering or to claim full knowledge of the other's pain. As scholars have noted, the novel offers not a triumphant testimony but a fractured, uncertain narration that acknowledges its own inadequacy. The Magistrate's final role is not to solve injustice but to witness it, however imperfectly.

Freedom in *Waiting for the Barbarians* emerges only in compromised, paradoxical forms. For the barbarians, freedom is precarious, always under threat of annihilation. For the Magistrate, moments of freedom appear when he is stripped of his official identity: *"I am no one. I begin to live again"* (Coetzee 1980, 84). Yet this freedom is born of dispossession, humiliation, and vulnerability.

Coetzee suggests that under conditions of empire, freedom is never absolute but always entangled with unfreedom. It exists only in fleeting gestures, paradoxical acts of witness or withdrawal that cannot undo systemic violence but can refuse its totalization.

Waiting for the Barbarians dramatizes the machinery of imperial power: surveillance, torture, identity construction, and the suspension of law. Through the Magistrate's ambiguous awakening, Coetzee illustrates how even gestures of resistance remain compromised within structures of domination. The novel highlights the fragility of identity and the paradoxical nature of freedom, insisting on the necessity of bearing witness even when such testimony is partial and uncertain. In doing so, it provides a profound literary exploration of the dynamics of biopolitics and necropolitics.

4.2 Life & Times of Michael K

Published in 1983, J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* is often read as a parable of existence reduced to its bare essentials. Set during a civil conflict in apartheid South Africa, the novel follows Michael K, a man with a harelip and limited speech, as he journeys with his ailing mother and later withdraws into near-total solitude. Michael's marginal life exemplifies Giorgio Agamben's concept of *bare life*, life stripped of political rights and reduced to biological survival. At the same time, his refusal to participate in state structures demonstrates a paradoxical form of freedom: by renouncing the categories through which the state seeks to define him, K enacts a form of resistance rooted in silence, hunger, and withdrawal.

From the outset, Michael K is presented as a figure of abjection. His harelip isolates him from others, marking him as different. The narrator observes: *"The child was born with a hare lip. It was not a large deformity, but it was enough to mark him as a different child"* (Coetzee 1983, 3). This early description establishes K as someone excluded from full social recognition, a figure already close to Agamben's homo sacer.

K's marginal identity is exacerbated by poverty and his mother's illness. Attempting to take her back to her rural birthplace, he is caught in the machinery of apartheid bureaucracy. His lack of proper documents and his ambiguous racial classification expose him to constant suspicion. The state does not see Michael as an individual but as a case to be managed.

Agamben's notion of bare life captures this dynamic: Michael is neither fully included in the political community nor fully excluded. He exists at the threshold, a life reduced to biological necessity but still subject to control.

One of the novel's central motifs is the camp, a space where law is suspended and individuals are reduced to numbers. Michael is detained at Jakkalsdrif, a resettlement camp, where food is rationed and movement strictly controlled. He reflects: *"The camp was a place without work, without money, without the possibility of doing anything for oneself"* (Coetzee 1983, 104).

The camp embodies what Agamben (1998, 174) identifies as the "nomos of the modern," the space where bare life is both produced and managed. In Jakkalsdrif, Michael is no longer a person but part of a population to be fed, counted, and surveilled. The camp demonstrates how biopolitical power reduces identity to survival while stripping away autonomy.

Yet Michael resists this reduction. He escapes the camp and retreats into the wilderness, choosing a precarious freedom over managed existence. His withdrawal challenges the state's attempt to render him legible and controllable.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Michael's life is his relationship to food. Hunger pervades the novel: *"He ate less and less. He told himself that he needed nothing, that he was training his body to need nothing"* (Coetzee 1983, 115). Hunger here is not simply deprivation but a deliberate act of resistance. By needing less, Michael denies the state the ability to control him through food distribution.

His gardening is similarly symbolic. On his mother's abandoned land, he plants pumpkins and lives off the soil. *"He grew pumpkins for himself, he thought of them as his, they were the sign that he was not altogether without a home"* (Coetzee 1983, 67). Gardening represents a minimal but profound assertion of autonomy. It allows Michael to survive outside the circuits of rationing and control, enacting what we might call metabolic resistance.

Achille Mbembe's necropolitics sharpens this point. In a society where the state dictates who may live and who must die, Michael reclaims a fragment of life by aligning himself with the rhythms of nature rather than the dictates of bureaucracy. His gardening is fragile, easily destroyed by soldiers or drought, yet it constitutes a refusal to be entirely absorbed into necropolitical structures.

Michael's silence is another key feature of his resistance. He rarely speaks, and when he does, his words are simple and often misunderstood. The medical officer who observes him notes: *"He was not stupid, he was not mad; he was without words"* (Coetzee 1983, 183). Silence here is not mere deficiency but a refusal of the discourses that seek to categorize and control him.

Foucault (1977) emphasizes how power operates through discourse, producing truths that bind subjects. By withdrawing from language, Michael disrupts this process. His silence denies the state the confessions and explanations it demands. In this sense, silence becomes a form of freedom: a refusal to be fully known or mastered.

Yet this freedom is paradoxical. Michael's silence isolates him, making communication with others nearly impossible. His refusal to articulate himself means that others interpret his life for him, as when the medical officer constructs narratives about his motives. Freedom, in Michael's case, comes at the cost of social invisibility.

Coetzee presents Michael as a figure of radical minimalism. He seeks to reduce life to its bare essentials: food, shelter, and solitude. He reflects: *"Perhaps it is enough to be simply alive, breathing in and out, eating and sleeping"* (Coetzee 1983, 135). This stripped-down existence challenges modern notions of identity tied to productivity, recognition, and social roles.

For some critics, this minimalism risks romanticization, portraying Michael as a saintly figure who transcends politics. Yet Coetzee complicates this reading by emphasizing the harshness of Michael's life. His hunger, loneliness, and vulnerability remind us that withdrawal is not liberation but survival under duress. Still, in choosing withdrawal, Michael enacts a form of agency unavailable to those who accept state management.

Michael's life illustrates that freedom in Coetzee's fiction does not always take the form of active resistance or heroic struggle. Instead, it emerges as refusal—the refusal to be categorized, to consume, to participate in structures of control. His gardening, silence, and hunger are acts of negation that paradoxically open a space for autonomy.

The medical officer reflects on Michael's example: *"He showed me that a man is not a prisoner of his body, that it is possible to live with little, with almost nothing"* (Coetzee 1983, 187). Here Michael becomes a lesson, not through grand gestures but through the persistence of life stripped to its core.

Agamben's concept of bare life helps us see that Michael's freedom arises within unfreedom. He is reduced to bare existence by the state, yet he transforms this reduction into a choice: to live minimally, outside the state's reach. His life thus embodies the paradox of freedom within unfreedom.

Life & Times of Michael K dramatizes the condition of bare life under apartheid's machinery of control. Michael is marked as marginal, detained in camps, and reduced to hunger. Yet through silence, gardening, and refusal, he enacts a fragile form of resistance. His freedom is paradoxical—achieved not through empowerment but through withdrawal, not through recognition but through invisibility. Coetzee presents Michael not as a hero but as a witness to the possibility of autonomy within deprivation.

Through Michael K, Coetzee interrogates the limits of identity and freedom under biopolitical and necropolitical regimes. The novel insists that even in states of unfreedom, life can find ways to persist, however tenuously, outside the categories imposed by power.

4.3 Disgrace

Published in 1999, J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* is set in post-apartheid South Africa and explores the unsettled terrain of race, gender, power, and ethical responsibility in a society undergoing profound transformation. The novel follows David Lurie, a middle-aged professor who resigns from his university post after an affair with a student, and his daughter Lucy, who lives on a farm in the Eastern Cape. After a brutal assault on Lucy, both father and daughter confront their vulnerabilities in a shifting political order. Through the lenses of Foucault's biopower, Agamben's *bare life*, and Mbembe's necropolitics, *Disgrace* dramatizes how power continues to shape identity and freedom, even in a democracy that claims to have transcended oppression.

The novel begins in the university, where Lurie teaches communications. His affair with Melanie Isaacs, a young student, exposes the dynamics of power embedded in academic relationships. He admits: *"Because a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it"* (Coetzee 1999, 16). This statement exemplifies Lurie's patriarchal entitlement, reducing Melanie's autonomy to an aesthetic resource for his gratification.

The disciplinary hearing that follows reflects Foucault's (1977) notion of institutional normalization. Lurie refuses to conform to the committee's demands for confession and contrition: *"Repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world, to religion, not to teaching"* (Coetzee 1999, 58). His resistance to disciplinary discourse highlights the tension between individual autonomy and institutional authority. Yet his refusal also reveals his blindness to the harm he has caused.

In this opening movement, Coetzee shows that power in post-apartheid South Africa is not only about race but also about gender, sexuality, and discourse. Academic institutions, like the Empire in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, demand confessions to produce truth. Lurie's refusal to participate destabilizes his identity, casting him into professional and personal exile.

The novel's turning point occurs when Lucy is attacked by three men on her farm. The assault leaves Lurie beaten and his daughter raped. This event exposes the necropolitical dimensions of post-apartheid South Africa, where violence is unequally distributed along racial and gendered lines. Lucy reflects on her vulnerability: *"They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without working? That is what they see"* (Coetzee 1999, 158).

Her words reveal how historical injustices persist as lived realities. Land ownership, race, and gender intersect to render Lucy's body a site of political struggle. Mbembe's (2003) necropolitics clarifies this: sovereignty manifests not only in control over life but also in exposure to death. Lucy's assault is not random but symbolic, tied to histories of dispossession and racial violence.

Lurie's response, however, reveals his inability to grasp the complexity of the situation. He demands legal recourse and retribution: *"What happened to Lucy was a crime. It must be punished"* (Coetzee 1999, 110). But Lucy rejects this framework, insisting instead on survival: *"What happened to me is mine. I must live with it alone"* (Coetzee 1999, 112). Her refusal of the legal system reflects her recognition that formal justice cannot address the deeper structures of vulnerability.

Lucy's decision to remain on the farm after the assault exemplifies what scholars call "strategic unfreedom." She negotiates with Petrus, a Black neighbor, agreeing to live on the land as his dependent in exchange for protection. She explains: *"Yes, I agree to be his tenant. He can have the land, and I can stay on it"* (Coetzee 1999, 204).

This decision shocks Lurie, who sees it as capitulation. Yet Lucy's choice reflects a pragmatic recognition of the new balance of power. Her autonomy is compromised, but by accepting dependence, she secures a form of survival. Agamben's notion of bare life illuminates this paradox: Lucy preserves her life by entering a condition of reduced freedom, accepting unfreedom as the price of existence.

Her pregnancy, a result of the assault, deepens this paradox. She refuses to abort, declaring: *"I am determined to have the child. If it means that I must lose the farm, I will lose it"* (Coetzee 1999, 199). Lucy's choice embodies both vulnerability and resilience. She transforms violence into a form of continuity, accepting life where others might see only shame. This act illustrates how freedom in Coetzee's fiction often emerges within and through unfreedom, rather than outside it.

While Lucy's story centers on survival and strategic unfreedom, Lurie undergoes a different transformation. Stripped of his academic authority and masculine privilege, he confronts his own disgrace. Working at an animal clinic, he assists in euthanizing unwanted dogs. The process humbles him: *"He has learned to kill them, and he has learned to bury them. That is what he does. He saves the honor of corpses"* (Coetzee 1999, 146).

This work becomes symbolic of his moral journey. In caring for abandoned animals, Lurie begins to acknowledge forms of life he had previously disregarded. He reflects: *"Because a dog will accept you as you are. You can be a dog's disgrace, and he will love you all the same"* (Coetzee 1999, 161). This recognition of unconditional vulnerability contrasts with his earlier exploitation of Melanie.

Foucault's emphasis on subject formation is useful here. Lurie's identity shifts through practices of care and humility. His disgrace becomes the condition for ethical transformation, albeit partial and fragile. He cannot undo his past, but he can learn to bear witness to suffering, whether human or animal.

Disgrace portrays identity in post-apartheid South Africa as contested and unstable. Lurie, once secure in his authority as a white male academic, becomes vulnerable in a society where old privileges no longer guarantee safety. Lucy, though embodying liberal ideals of reconciliation, is forced to negotiate her survival through compromise. Petrus, once a servant, becomes a landowner and protector, illustrating the shifting balance of power.

Yet Coetzee refuses simple binaries of victim and oppressor. The novel insists on ambiguity: Lucy's attackers are neither purely political avengers nor mere criminals; Lurie is both abuser and penitent; Petrus is both liberator and patriarch. Identity emerges as relational, defined by power, vulnerability, and negotiation.

Freedom in *Disgrace* is never absolute. For Lucy, freedom entails accepting dependence and living with vulnerability. For Lurie, it involves renouncing entitlement and embracing humility. Both forms of freedom are paradoxical, achieved through compromise and loss.

Coetzee resists offering closure. The novel ends with Lurie giving up a dog he has grown attached to, saying: *"Yes, I am giving him up"* (Coetzee 1999, 220). This gesture encapsulates his transformation: acceptance of limits, renunciation of possession, and recognition of life's fragility. Freedom, in this context, is not mastery but surrender.

Disgrace dramatizes the entanglement of identity, power, and freedom in post-apartheid South Africa. Through Lucy's assault and strategic unfreedom, Lurie's disgrace and moral transformation, and Petrus's rise to authority, the novel illustrates how power continues to shape lives in new configurations. Identity emerges as fragile and relational, while freedom is paradoxical, achieved only through compromise, vulnerability, and care.

By applying the concepts of biopower, bare life, and necropolitics, the analysis shows how Coetzee interrogates the ongoing legacies of violence and the fragile possibilities of survival in a society struggling with transformation.

4.4 Comparative Synthesis

The three novels examined—*Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), and *Disgrace* (1999)—span different historical and political contexts, yet together they construct a coherent vision of what may be called "states of unfreedom." Coetzee consistently interrogates how power defines identity, how life is reduced to biological survival, and how freedom emerges only in paradoxical, compromised forms.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, unfreedom arises from the machinery of empire: surveillance, torture, and the suspension of law. The Magistrate's awakening demonstrates that complicity is inescapable, while the invention of the "barbarian" reveals how power constructs identities to justify domination. In *Life & Times of Michael K*, unfreedom manifests in the bureaucratic apparatus of apartheid: camps, documents, and resettlement schemes. Michael K is reduced to bare life, yet he transforms deprivation into a fragile autonomy through silence, hunger, and gardening. In *Disgrace*, the post-apartheid order reconfigures unfreedom through gendered violence, racial vulnerability, and shifting land relations. Lucy accepts strategic unfreedom as survival, while Lurie learns humility through disgrace.

Across these novels, certain motifs recur. The camp—whether the torture yard, Jakkalsdrif, or the farm—emerges as a space of exception where law is suspended and power over life and death is absolute. The body is another site of continuity: tortured, starved, raped, or humbled, the body becomes the primary medium through which power inscribes itself. Silence and speech constitute a third motif. The Magistrate struggles to articulate witness, Michael K refuses speech altogether, and Lucy's silence after her assault resists juridical capture. In each case, language is shown to be inadequate or complicit, revealing that freedom may lie in the refusal of discourse as much as in its articulation.

Finally, the concept of freedom as paradox unites the novels. Freedom is never depicted as liberation from power; rather, it appears within unfreedom—whether in the Magistrate's reluctant witness, Michael K's minimal withdrawal, or Lucy's compromised survival. Coetzee suggests that freedom under modern regimes is not heroic emancipation but fragile negotiation, often marked by loss, humility, or dependence.

Taken together, the novels insist on the ethical necessity of recognizing vulnerability and witnessing suffering, even when solutions are elusive. Coetzee's vision of unfreedom, across empire, apartheid, and democracy, challenges readers to confront the enduring structures of domination that shape human life and to rethink freedom not as mastery but as ethical responsibility.

5. FINDINGS

The preceding analysis of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), and *Disgrace* (1999) demonstrates how J.M. Coetzee's fiction consistently interrogates the relationship between identity, power, and freedom across shifting historical contexts. Drawing on the conceptual frameworks of Foucault's biopower, Agamben's *bare life*, and Mbembe's necropolitics, several key findings emerge. These findings not only clarify Coetzee's literary strategies but also highlight his contributions to debates on political domination, subjectivity, and ethics.

One of the strongest findings is that identity in Coetzee's fiction is never fixed or autonomous. It is always constructed in relation to structures of power that define, exclude, or erase subjects.

- In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the "barbarian" identity is invented by the Empire as an empty category to justify violence.
- In *Michael K*, identity collapses into biological survival: Michael is seen less as a person than as a case to be managed by bureaucratic and medical authorities.
- In *Disgrace*, identities are destabilized in post-apartheid South Africa, where gender, race, and class intersect in unpredictable ways.

This fragility demonstrates that identity is a political process rather than a natural essence. Coetzee highlights how categories such as "civilized/barbarian," "fit/unfit," or "master/servant" emerge from discourses of power, not from intrinsic qualities.

Another finding is the body's central role as the site where power inscribes itself. Across the novels, bodies are tortured, starved, raped, or humbled, becoming the medium through which domination operates.

- In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, torture seeks to extract "truth" from bodies through pain.
- In *Michael K*, hunger and emaciation dramatize how the state controls populations through food distribution.
- In *Disgrace*, Lucy's violated body embodies the intersection of gendered vulnerability and racial history.

The recurring emphasis on bodily experience underscores Coetzee's insistence that political oppression is not abstract but materially lived. It is felt as pain, hunger, and vulnerability.

The analysis reveals the recurring motif of the camp—spaces where law is suspended and individuals are reduced to bare life.

- The torture yard in *Waiting for the Barbarians* functions as a zone of exception where prisoners lose legal protection.
- Jakkalsdrif camp in *Michael K* reduces individuals to numbers and rations, stripping them of autonomy.
- In *Disgrace*, Lucy's farm functions as a precarious frontier space where law offers little protection, leaving her exposed to violence.

These spaces illustrate Agamben's thesis that the camp is the "nomos of the modern," the paradigm through which sovereignty exercises power over life and death.

Perhaps the most significant finding is Coetzee's representation of freedom as paradoxical. Freedom in his fiction never appears as absolute liberation but always within or through unfreedom.

- The Magistrate in *Barbarians* experiences a fleeting sense of freedom only when stripped of authority and reduced to a prisoner.
- Michael K achieves autonomy through withdrawal, silence, and hunger, yet this "freedom" is bound to deprivation and invisibility.
- Lucy's decision to remain on her farm after her assault exemplifies strategic unfreedom: she accepts dependence on Petrus to secure survival.

Freedom is thus fragile, compromised, and often indistinguishable from vulnerability. Coetzee suggests that true liberation may be impossible under modern regimes of power, but fragile forms of autonomy and ethical practice remain possible.

Another finding is the role of language and silence. Coetzee's characters struggle to articulate experiences of violence, and the narratives themselves foreground the inadequacy of testimony.

- The Magistrate finds words like "barbarian" losing meaning under the weight of violence.
- Michael K resists language altogether, living in silence that denies the state the confessions it demands.
- Lucy refuses to narrate her assault in legal terms, insisting instead on private endurance.

These moments highlight Coetzee's concern with the ethics of representation. He resists aestheticizing suffering or claiming full knowledge of others' pain, instead presenting fractured, uncertain forms of witness.

Finally, the novels converge on the theme of ethical responsibility. Coetzee suggests that under domination, the most meaningful acts may not be heroic resistance but humble gestures of care and witness.

- The Magistrate's attempt to care for the barbarian girl is ambiguous but signals a desire for restitution.
- Michael K's gardening and hunger exemplify a life lived outside domination, however tenuous.
- Lurie's work at the animal clinic teaches him humility and compassion, a recognition of shared vulnerability.

These acts do not overthrow structures of power, but they mark ethical responses within unfreedom.

The findings reveal that Coetzee's fiction consistently dramatizes how identity is constructed under domination, how power inscribes itself on bodies, how law is suspended in spaces of exception, and how freedom emerges only as paradox. Through ambiguous acts of witness, silence, and care, his characters embody fragile forms of autonomy and ethical

responsibility. Coetzee's vision is thus profoundly sobering yet ethically urgent: it insists that even within unfreedom, there remains a duty to acknowledge suffering and to practice humility.

6. CONCLUSION

The study set out to explore how J.M. Coetzee represents identity, power, and freedom in three of his major novels. Using the theoretical frameworks of Foucault, Agamben, and Mbembe, it examined how biopolitical and necropolitical forces shape subjectivity and constrain autonomy. The analysis reveals that Coetzee's fiction offers a sustained critique of domination across empire, apartheid, and post-apartheid contexts, while simultaneously imagining fragile possibilities of ethical response.

One of the central conclusions is that Coetzee should be read as a chronicler of unfreedom. His works do not celebrate triumph over oppression but expose the endurance of domination in different forms. Empire, apartheid, and democracy may differ historically, but in Coetzee's vision, they all produce vulnerable lives, reduced identities, and compromised freedoms.

This continuity underscores his relevance beyond South Africa. In an age of global surveillance, refugee crises, and racialized violence, Coetzee's exploration of unfreedom resonates as a universal commentary on modern governance.

Another conclusion is that Coetzee redefines freedom. Instead of equating freedom with autonomy, mastery, or liberation, he presents it as paradoxical, fragile, and often bound to unfreedom. Freedom in his fiction is found in silence, humility, withdrawal, and care—gestures that resist domination without abolishing it.

This reconceptualization challenges liberal ideals of freedom as independence or choice. For Coetzee, freedom is not about escaping power but about negotiating it ethically, even when that means embracing dependence or vulnerability.

Coetzee also insists on the importance of witnessing. His novels foreground the difficulty of speaking about suffering without appropriating it. Characters like the Magistrate, Michael K, and Lucy grapple with the inadequacy of language, often resorting to silence or ambiguous gestures. Yet these fractured testimonies remain ethically significant.

The conclusion here is that literature itself functions as a form of witness. By presenting narratives that resist closure, Coetzee compels readers to confront the persistence of unfreedom and the fragility of ethical response. His fiction becomes an ethical practice of bearing witness to the lives reduced by power.

The study also concludes that Coetzee's fiction contributes to broader theoretical debates. His works exemplify and complicate Foucault's biopolitics, embody Agamben's bare life, and resonate with Mbembe's necropolitics. Yet Coetzee is not merely illustrating theory; he dramatizes its lived experience, showing how abstract concepts play out in pain, hunger, silence, and compromise.

This makes his fiction invaluable for contemporary discussions of sovereignty, human rights, and ethics. Coetzee shows that behind every theoretical construct lies a lived body, a fragile life negotiating survival.

Ultimately, Coetzee's fiction teaches that the struggle for freedom is inseparable from the recognition of vulnerability. His characters remind us that freedom cannot be secured once and for all but must be continually renegotiated within conditions of unfreedom. Whether through the Magistrate's compromised witness, Michael K's silent withdrawal, or Lucy's strategic unfreedom, Coetzee insists that ethical responsibility persists even when political liberation seems impossible.

This conclusion affirms the enduring significance of Coetzee's work. By dramatizing states of unfreedom across different historical contexts, his novels compel us to confront the persistence of domination in our own world and to imagine freedom not as mastery but as humility, care, and ethical witness.

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ETHICAL DECLARATIONS

Authors' Contributions

S. Kumaran Arul Devaram, Ph.D. Research Scholar, conceptualized the study, conducted the primary analysis of the selected works of J.M. Coetzee, and drafted the initial version of the manuscript. Dr. S. Gunasekaran, Assistant Professor (Selection Grade) and Head, Department of English, Anna University Regional Campus, Tiruchirappalli, served as the corresponding author. He provided critical guidance in framing the theoretical framework, refining the methodology, and offering substantial revisions to ensure academic rigor and clarity. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

All data supporting the findings of this study are derived from publicly available literary texts and secondary scholarly sources cited in the References section.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to this research.