
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Postmodern Individual in J.M. Coetzee's Novels: Exploring Issues of Identity, Representation, Intertextuality, and the Self

Fatima Nader¹ and Mohamed El Bakal² ✉

¹PhD Candidate, Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Sultan Moulay Slimane University – Beni Mellal, Morocco

²PhD, Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Sultan Moulay Slimane University – Beni Mellal, Morocco

Corresponding Author: Mohamed El Bakal, **E-mail:** elbakalmohamed21@gmail.com

| ABSTRACT

This paper explores the postmodern elements in J.M. Coetzee's novels, focusing on his treatment of themes such as representation, intertextuality, fragmentation, and ambiguity. Through a close examination of works like *Foe*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and *In the Heart of the Country*, the study demonstrates how Coetzee disrupts conventional narrative structures and challenges traditional ideas of truth and reality. The analysis delves into how Coetzee's novels reflect the postmodern rejection of a singular truth, emphasizing the plurality of perspectives and interpretations. The paper also highlights Coetzee's use of fragmented narratives to depict the instability of identity and meaning in a chaotic world. Furthermore, it explores Coetzee's conscious deployment of intertextuality, where his works engage with and reinterpret previous literary texts, reinforcing the postmodern view that no text is entirely original. The paper ultimately argues that Coetzee's fiction exemplifies postmodern techniques, inviting readers to actively engage in constructing meaning and questioning established narratives.

| KEYWORDS

J.M. Coetzee, postmodernism, representation, intertextuality, identity, fragmentation.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 October 2024

PUBLISHED: 13 October 2024

DOI: 10.32996/ijts.2024.4.3.5

1. Introduction

Postmodernism is a philosophical, cultural and artistic movement that began to take shape in the mid-20th century, emerging as a reaction against modernism. While it shares certain characteristics with its predecessor, postmodernism fundamentally challenges the cohesive structures and grand narratives that modernism often embraced. It is characterized by broad skepticism, subjectivism, and relativism, along with a general suspicion of reason, and a keen sensitivity to the role of ideology in maintaining and asserting political and economic power (Duignan, 2024). Defining postmodernism, however, proves difficult, as it lacks the unified philosophy or singular style that typically characterizes intellectual and artistic movements. A 'movement' implies a collective approach governed by a shared set of ideals or techniques, yet postmodernism is anything but unified. Instead, it represents a broad array of responses to the limitations of modernism, leading to a fragmented, pluralistic approach to literature, art, and culture.

As Brian McHale (1987) points out, postmodernism encompasses multiple distinct strands of thought and practice. John Barth's postmodernism, for example, focuses on the literature of replenishment, while Charles Newman's views postmodernism through the lens of an inflationary economy. Jean-François Lyotard's postmodernism critiques the structures of knowledge in the contemporary information age, whereas Ihab Hassan sees postmodernism as a stage on the road to the spiritual unification of humankind. There is even Frank Kermode's radical interpretation, which deconstructs postmodernism almost to the point of non-existence, suggesting that it defies definitive boundaries altogether (p. 4). Thus, as McHale suggests, postmodernism is not a single, cohesive movement but rather a convergence of diverse and often contradictory "postmodernisms".

This paper explores key issues related to postmodern literature with a particular focus on J.M. Coetzee, whose engagement with postmodernism reflects the multifaceted and fragmented nature of the movement itself, as his works navigate themes of representation, intertextuality, fragmentation, and ambiguity. Coetzee's novels often disrupt conventional narrative structures and question the very essence of truth and reality, making his literary practice an exemplary case of how postmodernism operates across different contexts. By examining these core aspects in the order that Coetzee handles them within his novels, this paper will reveal how his work reflects and contributes to the postmodern literary discourse, in particular, and the broader postmodern landscape, in general.

2. The Aspects of Postmodernism in Coetzee's Writings

Before delving into specific aspects of postmodernism in J.M. Coetzee's writings, it is essential to understand the fundamental shifts in literary thought that postmodernism introduced. At the core of postmodernist literature is a deep skepticism toward traditional modes of representation, narrative, and meaning-making. Postmodernism challenges the conventional belief that literature can faithfully represent reality, instead emphasizing the instability of language and the plurality of interpretations. Coetzee skillfully navigates these concepts as he uses his novels as platforms to explore and critique the boundaries of representation. The following sections will examine how Coetzee's works engage with the major aspects of postmodernism, beginning with his treatment of representation which is a key theme that underscores much of his literary output. Coetzee's novels often blur the line between fiction and reality, thus challenging readers to reconsider the role of storytelling and the inherent subjectivity in how narratives are constructed and understood.

2.1 The Issue of Representation

Postmodernism declares a radical break with traditional ways of representation. While the previous movements were, more or less, concerned with how to represent the world, postmodernism questions the very essence of representation. According to many American literary critics who introduced the concept of postmodernism in the 1960s and early 1970s, postmodernism represents a departure from traditional narrative and representation. Instead, it emphasizes self-reflexivity, particularly through the use of metafiction during this period (Bertens, 1995, p. 4). Taylor and Winqvist (2001) maintain that, "to say that a picture or a discourse 'represents' is to claim that it depicts and tells the truth about something represented" (p. 340). This statement suggests that representation is related mainly to the idea of truth. The latter has been one of the central issues of postmodernism. Being largely influenced by Derrida's deconstruction, postmodernism advocates the idea that there is no one Truth but, rather, different versions of truth. Therefore, representation, for postmodernist writers, is no more than a process that represents 'something' through a particular point of view. Coetzee's novel *Foe* is the best example of this idea. The novel deals with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* from another perspective: Coetzee chooses Susan Barton as the narrator of the story. This is done so as to suggest that every story can be told from different perspectives apart from the given one.

Moreover, an in-depth reading of Coetzee's novels reveals the complexity of his style, not in terms of the vocabulary used, but actually in relation to the multi-layered meanings the text conveys. In fact, Coetzee's language is metaphorical; it always calls for interpretation and is not to be taken literally. In this way, Coetzee adopts the postmodern style of writing, in which the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. This can be clearly seen in his novels. *In the Heart of the Country* confirms this idea in the sense that the novel cannot be dealt with simply in terms of a story of a girl and her father in a farm. It can, for instance, be analyzed using the lens of colonialism, resistance, feminism, race, and probably psychological disorder. Coetzee's other works can also be read and interpreted in a myriad of ways.

What is more, one can clearly see the fictionality of Coetzee's writings. *Foe*, for example, makes the reader aware of the fact that the story is no more than mere fiction. That is because it is a reworking of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. This goes within the postmodern metafiction, in which the artificiality of a literary work is made explicit for the reader. In so doing, Coetzee advocates the idea that a work of art cannot represent reality. In other words, Coetzee's *Foe* is just another version of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. With this in mind, the reader is certain about the absence of any referent outside the text. *Foe* does not represent some reality outside the text. It is just a piece of fiction that was written about another piece of fiction and told from a different point of view. This gives room to the unrepresentability of literary works to be established within the postmodern style of writing, to which Coetzee's writings belong.

There are other aspects that support the postmodern view of representation adopted by Coetzee in his novels. The focus, however, was on three elements that can be deemed crucial in defining the concept of representation within postmodern writings. As has been shown, there is a crisis of representation in the works of Coetzee. The latter uses a metaphorical language, by which he suggests that a text is not univocal. This results in the absence of one-to-one relationship between the sign and the referent, which means that there is no one reality to be mirrored. Coetzee's works advocate this idea by demonstrating that there is no reality to be represented, and if ever there was one, fiction is incapable of reflecting it. That is because, as its name indicates, fiction has to

do with imagination and the reader should be made aware of this so that they can construct their own understanding of a certain literary work without being affected by representational issues.

2.2 Intertextuality

The term 'intertextuality' is largely circulated in discussions related to postmodern styles of writing. It is necessary, then, to probe into intertextuality and the way it was handled by Coetzee in his novels. This concept was coined by Julia Kristeva to suggest that a text is not self-contained as it used to be seen. Rather, a text is an intertext in the sense that it is connected to previous texts. In this sense, both the claimed originality of texts and the way readers are supposed to read literary texts are put into question.

Julia Kristeva coined the concept of 'intertextuality,' but she was not the only one to explore the relationship between texts. In his article "Tradition and the Individual Talent", T.S. Eliot argues that every literary work bears traces of past authors and poets; in other words, every author shares similarities with his or her predecessors. Similarly, Mikhail Bakhtin explores the dialogic nature of texts, suggesting that they are in constant dialogue with one another. For Bakhtin, texts are polyvocal, reflecting multiple perspectives and voices. Roland Barthes expands on this idea in "The Death of the Author". As the title suggests, Barthes rejects the notion of textual originality. He argues that authors do not create meanings but instead arrange and organize pre-existing possibilities of meaning within the language system. Intertextuality, then, is a theory that deconstructs, to use Derrida's term, the concept of originality in texts, and this, in turn, informs a different approach to reading literary works.

Taking all that has been mentioned into account, the focus shifts from the author to the reader. The reader is no longer a passive consumer of what has been written; instead, they become an active participant in the process of creating meaning. The reader negotiates, questions, compares, interprets, and understands the text in relation to previous texts. Intertextuality, therefore, can be seen as:

A method of reading one text against another that illuminates shared textual and ideological resonances, the assertion that all texts and ideas exist within a fabric of relations.[...][it] juxtaposes texts in order to discover points of similarities and differences. (Taylor and Winquist, 2001, p. 190)

Therefore, reading becomes an active process which takes into account the interrelationship and the interdependence between texts. This approach can be adopted in dealing with Coetzee's works as being examples of intertexts.

In light of the aforementioned points, Coetzee's novels can be viewed as intertexts, as they consistently refer to other texts and writers. For instance:

Waiting for the Barbarians (1980) takes its title from the Greek poet Cavafy's eponymous poem and evokes Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Furthermore, it contains a scene that constitutes a rewriting of "In the Penal Colony" (1919) by Franz Kafka, a writer who reappears in *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) through Coetzee's use of the letter 'K' to refer to his character, and in *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), which establishes a dialogue with both "A Report to an Academy" (1917) and *Before the Law* (1915). [...] The title *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) alludes to Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722). (López and Wiegandt, 2016)

As can be seen, most, if not all, of Coetzee's works are connected to earlier texts. His writings are often rewritings of pre-existing works. However, beyond the intertextual nature of his texts, as discussed by the aforementioned theorists, Coetzee consciously selects certain works and authors to reference. He uses intertextuality as a deliberate strategy to reformulate, reconsider, challenge, reveal limitations, support, or further elaborate on the literary works he chooses. This sort of "conscious deployment of intertextuality – i.e. intertextuality as textual strategy rather than ontological feature of any text – testifies to a preference for certain texts rather than others" (López and Wiegandt, 2016). Therefore, Coetzee consciously employs intertextuality to alter, align with, or deconstruct works he finds significant.

2.3 Fragmentation

Fragmentation is a widely used technique in postmodern writing. Readers of postmodern works can easily observe its frequent use on both formal and thematic levels. Sim (2001) argues that "the postmodernist writer distrusts the wholeness and completion associated with traditional stories, and prefers to deal with other ways of structuring narrative" (p. 127). This resistance to narrative coherence is handled differently in postmodernism compared to modernism. This distinction, along with Coetzee's postmodern use of fragmentation, will be explored in the following paragraphs.

The concept of 'fragmentation' entails notions of discontinuity, disorder, and nonlinearity. It suggests a reaction against the coherence typically upheld in traditional narratives. Through the use of fragmentation, authors break with conventional storytelling methods. Traditionally, narratives were expected to be coherent, linear, and told by a single narrator, which is not the case in modernist and postmodernist literature.

Fragmentation is not exclusive to postmodernism. In fact, its roots can be traced back to modernism. However, the purpose of its use differs between the two movements. Modernist writers employ fragmentation to express their ongoing search for meaning in a world they struggle to comprehend. Their use of nonlinearity and discontinuity reflects dissatisfaction with the disorder of the modern world, yet they still believe in the possibility of finding unity and order. They seek to uncover meaning and reestablish coherence. In contrast, postmodern writers use fragmentation to emphasize the chaotic nature of the world, without any intention of discovering meaning. For them, disorder is inherent, and fragmentation reflects this reality. As Bertens (1995) notes, "postmodern writers do not so much seek to understand the world, as to accept it, in all its fragmentation and incoherence, without seeking to control its tensions by aesthetic means, as the (Anglo-American) modernists used to do" (p. 73).

In light of these considerations, Coetzee's use of fragmentation is distinctly postmodern, particularly in its application to plot, setting, and character development. Linearity is rarely present in Coetzee's works; instead, he employs multiple narrators to reveal the various facets of a single story. This is evident in *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Foe*, both of which are told through multiple perspectives. Furthermore, events in Coetzee's novels are not arranged in a strict chronological order. *In the Heart of the Country* exemplifies this approach, as Magda, an unreliable narrator, portrays a world that lacks logical sequence. Her stream of consciousness contributes to the disassociation from linear narratives. This same technique is employed in *Disgrace* and *Age of Iron*, where the fragmented mental states of the characters are reflected through the narrative structure.

A similar approach can be observed in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, where the magistrate's fragmented sense of self leads to the emergence of a fragmented identity. This internal fragmentation reflects the disorderly setting of the narrative. Coetzee often explores the instability of space and time in his writings. For instance, the events in *Foe* are temporally distanced from the postmodern era, set in a remote past but retold in a postmodern style by a contemporary novelist. *Waiting for the Barbarians* goes even further, narrating a story that is detached from any specific temporal or spatial framework. In doing so, Coetzee disassociates the events from their context, emphasizing the disconnection and ambiguity inherent in his narratives. Thus, fragmentation should not be viewed merely as an aesthetic device; it is a fundamental aspect of Coetzee's works. He uses it to convey the dilemmas and absurdity individuals face when confronting a chaotic world.

2.4 Ambiguity

The combination of postmodern strategies such as intertextuality, fragmentation, and temporal distortion results in a crisis of representation, which in turn creates ambiguity. Postmodern works are typically ambiguous, inviting multiple interpretations. Coetzee's writings are no exception; his novels are both ambiguous and intellectually challenging.

In the *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Empson (1949) explains that "an ambiguity, in ordinary speech, means something very pronounced, and as a rule witty or deceitful". He goes on to suggest that ambiguity has to do with "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language" (p. 1). This definition associates ambiguity with reception, indicating that spoken or written utterances induce a state of confusion in the listener or the reader (the addressee). The way the reader interprets a text is just one of many possible perspectives, leaving the text open to various interpretations. Although the issue of language and meaning is highly complex and warrants a more detailed discussion beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that ambiguity is the result of a mismatch between the author's intention, the written text, and the reader's understanding. As Empson notes, ambiguity can refer to "an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings" (p. 5). These elements are to be considered when approaching Coetzee's works.

Readers of Coetzee often find it difficult to establish a specific meaning in his works. His texts are ambiguous and challenging, as they can be understood in multiple ways. This ambiguity is further compounded by the fact that the author's intentions are unclear and not explicitly expressed. For example, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the central character is in an ambivalent state regarding colonialism and the so-called barbarians. He opposes the colonial enterprise but continues to work within it, showing sympathy for the barbarians without attempting to communicate with them.

A similar ambiguity is present in *In the Heart of the Country*, where Magda is unable to establish meaningful dialogue with either her father or the black servants, leaving both herself and the reader confused. This aligns with Brian McHale's observation in *Postmodernist Fiction*, where he notes that "[it] may also happen that ambiguity is sustained in a number of sentences with a certain consistency; then this opalescence applies to entire spheres of objects, so that, in a manner of speaking, two different worlds are

struggling for supremacy, with neither of them capable of attaining it" (p. 32). Coetzee keeps this struggle unresolved, offering no clear indication of his own perspective. His goal is to create dilemmas, without intervening to resolve them.

So far, we have discussed ambiguity in relation to the themes in Coetzee's novels. However, it is important to note that ambiguity extends to all components of his narratives. For example, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the setting is deliberately left vague, making it difficult to construct a definite interpretation. Similarly, in *In the Heart of the Country*, the plot is ambiguous, with Magda serving as an unreliable narrator and the events unfolding in a dream-like sequence.

By creating a sense of ambiguity in his novels, Coetzee invites readers to actively participate in the construction of meaning. Meaning is no longer dictated by the author and accepted by the reader; instead, it is negotiated, questioned, revised, and reconsidered. Readers engage in a dialogue with the text, gaining the freedom to critically explore the various issues presented. Ultimately, the enigmatic nature of postmodern writing should not be seen as a hindrance to the construction of meaning. Rather, ambiguity should be celebrated for the freedom it offers readers to interpret a certain work and take an active role in the creation of its meaning.

3. The Construction of the Postmodern Individual in Coetzee's Fiction

Generally, the form of a literary work provides readers with profound insights into its content, as it acts as a mirror that reflects the themes and messages the author intends to convey. In the context of J.M. Coetzee's fiction, the formal aspects, such as narrative structure, stylistic choices, and thematic explorations, deeply reflect the ambiguous and fragmented nature of his characters and the events they navigate. Coetzee's characters are often engaged in a continuous process of self-reflection, as they persistently question their existence, identity, and relationships with others. This essay delves into the construction of the postmodern individual in Coetzee's fiction, examining how his works address ontological questions, portray the self's dilemma in a postmodern world, and explore the philosophy of otherness. By analyzing these elements, we can better understand how Coetzee's narratives embody the postmodern shift from epistemological to ontological concerns, highlighting the complexities of selfhood and the intricate dynamics between the self and the other.

3.1 Coetzee's Fiction and Ontological Questions

Modernism and postmodernism, one might argue, share similarities, and the differences between them may not seem significant at first. However, readers of both modernist and postmodernist works often conclude that the key distinction between the two lies in the types of questions they explore. While modernism is primarily concerned with epistemological issues, postmodernism shifts its focus to ontological questions. This shift is evident in Coetzee's works, where the characters grapple with fundamental questions about existence and being.

Before examining how Coetzee addresses ontological concerns in his novels, it is important to establish a theoretical framework. The shift from modernism to postmodernism has been a key topic of debate among critics, with Brian McHale being one of the prominent voices. In *Postmodernist Fiction*, McHale argues that the dominant focus of postmodernism is ontological. Unlike modernism which is primarily concerned with questions of knowledge, postmodernism shifts away from seeking explanations or understanding. Instead, it centers on raising ontological questions.

Like the ones Dick Higgins calls "post-cognitive": "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" Other typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for instance: What is a world? What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated? What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects? How is a projected world structured? And so on. (McHale, 1987, p. 10)

These questions inevitably remind the reader of the crisis of representation in postmodern fiction. The focus, as previously noted, has shifted from how to represent to what is being represented. In this way, postmodernism is more concerned with the ontological structure of what is being represented, rather than the act of representation itself.

However, assuming that postmodernism is ontologically oriented implies that it seeks to establish a foundation for understanding the world. The initial questions raised primarily concern ontological status, and addressing these questions ultimately involves attempting to construct a version of truth. This appears paradoxical, as postmodernism rejects the notion of an absolute Truth. This contradiction, however, can be resolved by adopting the definition McHale offers in his book:

"An ontology, writes Thomas Pavel, is 'a theoretical description of a universe.' This definition should lay to rest the objections of those who find the coupling of "postmodernist" with "ontology" in itself oxymoronic and self-contradictory, on the grounds that postmodernist discourse is precisely the discourse that denies the possibility of ontological grounding. For the operative word in Pavel's definition, from my point of view, is the indefinite article: an ontology is a description of a universe, not of the universe; that is, it may describe any universe, potentially a plurality of universes. In other words, to "do" ontology in this perspective is not necessarily to seek some grounding for our universe; it might just as appropriately involve describing other universes, including "possible" or even "impossible" universes—not least of all the other universe, or heterocosm, of fiction. (p. 27)

Consequently, when discussing ontology in postmodern fiction, it should not be understood in its traditional sense as the philosophical study of the nature of being. Instead, it should be linked to the postmodern perspective, which emphasizes that the ontological questions raised are related to one's personal existence and world. Most importantly, these questions are not meant to be answered; they are not posed to uncover meanings or to build a foundation for a deeper understanding of one's being. Rather, they serve to raise the reader's awareness of the multiple possibilities of existence. Characters in postmodernist fiction are engaged in an ongoing process of questioning and interrogating their state of being, each navigating their own unique world and dilemma.

This is clearly evident in Coetzee's fiction, where his narrative structures center on characters undergoing processes of ontological confusion. In *Slow Man*, Coetzee explores the mind-body dichotomy. After Rayment loses his leg in an accident, he begins to question his very existence, as his sense of self was previously tied to his physical capabilities. This shift can be seen as a challenge to the certainties often advocated by modernism, with the accident acting as a radical disruption that puts these certainties to the test. As a result, Rayment begins to question the essence of his being, particularly in terms of the relationship between mind and body.

Another ontologically oriented issue concerns the nature of the text *per se*. The ontological existence of the text, and the way events are rearranged and manipulated, comes into focus when Elizabeth Costello, the author of Rayment's story, enters the scene. Costello attempts to guide the flow of events, but Rayment resists and is hesitant to follow her suggestions. Through this dynamic, Coetzee raises questions about the ontological nature of the text and the relationship between author and character. Furthermore, he illustrates the fictional nature of the literary text and explores the extent to which authors can control the direction of the narrative. There are other aspects of ontological questioning in Coetzee's novels, but *Slow Man* primarily revolves around the two types of ontological questions that Dick Higgins highlights in the earlier quote. The novel, therefore, addresses the ontological nature of both character and text.

3.2 The Self Dilemma in Coetzee's World

In the modernist paradigm, the self is engaged in a constant search for meaning, identity, order, coherence, and truth. The dilemma faced by modernist individuals stems from their embodiment of the chaotic world they inhabit. Modernists argue that order must be restored for meaning to be found. For them, the self is diverse, confused, fragmented, and uncertain. This complexity is carried forward by postmodernists in their depiction of the self, which suggests a certain similarity between modernism and postmodernism in how they handle this concept. While this may seem logical, the key difference lies in the purpose behind portraying the self in such terms.

Unlike modernists who believe in the existence of unity, order, and meaning and strive to reestablish them, postmodernists call these very ideas into question. This aligns with the broader postmodern stance of "incredulity towards metanarratives", as Lyotard (1979) describes it (p. xxiv). These metanarratives include the notion of the self as a unified, coherent, and stable entity, as advanced by liberal humanism. Hutcheon (1988) further elaborates on this by stating:

Like much contemporary literary theory, the postmodernist novel puts into question that entire series of interconnected concepts that have come to be associated with what we conveniently label as liberal humanism: autonomy, transcendence, certainty, authority, unity, totalization, system, universalization, center, continuity, teleology, closure, hierarchy, homogeneity, uniqueness, origin. As I have tried to argue, however, to put these concepts into question is not to deny them – only to interrogate their relation to experience. (p. 57)

In these lines, Linda Hutcheon highlights the essence of postmodernism as a movement rooted in questioning rather than seeking definitive answers. It challenges certainties that were once taken for granted. In this sense, postmodernism defines the self as a process, not a stable or unified entity. Unlike the modernist self which is in search of meaning and unity, the postmodern self is

not inherently unified. As a result, the fragmentation and uncertainty experienced by individuals are intrinsic to their nature. These qualities are fundamental to the postmodern self, contrasting with the modernist belief that the self was once whole but has become fragmented due to the chaotic modern world.

The postmodern perspective on the self is evident in Coetzee's novels, where his central characters often undergo a process of questioning and interrogating their states of being and their relationships with others, be it spaces, events, people, or institutions. This process is not meant to reach a conclusion or resolution; rather, Coetzee's novels focus on the ongoing dilemma of the self and its continuous questioning. *Disgrace*, for instance, revolves around the inner workings of the central character, David Lurie. The first notion the reader encounters is Lurie's supposed certainty regarding sexuality: "For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well" (Coetzee, 2000, p. 1). This certainty is not only dismantled but becomes the central issue that ultimately undermines his entire life. Lurie's understanding of sexuality remains unresolved and elusive, leading to the loss of his academic reputation and professional career due to his sexual affairs.

Coetzee thus reflects the postmodern attitude of questioning certainties that were once taken for granted. The structure of his novels mirrors the shift from modernist confidence in the nature of things to postmodern uncertainty. For Coetzee, certainty is merely an illusion, as demonstrated by the phrase he uses to describe Lurie's belief, "to his mind". This idea is further reinforced by the events that unfold after Lurie's initial claim. Coetzee deconstructs, to use Derridian terminology, the sense of *sureness* one might have about any issue. In this case, sexuality serves as an example of a subject that suggests multiple possibilities and refutes any notion of absolute certainty.

Lurie's sexual life makes him aware of the complexity of his entire existence. Sexuality, then, becomes a trope that calls everything else into question. The same trope is employed in Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*, where Magda's sexuality reflects her profound complexity and unease. The novel is again structured around the workings of Magda's mind. Her fantasies, desires, thoughts, and questions are woven into a dreamlike structure that lacks logical sequencing. This structure mirrors the inner turmoil she experiences. Magda is considered an unreliable narrator because her desires and perceptions are constantly at odds with reality. Her restless mind is echoed in the disordered narration, suggesting that Magda is not a cohesive entity; rather, she is fragmented and resists order. To sum up, Coetzee illustrates the dilemma of the self in his novels through structuring them around the process of self-questioning. Therefore, the self is no longer portrayed as a unified entity but rather as a fragmented being.

3.3 The Philosophy of Otherness

Some of the ontological questions central to postmodernism revolve around the relationship between the self and the other. It is impossible to discuss the self without acknowledging and referring to the other as a crucial element in the process of identity formation. The concept of the 'other' has been explored by various critics from different perspectives. Emmanuel Levinas is one of various theorists who move beyond the exclusive discourse often adopted in discussions of the other. His philosophy of otherness promotes a positive relationship with the other, which Coetzee adopts in his novels.

In *Alterity and Transcendence* (1999), Levinas argues that the relationship between the self and the other is dialectical, with the other considered as a central and constitutive part of the self. For Levinas, the self transcends its own limits by seeking the other. In this way, alterity becomes a process of transcendence where the self frees itself from its ego and embraces the realm of the other. This is akin to a journey toward the other, where the self steps outside itself and projects onto the other. Thus, the process of knowing the self is fundamentally tied to that of knowing the other. Levinas clearly expresses this in the preface to his book, where he states: "In such a relation, the I does not put itself in question; it is put in question by the other. It is precisely in taking the other as one's point of departure that transcendence can emerge" (p. xiii). The question Levinas focuses on is primarily one of knowledge: what one knows about oneself is deeply rooted in how well they know the other.

This process leads to a face-to-face interaction, where the self is reflected in the other. In this way, the self gains meaning through the other and its existence becomes highly dependent on this relationship. This interdependence between the self and the other creates space for a sense of responsibility to emerge. As Levinas states, "fear for the other, fear for the death of the other man, is my fear" (p. 25). This suggests that the concerns of the other become the self's responsibility and moral duty. In Levinas' philosophy, the self is accountable for the other. This responsibility, he explains, "is not the privation of the knowledge that comprehends and grasps, but the excellence of ethical proximity in its sociality, in its love without concupiscence" (p. 29). He encourages the reader to think ethically about the other and adopt a sense of responsibility towards them.

This perspective is similarly reflected in Coetzee's fiction, where readers can easily observe the importance of the other. In Coetzee's novels, it is through the other that the self questions its own existence, and the ethical response to the other is brought to the forefront. *Waiting for the Barbarians* offers a good example of this idea. The Magistrate's subjectivity and inner unease are projected onto the barbarian girl's body. His interpretation of her body reveals his limitations in understanding its signs, much like

his struggle to understand himself. Furthermore, the Magistrate's treatment of the girl illustrates his sympathetic attitude towards the other. In this manner, Coetzee aligns with Levinas' concept of responsibility; the Magistrate embodies this sense of responsibility when he seeks to alleviate the girl's suffering. The other, therefore, is seen as an essential phenomenon for the self. Without the other, the self cannot exist. This significance placed on the other creates a deeply ethical relationship, characterized by mutual respect and responsibility.

4. Conclusion

In examining J.M. Coetzee's fiction through the lens of postmodernism, it becomes clear that his works embody the philosophical and literary complexities of the movement. Coetzee's novels challenge traditional notions of representation, narrative coherence, and identity, employing postmodern strategies such as intertextuality, fragmentation, and ambiguity to explore the depths of human experience. Through his characters, Coetzee engages with ontological questions, illustrating the fragmented and unstable nature of the self in a world where meaning is no longer fixed but constantly shifting.

A key theme in Coetzee's writing is the relationship between the self and the other, as explored through the philosophies of Emmanuel Levinas. The self, as depicted in Coetzee's novels, is deeply intertwined with the other, with identity being constructed through a constant process of questioning and ethical responsibility. Characters such as the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* embody the complexities of this dynamic, highlighting how the self's existence and moral obligations are conditioned by the presence of the other.

All things considered, Coetzee's postmodernism reflects a world in which certainty is elusive, and identity is fragmented. His use of metafiction, disordered narratives, and ontological explorations invites readers to actively engage with the text, questioning not only the characters' realities but their own understanding of truth and meaning. In doing so, Coetzee's fiction serves as a profound commentary on the postmodern condition, challenging readers to reconsider their perspectives on existence, ethics, and the very nature of storytelling.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Fatima Nader: ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7200-4019>

Mohamed El Bakal: ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0548-2577>

References

- [1] Bertens, H. (1995). *The idea of the postmodern: A history*. Routledge.
- [2] Coetzee, J. M. (1982). *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Penguin Books.
- [3] Coetzee, J. M. (1983). *Life and Times of Michael K*. Penguin Books.
- [4] Coetzee, J. M. (2000). *Disgrace*. Penguin Books.
- [5] Duignan, B. (2024, September 9). Postmodernism. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/postmodernism-philosophy>
- [6] Empson, W. (1949). *Seven types of ambiguity*. Chatto and Windus.
- [7] Hutcheon, L. (1988). *A poetics of postmodernism: History, theory, fiction*. Routledge.
- [8] Levinas, E. (1999). *Alterity and transcendence*. The Athlone Press.
- [9] López, M. J., & Wiegandt, K. (2016). Introduction: J.M. Coetzee, intertextuality and the non-English literary traditions. *European Journal of English Studies*, 20(2), 1-13.
- [10] Lyotard, J. F. (1979). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* (G. Bennington & B. Massumi, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.
- [11] McHale, B. (1987). *Postmodernist fiction*. Routledge.
- [12] Sim, S. (2001). *The Routledge companion to postmodernism* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- [13] Taylor, V. E., & Winquist, C. E. (2001). *Encyclopedia of postmodernism*. Routledge.