

INTERSECTIONALITY AND RESISTANCE: APPLYING J. M. COETZEE'S FICTION TO THE INTERPLAY OF GENDER, RACE, ETHNICITY, CASTE, RELIGION, AND DISABILITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper applies an intersectional framework—foregrounding gender, race, ethnicity, caste, religion, and disability—to selected works of J. M. Coetzee, including *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), *Age of Iron* (1990), *Disgrace* (1999), *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), and *Slow Man* (2005). Building on Kimberlé Crenshaw's account of intersectionality and Patricia Hill Collins's "matrix of domination," and placing these in conversation with postcolonial and disability studies, the article argues that Coetzee's ethical fictions stage how institutions, moral vocabularies, and embodied difference co-produce vulnerability and resistance. While "caste" is not a South African social category, caste-analytic insights regarding purity, stigma, and endogamy illuminate caste-like hierarchies under apartheid and in post-apartheid inheritances; this comparative move is made explicit and critically bounded. Through close readings, the paper identifies recurring mechanisms: administrative violence that renders multiply marginalized subjects illegible; penitential discourses that mask domination as redemption; and carceral and care infrastructures that convert impairment into dispossession. The discussion shows how Coetzee's narratives both expose and unsettle authoritarian grammars—of empire, race, respectability, and "normal" embodiment—while probing the limits of liberal witnessing. The conclusion proposes intersectionally sensitive avenues for pedagogy and research, reading Coetzee as a testing ground for ethics adequate to plural axes of power.

Keywords: J. M. Coetzee; intersectionality; gender; race/ethnicity; caste (comparative); religion; disability; postcolonial ethics

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Coetzee's Fictional Universe and the Question of Power

J. M. Coetzee, one of the most influential postcolonial writers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, persistently interrogates how power, authority, and domination intersect with the vulnerabilities of human life. His novels resist simple moral allegories, instead presenting ethically fraught scenarios where individuals—often marginalized by history, society, and institutions—are caught in webs of domination that are never reducible to a single axis of oppression. Whether the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* grappling with the violence of empire, Michael K in *Life & Times of Michael K* embodying a life reduced to bare subsistence, or Lucy Lurie in *Disgrace* struggling against the racialized and gendered aftermath of apartheid, Coetzee dramatizes the complex interplay of institutions, histories, and identities.

What makes Coetzee particularly relevant to contemporary critical debates is his staging of overlapping modes of vulnerability. His characters are rarely "only" gendered, "only" racialized, or "only" disabled. Instead, they embody a convergence of forces where race intersects with gender, disability intersects with poverty, and religion intersects with state violence. This complexity renders Coetzee's work a fertile site for intersectional analysis.

1.2. Intersectionality as Theoretical Lens

The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), emphasizes how systems of oppression—such as racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and religious intolerance—do not operate in isolation but interlock to shape lived experiences. Crenshaw's foundational critique of single-axis frameworks highlighted the inadequacy of analyzing discrimination solely through gender or race when, for example, Black women encounter compounded forms of marginalization invisible to analyses that treat race and gender as separate categories.

Building on this insight, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) advanced the idea of the matrix of domination, in which power operates across structural, cultural, and interpersonal domains. For Collins, intersectionality is not simply about adding categories together but about recognizing how systems of domination construct one another.

When applied to Coetzee, intersectionality opens new interpretive avenues. The apartheid and post-apartheid contexts foreground race and ethnicity, but as Coetzee's novels reveal, domination also takes form through gendered violence, the stigmatization of disability, the disciplining of sexuality, and the moral vocabularies of religion. Reading Coetzee intersectionally prevents reductive interpretations and illuminates how domination persists even in moments of apparent emancipation.

1.3. Why Caste Matters as a Comparative Analytic

At first glance, caste may seem out of place in Coetzee's South African fictions, since caste as a formalized hierarchy is specific to South Asia. Yet, when approached as a comparative analytic, caste provides a conceptual vocabulary for discussing hierarchies based on purity, stigma, exclusion, and endogamy. Scholars of comparative social stratification (Dirks 2001; Gupta 2004) have observed how caste-like logics emerge in other contexts of rigid social ordering, particularly where the regulation of sexuality, reproduction, and community boundaries become central to maintaining privilege.

In apartheid South Africa, racial classification and segregation created a system of hierarchy structurally different yet functionally similar to caste. Coetzee's novels resonate with caste insights because they reveal how "untouchability" and "purity" discourses reappear in racial and ethnic exclusions. For instance, Lucy's violation in *Disgrace* is simultaneously a racialized, gendered, and caste-like assertion of power. By bringing caste into the interpretive framework, this study seeks not to impose an alien concept but to enrich comparative thinking about how societies sustain domination through overlapping hierarchies.

1.4. Institutions as Ethical Stages

A striking feature of Coetzee's fiction is its obsession with institutions—colonial administrations, prisons, universities, hospitals, tribunals, and churches. These institutions not only enforce order but also shape subjectivity. They define who counts as fully human, who is reducible to bare life, and who is disposable.

- In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Empire's administrative machinery reduces "barbarian" bodies to objects of torture and illegality.
- In *Life & Times of Michael K*, the state turns hunger and impairment into grounds for dispossession.
- In *Age of Iron*, the clinic and the family home alike become spaces where sickness, race, and resistance converge.
- In *Disgrace*, the university's bureaucratic procedures intersect with sexual politics and racial transition, exposing both institutional hypocrisy and personal complicity.
- In *Elizabeth Costello*, the stage of the lecture hall becomes a space for interrogating global ethical responsibility, including the treatment of animals as an "othered" category.
- In *Slow Man*, the hospital and the domestic care system dramatize how disability is managed through paternalistic infrastructures that often reproduce dependency rather than empowerment.

These narratives underscore Coetzee's deep engagement with the ethics of institutions and their role in co-producing domination and vulnerability.

1.5. Resistance, Witnessing, and Ethical Ambiguity

Intersectional oppression in Coetzee's fiction is not met with heroic resistance alone. Instead, Coetzee dramatizes ambivalent forms of survival, negotiation, and compromise. Michael K resists not through open rebellion but through withdrawal, cultivating a garden as an act of autonomy. Lucy chooses to remain on the farm, even if that means accepting a subordinated role in a patriarchal, racialized order, thereby reframing survival as a form of resistance.

Yet Coetzee also probes the limits of witnessing. His narrators—whether the Magistrate, Mrs. Curren, or David Lurie—are often compromised figures whose attempts to witness or "give voice" are shaped by their own privilege and blindness. This dramatization cautions against liberal fantasies of empathy and insists on the difficulty of ethical representation across difference.

1.6. Religion, Morality, and the Grammar of Domination

Religion in Coetzee's fiction does not appear merely as private belief but as a moral discourse that legitimizes domination. In *Age of Iron*, Christian compassion is entwined with resignation, complicating resistance to apartheid violence. In *Disgrace*, penitential discourses frame confession as redemption, even when confession fails to transform structural injustice. Similarly, in *Elizabeth Costello*, philosophical and religious arguments about the soul and dignity expose the fragility of universalist ethics when confronted with embodied difference.

By situating religion alongside race, gender, caste, and disability, this paper demonstrates how moral vocabularies function as subtle technologies of power. They promise redemption while masking coercion, thus perpetuating inequality.

1.7. Disability as Embodied Vulnerability

Disability is often a neglected axis in postcolonial analysis, yet Coetzee repeatedly foregrounds bodily impairment and vulnerability. Michael K's cleft lip and emaciated body, the cancer-stricken Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron*, the aging Elizabeth Costello, and the amputee Paul Rayment in *Slow Man* embody how social structures convert physical difference into stigma and dispossession.

Disability studies remind us that impairment alone does not create vulnerability; rather, social and institutional arrangements determine whether impairment becomes disabling. Coetzee anticipates this insight by dramatizing how hunger, poverty, and policy transform impairment into exclusion. An intersectional approach highlights how disability interacts with race, gender, and class to produce unique forms of marginalization.

1.8. Towards an Intersectional Reading of Coetzee

This paper proceeds with the conviction that intersectionality is not merely a theoretical imposition but a hermeneutic already present in Coetzee's texts. His novels stage how domination is experienced across multiple, co-constitutive axes. By naming these axes explicitly—gender, race, ethnicity, caste, religion, and disability—this study seeks to clarify how Coetzee's fiction contributes to broader debates on ethics, justice, and human dignity. The contribution of this paper lies in three interrelated moves:

1. Close Reading of Intersectional Mechanisms: Identifying specific narrative moments where multiple forms of oppression converge.
2. Comparative Expansion: Bringing caste studies into dialogue with Coetzee to enrich postcolonial analysis.
3. Pedagogical and Ethical Implications: Proposing how intersectional readings of Coetzee can inform both literary scholarship and broader human rights discourse.

1.9. Structure of the Paper

The rest of the article is organized as follows:

- **Section 2** surveys theoretical literature on intersectionality, postcolonialism, and disability studies, situating this paper within existing scholarship.
- **Section 3** undertakes close readings of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K*, and *Age of Iron*, focusing on how empire, hunger, and illness intersect with racialized and gendered identities.
- **Section 4** analyzes *Disgrace*, Elizabeth Costello, and *Slow Man*, tracing how institutions such as the university, the church, and the clinic shape ethical possibilities and failures.
- **Section 5** considers comparative insights from caste studies to illuminate structural parallels between apartheid and caste hierarchies.
- **Section 6** concludes by highlighting how intersectional readings of Coetzee unsettle liberal humanist frameworks and propose ethically sensitive approaches to plural axes of power.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To demonstrate how Coetzee's key novels stage co-produced harm at the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, caste-like hierarchy, religion, and disability.
2. To identify narrative and institutional mechanisms—administrative violence, penitential scripts, carceral care—visible only under an intersectional reading.
3. To place Coetzee's ethics of witnessing in dialogue with postcolonial feminism and disability studies, clarifying both the reach and the limits of liberal spectatorship.
4. To articulate a cautious, comparative use of "caste" as an analytic for purity/stigma where it illuminates apartheid and post-apartheid stratifications without collapsing distinct histories
5. To explore how Coetzee's fictional representations of vulnerability and resistance can inform contemporary pedagogical practices and interdisciplinary research, offering models for engaging with plural axes of power in literary and cultural studies.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Coetzee Studies: Ethics, Allegory, and Representation

Since the 1980s, scholarship on J. M. Coetzee has been preoccupied with his ethical style, allegorical techniques, and the tension between political urgency and aesthetic restraint. David Attwell's foundational works—*J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (1993) and *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* (2014)—established the critical frame for reading Coetzee as a writer whose fiction is inseparable from South Africa's histories of colonialism and apartheid. Attwell emphasizes that Coetzee's allegories operate in a double register: they are historically situated yet structured to raise universal questions about power, complicity, and the ethics of witnessing.

Derek Attridge's *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004) further deepens this emphasis by reading Coetzee through Levinasian ethics. Attridge argues that Coetzee's style resists closure and demands a form of readerly responsibility—a responsibility to encounter the other without reducing alterity to sameness. This "ethics of reading" remains one of the most influential paradigms in Coetzee criticism, though it has been critiqued for privileging textual ethics over material politics.

Rita Barnard's *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (2007) situates Coetzee in relation to other South African writers, arguing that his fiction interrogates the burden of representation placed on white liberal intellectuals during and after apartheid. Barnard highlights how Coetzee's reticence and irony both critique and reproduce the limits of liberal spectatorship.

Taken together, Attwell, Attridge, and Barnard mark an early critical consensus: Coetzee's fiction is ethically charged, allegorical in design, and deeply engaged with colonial and postcolonial histories, yet it persistently dramatizes the difficulty of speaking for or representing the subaltern.

3.2. Intersectionality: Theoretical Foundations and Literary Uses

The entry of intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991), into literary studies has transformed how scholars approach Coetzee. Crenshaw demonstrated how Black women's experiences of oppression were invisible in legal and theoretical models that treated race and gender as separate, additive categories. Instead, she proposed that identities intersect, producing unique forms of discrimination not reducible to any single axis.

Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) further developed this framework by introducing the matrix of domination. Collins highlighted how structural, cultural, and interpersonal domains of power sustain one another, producing overlapping vulnerabilities. This insight provides a critical tool for analyzing Coetzee's novels, where institutions like universities, clinics, prisons, and empires not only enforce order but also shape the very conditions of subjectivity.

In Coetzee scholarship, intersectionality has increasingly been employed to read his characters as multiply marginalized. For example, Lucy Lurie in *Disgrace* is not simply a victim of gendered violence but also of racial transition and economic dispossession. Similarly, Michael K in *Life & Times of Michael K* embodies how poverty, race, and disability converge in the apartheid state's apparatus of control. Intersectionality thus illuminates dimensions of harm that single-axis approaches—focused only on race or only on gender—cannot fully capture.

3.3. Comparative Frames: Caste and Postcolonial Stratifications

While caste is not a category native to South Africa, scholars have begun exploring its comparative relevance. Sharmila Rege's *Dalit Women Talk Differently* (1998) and Uma Chakravarti's *Gendering Caste* (2003) emphasize how caste intersects with patriarchy, purity discourses, and stigmatization, creating layered experiences of oppression. These insights provide conceptual tools for reading caste-like logics in Coetzee's South African settings.

Recent comparative scholarship (e.g., Gupta 2004; Dirks 2001) suggests that apartheid's racial ordering operated with caste-like rigidity: reproduction, sexuality, and community boundaries were tightly policed, while discourses of purity and contamination structured social belonging. When Coetzee's fiction depicts racial hierarchies under apartheid and their afterlives, caste provides an analytic vocabulary that highlights how social stigmatization works across distinct yet structurally analogous contexts.

For example, Lucy's decision to remain on her farm under Petrus's protection (*Disgrace*) may be read not only as gendered and racialized but also as an accommodation to caste-like hierarchies of purity, belonging, and power. Such comparative readings do not collapse caste and race but illuminate how domination functions through intersecting categories of identity and stigma.

3.4. Disability Studies and Coetzee

Disability has emerged as one of the most dynamic new lenses in Coetzee criticism. Earlier scholarship often treated bodily impairment in Coetzee metaphorically—reading Michael K's cleft lip or Paul Rayment's amputation as symbols of political disfigurement. However, recent disability studies foreground embodiment as material and socially mediated rather than merely symbolic.

Katarzyna Wojtas's *Narratives of Disability and Illness in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee* (2024) is the first full-length monograph to systematically analyze Coetzee through disability frameworks. Wojtas mobilizes concepts such as ocularnormativism (the privileging of sighted norms), eco-disability (how environmental degradation interacts with disability), and dismodernism (Lennard Davis's idea that all bodies are potentially disabled). She argues that Coetzee persistently stages how impairment interacts with political and institutional forces, transforming physical difference into social exclusion.

Gümüş (2025) reads *Foe* through the lens of disability allegory, suggesting that Friday's muteness represents how imperial discourse disables subaltern voices. Friday's silence, rather than simply symbolizing oppression, also challenges the limits of narration itself, forcing readers to confront how language can both reveal and erase.

Oladeji (2025) applies a postcolonial feminist disability perspective to *In the Heart of the Country*, where Magda's "madness" is read as socially produced by patriarchal isolation and colonial suppression. This shifts interpretation from individual pathology to structural oppression, aligning with disability studies' critique of medicalized models of impairment.

Rajesh (2025) employs an intersectional reproductive justice lens in *Disgrace*, arguing that Lucy's rape and subsequent pregnancy exemplify how reproductive rights, gendered violence, and land dispossession intersect in post-apartheid South Africa. Disability enters this analysis not only in terms of bodily violation but also in the broader sense of how institutions disable women's autonomy.

Finally, a 2025 ResearchGate study on Coetzee's early fiction underscores how displacement, class, race, and disability intersect, particularly in narratives of marginalization such as *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country*. Together, these works establish disability as central rather than peripheral in Coetzee studies, shifting attention from allegorical readings to embodied, intersectional analyses.

3.5. Religion, Morality, and Ethical Grammars

Religion has also received sustained critical attention in Coetzee's oeuvre. Scholars have noted how Christian and penitential discourses structure the moral universe of *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace*. For instance, Mrs. Curren in *Age*

of Iron invokes Christian compassion even as she confronts the brutalities of apartheid, while David Lurie's insistence on confession in *Disgrace* exposes the limits of liberal redemption narratives.

The intersectional value of religion lies in its function as a moral vocabulary that legitimizes domination. As critics such as Mike Marais (2006) have argued, Coetzee destabilizes these vocabularies by showing how they mask violence as redemption. Reading religion alongside race, caste, and disability highlights how domination operates not only through force but also through cultural scripts of purity, penitence, and care.

3.6. Feminist and Postcolonial Perspectives

Postcolonial feminist readings of Coetzee have emphasized how gendered violence intersects with colonial and racial hierarchies. Critics such as Sue Kossew (2003) highlight how Coetzee's women characters—Lucy in *Disgrace*, Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*, and Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron*—bear the weight of multiple oppressions. These readings underscore the need for intersectional analysis: gender alone cannot explain Lucy's choices without also considering race, land, and power.

More recently, feminist disability scholars have sharpened this intersectional lens. By examining how women's bodies are medicalized, stigmatized, or rendered vulnerable in Coetzee's fiction, these critics highlight the convergence of patriarchy, colonialism, and ableism.

3.7. Intersectionality as Critical Necessity in Coetzee Studies

The cumulative trajectory of scholarship suggests a clear shift: from allegorical readings of Coetzee's fiction in the 1990s and 2000s to intersectional, materialist, and embodied readings in the 2020s. Where Attwell and Attridge emphasized ethical style and allegory, contemporary critics highlight how Coetzee stages concrete mechanisms of domination: administrative violence, carceral care, penitential scripts, and the disabling functions of institutions.

What unites these diverse strands is the recognition that intersectionality is not a theoretical overlay but a hermeneutic necessity. Coetzee's fiction itself insists that oppression is never experienced one axis at a time. Lucy's violation in *Disgrace* is simultaneously racialized, gendered, and tied to land and class. Michael K's suffering emerges not only from poverty but also from the way state institutions transform impairment into dispossession. Friday's silence in *Foe* exposes how colonialism intersects with linguistic and bodily disablement. Thus, recent scholarship confirms that intersectionality clarifies what Coetzee's fiction already dramatizes: domination is co-produced at the crossings of gender, race, caste-like hierarchy, religion, and disability, and resistance is always fragile, negotiated, and ambivalent.

3.8. Research Gap and Contribution

Despite these developments, several gaps remain. First, while disability has received increasing attention, it is rarely analyzed in sustained dialogue with race, gender, and religion in Coetzee. Second, caste remains largely absent from Coetzee scholarship, even though comparative caste analysis could illuminate caste-like hierarchies under apartheid. Third, while feminist and postcolonial readings highlight intersectional harms, there is less focus on how institutions—universities, clinics, prisons—act as infrastructures that materialize intersectional oppression.

This paper seeks to fill these gaps by:

1. Placing Coetzee's novels in explicit dialogue with intersectionality theory.
2. Introducing caste as a bounded yet illuminating comparative analytic.
3. Expanding disability studies approaches to emphasize how impairment interacts with race, gender, and religion under institutional structures.
4. Reassessing Coetzee's ethics of witnessing in light of intersectional feminist and disability critiques.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in the interpretive traditions of literary criticism. At its core is the method of close reading, a practice long associated with both formalist and post-structuralist criticism, but here repurposed as a critical-ethical tool for examining how Coetzee stages the interplay of domination and resistance. Close reading is particularly suited to Coetzee's fiction, which is stylistically spare, ethically charged, and layered with allegorical complexity. Each textual detail—dialogue, narrative perspective, descriptive imagery—serves as an entry point into broader questions of power, vulnerability, and justice.

The guiding framework is intersectionality. Rather than reading Coetzee's novels along single axes such as race or gender, this study systematically examines how multiple categories—gender, race, ethnicity, caste (as a comparative analytic), religion, and disability—converge within the narratives. Intersectionality, as theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins, does not simply add categories together; it insists that categories of difference co-construct one another, producing complex, situated experiences of oppression and resistance. By employing an explicitly intersectional heuristic, this study avoids the reductionism of one-dimensional readings and instead foregrounds the entangled nature of identity and vulnerability in Coetzee's fictional worlds.

4.2. Corpus Selection

The study examines six major novels spanning Coetzee's career:

1. *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980)
2. *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983)

3. Age of Iron (1990)
4. Disgrace (1999)
5. Elizabeth Costello (2003)
6. Slow Man (2005)

The selection is strategic rather than exhaustive. These novels collectively cover:

- Empire and Colonialism (Waiting for the Barbarians)
- Poverty and Disability (Life & Times of Michael K)
- Sickness, Race, and Ethics (Age of Iron)
- Gendered and Racial Violence (Disgrace)
- Religion and Animal Ethics (Elizabeth Costello)
- Care, Aging, and Disability (Slow Man)

Taken together, they span Coetzee's engagements with apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, as well as his later philosophical turn toward global ethics. This breadth allows for mapping how intersectional mechanisms recur and evolve across contexts.

4.3. Analytical Procedure

The methodology unfolds in three sequential but overlapping stages:

4.3.1. Mapping Institutional Touchpoints

The first stage involves identifying sites where institutions encounter bodies. Coetzee's novels are populated by institutions—courts, tribunals, camps, clinics, universities, households—that classify, discipline, and regulate life. This mapping proceeds by:

- Cataloguing institutional spaces in each novel (e.g., the Empire's barracks in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the medical camps in *Michael K*, the university tribunal in *Disgrace*).
- Documenting bodily encounters: torture, hunger, sickness, sexual violence, amputation, aging.
- Tracing institutional logics: how law, medicine, and administration justify violence as necessary or benevolent.

This stage aligns with Foucault's analysis of biopolitics and disciplinary power—how institutions do not merely repress but actively produce subjectivities. By mapping institutions, the study clarifies how domination is not abstract but embodied, enacted on specific characters whose lives are reshaped by administrative structures.

4.3.2. Identifying Identity Production and Erasure

The second stage focuses on how identities are named, erased, or administratively produced. Coetzee's characters are often subjected to bureaucratic processes—papers, registries, disciplinary hearings—that define their legibility. For example:

- Michael K is rendered illegible because his body and existence do not fit bureaucratic categories.
- Lucy in *Disgrace* is redefined through the racial and gendered violence she endures, her autonomy negotiated through land and patriarchal structures.
- Paul Rayment in *Slow Man* is administratively categorized as a disabled subject requiring care, which limits his agency.

This analysis draws from critical legal studies and disability studies, highlighting how identity is not natural but institutionalized. The erasure of Friday's voice in *Foe* (though outside the main corpus, conceptually relevant) exemplifies how language itself becomes a tool of administrative violence.

4.3.3. Tracking Moral Vocabularies

The third stage examines the moral and ethical vocabularies that attempt to metabolize violence. Coetzee's novels consistently stage languages of:

- Confession and Repentance (*Disgrace*).
- Charity and Compassion (*Age of Iron*).
- Animal Ethics and Universal Dignity (*Elizabeth Costello*).

These vocabularies promise redemption or empathy but often reproduce domination. For example, David Lurie's confession does not undo structural violence; Mrs. Curren's compassion cannot dismantle apartheid brutality. This stage tracks how moral discourses obscure, justify, or complicate the very harms they claim to address.

4.4. Caste as Comparative Analytic

A distinctive methodological move in this study is the inclusion of caste as a comparative axis. Importantly, caste is not treated as equivalent to race or as directly translatable to the South African context. Instead, it is approached as an analytic heuristic, drawing on insights from Dalit feminist scholarship (Rege 1998; Chakravarti 2003) and comparative sociology (Dirks 2001; Gupta 2004).

The comparative use of caste is structured around three key dimensions:

1. Purity and Pollution – apartheid's obsession with racial purity and spatial segregation parallels caste's emphasis on untouchability and contamination.
2. Endogamy and Exogamy – control of sexuality and reproduction in apartheid echoes caste's reproductive boundaries.
3. Hereditary Stigma – the transgenerational persistence of racial hierarchy mirrors caste's inherited stigma.

At the same time, methodological caution is emphasized: the analysis consistently marks differences between caste and apartheid, resisting the temptation to collapse distinct histories. The aim is not equivalence but comparative illumination, enriching how we understand stratification and domination across contexts.

4.5. The Role of Theory in Reading

The methodological design integrates theory not as an external imposition but as a dialogical partner with the text. Intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and disability studies provide vocabularies to name dynamics that Coetzee's fiction already dramatizes. For example:

- Crenshaw's notion of compound harm clarifies why Lucy's experience in *Disgrace* cannot be read only as gendered or only as racial.
- Collins's matrix of domination explains how Michael K is simultaneously disabled, impoverished, and racialized.
- Disability frameworks such as dismodernism explain how Paul Rayment's impairment destabilizes assumptions of independence.

Thus, theory is used heuristically: it provides precision without foreclosing the ambiguities Coetzee so carefully stages.

4.6. Justification of Method

This tripartite method—mapping institutions, analyzing identity production, and tracking moral vocabularies—ensures that intersectionality is operationalized rather than merely invoked. Each step highlights a dimension of how domination is co-produced:

- Institutions show the structural level of power.
- Identity processes reveal the administrative and discursive level.
- Moral vocabularies expose the cultural and ethical level.

Together, these stages map onto Collins's tripartite model of power (structural, cultural, interpersonal), making the methodology theoretically consistent and analytically comprehensive.

4.7. Limitations and Reflexivity

No methodology is without limits. This study acknowledges:

- Textual focus: As a literary study, it does not claim empirical generalizability but offers interpretive insights.
- Comparative caste use: While analytically fruitful, caste must be handled with care to avoid flattening differences.
- Researcher position: The analysis is shaped by contemporary theoretical frameworks that postdate Coetzee's novels; reflexivity is required to avoid anachronism.

These limits are addressed through methodological reflexivity: explicitly marking where theory illuminates versus where it risks overextension.

4.8. Expected Outcomes of Method

By deploying this methodology, the study expects to:

1. Reveal how Coetzee dramatizes intersectional harms—not isolated oppressions but converging ones.
2. Identify recurring institutional mechanisms—administrative violence, penitential discourses, carceral care—that operate across novels.
3. Clarify the ambivalent role of moral vocabularies, showing how they metabolize but do not undo violence.
4. Offer a comparative framework for thinking about caste-like hierarchies in apartheid contexts.
5. Contribute to broader debates in postcolonial ethics, disability studies, and feminist criticism.

5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Empire, Gendered Witnessing, and Racialized "Others": Waiting for the Barbarians

Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* is frequently read as an allegory of empire and authoritarian power, yet an intersectional analysis reveals how gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and disability converge to shape the novel's drama. The Magistrate, positioned as a compromised witness, embodies liberal ambivalence: he resists imperial cruelty but remains complicit in its logics of classification. His relationship with the young barbarian girl encapsulates this tension. On the surface, his care appears benevolent—washing her feet, massaging her body—but as critics such as Attridge (2004) have observed, his gestures are also erotically charged. Gender thus functions as a hinge for imperial knowledge: the girl's body becomes both an object of desire and a site of jurisdiction, where the Magistrate projects guilt, pity, and fantasy.

Race and ethnicity structure who is subject to torture and who is visible as a victim. The Empire marks "barbarians" as inherently torturable, outside the law's protection. Disability enters here as state-produced impairment: the girl is partially blinded, her feet broken, her body scarred. These impairments are not natural but manufactured by administrative violence, turning bodies into living archives of state cruelty. Religion lingers spectrally—civilizing missions, confessional rituals—laundering violence as moral duty.

Recent disability-centered scholarship extends this reading. Gümüş (2025) argues that Coetzee persistently uses disability as a metaphor for subaltern silencing, with Foe's Friday exemplifying how muteness embodies both literal impairment and systemic exclusion. Applied to *Barbarians*, this insight clarifies how impairment in the girl's body is not merely individual suffering but institutional silencing. The girl is doubly illegible: as a racialized "barbarian" and as a disabled woman. Intersectionality therefore exposes how her subjectivity cannot be reduced

to “native” or “female” alone; she exists at the crossing of overlapping regimes—military, patriarchal, ethnopollitical—that render her simultaneously visible and unspeakable.

Thus, the novel demonstrates that empire is not only territorial domination but also a machinery that produces intersectional vulnerabilities. The Magistrate’s failed witnessing dramatizes the limits of liberal spectatorship: even in compassion, he reinscribes domination through desire and paternalism.

5.2. Impairment, Hunger, and Bureaucracy: Life & Times of Michael K

In *Life & Times of Michael K*, Coetzee turns from the spectacle of torture to the quieter violence of bureaucracy, hunger, and dispossession. Michael K, with his cleft lip, presumed cognitive difference, and itinerant poverty, is persistently misrecognized by institutions. Camps, clinics, and military authorities read him as suspicious, defective, or subversive. His impairment and poverty do not merely mark him as vulnerable; they trigger administrative sorting that seeks to contain and discipline him.

This novel demonstrates how disability is administratively manufactured. Michael’s inability to “fit” into the categories of the state—worker, soldier, dependent—renders him illegible. His body resists bureaucratic inscription, but that resistance only intensifies surveillance. Ethnicity and class fold into this process: his marginal social status as a poor, racialized man compounds the suspicion directed at him. Gender norms also withdraw protection; Michael is neither warrior nor patriarch, leaving him outside the social contract.

Wojtas (2024) identifies Coetzee’s aesthetics of disability as “dismodernist,” where impairment is not merely deficit but a condition that exposes the fragility of normative embodiment. Michael epitomizes this mode: his silence, hunger, and refusal to participate in bureaucratic regimes render him unintelligible yet also radically free. His survival in the veld, cultivating a small garden, enacts a form of resistance outside legible productivity.

An intersectional analysis shows that Michael’s vulnerability is co-produced: disability, class poverty, and ethnicity together render him an object of suspicion, while bureaucratic institutions translate his difference into pathology. Yet Michael’s refusal to be fully legible destabilizes the system itself, revealing the limits of bureaucratic power.

5.3. Terminal Care, Post-Secular Ethics, and Racial Proximity: Age of Iron

Age of Iron dramatizes apartheid at its end-stage through the figure of Mrs. Curren, a white woman dying of cancer who narrates her final days in a letter to her daughter abroad. Her illness provides the novel’s central lens, foregrounding disability and terminal care, but always entangled with race, class, and religion.

The epistolary form itself embodies confession, charity, and dependence. Illness transforms Mrs. Curren’s moral vision: she becomes acutely aware of injustice, befriends a homeless Black man, and confronts police brutality. Yet her proximity to racialized suffering is mediated by privilege—she remains housed, resourced, and insulated by whiteness, even as illness strips her body. Gender adds another dimension: as an older woman, she negotiates vulnerability and care in ways distinct from male witnesses like the Magistrate.

Religion surfaces in her constant appeal to forgiveness, guilt, and absolution. These penitential vocabularies resemble liberal redemption narratives, where acknowledgment substitutes for structural change. Intersectionally, the novel demonstrates how illness-centered witnessing risks eclipsing systemic critique: Mrs. Curren’s cancer becomes a moral drama, but apartheid’s infrastructures of policing, housing, and education continue untouched.

The 2025 ResearchGate study on displacement and disability underscores this dynamic, arguing that in Coetzee’s fiction, disability often functions as dislocation—uprooting individuals from privilege and placing them in proximity to marginalized others. In *Age of Iron*, cancer displaces Mrs. Curren from her insulated life, forcing her into encounter with the structurally excluded. Yet the novel also shows the limits of such displacement: her compassion cannot reorder apartheid’s material structures.

5.4. Sexual Violence, Land, and Reproductive Justice: Disgrace

Disgrace is perhaps Coetzee’s most controversial and widely discussed novel, particularly for its treatment of Lucy Lurie’s rape. Intersectional analysis is crucial here. Lucy’s violation cannot be reduced to gender alone; it occurs at the nexus of land dispossession, post-apartheid masculinities, and racialized imaginaries of revenge. Her decision to remain on her farm and accept a protector/husband arrangement with Petrus refracts concerns familiar to caste analysis: endogamy and exogamy, purity and pollution, and the renegotiation of belonging after sexual violence.

Caste-analytic insights sharpen this reading: shame attaches to female sexuality, and community membership is renegotiated through patriarchal bargains. Lucy’s decision mirrors caste-like logics, where women’s sexuality becomes the terrain upon which community honor and belonging are contested.

Meanwhile, David Lurie’s disciplinary hearing at the university stages secular penance. His refusal to deliver scripted confession echoes religious rituals of repentance, highlighting how penitential vocabularies shape secular institutions. Yet the tribunal leaves intact the racial and gendered economies beyond campus. Confession here functions as a performance that masks structural inequalities.

Rajesh (2025) applies a reproductive justice framework, showing how Lucy’s situation illustrates the convergence of reproductive rights, gender violence, and land politics. Her pregnancy and her negotiations with Petrus highlight how women’s reproductive autonomy is constrained by overlapping structures of patriarchy, race, and property.

Thus, *Disgrace* demonstrates how sexual violence in transitional South Africa cannot be analyzed through gender alone. Intersectionality reveals the convergence of racial resentment, patriarchal control, caste-like logics of purity, and the politics of land.

5.5. Voice, Doctrine, and Ethical Speech: Elizabeth Costello

Elizabeth Costello departs from Coetzee's South African settings but continues his interrogation of institutions, morality, and the limits of ethical witnessing. The aging female intellectual at its center occupies multiple marginal positions: a woman in patriarchal academia, an older voice in a youth-driven public sphere, and a writer navigating doctrinal disputes.

The novel's lectures dramatize how authority is structured by gender, race, and religion. Costello's authority is questioned not only because of her arguments (on animal ethics, for example) but also because of her embodied identity as an elderly woman. Religion emerges centrally in the tribunal of "belief," which echoes colonial forums where doctrinal tests were used to legitimize domination. The novel asks who is authorized to speak ethically across difference and how even secular reason reinscribes exclusion.

Wojtas (2024) notes that Coetzee often places liminal figures—aging intellectuals, impaired narrators, silenced subalterns—at the center of his fiction, destabilizing institutional authority. Costello's frailty and outsider status exemplify this. Her voice is both marginalized and ethically insistent, unsettling the dominance of doctrinal and secular rationality alike.

Intersectionally, Elizabeth Costello highlights how gendered authority, religious discourse, and ethical speech intertwine to determine who is legible as an ethical subject.

5.6. Prosthesis, Migration, and Care Contracts: *Slow Man*

Slow Man extends Coetzee's exploration of disability by centering on Paul Rayment, an amputee whose life after a cycling accident is reorganized by prosthetics, insurers, and caregivers. Disability here is inseparable from migration and gendered economies of care. Paul's Croatian caregiver, Marijana, embodies the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and class: she provides intimate labor shaped by her own familial and cultural obligations.

Institutions—clinics, insurers—mediate Paul's impairment, but it is Marijana's care that structures his everyday life. Dependency becomes a site of negotiation, where disability intersects with migrant labor hierarchies. Paul desires intimacy beyond professional care, but this desire collides with Marijana's familial obligations and cultural boundaries, producing ethical tension.

Oladeji (2025)'s analysis of *In the Heart of the Country* demonstrates how Magda's "madness" is culturally scripted by patriarchy and colonial isolation. Applied to *Slow Man*, we see a similar entanglement: disability is not only medical but culturally mediated through gendered and ethnicized care structures. Intersectionality clarifies that Paul's situation cannot be reduced to "disabled subject" alone; it is shaped by the intersections of aging, class privilege, ethnic minority labor, and gendered expectations of caregiving.

5.7. Comparative Note on "Caste"

Throughout these analyses, caste has functioned as a comparative heuristic rather than a historical claim. The logic of purity/pollution resonates with the Empire's treatment of "barbarians" in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, where civilizational purity justifies torture. Endogamy/exogamy resonates with Lucy's predicament in *Disgrace*, where sexual violence renegotiates belonging and community membership. Hereditary stigma echoes in Michael K's social illegibility, where bodily difference and poverty mark him as perpetually suspect.

Crucially, the analysis keeps differences explicit: caste is not race, nor is apartheid caste. Yet the comparative move illuminates how societies across contexts maintain stratification through embodied stigmas, reproductive control, and boundary policing. This transnational feminist approach resists collapsing histories while enabling productive cross-reading.

5.8. Synthesis

Across these six novels, intersectionality emerges as more than a critical tool: it is the condition of Coetzee's fictional worlds. Empire, poverty, illness, sexual violence, doctrinal tests, and disability are never experienced along a single axis. They converge, co-producing subjects who are vulnerable precisely because of overlapping structures.

Institutions—courts, camps, clinics, universities—materialize these intersections by classifying, disciplining, or silencing. Moral vocabularies—confession, compassion, doctrine—seek to metabolize violence but often reproduce domination. Resistance appears in fragile forms: Michael K's withdrawal, Lucy's choice to remain, Costello's frail lectures. These are not heroic victories but precarious negotiations within intersecting systems of power.

6. CONCLUSION

J. M. Coetzee's fiction, when approached through an explicitly intersectional heuristic, emerges as a set of ethical laboratories where categories of domination—gender, race, ethnicity, caste-like hierarchy, religion, and disability—converge and collide. Across his works, Coetzee consistently resists simplified accounts of victimhood and instead dramatizes how vulnerability is produced at the crossing of multiple axes of power. This expanded perspective reveals that the injuries represented in his fiction are not discrete or isolable but co-constituted: racialized subjection is entangled with gendered violence, disability is intensified by bureaucratic regimes, and religious or penitential discourses are mobilized to legitimize coercion. Intersectionality thus does not merely

provide a contemporary theoretical overlay on Coetzee's work but illuminates what his texts already enact—the impossibility of parsing human experience into singular categories of oppression.

The Magistrate's failed witnessing in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is exemplary in this regard. His care for the tortured barbarian girl is framed simultaneously by erotic desire, patriarchal pity, and imperial power, while the girl herself is made illegible at the crossing of race, gender, and impairment. Michael K in *Life & Times of Michael K* exemplifies how bureaucracy transforms bodily difference and hunger into administrative suspicion, producing disability as a social rather than biological condition. Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron* demonstrates how illness displaces privilege and brings the liberal conscience into proximity with structural injustice, even as her appeals to compassion and absolution remain insufficient for systemic change.

Lucy in *Disgrace* embodies perhaps the most layered intersection of vulnerabilities: her rape and its aftermath reveal how gender, race, property, and reproductive rights intertwine, while her decisions to stay and enter into protective arrangements with Petrus resonate with caste-like concerns of purity and community belonging. Elizabeth Costello's aging female voice destabilizes doctrinal forums of belief, asking who is authorized to speak ethically across difference, while Paul Rayment in *Slow Man* shows how disability is negotiated through prosthetics, migrant care labor, and class privilege.

Taken together, these narratives show how Coetzee persistently stages domination as a convergence of forces rather than a singular oppression. His novels expose the workings of institutions—tribunals, camps, clinics, universities—that touch bodies and manage lives. These institutions operate not only through coercion but also through discursive and moral vocabularies: confession, repentance, compassion, charity, and doctrinal judgment. Such vocabularies metabolize violence, turning domination into duty, redemption, or benevolence. Yet Coetzee's fiction consistently unsettles these moral grammars, showing their limits and their complicity in sustaining systemic inequities.

The comparative use of caste as an analytic enriches this analysis. Though caste is not a South African category, its logics of purity, stigma, and endogamy illuminate structural parallels in apartheid and post-apartheid stratifications. By examining how purity discourses underpin imperial and racial violence in *Barbarians*, how reproductive stigma informs Lucy's predicament in *Disgrace*, or how hereditary suspicion shadows Michael K's illegibility, caste provides a conceptual tool for transnational comparison. Importantly, the analysis maintains caution: caste and race are not equated, and their historical specificities remain distinct. Yet juxtaposing them highlights how systems across different societies deploy similar strategies of boundary policing, stigma, and control. In doing so, the study not only deepens Coetzee scholarship but also contributes to comparative postcolonial and feminist inquiries that seek to understand domination in global terms.

What emerges, then, is not a picture of heroic resistance but of fragile negotiation. Coetzee's characters rarely overthrow the structures that oppress them. Instead, they survive, adapt, or choose compromised forms of agency. Michael K retreats into gardening, Lucy chooses to remain on her farm, Costello continues speaking despite her marginalization, Paul Rayment renegotiates care contracts. These responses are not triumphs in conventional terms; they are minor, precarious, and sometimes complicit. Yet precisely in their ambiguity lies their ethical force. Coetzee refuses the consolatory spectacle of liberation narratives and instead insists that resistance is often indistinguishable from survival, that ethical agency may be partial, compromised, and situated within oppressive systems rather than outside them.

For pedagogy, the implications are significant. An intersectional reading of Coetzee trains readers to recognize administrative violence wherever identities cross. It draws attention not only to spectacular scenes of torture or rape but also to the quieter violences of documentation, tribunals, care infrastructures, and moral scripts. In classrooms, this mode of reading encourages students to see how institutions—whether universities, hospitals, or immigration regimes—are not neutral spaces but sites where multiple axes of power converge on vulnerable bodies. It also highlights how literary form itself participates in staging or resisting these mechanisms: the epistolary voice of *Age of Iron*, the allegory of *Barbarians*, the tribunal form of *Disgrace*, the lecture structure of Elizabeth Costello, all dramatize how genres of speech are implicated in power. Teaching Coetzee intersectionally thus fosters not only literary sensitivity but also ethical literacy—an awareness of how systems of domination persist in and through everyday practices.

For research, the payoff lies in designing intersectionally sensitive inquiries that foreground legibility: who becomes recognized as a subject of rights, care, and voice? Who is rendered illegible or disposable? Coetzee's fiction insists that legibility is always mediated by intersecting axes of power. Friday's muteness, Michael K's silence, Lucy's constrained decisions, Costello's marginalized voice—all demonstrate how subjectivity is denied or qualified through institutional, cultural, and moral frameworks. Future research can extend these insights beyond Coetzee, applying similar heuristics to other postcolonial literatures where domination is similarly layered. Moreover, intersectional readings challenge the very question of representation. Rather than asking whether Coetzee "fully" represents subaltern experience—a question that presupposes the possibility of transparent representation—this approach emphasizes how his novels stage the pressures that make representation impossible. The silences, gaps, and ambiguities in his texts are not failures but dramatizations of the ethical limits of representation. They compel readers to confront the impossibility of speaking fully for the other and to reckon with what that impossibility demands of us. It demands humility, attentiveness, and a refusal to translate difference into sameness. It demands that we resist the temptation of moral closure and instead remain in the discomfort of ambiguity.

Ultimately, Coetzee's contribution lies not in offering solutions but in unsettling certainties. His fictions expose how domination is intersectional, how institutions metabolize violence, how moral vocabularies mask coercion, and how resistance is often fragile rather than triumphant. They challenge readers to rethink ethics not as the extension of sympathy or pity but as the recognition of incommensurable differences, the acknowledgment of structural complicity, and the commitment to interrogate systems of domination.

An intersectional reading, then, reframes Coetzee's oeuvre as a sustained inquiry into plural axes of power. It invites readers and researchers alike to see beyond singular categories and to confront the co-produced nature of harm. It resists the consolatory spectacle of liberal redemption and instead insists that ethics must be grounded in structural transformation. In this sense, Coetzee's novels are not simply literary artifacts but ethical experiments, staging scenarios where power, vulnerability, and resistance intersect in ways that remain urgently relevant to our contemporary world.

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Ethics Declaration

Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate

This article is based on textual analysis of published literary works by J. M. Coetzee and does not involve human participants, personal data, or animal studies. Hence, formal ethics committee approval and informed consent are not required.

Consent for Publication

No human or personal data are included in this study. Consent for publication is therefore not applicable.

Competing Interests

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