

J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*: Putting a Mirror to a Society Rotten with Racial Hatred and Brutalities

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Abstract:

Age of Iron is an awe-inspiring novel written by J. M. Coetzee. It depicts a society where dominant class is full of hatred for a large group of people. The hatred is nurtured solely on the basis of racial differences. The white ruling class inflicts injustice and brutalities on black people. The period depicted by Coetzee is an 'age of iron' signifying the most difficult span of time for people who are made to suffer politically, socially, economically, physically and mentally. The setting of the novel clearly implies the violent period of state of emergency. The government imposed strictest rules on the people participating in the protest. Apartheid had been suppressing people for too long, refusing their needs and demands. The government refused to listen to their demands. This resulted in deterioration of the order situation. Coetzee alludes to this situation in his novel through the depiction of burning of Black Township, killing of students, etc. The novel contains some very horrifying scenes of torture caused due to racial segregation. It also records how the central character, Mrs. Curren, responds to the chaotic situation. Her sense of complicity, shame and dejection is seen as the novel progresses toward the end. She sympathises the oppressed and accepts her part in the crime done in the name of white superiority, and shows readiness to pay for it. *Age of Iron* is a hideous picture of a society/territory suffering from a disease of racial segregation.

Keywords: Racial segregation, Apartheid, South Africa, Complicity, Race

J. M. Coetzee lived in South Africa when racial segregation was severely practiced in his country. His career witnessed the most infamous apartheid rule, its downfall in 1994, and the democratic transition of his nation. Apartheid is a practice of segregation of blacks on the basis of racial or colour differences. Later in 1948 it became an official state policy of South Africa. Then white government of South Africa exploited all its resources for the implementation of apartheid policy. The natives were tortured brutally. Discriminatory policies were designed and laws were passed accordingly. All these added to the chaotic situation of the country. Irving Howe, American literary and social critic, in his article “A Stark Political Fable of South Africa” comments on the South African chaotic situation during the apartheid regime. He says: “An endless clamour of news about racial injustice, the feeling that one’s life is mortgaged to a society gone rotten with hatred, an indignation (anger or injustice) that exhausts itself into depression, the fear that one’s anger may overwhelm and destroy one’s fiction”. This was the scenario in the then South Africa.

Age of Iron is the sixth novel written by John Maxwell Coetzee. It deals with issues of racial segregation picturing the horrible and awful scenes of atrocities and torture inflicted upon the blacks of South Africa. This novel is published in 1990, the year in which great African nationalist leader Nelson Mandela was released from Robben Island Prison. According to Dominic Head composition of the novel spans 1986-89 and this was the period of State of Emergency in South Africa (67). During this span African government witnessed unprecedented mass unrest against apartheid. On 12th June 1986 – four days before the 10th Anniversary of the Soweto Uprising – the government declared a country-wide State of Emergency to curb the political dissent shown by blacks (“States of Emergency in South Africa”). Coetzee takes some of the scenes from history and uses them in the novel with a distinct aim of replicating the horror caused by apartheid.

The central character of this novel, Mrs. Curren – a white woman, is the retired professor of Classics living in Cape Town during apartheid rule. It is an epistolary novel in which we follow the life of central figure through her letter. Mrs. Curren becomes aware of the fatal disease she is suffering from and she starts writing a letter to her daughter who resides in the USA. The letters would be posted after her death. The novel is a story of

a white woman, dying of cancer, who undergoes a change in her perspectives towards her country and its wrong practices.

The setting of the novel clearly implies the violent period of state of emergency. The government imposed strictest rules on the people participating in the protest. Political funerals were restricted, curfews were imposed, and certain indoor gatherings were banned. The news crews with television cameras were banned from filming in areas where there was political unrest (*sahistory.org.za*). Apartheid had been suppressing people for too long, refusing their rights. The government refused to listen to their demands. This resulted in deterioration of the order situation. Coetzee alludes to this situation in his novel through the depiction of burning of Black Township, killing of students, etc. This novel has some black characters. Bheki, one of them, is a son of Mrs. Curren's housekeeper Florence. Bheki and his friend John suffer the atrocities of apartheid. They are tortured by apartheid machinery.

The most pathetic and horrifying scene of torture caused due to apartheid portrayed by Coetzee is the scene where five dead bodies are seen lying before the entrance of a school: "Against the far wall, shielded from the worst of the rain, were five bodies neatly laid out . . . their clothes, their very hair, had a flattened, dead look" (Coetzee 102). One of these dead bodies is of Bheki's, whose "eyes were open and staring, his mouth open too" (102). The wide open eyes signify the horror of death experienced by the dead person. Five dead bodies of young black Africans, who are shot dead, give the testimony of brutalities of apartheid. It shows how the black protest against racial segregation was crushed by the Police State of South Africa during the state of emergency. Mrs. Curren sees these bodies, and this is for the very first time she comes across apartheid and the uprising against it, which restructures her perspectives towards South Africa, its government and the diseased society. She receives the most dreadful shock and she asks Mr. Thabane about the killer. The answer which comes from Mr. Thabane is an instance of an evidence of Coetzee's portrayal of racial segregation – its torture and slaughter. Mr. Thabane answers: "Who did it?" said Mr. Thabane. "If you want to dig the bullets out of their bodies, you are welcome. But I will tell you in advance what you will find. 'Made in South Africa. SABS Approved.' That is what you will find" (AOI 103). The bullets having a 'made in South Africa' stamp is a clear sign of state sponsored violence and brutality upon the blacks who oppose and stage strong

protest. Coetzee illustrates the black protest depicting the way black come together and fought against racial segregation. The novel also echoes the black unity in their widespread uprising. Character of a young and rebellious black boy, Bheki, represents this uprising. His stance is indicative of “increasingly militant youth, promoting a new wave of school boycotts, of a marked feature of this phase of black resistance” (Head 67). Bheki embodies the new South Africa which disapproves the racial segregation and puts strong dissent against it. J. M. Coetzee reflects the struggle against apartheid through the portrayal of John and Bheki.

Age of Iron, through the character of Mrs. Curren, represents the white liberals who reacted against apartheid. Mrs. Curren questions her own beliefs and her own perception about her country and in the process, she undergoes drastic changes in this respect. This is one of the important themes of the novel. Mrs. Curren is “fully aware of her own history and the ill-doings of her white ancestors and their oppression, she sets off on a journey where everything is questioned” (Hasselqvist 5). When Bheki flees from home, and Mrs. Curren comes out searching for him, she first time comes across the horrible effects of apartheid policy on the lives of blacks. She witnesses various violent events including the burning of a black township and the killing of her servant's son, as well as the firing bullets by security forces on a young black activist whom she shelters in her house. She is shocked to see the horrors of the system. Racial segregation has kept her aloof so far from the realities of society and so she is ignorant about the plight of blacks. When she sees the dead bodies of black boys she tells Vercuiel that she has “not seen black people in their death before” (Coetzee 124). The change in her perception is accelerated after she witnesses the death of Bheki and his friend John, and she confesses that apartheid is a crime committed by whites. She affirms: “A crime was committed a long time ago. How long ago? I do not know. But longer ago than 1916, certainly. So long ago that I was born into it. It is part of my inheritance. It is part of me, I am part of it” (AOI 164). It is a kind of repentance which comes from a white person. Mrs. Curren further thinks that though she has not committed this crime personally, she will have to pay for this crime, and that the price for this is a life full of shame. She declares:

Like every crime it had its price. That price, I used to think, would have to be paid in shame: in a life of shame and a shameful death, unlamented, in an

obscure corner. I accepted that. I did not try to set myself apart. Though it was not a crime I asked to be committed, it was committed in my name. (Coetzee 164)

She considers this shame as a responsible factor for her suffering from cancer. She asserts: “I have cancer from the accumulation of shame I have endured in my life. That is how cancer comes about: from self-loathing the body turns malignant and begins to eat away at itself” (Coetzee 145). This shows complicity on the part of Mrs. Curren who feels ashamed of the brutalities and violence inflicted upon innocent natives in the name of racial segregation. She accepts the responsibility of this crime readily and accepts to compensate the price to be paid for it. She witnesses the dreadfulness of apartheid and considers that it is all because of her ancestors’ wrong-thinking and wrong behaviour. Viewing this trait of Mrs. Curren’s personality Dominic Head emphasizes:

In a broader historical context, Mrs. Curren understands that it is colonial history, and specifically Afrikaner Nationalism, that has produced this political inter-regnum of resistance. This ‘age of iron’, in which normal human relations are distorted. (67)

She has opposed the apartheid regime throughout her life. But when she personally sees all the injustice and suppression, she becomes dejected and helpless thinking about the dark side of her country. She grows more conscious about the depressing world around her.

Mrs. Curren sympathizes the oppressed and their plight. By doing this she resembles to the Magistrate of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), another novel by Coetzee,. She is disturbed by the death of Bheki. She says: “I was shaken. . . . I won’t say *grieved* because I have no right to the word, it belongs to his own people. But I am still – what? – disturbed” (Coetzee 124). Unlike the Colonel Joll from *Waiting for the Barbarians*, who turns the trashing of natives into a game and enjoys sadistic pleasure, Mrs. Curren has great sympathy for the natives along with the sense of guilt for the wrong doings in the name of apartheid. Patrick McGrath in his article “To be Conscious is to suffer” comments:

Age of Iron is about an old white woman dying of cancer in a comfortable suburb of Cape Town finds her maternal sympathies aroused by her black housekeeper's son when she sees him brutalized by the police. Surrogate

parenthood gradually opens her eyes to the vicious realities of the apartheid state. . . . Her real children, she begins to see, are the black youths being murdered by the security forces under her nose. The personal and the political are most elegantly conflated in this novel.

The complicity creates a relation with the victim, and this complicity in turn, in spite of her being a member white ruling class, initiates a neutral state in her, and she disapproves racial segregation.

The reflection of apartheid and its related aspects is presented by using symbols and metaphors. In *Age of Iron*, a mother in apartheid governed country who is suffering from incurable bone cancer writes a letter to her daughter. Coetzee uses the symbol of cancer to show the degrading and deteriorating condition of South Africa. Mrs. Curren and South Africa face the same fate. Mrs. Curren states: "To each us fate sends the right disease. Mine a disease that eats me out from inside" (Coetzee 112). She is suffering from cancer that eats her body from within. In the same way the apartheid conflict is a disease which is eating up South Africa from inside out. She feels that the present chaos is a result of oppression of blacks by whites. She feels that the chaos is a right disease sent by fate. Henrik Hasselqvist remarks: "The narratives of the main protagonist Mrs. Curren is analysed to answer the question of how certain events, objects and passages describe decay and downfall, both in bodily function of Mrs. Curren and in the country in which she lives" (4-5). In continuation Coetzee consequently describes Mrs. Curren's effort to fight with cancer to show black struggle set against racial segregation.

Mrs. Curren's letter gives a detailed account of history of the time she lives in. Coetzee does not attempt to present truth through this account of history. His aim is to put the situation of his country during apartheid rule by critically analyzing the history and relating all into his novel. Critic Laura Wright comments on the theme of *Age of Iron*. She says, "In *Age of Iron*, as in his preceding female narrated texts, Coetzee again provides a critique of authorial and historical truth" (70). Coetzee also speaks of rivalry of novel with history and argues that this rivalry with history creates novel independent but supplementing historical facts. *Age of Iron* can be considered as a novel supplementing historical information of apartheid regime and state of emergency in South Africa between 1986 and 1990.

Age of Iron encompasses several themes like mother and daughter relationship, meaning of freedom, questioning one's self. However, the most important themes are the oppression by government and the downfall of apartheid. Coetzee has used cancer and decaying body of central figure as a symbol to present this theme. The narrator "stands for South Africa, the cancer within mirroring the diseased society without" (Head 67). Through this picture of cancerous body, Coetzee sends a message to all whites to open their eyes, as Mrs. Curren opens, to look at the atrocities with broad mind. Mrs. Curren says: "I thought: This is the worst thing I have witnessed in my life. And I thought: Now my eyes are open and I can never close them again" (Coetzee 102-103). It's an appeal to end the oppression continued in the name of apartheid or racial segregation. Coetzee suggests that issues involving oppression and racism, if perceived neutrally and sympathetically, will definitely compel us to scrutinize ourselves and to question our prejudice.

Technically, age of iron signifies a period from human history known for hardship in leading the life as well as discovery and use of the metal iron. However, the present novel depicts the 'age of iron' signifying the brutal and inhuman ways of whites towards natives. Nevertheless, the novel contains hope for future too. At one place Mrs. Curren refers to the two young daughters of her housekeeper by their names, and says "Hope and Beauty. It was like living in an allegory" (Coetzee 90). The implication is that she sees the children as the future. She hopes that when they grow old, they will build a new country founded on values of equal rights and justice. Moreover, the novel signals a shift as compared to earlier novel by Coetzee. There is a character called 'Friday' in Coetzee's earlier novel *Foe* (1986), who is a tongue less slave, and who cannot speak and voice his thoughts. Here, the black people of South Africa have a voice, and they are speaking themselves.

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