

Race, Class and Classics in *Age of Iron* by John Maxwell Coetzee

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Abstract

John Maxwell Coetzee is one of the most influential and distinguished writers in the modern world. Known for analytical brilliance and subtle precision in his fiction to expose the horrors of apartheid in South Africa via universal characters, unnamed settings and unique narrative style Coetzee's novels deal with themes of exploitation, violence, racism, desire, remorse, shame, injustice, cruelty and empathy. Amongst many of J M Coetzee's masterpieces *Age of Iron* too deals with similar themes in its own peculiar way. The present paper will focus on the themes of race class and classics in the novel to unearth various perspectives intending to give a meaningful insight about the work.

Key Words: Coetzee, Race, Class, Classics, protagonist, Apartheid

Coetzee has put sincere efforts directly or indirectly, to condemn injustice, to unearth fears and express uncertainties about South Africa, giving voice to those familial, social, political and racial elements that in the South African apartheid era were for a long time silenced and deprived of any form of expression. Winner of the Sunday Express Book of the Year award *Age of Iron* is a novel by South African and Nobel Prize winning author J.M. Coetzee. Published in 1990 and Set in Apartheid era Cape Town, the novel *Age of Iron* is narrated in an epistolary style through the letters of Mrs Curren, a white elderly retired professor of Classics and economically strong who is slowly dying of cancer, to her unnamed daughter, who has left South Africa for America in protest against the apartheid system prevalent in South Africa. While Mrs Curren has always been ideologically

opposed to Apartheid, she has never done anything to actively fight against this system of oppression. With progression of the novel, the violence between white and black South Africans moves from the backdrop to directly affecting Mrs Curren's life. Among other horrors, she witnesses the burning of a nearby black township and discovers the murdered body of her servant's son. All these inhuman incidents force her to confront and guesstimate her lifelong relationship to her city and the injustices of Apartheid.

Winner of Nobel prize and Booker prize twice J M Coetzee has always portrayed the theme of race in almost all his novels and the work *Age of Iron* is no exception. He has put sincere efforts although indirectly, to denounce injustice, to unearth fears and express uncertainties about South Africa, giving voice to those familial, social, political and racial

elements that in the South African apartheid era were for a long time silenced and deprived of any form of expression. Age of is about an old, intellectual white woman who remains indifferent and uninvolved in the contemporary issues of apartheid and racism but comes to a realisation and sensitivity due to several events during the course of the novel that shake the conscience of both the protagonist and the readers alike.

The protagonist Mrs. Curren almost never gives any reference explicitly to apartheid system or Blackness. Though Florence, the black woman is the caretaker of Mrs. Curran and is good at her work, yet she is described as "severe and unsmiling". The son of Florence Bheki is only fifteen years old and involved in the anti-racism movement in South Africa. His mother is very proud of him. During the course of the novel when Bheki is murdered either by the police or by the white extremists Mrs. Curren is disturbed and looks at the pictures of her childhood in which she is surrounded by her white family and black servants in a beautiful garden of her home. She ponders over the ones in the picture who are not alive now.

Year after year fruit and flowers and vegetables burgeoned in that garden, pouring forth their seed, dying, resurrecting themselves, blessing us with their profuse presence. But by whose love tended? Who clipped the hollyhocks? Who laid the melon seeds in their warm, moist bed? Was it my grandfather who got up at four in the icy morning to open the sluice and lead water into the garden? If not he, then whose was the garden rightfully? Who are the ghosts and who the presences? Who, outside the picture, leaning on their rakes, leaning on their spades, waiting to get back to work, lean

also against the edge of the rectangle, bending it, bursting it in? (111)

Mrs. Curren goes on to say how these photos have developed "further than one would ever have dreamed" and have "become negatives again, a new kind of negative in which we begin to see what used to lie outside the frame, occulted" (112). This is an important "we" for understanding Curren's perspective—a similar "we" to the one Curren, herself, notes in Florence's speech. When Curren accuses Florence of turning her back on her children, Florence responds, "These are good children, they are like iron, we are proud of them." Reflecting on the exchange, Curren quotes an excerpt of Florence back to her daughter—"We are proud of them.' We. Come home either with your shield or on your shield" (50). When Curren says "we," she refers to the white middle-class South Africans like herself, her mother, her daughter, and the "we" doesn't register to her as noteworthy. When Florence says "we," Curren hears it as a loud and clear segregation of the white and Black population of South Africa; she even poses Florence as a "Spartan matron," filtering the Black African resistance through a comfortable reference point for her, a military nation-state of ancient Greece, further othering Black Africans by applying her classical metaphors.

Racism and class are closely mingled in *Age of Iron*, and Mrs. Curren doesn't spend time discussing poverty and other necessary issues among white South Africans, rather she focusses her discussion on the privileged, white middle class to which she belongs. Similarly, Vercueil who is described as a nomad, a drunkard and a former seaman becomes an important character in the novel to

discuss poverty and nomadism in South Africa. Vercueil's race is never revealed or referred to, which, in a novel so deeply concerned with race relations, can be nothing other than intentional. It is interesting that Mrs. Curren initially hates Vercueil and shoos him away from her house but at the end of the novel he is described as some sort of angel who possesses supernatural qualities.

During her illness and severe pain Vercueil, discovering that she is in the last stage of cancer, helps Mrs. Curren up and into the house. He suggests, "This is a big house. ... You could turn it into a boarding house" (10). Vercueil investigates Curren's life and sees excess, affordances, and opportunities for use by himself and others in need. He sees in Curren a deficit of need—she has more than she can use. Shortly after this encounter, Curren offers Vercueil a job gardening for her. She tells him they cannot "proceed on a basis of charity," and he simply asks her, "Why?" She tells him, "Because you don't deserve it," and he replies, "Who deserves anything?" (21) This sets Curren off. She yells "take!" at him and thrusts her purse in his hands. He calmly removes thirty rand from it. This discussion proves that though Mrs. Curren is an old woman suffering from cancer in the last stage and well aware of the apartheid system of the country, yet she has her own perspective to look at non-white countrymates. There is an unsaid acknowledgement of the need of each other between Vercueil and Mrs. Curren yet the latter struggles to realize the acknowledgement.

The migration and settling of the unnamed daughter of Mrs. Curren in US is another example of class difference. The narration in the novel at first hints the migration of the daughter to the US as an important and

required step to escape the brutalities of violence, apartheid and other issues but hints get more and more intense with the progression of the novel that the daughter left South Africa not to escape any trauma but to enjoy the luxuries of a more developed country. While referring to the white, middle- and upper-class youth of South Africa, Mrs. Curren opines, "Their residence the limbo of the unborn, their innocence the innocence of bee grubs, plump and white, drenched in honey, absorbing sweetness through their soft skins. Slumbrous their souls, bliss-filled, abstracted." The larva-grub metaphor here signifies white ignorance and historical innocence in the book, which later is acknowledged by Mrs. Curren to absorb that how her own understanding of how her whiteness and class makes her complicit in upholding apartheid.

Intellectual acumen and academia often find great impression and important role as undercurrent or prominent themes in oeuvre of J.M. Coetzee. In *Age of Iron* Mrs. Curren is a retired professor of classics and ipso facto time and again cites quotes and examples from the renowned classics. Throughout the novel, she sprinkles etymologies, explicates in Latin phrases, and recites Virgil. In the spasm of pain and throes of trying to convince John to abandon his cause and let go of his idea of "comradeship," which Curren insists is nothing more than a "mystique of death" (150), she cites Thucydides. She tells John that if he were to take her Thucydides class, he "might have learned something about what can happen to our humanity in a time of war. Our humanity, that we are born with, that we are born into" (80).

David Attwell in *Mother: Age of Iron* writes of Coetzee's 1988 revisionary progress, "Coetzee was now able to write himself

into the voice of Mrs. Curren. No longer the grieving son but the intellectual and fellow humanist, Coetzee was able to develop Mrs. Curren's classicism, giving cultural weight to her approaching death" (389). Curren's academic background aligns her with Western exceptionalism, which is why she so often refers to a constellation of Greek and Roman metaphors to make sense of the current situation in South Africa; the problem is, these metaphors continually fail her. In her dream, she envisions Florence as Aphrodite, but in relating the dream back to Vercueil, notes that "Florence has nothing to do with Greece" (179). Clearly, Curren is unable to shake her worldview, even as she begins to understand its limits.

She often expresses her personal experiences through the lens of Greek and Roman mythologies, most frequently referring to the Aeneid. When Curren moves through the mist, smoke, and chaos of Site C, the scene is highly reminiscent of Aeneas's journey through the underworld (Dooley). But, returning to her gradual understanding of the obsolescence of her classics background, when Vercueil asks Curren in the final scenes of the novel, "What is Latin," she responds simply, "A dead language ... a language spoken by the dead" (191). By the time the life leaves her body, Curren seems at least aware that Latin and Greek and Roman myths are of little use to the rising generation of South Africa.

Conclusion

Age of Iron is a dismal but appealing and promising novel that examines one woman's awakening to the injustice, cruelty, and inhumanity around her. After thorough introspection and assessment of life, society, and self. Maneuvering amid the horrors of apartheid, racism and class

conflict the novel leads the reader Mrs. Curren the protagonist, to realize the reality of humanitarian values which form the core of the world. Coetzee through ideas of the Professor of Classics has given voice to his own views and experiences thus not only lending the tinge of autobiographical elements in the work but also has securing *Age of Iron* itself status of a classic.

Works Cited

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