

J M Coetzee's *Age of Iron* as a Critique of the Confessional Narrative

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Abstract

One of the important concerns in the fiction of J M Coetzee is the representation of social relations under apartheid and the painful self-questioning of white liberals. This awareness of social injustice has been instrumental in the development of confessional narrative in white South African fiction. But this mode has a built in complexity. The confession becomes ironic when the speaker believes himself to be saying one thing but in truth is saying something altogether different. In this way, self-deception can not be avoided in a confessional narrative. My focus in this paper is to analyse the contradictions in 'Age of Iron' that undermine the truth of the narrative. I also understand this text as a response to the degradation of life under apartheid where Coetzee weaves the personal with the political and presents the marginalized characters but does not attempt to speak for them. He addresses the painful questions of guilt and complicity faced by a white liberal but this awareness is subtly ironized.

Key-words: confessional narrative, white writing, complicity, marginality, unreliable narrator.

For more than four decades, apartheid had legal acceptance in South Africa. Race laws were institutionalized in 1948 and could not be done away with till the coming to power of African National Congress (ANC) in 1994. Apartheid bred a climate of intolerance and distorted the multiracial texture of life in South Africa. Derived from a Dutch word, apartheid translates as 'apartness'. This segregationist policy deprived the coloured and black people of their basic rights and confined them to the margins. It also created a class of privileged white people especially the liberal intellectuals who found it difficult to remain contented in their comfort zones. The representations of social relations under apartheid and the painful self-questioning of white liberals has been an important thematic concern in the fiction of J M Coetzee. In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee recounts the strategic importance of racial politics on his life and work:

The deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life. All expressions of that inner life, no matter how intense, no matter how pierced with exultation and despair, suffer from the same stuntedness and deformity. (97-98)

This awareness of social deformity has been instrumental in the development of confessional narrative in white South African fiction. Confessional narrative is a mode of writing that is an attempt of white people to come to terms with their feelings of guilt and collective responsibility for being part of the unjust social system. The confessional narrative has a built in complexity and ambivalence. It may mean “*confronting one's culpability*” but it could equally mean “*accommodating, establishing a comfortable relationship with it*” (Heyns: 42). Nuttall and Coetzee also understand this mode of writing as a gesture aimed at liberation from complicity. It involves a self that is 'split': “*The narrating self in these texts typically aims to effect a distance from an earlier, politically less enlightened or in other ways unacceptable, version of the self.*” (Heyns: 54-55).

In his essay 'Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky', Coetzee discusses the confessional narrative and its ambivalence. He analyses Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Rousseau's *Confessions* and Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* as variations of the confessional mode of narration. Coetzee defines the confession as a mode of autobiographical writing “*where the underlying motive is to tell an essential truth about the self*” (194). Confession is a sort of liberation as it reconciles the painful experience in the consciousness and serves to achieve some sort of resolution. But a confession works in a complex manner because “*...the truth, the “unconscious” truth, slips out in strange associations, false rationalizations, gaps, contradictions*” (199). Coetzee defines an 'ironic' confession as one where the speaker believes himself to be saying one thing but in truth is saying something altogether different. In this manner, self-deception can not be avoided in a confessional narrative.

In this paper, I attempt to analyse *Age of Iron* as a critique of the confessional narrative. I base my paper on Coetzee's essay and find two levels of meaning emerging from the narrative: one that is believed by the narrator and the other that comes out from the contradictions in the text. I also understand this text as a response to the degradation of life under apartheid where Coetzee weaves the personal with the political and presents the marginalized characters but does not attempt to speak for them. He addresses the painful questions of guilt and responsibility felt by a white liberal in South Africa but this awareness is subtly ironized.

Age of Iron (1990) is in the form of a long letter written by Elizabeth Curren to her only daughter settled in the US. It recounts her experiences as she copes with bone cancer and imminent death. Death becomes a leitmotif as everything about the narrator reminds one of death. Her body is ailing, she has taught Latin and Greek all her life: dead languages, she drives an outdated car and her liberal humanist values seem out of place in South Africa. She calls herself a dodo and her house is “*a museum in decay*” (190). As she faces her death, she also witnesses her country being ravaged by vicious apartheid policies. There is violence in

townships, police brutality and a breakdown of normal life. The novel mentions 1986-89 as its years of composition. These years were, in many ways, crucial in the black revolt against apartheid. These were years of unprecedented violence and thousands of blacks were killed in the struggle for equality. One of the significant features of the rebellion was the educational boycott. Black children, as young as nine or ten, left schools to wage a war against the discrimination being meted out to them. They stayed away from school exams and raised slogans such as "Liberation before education". These ideas are echoed by Bheki and John in the novel. These boys have chosen to opt out of school. Bheki describes education as an ideological control imposed by the state "*to make us fit into the apartheid system*" (67). Mrs Curren finds their choice preposterous as she firmly believes in the ennobling touch of education. The novel "*evokes a tension between the educational ideals she stands for and the contemporary condition of South African education*". (Yeoh: 108).

The political imbroglio of the 1980s has been seen as one of the most important revolts against the white rule. The Western Cape Student Action Committee had boycotted the schools when Emergency was declared in 1985. The boycott intensified as the parents, teachers and student organizations also got involved in the turmoil. The new policy of divide and rule devised by the Government contributed to bitterness among the blacks because a new Parliament was created with three chambers: one each for whites, coloured and Indians. (Head: 131). The protests described in the novel reflect the struggle of black people against their marginalization.

A poignant feature of the South African society is reflected in the change discernible in children. They have hardened up and feel no need of parents. Mrs Curren describes them as children of iron who have developed an impenetrable shell around themselves. The roaming gangs of townships are "*children scorning childhood, the time of wonder, the growing time of the soul. Their souls, their organs of wonder, stunted, petrified. And on the other side of the great divide their white cousins soul-stunted too, spinning themselves tighter and tighter into their sleepy cocoons*" (7). Mrs Curren differs sharply in her attitude from her maid Florence who takes pride in the children of iron. They frequently debate the reason of this stone-heartedness: is it the failure of black parents to exercise authority or the cruel oppression of the whites? Mrs Curren finds these children obdurate as pig iron or lead. These children have lost all touch with human values and emotions. Bheki and John fight the anti-apartheid struggle like adults but there is great anguish in Bheki's death: "*When he died he was a child again. The mask must have dropped in sheer childish surprise when it broke upon him in that last instant that the stone-throwing and shooting was not a game after all*" (125). Not only have the children lost their natural innocence, the parent-child bond has also become redundant. Mrs Curren's daughter's staunch refusal to see her mother is also symptomatic of the hardening of the heart that signifies

the mutilation of the parent-child bond in the novel (Gallagher: 207). Derek Attridge points out the reversal of parent-child bond in *Age of Iron*. The children are full of rebellion whereas the parents no longer have the authority to guide the (Trusting: 72). The motif of shattered childhood is a pointer to the social depravity of the country. Mrs Curren's daughter has vowed not to return until the people responsible for the policy of apartheid are thwarted. She would celebrate the occasion but before that happens; her ties with her mother are not strong enough to bring her back. Mrs Curren conceals the news of her terminal cancer from her daughter and annihilates all chances of their reunion. The mother-daughter bond has lost all significance.

Age of Iron questions the role of the white liberal in troubled times. The sense of complicity and the accompanying feeling of guilt direct the course of Mrs Curren's life. Her cancer is a metaphor for shame and the battle fought with the forces within. As the narrator approaches the end of her life, the cancer of apartheid is eating away the vitality of the nation and spelling its doom: "That is how cancer comes about: from self-loathing, the body turns malignant and begins to eat away at itself" (132). When the body is afflicted with cancer, a part of the self turns rebellious and becomes Other. Fiona Probyn builds up on the work of immunologist John Dwyer's work *The Body at War* in which Dwyer consistently informs his readers that the growth of cancerous cells mimics political insurrection and lawless rebellion against the body/state. Probyn argues that in *Age of Iron* Coetzee manipulates the cancer metaphor to provide a commentary on South African race relations because race relations have often been seen in terms of infection, disease and contagion (220-21). She points out that the disease metaphor lies at the root of apartheid as revealed in Coetzee's essay 'Apartheid Thinking' anthologized in *Giving Offense*. Geoffrey Cronje, the mind behind apartheid, was obsessed with the idea of maintaining "pure" white blood and his fear of miscegenation made him obsessed with infection and contagion (179-80). Coetzee concludes that Cronje infected the white population with his obsessions. Blackness became a synonym of infection and thus subject to measures like isolation/segregation (181). The cancer motif is deployed in the novel to signal personal as well as social rebellion and extinction.

In *Age of Iron*, Coetzee builds on the concept of the Other. This idea is firmly entrenched in the South African society. To be an Other is to be somehow different. These differences can be physical, mental, cultural, social or economic. The Other is viewed by the majority as an outsider. This Otherness hampers, to some degree, the integration of the character in society. The Other in Coetzee's fiction is the silent and marginalized figure that bears the brunt of power politics. Vercueil, the marginalized figure in *Age of Iron* shares affinity with Michael K in *Life & Times of Michael K*, the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Friday in *Foe*. Like Michael K who has a harelip and Friday whose tongue has been chopped off, Vercueil has a crooked hand because of an accident. Mrs Curren is not sure of Vercueil's name, his race is nowhere mentioned and

he is rarely articulate during the course of the narrative. He does not have a home or sense of belongingness to any community and lives a minimal life.

An important dimension of Coetzee's work is "...*the capacity of his work to engage with-to stage, confront, apprehend, explore-Otherness*" (Attridge 198). This exploration of Otherness brings metamorphosis in the protagonist and makes her empathize with the Other. Mrs Curren's encounter with Vercueil marks the beginning of a strange bond because it happens on the fateful day. This sets off a chain of events that makes the narrator more and more involved in the lives of the characters around her and sort of opens her eyes to their suffering. She realizes that she has lived an empty life: "Were I to be opened up they would find me hollow as a doll, a doll with a crab sitting inside licking its lips, dazed by the flood of light" (112). She feels a responsibility towards Vercueil, John and Bheki that exerts a strong pull on her. She treats them with maternal affection and helps them in spite of her serious illness. She hides the two black boys in her home and makes futile attempts to save them from the police. Her response is primarily an ethical one as pointed by Derek Attridge:

An ethical response on the part of privileged South African whites to the violent and dehumanizing campaign of the townships would be one that is neither condemnation nor approval, neither detachment nor immersion, but a *living through* (in concrete action as well as thought and emotion) of the torsions it produces in shared value systems. (Trusting 76)

Mrs Curren places absolute trust in Vercueil. He is non-committal yet she entrusts him with the vital responsibility of posting the letter to her estranged daughter. Her gesture is seen as a sort of sacrificial trust because its outcome can not be known in advance (qtd in Attridge 80). Coetzee emphasizes the absolute need of trust in order to refashion the South African society.

The use of a white woman narrator raises the question of white woman's place in the power hierarchy. Her place is neither with the oppressor nor with the oppressed. Dorothy Driver points out the contradictory and ambivalent position occupied by white women in the colonial equation. These women are assigned a mediatory role which places them in a position where their "*sympathy for the oppressed and their simultaneous entrapment within the oppressive group on whose behalf they may desire to mediate complicates their narrative stance*" (Kossew: 168). Caroline Rody also points out the complex position of white women who are above black men and women but below white women, hence they are "*uncomfortably situated as inferior members of the dominant but deracinated group*" (158). In the novel, Mrs Curren does her best efforts to open up to black people but she also realizes the limitations of her position. She drives to the burning township of Guguletu but feels speechless while talking to black people: "*My words fell off him like dead leaves the moment they were uttered. The words of a woman, therefore negligible; of an old woman, therefore doubly negligible; but above all of a white*" (79). She uses maternal love as resistance against the political

impasse. She associates Vercueil with her daughter and also attempts to love John and Bheki who are strangers to her. She is aware of her strange bond with these boys and knows she has no right to grieve for their death. With all her sincerity she fails to achieve any sincere reciprocity with the black people.

Mrs Curren's discourse is characterized by eloquence. She seems to be telling the truth but her narrative is tinged with self-deception. She extends maternal concern to Vercueil, John and Bheki but she does a lot of glib talk. She thinks of an earlier unawakened self and the new awakened one. She thinks she is responding to the need of others whereas she is the one who needs others: "To be full enough to give and to give from one's fullness: what deeper urge is there?" (7). She seems to be providing care and food out of generosity but it is her loneliness and impending death that makes her a seeker, not a giver. She reacts strongly to Vercueil's woman friend and wants her to leave immediately. She even contemplates setting up a home with Vercueil: "*For that is, after all, what one wants in the end: someone to be there, to call to in the dark*" (85).

Mrs Curren is an unreliable narrator. She has a tendency to weave a labyrinth with words. She uses her narrative to beguile the reader as is apparent when she describes William and Florence at their home. She describes everything naturally as if she had witnessed it: "*All of this happened. All of this must have happened*" (43). At another point in the narrative she describes Vercueil as throwing the sandwich to the dog at the corner of street when she was not in a position to find it out. She also accuses him of keeping a stolen dog with him. "*So I ask you: attend to the writing, not to me. If lies and pleas and excuses weave among the words, listen for them. Do not pass them over, do not forgive them easily. Read all, even this adjuration, with a cold eye*" (104).

The narrative sometimes gives an insight into Mrs Curren's real motives as when she accepts that her letter is not a baring of the heart. She may have given space to her daughter to choose her own life but she also feels the daughter has abandoned her. With all her best intentions, she accepts that she could only half-attend to her country because her attention is turned inwards to the disease. Despite her solicitude for the black boys, she feels good that her daughter has settled away from the country. The narrator frequently uses animal imagery to describe the other characters. When she first encounters Vercueil, she describes him as "first of the carrion birds" (5). She also describes him as an insect "emerging from behind the baseboards when the house is in darkness to forage for crumbs" (14). She compares John to a cat she had once taken care of. Not only this, her narrative is rich with rhetorical devices like similes, metaphors and personification. Gilbert Yeoh describes *Age of Iron* "a rich compendium of rhetorical figures like simili, antithesis, tautology, alliteration, personification, chiasmus, catachresis and polyptoton" (118).

Mrs Curren's strong convictions change as the narrative progresses: "*When an old person begins to plead for love everything turns squalid. Like a parent trying to creep into bed with a child: unnatural*" (73). As

pain and helplessness shoot up, Vercueil becomes her shadow husband. Throughout the narrative, she talks of letting go but it never happens. As the cancer spreads and enfeebles her body she gets dependent on Vercueil for her needs and it is he who nurses her. She emerges as a manipulative person whose “discourse of maternal love, benevolence and solicitude enables a subtle subjugation of others and a reinforcement of her centrality, and is finally self-serving rather than truly loving” (Yeoh: 123). Thus, *Age of Iron* turns out to be an ironic text where the narrator’s eloquence turns out to be hollow mask. Her confession reveals the contradictions in what she upholds as true and what comes out as the truth on its own.

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