The metaphorical aspect in J. M. Coetzee’s Age of Iron (1990)

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Abstract
The present study aims at examining the metaphorical aspect in J. M. Coetzee’s Age of Iron. To make the investigation a purposeful one, the Psychoanalytic approach is employed taken Displacement as a means of coexistence and adaptation. The study also seeks to underscore how J. M. Coetzee employs the Psychoanalytic approach in portraying the character of Elizabeth Curren –the protagonist- to convey his contempt toward the oppressive practices of the ruling system of Apartheid in South Africa. In the present novel, Coetzee presents a model of a female white character who is not in line with the practices of the system. Mrs. Curren finds a means of revealing her suppressed feelings in writing a confessional letter to her daughter because of her inability to openly express her adverse attitude toward the ruling system in her community. In a word, the main objective of the study lies in exploring J. M. Coetzee’s vision of the dilemma of both the oppressed and the oppressor South Africans through Metaphor of the body of both the protagonist and the system to convey the theme of his novel.

Keywords: apartheid, body, displacement, metaphor, psychoanalysis


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Introduction

Generally speaking, a Metaphor is a figure of speech which the writer uses to draw some comparison between two objects or ideas through stating certain traits or features that are there in the two objects indirectly through reference. It is used to give certain attributes to a certain object to help the reader understand certain experiences through putting them together into the context of everyday life (Kumar, 2020). Antonia Barcelona defines Metaphor as “The cognitive mechanism whereby one experiential domain is partly projected onto a different experiential domain, so the second domain is partly understood in terms of the first one”. (Barcelona) J. M. Coetzee’s Age of Iron is the story of the physical suffering and psychological ailment of a white woman due to her inability to express her feelings of resentment toward Apartheid. The novel is an indictment of the South African society on account of its oppressive practices of both its black citizens because of their color of skin, and some of its white citizens because of being denied the freedom of expression toward the system. As such, Mrs. Curren finds in Displacement a means to reveal her suppressed feelings toward the system.

In this study, Displacement is employed as a way-out for revealing the suppressed feelings of the protagonist to come to terms with the situation in which she finds herself. Generally, Displacement occurs when a person finds himself in a situation that he feels unable to cope with one way or another. The negative attitude on the part of that person shifts to another object or person that he sees as less threatening, less pleasant and less harmful than the source to avoid expected negative consequences. Displacement is a mechanism that operates unconsciously in the mind. It entails ideas or wishes that are shifted from the original subject of tension to another which is a less unpleasant and more acceptable substitute is some way. In Freudian Psychoanalysis, Displacement is “an unconscious defense mechanism whereby the mind substitutes either a new aim or a new object for goals felt in their original form to be dangerous or unacceptable’. (Psychology, Wikipedia) In other words, Displacement occurs when one wants to react to an unpleasant situation but he finds out that he cannot directly do this because of certain reasons. In doing so, this person tries unconsciously to get rid of such negative feelings by inflicting it on another in an acceptable way (Jabeen et al., 2022; Kumar, 2020).

South Africa is one country that has suffered a lot under Apartheid for long. As a system characterized by discrimination, violence and oppression, it has created a state of disharmony between the people and the regime. Under Apartheid, the black South Africans are oppressed at many levels and, consequently, young black generations are greatly impacted by such oppression and insecurity. Furthermore, all the bodies of the ruling system including that of Media are directed toward serving the regime one way or another. As the narrator tells “The Radio says nothing, the Television say nothing, the newspaper says nothing of the events in the black township”. (Coetzee) In doing so, the system seeks to present an image of a stable society in which all the citizens (Black and White) are happily living together under the same system whereas the Black are oppressed and denied the least freedom of expression in Mass Media. It is in South Africa under
Apartheid that hunger, poverty and misery are widespread.

Born in 1940 in South Africa, J. M. Coetzee is one of the most acclaimed contemporary writers in the African continent. His position as a writer of mixed origin is very critical in the context of the South African society. He lives in a period when the Black are severely oppressed under Apartheid. Coetzee’s life spans a lot of generations as he is currently 83. He is a novelist, a linguist and a translator who has been rewarded the Booker’s Prize for two times and the Nobel Prize in 2003. Coetzee’s novels present elements of protest, resistance and violence against the system. He identifies himself with the oppressed and he is greatly moved by their sufferings. He gives vivid descriptions of a society torn between different forces of oppression and feelings of disappointment and insecurity. As David Attwell remarks “Coetzee’s novels constitute a psychological allegory in which the narrator struggle to present themselves in traditional South African literary discourse”. (Attwell, 1990)

Like many of Coetzee’s novels, Age of Iron deals with the impact of Apartheid on the psyche of both the White and the Black in South Africa. What is particularly important about Age of Iron is that it marks a shift in describing the sufferings of the Black. The story is narrated from the perspective of the Back to the same from the perspective of the White under Apartheid. Age of Iron is an epistolary novel that is written in the form of a confessional letter by a sick mother to her daughter who lives abroad. Mrs. Curren is a white woman who is not in line with the ruling system. The daughter has left to settle in USA and has no plans to come back. The mother lives alone. She has developed terminal cancer recently. As a first-person narrator, she relates the events of her life in the form of a letter. Here, she takes writing as a private means to reveal her contempt toward the system. In doing so, she makes of her connections with the black people in her community the substance of this writing. The letter serves as a testimony to her suffering as well as the sufferings of the Black with whom she connects.

Mrs. Curren leads a very private life at her house in Cape Town and she knows little about the reality of the situation outside. Television and Radio are the source of her knowledge about the outer community. She is primarily against any oppressive practices taking place in the outer society. She condemns the system saying “A crime has been committed long back ago. How long ago? I don’t know. But longer than 1916. So long that I was born into it. It is part of my inheritance. It is part of me. I am part of it”. (Coetzee) Being white, Mrs. Curren develops a sense of complicity with the system despite her condemnation of its practices. She finds in writing the confessional letter a means to absolve this sense of guilt and shame. She sees in writing to her daughter a compromise between her unspoken rejection of the system and her being white. James Poyner points out “Curren’s letter to her daughter can be seen as a conduit for getting her voice heard on what she sees as wanton violence both on the state and the black community levels; she wants to express her opinion from a liberal position”. (Poyner, 2009)

Mrs. Curren is quite aware of the history of Apartheid and the oppressive practices of her white ancestors. Coetzee’s main objective of writing this novel is to pinpoint what has happened in South Africa during the fall of Apartheid. South Africa has been on the verge of collapse given the prevailing devastation at the different levels especially the political one. All the bodies of the system experience deterioration and things are falling apart. The system as a whole is deteriorating and experiences a gradual downfall. In the present novel, Coetzee employs Metaphor to convey his disdain and contempt toward the system of Apartheid. In Age of Iron, there are a lot of political as well as physical attributes to present. Here, Metaphor is employed as a tool to compare the political condition of South Africa during the downfall of Apartheid to the deteriorating health condition of Mrs. Curren after knowing about her terminal cancer. Here, Coetzee employs Metaphor to describe the deterioration going on in the body of Mrs. Curren and that of the system under which she lives. Terminal cancer is eating out Curren’s body in the same way Apartheid is eating the body of the country from inside.
Thus, the story of *Age of Iron* is not just a story of a woman who suffers from terminal cancer and the deterioration of her health as a result. Rather, it is an extended metaphor for a corrupt political system that experiences decay as a result of its unjust and oppressive practices taking its official bodies as a cover. Here, the infected body of Mrs. Curren is used as a metaphor for the outside forces with its political attributes. In other clearer words, the story signifies that a morbid political system and the dying body of the narrator are put face to face.

Mrs. Curren leads a troubled life and has a troubled conscience as a result of her inability to openly oppose the system. She goes to connect with the young black generation in her community and, gradually, she grows aware of the reality of the practices of the system. She expresses her shock saying “Is this how I feel about South Africa, not loving but habituated to its bad smell”. (Coetzee) In the beginning, she blames the young Black for their violence. However, her view starts to change and she feels oppressed because she is unable to show any opposition or negative attitude toward the system. As Grayson remarks “Feeling herself trapped in a lonely place where no one is watching out for or willing to engage in discourse with her, Curren experiences a sense of fury at the devaluing of her life by those around her”. (Grayson, 2010) Consequently, she finds in writing to her daughter an acceptable way to give authority to her marginalized voice. In this letter, she goes to reveal her contempt against the system on the one hand, and in connecting with young Blacks she absolves her sense of complicity with the system on the other. She states “It is like being on trial for your life and being allowed only two words, Yes and No. whenever, you like a breath to speak out, you are warned by the judge. Yes or No, no speeches. Yet all the time you feel other words stirring inside you like life in the womb”. (Coetzee)

Mrs. Curren considers cancer and Apartheid as equal. She says “I have a child inside me that I cannot give birth to, cannot because it will not be born, because it cannot live outside me. So it I my prisoner or I am its prisoner”. (Coetzee) To her, cancer is the source of pain from inside and Apartheid is another source of the same from outside. In connecting with the Black, Curren finds a way to fill the gap created by the departure of her daughter. It is with them that she seeks redemption of her sense of guilt and salvation of her soul. While living alone, Curren’s life is invaded by Vercueil, a stranger whose appearance is disgusting due to his unhygienic body and dress. Initially, he is not welcomed by the lady, yet, gradually, she grows familiarized with his existence in front of her house. She provides him with shelter and food and he does some tasks in return. She realizes that his existence has become indispensable to her. In her letter to her daughter, she writes “Because I cannot trust Vercueil, I must trust him. I am trying to keep a soul alive in times not hospitable to the soul”. (Coetzee) She finds in her relationship with him part of her salvation. She says “I know I must love first of all, the unlovable. He is part of my salvation. I must love him”. (Coetzee)

In the passage of time, both Curren and Vercueil developed mutual understanding that she goes to put trust in him. She entrusts the letters she writes to her daughter to him to deliver after her death. She considers the letters as her only inheritance that she can give to her daughter. She says “Those private papers, private letters; they are my daughter’s inheritance. They are all I can give her, all she will accept… I don’t want them opened or red by anyone else”. (Coetzee) She develops some intimacy with the man and this intimacy goes beyond the limits that she goes to share him the private details of her life. To her, he is the only person to trust and share the removal of her infected breast. She enjoys his company in her old car across the country considering him as her soulmate. “Two souls, his and mine, twined together” (Coetzee) Commenting on this attachment between the two, Suthipinitherm points out “She invests hope in him to release her from the shock of her shameful state when she does not know how”. (Suthipinitherm, 2015)

Toward Vercueil, Curren shows moral obligation that she has to fulfill. It is in such obligations that she finds a way to absolve her sense of guilt originated from her belonging to the White race not only toward Vercueil but also toward the Black in her community. She cannot exclude herself from complicity with
system. She sometimes goes to express ambivalent feelings toward him in her letters to her daughter. “I trust Vercueil because I don’t trust him. I love him because I don’t love him”. (Coetzee) In another situation, she expresses the same “Why do I write about him? Because he is and he is not. Because in the look he gives me, I see myself in a way that can be written”. (Coetzee) Vercueil is always in Curren’s company. He accompanies her to Guguletu where she is exposed to humiliation upon being compelled to spend a night under a bridge. There, he is the sole person to take care of her to which she responds with showing some affection. On the whole, in connecting with Vercueil, Curren finds a way to reveal her unspoken feelings in an acceptable way. To her, he is a subject of Displacement of her suppressed feelings.

Mrs. Curren’s confrontation with the reality of the situation of the Black strengthens her resolve in the face of Apartheid. The situation is really pathetic and she tries to comfort her troubled conscience through sympathizing with them. Florence is Mrs. Curren’s housekeeper through whom she knows about the outer world. As a mother of black children, Florence incites them to do some violent actions against the white community. She argues “It is the White who made them so …. They are like iron”. (Coetzee) Curren is influenced by Florence’s words and starts to be more interested in knowing the ongoing unrest resulting from the practices of Apartheid. Florence lives in the town of Guguletu with her family. It is a town where great violence is committed against the Black. In Guguletu poverty is striking and deterioration can be seen everywhere. Mrs. Curren develops awareness of the reality of the situation, and this awareness is accompanied by a growing sense of guilt on account of her inability to oppose this violence, on one hand, and her being White on the other.

One day, Florence’s work at Mrs. Curren’s house is interrupted by a call from Guguletu informing her of the accident in which her son Bheki and his friend John have been hit by a police car. Mrs. Curren accompanies Florence to Guguletu. On their way, Mrs. Curren is shocked by the horrible view of the black neighborhood. She is face to face with the reality of the situation there for the first time. The White police commit a lot of atrocities against the Black that they kill them indiscriminately. Bheki dies at the hospital and John is badly wounded. Mrs. Curren is overwhelmingly shocked by the incident. She grows more and more sympathetic with the oppressed souls as the only available means to overcome her sense of guilt. William Purcell remarks “She realizes that before seeking the forgiving of others, she has to forgive herself”. (Purcell, 2013; 8). Mrs. Curren realizes that the struggle of the Black against Apartheid is an ongoing one. Here, Curren’s visit to Guguletu marks a turning a drastic change in her attitude toward Apartheid. She is too appalled to be able to describe the situation. “To speak of it, you would need the tongue of a god”. (Coetzee) Curren cannot stand seeing what is going around her. “Now my eyes are open, and I can never close them again”. (Coetzee)

Again, Mrs. Curren finds in writing to her daughter a means to reveal her dejected self. What she sees inside the hospital where Bheki has died makes her speechless. To her daughter, she describes “It is through my eyes that you see. The voice that speaks in your hand is mine….I tell you the story not so that you will feel for me but so that you will learn how things are ….I am the only one. I am the one writing I, I. So I ask you: attend to the writing not to me”. (Coetzee) Bheki dies at the hospital and his friend John is left severely injured. After recovery, Mrs. Curren advises him not to be involved in the riots made against White police by groups of Black young men. Yet, he refuses to take her advice considering her a member of the White race. Later, John moves from Guguletu to Cape Town where Mrs. Curren resides. There, he still shares in the violence against the state police and he is chased by it. Mrs. Curren gives him shelter at her house and she is taken by the police as a result. She shows objection but her objection is ignored. “They paid my words no more attention than they would a child’s”. (Coetzee) In fact, Curren’s siding and sympathy with the Black constitutes a major part of Mrs. Curren’s ethical journey of salvation because she finds in protecting John a way to project her rejection of Apartheid and absolve her sense of complicity. She
writes “I must love first of all, the unlovable. I must love him. But I don’t love him”. (Coetzee) Commenting on Mrs. Curren’s sympathetic attitude toward the Black and how she finds in it a means to displace her negative feeling toward Apartheid, Marais (2013) remarks “It is significant that Age of Iron should be a love story that deals with Mrs. Curren’s recovery of her humanity after having been brutalized by the relations between human being established by the state, she asserts her humanity’.

Another Metaphor employed by Coetzee is that of Mrs. Curren’s car. The car is very old and unfashionable. It has some problems that Mrs. Curren does not want to fix. She says “It belongs to a world that barely exists any more”. (Coetzee) Here, in its condition, the car is used to represent Coetzee’s view of South Africa. She thinks that the world is no longer the same as it used to be. He wants to underscore that the car needs to be replaced by a new one as it is no longer fitting. Similarly, the present ruling system should be replaced and changed by a new one. Apartheid should vanish and be replaced by a new system that can maintain justice and freedom among its Black as well as White citizens. She writes “I had a vision of this little green car waiting quietly at the roadside. There was nothing I longed for more than to get into my car, slam the door behind me and close out the looming world of rage and violence”. (Coetzee) Here, Curren is like her car. As her health deteriorates, death approaches. The car is sulky, broken and old, and she will be neglected and forgotten in the same way the car will.

On the whole, Mrs. Curren’s growing enlightenment of the reality of the situation in South Africa is the outcome of her direct confrontation with the reality of the situation of the oppressed. In her stance, as the only white person who adopts such a negative attitude toward the system, Elizabeth Curren exhibits a unique humanitarian approach in her relationships with the Black in her community, and this is demonstrated in the form of a confessional letter. She insists on getting through by questioning the reality. She demonstrates her vision through an act of confessional writing taking her connections with others as the substance of this writing. In a word, Curren finds in inflicting her negative feeling of contempt toward the system a means of coexistence and salvation. Commenting on Mrs. Currens’s situation, Erik Grayson points out “Mrs. Curren’s letter to her daughter serves as a testament to her attempt to salvage meaning from her existence to preserve and extend her life beyond the grave”. (Grayson, 2010)

As the story moves toward its end, Coetzee still presents Mrs. Curren’s deteriorating health condition in the face of the ruling system. After siding with the Black, she sees that committing suicide by setting herself on fire another means to absolve her sense of complicity and completing her journey of salvation and redemption. She has lost faith in everything. She says “Death by fire is the only death left-to-burn and be gone, to be rid of, to leave the world clean”. (Coetzee) It is an act which is directly in the face of Apartheid. What she is inclined to do for her body, she wishes to do for the body of the whole system. That is to say, her rejection of Apartheid through getting rid of her own life. Commenting on Mrs. Curren’s desire of committing suicide, Kosecki points out “Curren’s act of suicide can be seen as an act of alterity with the self. Death through suicide is an act of atonement”. (Kosecki, p. 41)

**Conclusion**

Being a study of a Psychoanalytic nature, the present study offers solutions for the suppressed souls through adopting Displacement as a mechanism. This mechanism can take different forms that end with avoiding tension and unpleasantness in an acceptable way. Coetzee has succeeded in employing Metaphor of the body to convey the theme of decay and downfall by presenting both the deteriorating health of Mrs. Curren face to face in confrontation with the deteriorating system of Apartheid. The study underscores that the oppressive practices of a ruling system result in deterioration both at the community as well as the individual levels. In other words, the study has found that disintegration of the body as a result of developing a certain disease can be a result of the accumulation of years of server political and moral decay of a ruling system and may result in disintegration of the well-being of the society as a whole.
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