



Children of Iron: Resistance against Apartheid in John Maxwell Coetzee's *Age of Iron*

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ABSTRACT

South African countries were dominated by the European powers under the system of Colonialism and Apartheid. They separated the native people in terms of race under which their rights were severely limited. The white people created an identity that they belong to the superior race and the native people belong to the lower strata of the society. They were segregated in terms of their skin colour. They also created an opinion that the native people are savages and a white man's duty is to correct them, so they imposed violence and inhumane practices to subdue them. The colonisers exploited them and forced the native people to attend separate schools and hospitals. In their homeland these native people were treated like slaves. The brutality of apartheid was very severe so that people fought with strong determination to obtain independence. Even small children involved themselves in the independence struggle. Due to the efforts taken by the leaders South Africa regained its freedom.

KEYWORDS : Colonialism, Apartheid and Independence struggle.

Introduction:

South African Literature served as a vehicle in bringing out the problems faced by the native people during colonialism and apartheid era. Not only native writers, few white writers also raised their voice against apartheid. J.M.Coetzee is a renowned novelist who has authentically portrayed the sufferings of the native people during apartheid and the trauma faced by the white people in the post-apartheid era. J.M.Coetzee is an internationally acclaimed white South African writer. For his remarkable contribution to literature he has received the Nobel Prize. Apart from that he has received Booker Prize twice, Commonwealth Writer's Prize etc. J.M.Coetzee has written many novels based on the theme of apartheid and its impact on both the races.

Age of Iron:

Age of Iron, published in the year 1990 realistically brings out the callousness of the colonisers and the brutality of apartheid. The background of the novel is set in 1986, a time in which Apartheid was in force and anti-apartheid struggle was getting very vigorous. *Age of Iron*, the title denotes the era of cruelty and oppression. As the title suggests, *Age of Iron* brings out the central character's identification that she is living in an era of hatred and hard-heartedness. *Age of Iron* is narrated in the first person by Mrs. Elizabeth Curren, the protagonist. It is an epistolary novel written as an extended letter by Curren to her daughter who is settled in a foreign country. In the letter Curren narrates all the events which happen around her. Curren also gives details about the situation which prevailed in South Africa during colonialism and expresses her sympathy for the native people.

Mrs. Elizabeth Curren:

Set in the city of Cape Town, *Age of Iron* is a remarkable novel which bites to the bones. Mrs. Elizabeth Curren, a retired Professor of Classical Language is diagnosed with cancer. Her cancer is a symbol of apartheid which has caused political instability in a colonised country. The cancer spread in her body was consuming her like how the cancer in the society which is inhumanistic because of apartheid. In spite of being a white woman, she opposes apartheid which traumatizes the native people. She cannot tolerate the inhumanity imposed by the people of her race.

Curren pities the condition of the natives in the apartheid South Africa. But white people like her cannot transform the system of apartheid. Hence, she remains as a witness for the brutal happenings around her. Due to this, Curren's perceptive towards the native people changes and she wishes them to lead a dignified life in their

country. Her compassion towards the natives made her to experience psychological trauma. In spite of her age she was humiliated for being sympathetic towards the native people. "As a white, middle-class subject living in Capetown, he cannot fully empathize with her black servants and neighbors whose families are traumatized rather than merely disgraced by the unchecked violence of the apartheid regime" (Walsh 169).

Mrs. Elizabeth Curren's Maternal Love:

Curren's character stands as an embodiment of love and compassion. She loves her daughter so much that she wanted her to lead a peaceful life in USA. Here, relationship between mother and daughter is portrayed as an estranged one. Curren's love for her daughter is not reciprocated by her daughter. Curren as a responsible mother wants her daughter to inherit her property. Curren also feels that the situation in a colonised country has become very worse and fortunately her daughter has settled in a peaceful country.

Curren, apart from her daughter has affection towards her house keeper Florence's son Bheki and his friend John. She also gives refuge to a vagabond Mr.Vercueil, a native man who helps her at the time of adversity. Her maternal love and affection makes her to think that in a war torn country there is no meaning for relationship and everything has become a humbug in the brutal world. "*Age of Iron* intervenes in the country's polarized condition not through a mere further assertion of right; rather it seeks to go beyond contestation to posit a minimal ethics of love. Still, though love is a key theme in the novel, its treatment is elliptical and tricky" (Yeoh 107).

Brutality and Violence:

Due to the civil war the political situation in South Africa was turned topsy-turvy and army was given utmost power to bring law and order under control. Riots, boycotts, curfews were there and young native men fought vigorously to express their hatred towards the system of apartheid and colonialism. People who participated in the struggle were ruthlessly killed by the army and policemen. Young men lost their lives for the sake of their country's freedom. School children also engaged themselves in the riots and the schools remain closed for several days. The situation was out of control and the people started to flee the city. Few engaged in violent activities like burning the shops, throwing stones, attacking the white people etc. Hence, army started to shoot the people. "It was from the people gathered on the rim of this amphitheater in the dunes that the sighing came. Like mourners at a funeral they stood in the downpour, men, women, and children, sodden, hardly bothering to

protect themselves, watching the destruction" (AI 95). The rampant condition of the city was subdued by the army and the police were given utmost power. The city was made unfit to live by the colonisers. The struggle for power relations has made the native people to behave in aggressive manner.

The native people were corroded off their values and they were made brutal by the colonisers. "Colonized peoples are not alone. Despite the efforts of colonialism, their frontiers remain permeable to news and rumors. They discover that violence is atmospheric, it breaks out sporadically, and here and there sweeps away the colonial regime. The Success of this violence plays not only an informative role but also an operative one" (Fanon 30).

Bheki and John:

The teenagers were very active and they participated in the freedom struggle. Curren's house keeper Florence's son Bheki and John also joined the revolutionary movements. Florence was very happy that her son is involved in the freedom struggle. She tells, "These are good children, they are like iron, we are proud of them" (AI 50). Both of them were shot dead by the police and this incident affects Curren more than her cancer. She cannot tolerate the death of the young boys. "I still detest these calls for sacrifice that end with young men bleeding to death in the mud. War is never what it pretends to be. Scratch the surface and you find, invariably, old men sending young men to their death in the name of some abstraction or other (AI 163).

Initially when Florence insists them to participate in the rebel movements, Curren advises them to attend the school regularly. But the boys were aggressive. After their death Curren realizes that there is no meaning in the education taught by the western system. She regrets that she was unable to save the lives of two innocent kids. "Her realization that the conventional system of Western ethics has lost its legitimacy in South Africa is the point in the novel at which Mrs.Curren attempts to break out of the relations of contestation to which the dualism of that ethical system predisposes her" (Marais 90).

Curren accuses the system which involves the kids into violence. Children are made brutal by the changing political system and external forces pressurize them to involve in the struggle. "But who made them so cruel? It is the whites who made them so cruel! Yes!" (AI 49).

Curren's State of Mind:

Curren was deeply affected by the happenings around her. During the time of John's death Curren was assaulted by the native boys. They humiliated her and she was rescued by Vercueil. The chain of events changed her perception about South Africa. She was counting her last days and the continuous blood-shed, war, violence and death of the boys induced her mental stress and she wanted death to embrace her. "Man, I thought: the only creature with a part of his existence in the unknown, in the future, like a shadow cast before him. Trying continuously to catch up with that moving shadow, to inhabit the image of his hope. But I, I cannot afford to be man. Must be something smaller, blinder, closer to the ground" (AI 170). Ignoring her pills she patiently waited for the time to come. Thinking about the strange events she leaves her last breath. The old white woman in spite of her disease was traumatized in her last days. This denotes the changing phase of the country and the verge of apartheid.

Vision of J.M.Coetzee:

By portraying the relationship between Curren and the native man Vercueil, J.M.Coetzee indicates that there should be equality among the races, so that people can live a peaceful life.

Curren, a white woman suffers mental trauma because of the violence imposed by her own race. But the native people like Vercueil and Florence were compassionate towards her and help

Curren at her last days. Curren dies holding the hands of Vercueil. This indicates that the position of white minority in post apartheid era is not safe and they have to surrender themselves to the native people for their livelihood otherwise they have to flee the country.

The violence which the colonisers practiced boomeranged on them and they were forced to face the insecure situation in a foreign country during the decline of apartheid. J.M.Coetzee through this novel brings out the trauma caused by apartheid and the aftermath of the apartheid era. He also portrays the hatred of the people to this system of segregating them in terms of race. Thus, through Curren, J.M.Coetzee brings out the need of love and compassion for the peaceful co-existence in a colonised country.

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