



Decoding ageing in *Age of iron* by J.M. Coetzee

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Abstract

John Maxwell Coetzee is an important South African writer of fiction and nonfiction and a Noble laureate. The present article tries to decode ageing, a very significant aspect of human life in the novel *Age of Iron* written by J.M. Coetzee. *Age of Iron* is the sixth novel by Coetzee published in the year 1990. The novel is set in late 1980s and deals with the Apartheid system and the atrocities committed on blacks by the whites. Mrs. Curren is both the protagonist and the narrator of the novel. Ageing studies can help us a great deal to understand the postcolonial condition as well as the tensions between the colonizer and the colonized. Mrs. Curren on the one hand is physically deteriorating into infirmity but on the other hand there is a moral rejuvenation or rebirth. Coetzee is successful in mixing two processes going on simultaneously in the life of Mrs. Curren. Through the character of Mrs. Curren, Coetzee seems to propose that the unavailability of physical deterioration in ageing does not necessarily suggest a lowering of moral vision. Physical deformity can't be a hurdle in political engagements for right reasons. Coetzee seems to suggest that ageing, far from being a process of moral degeneration, is rather a time of awakening to moral consciousness.

Keywords: ageing, apartheid, postcolonial condition, moral degeneration

Introduction

John Maxwell Coetzee is a prolific South African novelist now settled in Australia. He has won the Noble Prize for Literature in 2003. J.M. Coetzee is notable for making Apartheid a global issue. The present article seeks to decode ageing in the novel *Age of Iron* by J.M. Coetzee. Ageing studies can help us a great deal to understand the postcolonial condition as well as the tensions between the colonizer and the colonized. Brian J. Worsfold has advised that:

Approaches to gerontology must focus on the microcosm, that is, focus not on the society, the nation or even the community at large, but on the individual and the human and social context of the individual. (Worsfold: 2011) ^[1]

Age of Iron by J.M. Coetzee begins with the description of Mrs. Curren, a former Classics Professor living in Cape Town during the Apartheid and the novel is a long letter she is writing to her daughter who has lived in the United States since 1976. The epistolary mode of the book allows the readers to access into Mrs. Curren most intimate feelings, worries, hopes as well as everyday activities. Coetzee is successful in mixing two processes going on simultaneously in the life of Mrs. Curren: on the one hand, she is physically deteriorating into infirmity, on the other hand there is a moral rejuvenation or rebirth. She recognizes the excesses of the dominant class which were based on racial or ethnic differences. She becomes more politically engaged rather than being passive and doing nothing. Hannah Zeilig argues that:

Fictional stories can be invaluable for considering the various manifestations of age and ageing. (Zeilig: 2011) ^[2]

Mrs. Curren and her husband had parted long ago and he is no more now. It is now 1986, Mrs. Curren reveals that she has a terminal cancer and she is trying to convey something about her last days to her daughter, but does not know for sure what it is. Mrs. Curren's dislike of her own body parts like hands, legs, abdomen, heart etc. is reflected in the following lines:

What do I care for this body that has betrayed me? I look at my hands and see only a tool, a hook, a thing for gripping other things. And these legs, these clumsy, ugly stilts: why Should I have to carry them with me everywhere? (*Age of Iron* 12)

In spite of the difficulties, sadness that she faces in life, she still craves for it. Mrs. Curren wants to find her own angel but she is sure that it will be impossible to find one in Mill Street where only a derelict, alcoholic and a lost soul can be found. Yet in her heart she longs for angelic chanting in the home. Mrs. Curren compares her own health with the bad state of the house in the following manner:

Last summer, when the workmen were re-laying the drains, I watched them dig out the old pipes. Two meter down into the earth they went, bringing up moldering brick, rusty iron, even a solitary horseshoe. But no bones. A site without a human past; to spirits, as to angels, of no interest. (*Age of Iron*, 15)

Mrs. Curren craves for human beings, their company but this house has no such history. She remembers the story of her mother, her imagining and fear of death. Mrs. Curren's wish to speak with her daughter is repeated many times in the novel but she knows it will never happen. The

description of the heaven presents heaven as a place of inactivity, without incident. It shows the desire for action and incident in the life of Mrs. Curren. Mrs. Curren is deeply sad at the thought of dying without succession. She calls it unnatural and feels that for peace of mind, it is important to know who is going to take place after we die. It is very painful for her to visualize the image of the house after her death. It is very painful for her to imagine the empty deserted house. It is unbearable for her to think about death. Mrs. Curren remembers her mother as she was scared by what seemed the looming arrival of her own mortality, and her worries only diminished in the morning when she realized the carriage had not moved at all.

Night time is one of the toughest times for Mrs. Curren, as she often finds her thoughts drawn to her approaching death. She marvels about the possibilities of the afterlife, including one situation in which she imagines the afterlife as one large hotel lobby. She wants to ensure that all of her writing gets delivered to her daughter after she dies. Mrs. Curren is not happy having several people in her house while she is feeling so sick. Mrs. Curren deeply misses her daughter and wishes to cry before her. She feels jealous of Florence, her servant as she enjoys the company of her children. Mrs. Curren is unable to confront that parents have no role in the modern times. She puts a valid point argument when she says the boys who beat somebody because he drinks, laughs and set fire on people, how will they treat their own children? Will they be capable of love?

Mrs. Curren considers of the hardened youths as a generation of people made of iron. Furthermore, she wonders if the period in which they live is a kind of age of iron. When Mrs. Curren missed her medication her pain level had gotten worse. Mrs. Curren finds comfort in thinking about her daughter even though she lives far away. She has not told her daughter that her illness is terminal. Mrs. Curren tries to explain how she simultaneously craves her daughter's comfort and feels she must deny herself that comfort.

Mrs. Curren tells Mr. Vercueil that she plans to commit suicide rather than face the long, slow end of her disease. She is surprised by how excited Mr. Vercueil seems to be by the idea. the death mask of Bheki still haunts her. Mrs. Curren's daughter had requested her to come and live with her but Mrs. Curren feels that she is inseparable from the land and history of South Africa. Mrs. Curren develops a cold, which rapidly settles into her lungs and does not lessen. She becomes weak and when she drops her groceries all over the sidewalk, she is annoyed by the indifference of people who walk or drive by. Mrs. Curren is slowly starting to rely more and more on her pain pills. Eventually, her pain gets the better of her, and she collapses into a heap on the street, urinates herself, and falls unconscious.

Mrs. Curren confesses that she has been blind to the predicaments of the many people who are oppressed in her country. She is no longer sure what freedom is, and admits she had no right to judge Bheki, John, Mr. Thabane, and especially Florence about their views on resisting oppression. Mrs. Curren's condition is rapidly deteriorating and she is taking her pain pills more often now, and some of them give her disconcerting hallucinations. Mrs. Curren recognizes that she is too weak for going to the hospital. Mr. Vercueil draws Mrs. Curren into an embrace and the breath finally leaves her body. Even in her sickness, she refuses to burden anyone but is ready to face death unaccompanied.

The experience of the ageing people can be a boon for them to understand the realities of the world in a better way.

J.M. Coetzee displays old age to be concerned with retrospective views accompanied by a number of crazy wishes like becoming young and beautiful again, for a return to the old safe and peaceful times, a regeneration of the blissful conditions of childhood or relishing the earlier close daughter–mother relationship. Feeling of being alive is very rare in old age.

Mrs. Curren finds it impossible to part with the principles of discipline and orderliness even under the conditions of illness and political terror. Old age is an age of physical decline and bodily deformation and an old body becomes a burden. The tussle of old people with sickness and fear of death is stressed throughout the novel. It often results in a longing for love and communication. Because of the old age, there is a gap in communication as Mrs. Curren has a hard time explaining to Bheki and his friend that it is not acceptable to sleep in her garage without asking for her permission. The identities of mistress and servant are shifted and their new association is based on a reversal of power because of the lessening in her mistress's domestic authority due to her old age and feelings of guilt and shame.

Old age is closely connected with the thoughts of afterlife. For Mrs. Curren afterlife has numerous dimensions. It is connected with memories, visions and mystery. The fear of being deprived of the entry to paradise is expressed in the following manner:

Will we at least be allowed our Nirwana, we children of that

Bygone age? I doubt it. If justice reigns at all, we will find ourselves barred at the first threshold of the underworld. (Age of Iron, 92)

Mrs. Curren, a white lady could easily have continued being the beneficiary of the Apartheid but she rejects this privilege, stands with the oppressed and adopts a rebellious position against the system. Coetzee is able to show that ageing is not the hardening of the heart, being unaffected by what happens around you rather it is an opportunity to question and redefine long held values as is done by Mrs. Curren in the novel. Mrs. Curren's activism deconstructs myths about the powerlessness of the aged people. Giving shelter to a homeless vagabond like Vercueil in her home is an example of her changed mindset. She becomes more morally conscious after seeing the atrocities committed by the police on black youngsters including Bheki, the son of her servant

Through the character of Mrs Curren, Coetzee seems to propose that the unavoidability of physical deterioration in ageing does not necessarily suggest a lowering of moral vision. Physical deformity can't be a hurdle in political engagements for right reasons. Coetzee seems to suggests that ageing, far from being a process of moral degeneration, is rather a time of awakening to moral consciousness.

References

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