

Narratives of Resilience and Resistance in J. M. Coetzee's Age of Iron

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Abstract

J.M. Coetzee, a South African novelist, is renowned for his profound explorations of apartheid, morality, and human suffering. In *Age of Iron* by J.M. Coetzee, Mrs. Curren, an elderly professor from Cape Town who is battling terminal cancer. She contemplates her existence during the harsh realities of apartheid South Africa. Her relationship with Vercueil, a man without a home, and her dealings with Bheki, a young black activist, shed light on her increasing understanding of racial inequalities. Despite her own hardships and the turmoil around her, Mrs. Curren shows remarkable strength and bravery. She criticizes the violence of apartheid, builds compassionate relationships, and documents her journey through letters, which serve as a form of resistance against oppression. Coetzee delves into the ideas of determination, moral responsibility, and rebellion, showcasing Mrs. Curren's inner fortitude and her growing support for those on the fringes of society, ultimately highlighting the human spirit's ability to endure through political and personal challenges. This paper explores personal and political struggles of Mrs. Curren, as she navigates the harsh realities of apartheid South Africa, forging bonds and finding resilience amidst societal unrest.

Key words: Apartheid, Violence, Resilience, Resistance, Injustice

Age of Iron by J.M. Coetzee tells the story of Mrs. Curren, a retired professor from Cape Town, who battles a terminal illness, forms a bond with Vercueil, a man without a home. The story is set in the context of apartheid South Africa and examines Mrs. Curren's deep thoughts on life, violence, and the unfairness of racial discrimination. As their relationship grows during times of social unrest and Mrs. Curren comes to terms with her own death, Coetzee uses a reflective style to delve into issues of suppression, kindness, and the fear of existence. *Age of Iron* is a depiction of personal struggle and the strength to endure in a nation divided by political conflict and racial animosity.

In *Age of Iron* the story is deeply rooted in tales of perseverance and defiance. The novel vividly illustrates the brutal truths of apartheid-era South Africa, seen through the perspective of Mrs. Curren, an older woman fighting against cancer. Mrs. Curren states that, "And I am sick too, I said Sick and tired, tired and sick. I have a child inside that I cannot give birth to. Cannot because it will not be born. Because it cannot live outside me. So it is my prisoner or I am its prisoner. It beats on the gate but it cannot leave"(75). Mrs. Curren shares

her frustration, feeling trapped in her situation. She resigned herself to the fact that she is destined to live with cancer, unable to escape its grasp.

Despite her personal hardships and the restrictive political environment, Mrs. Curren shows strength by standing up to the wrongs she encounters and developing a connection with Vercueil, a man living on the streets who ends up caring for her. The theme of resistance is shown through a variety of characters and their battles against apartheid, including Mrs. Curren's attempts to comprehend and challenge the violence and suppression she observes. The novel delves into issues of ethical duty, the impact of political aggression on people, and the underlying power structures. *Age of Iron* presents a moving examination of human perseverance, ethical bravery, and the intricacies of fighting back against hardship.

In *Age of Iron*, Mrs. Curren is depicted as an older woman who is struggling with a terminal illness. Despite her deteriorating health and the agony, she experiences, she shows a quiet fortitude and resolve to face the tough truths of her situation. Mrs. Curren's ability to withstand the challenges and restrictions brought on by her sickness is evident in her daily life activities, maintaining a sense of self respect even as her condition weakens. Her strength is further demonstrated by her refusal to let her illness define her. She stays mentally active and connected with her surroundings, especially through her interactions with Vercueil, the homeless man she lets into her home.

Marwan M. Obediat states that the associations Mrs. Curren makes between her emotional state and her physical condition are hardly new. Nowadays, tension and stress are highlighted by physicians as the common causes of most diseases. Mrs. Curren uses a punitive conception of cancer as a lethal disease, as a killer that arrests an unwitting victim.

Age of iron is set in the era of apartheid in South Africa, which also sheds light on Mrs. Curren's reaction to the societal and political wrongs around her. Despite facing the harshness of the system and its effects on others, she holds a critical yet steadfast position, trying to understand the turmoil and injustice. Mrs. Curren's relationships with others, especially with Vercueil, the homeless man she shelters, showcase her empathy and strength. Despite starting off with distrust and discomfort, she forms a deep bond with him, demonstrating her resilience in forming connections with others despite their differences.

Coetzee delves into the struggle against apartheid and its tyrannical rule is a key subject dissected through a variety of characters and their encounters. Initially, Mrs. Curren is portrayed as a reclusive, indifferent woman, but her interactions with Vercueil, an unwashed homeless individual, and Bheki, a young black activist, slowly awaken her to the social realities around her. She begins to question her own role in perpetuating the oppressive apartheid system. Through her bond with Bheki, Mrs. Curren experiences the harshness of apartheid's rule directly. She observes the brutality and unfairness endured by black South Africans, which deeply unsettlingly impacts her and intensifies her resistance.

Mrs. Curren begins to voice her disapproval of the abuses she sees. She writes letters to authorities and participates in conversations with others, despite the dangers that lie ahead. Her public opposition marks a profound change from her initial reticence. Mrs. Curren forms

a protective circle around Bheki and his sister, who face government-sponsored attacks for their anti-apartheid efforts. She keeps them in her house, putting herself at risk to protect them from the law. Even as her health deteriorates and she confronts the bleak truths, Mrs. Curren upholds a moral backbone and stands firm against being silenced. Her resistance becomes a spiritual battle against the dehumanizing impacts of apartheid.

Mrs. Curren, at first, lives in a world where she is disconnected from the political realities of her time. Yet, as she becomes aware of the injustices and suffering caused by apartheid, she begins to fight against being passive and indifferent. Her thoughts and reflections turn into a way of standing up against her own involvement and facing her privileged status in society. Her bond with Vercueil, a man without a home who ends up being her caregiver, represents a kind of resistance through their connection and understanding of each other. Even though they have their differences and start off distrustful, Vercueil's presence makes Mrs. Curren question her biases and assumptions. By seeing the hardships and pain faced by Vercueil, Mrs. Curren participates in resistance by recognizing and humanizing those who are marginalized.

Coetzee speaks for those who are overlooked and oppressed by apartheid. Through Mrs. Curren's interactions with various characters, like Bheki and his mother, the story highlights their resistance through perseverance and survival against widespread oppression. Their stories challenge the usual stories of power and privilege, presenting different viewpoints and truths. As Mrs. Curren records her experiences and thoughts in letters to her daughter who is estranged, she does so as a form of resistance through writing.

Mrs. Curren is diagnosed with cancer, casting a shadow of fear over the story. Even as she knows her time is short, she faces her impending death with a serene acceptance, demonstrating strength in the face of death's close approach. As her condition worsens, Mrs. Curren slowly begins to lose her grip on her body and her environment. Despite this diminishing control, she holds onto a deep inner strength, not succumbing to complete despair or a sense of hopelessness. Coetzee delves into Mrs. Curren's emotional journey through personal tragedy, like her son's passing. This loss deeply impacts her, yet she deals with her sorrow and strength, contemplating the wider effects of loss and suffering. Current reflects on the paradoxical sorrow of mortality and her lack of control over it. Similar to the soldiers anticipating death, Current finds herself without any means to negotiate for her survival, thus perceiving any form of negotiation as pointless. She mentions that as,

I think of prisoners standing on the brink of the trench into which their bodies will tumble. They plead with the firing-squad, they weep, they joke, they offer bribes, they offer everything they possess: the rings off their fingers, the clothes off their backs. The soldiers laugh. For they will take it anyway, and the gold from their teeth too (23).

Mrs. Curren's letters act as a record of the atrocities of apartheid and a call for responsibility and justice. By remembering and documenting, Mrs. Curren resists the forgetting of history and the suppression of voices that disagree. Although Mrs. Curren might not participate directly in the usual forms of political activism, her increasing awareness and moral indignation contribute to a wider story of resistance against apartheid. Her personal struggles

and changing mindset show a journey towards unity with those who actively resist through protests, strikes, and other direct actions. Eckard states that, *Age of Iron* that focuses on the protagonist Mrs. Curren's efforts, during the violent political struggle in apartheid South Africa, to speak in her own voice. Coetzee's perennial staging of the conflict between a desire for autonomous expression and a socio-historical milieu that is indifferent to that desire can be read as an imaginative form of resistance.

This paper has detailed the human spirit's endurance and ethical defiance during the apartheid period in South Africa, focusing on Mrs. Curren's struggle with a terminal disease and the formation of unforeseen connections. Coetzee explores the concepts of oppression, compassion, and moral obligation through Mrs. Curren's evolution from a passive observer to a vocal critic of the societal wrongs she encounters, showcasing her inner fortitude and toughness. Her exchanges with Vercueil and Bheki expose the harsh realities of apartheid, forcing her to reconsider her previous convictions.

Works Cited

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