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Legitimacy and Authority of Narration in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*

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Abstract

As a writer who is conscious of the ways in which the act of writing for the white postcolonial authors in South Africa is inextricably bound with power, Coetzee constantly endeavours to marginalize this power. In *Age of Iron*, Coetzee represents his marginality and "writing without authority" by employing a white woman narrator, Elizabeth Curren, who writes her text from the position of marginality in relation to the recognized literary forms and their masculine dominance. However, as she is conscious of her complicity in the act of colonialism, she is filled with self-doubt. She questions her authority to speak from the position of liberalism and the possibility of telling the truth. There is further difficulty in the inadequacy of the colonizers' language to represent the colonized.

The novel depicts the constraints of its narrator but falls short of presenting a resolution, prompting questions about narrative authority in *Age of Iron*. This article contends that if Curren's records are read as a truthful confession- an exercise driven by personal dissolution that involves relinquishing everything she lived with in South Africa and acquiring greater political understanding, it can lend authority to the text in terms of objective truth-telling and in confirmation with historical realities.

Keywords: colonialism, complicity, authority, narrator, positioning, language, relinquishment, confession

Being an author with Western influences, J. M. Coetzee's novels are subconscious texts written in confirmation of postmodernist and poststructuralist theory. Teresa Dovey was the first to claim in her study *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* that Coetzee's novels possessed theoretical sophistication that disarmed the critics in advance, and it is no longer possible to ignore the discursive complexity and self-consciousness of his texts. While Coetzee's fiction offers much in terms of being responsive

to postmodernist and poststructuralist theories, it has often been argued that his work does not sufficiently reflect the political resistance and historical forces prevalent in South Africa. David Atwell responds in his study *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and Politics of Writing* that such polarization of view of Coetzee's fiction is not correct. He asserts:

> Coetzee's novels are located in the nexus of history and text that is, they explore the tension between these polarities. As a novelist and linguist with a European heritage, working on the experimental fringes of his genre, Coetzee leans towards a reflexive examination of the constitutive role of language in placing the subject within history; yet as a South African, and one who returned to the country after a prolonged and finally unsuccessful attempt to emigrate, Coetzee cannot avoid having to deal with his national situation (Atwell 3).

Coetzee maintains that his novels offer a tension between reflexivity and historicity. Behind all narrators in each of his novels lies an implied narrator who responds to the play of historical forces in South Africa. Coetzee himself calls these narrators the self-of writing or the "one who writes". However, David Atwell points out that if a writer in South Africa has to write in the national context, positionality is always an issue and he has to answer questions like: Who is the self-of writing? What is his/her power, representativeness, legitimacy and authority? This "problem of agency" (as Atwell has defined it) is a prominent feature in South African writing and Coetzee has more austerely examined it than any other South African writer. Coetzee, in his work, has problematized issues of "writing", "authority", "power", "race", "patriarchy", "gender", "marginality" among others including "authorial identity".

Furthermore, an analysis of the status of postcolonial "white writing" reveals their focus on the continuation of colonialism under the white nationalist government. Ashcroft expounds that the term post-colonialism does not imply the time after colonialism but signify "all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (Ashcroft et.al. 2). Hence, the act of writing for the white postcolonial authors is inextricably bound with power. Jane Poyner, an English academic, edited significant compilation of essays titled "J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual" (Ohio University Press, 2006). Currently, she has authored a monograph that explores Coetzee's portrayal of the paradox inherent in postcolonial authorship. She contends:

> whilst striving symbolically to bring the stories of the marginal and the oppressed to light, stories that heretofore have been suppressed or silenced by oppressive regimes, writers of conscience or conscience-stricken writers risk re-imposing the very authority they seek to challenge. (2)

Coetzee's work reflects a characteristic attempt to avoid mastery over narrative. He abstains from responding definitively to his text and resists the suggestion that the " text begins and ends" solely within the author's interpretive domain. Coetzee disavows the authoritarian implications linked to his role as a white male in South Africa and actively works to dismantle it, positioning himself as "without authority." As a writer in concurrence with the inherent connections between writing and power, Coetzee consistently endeavors to diminish the influence wielded by this power. Jane Poyner, in her study on postcolonial authorship *J. M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship*, has cited the instances of a number of Coetzee's protagonists and narrators, asserting that they are only nominal, figurative authors of their texts.

The white authors in South Africa have constantly endeavored to resolve the issue of authority of authorship due to which they always compromise with ethico-political

convictions. This is because, as Coetzee believes, that authorship entails power, mastery and colonization. Raising the question of "white writing" Coetzee states that: "white writing is white only in so far as it is generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet Africans" (White Writing 11).

J. M. Coetzee has attempted to resolve this problem of authorship in two of his novels, the quasi-novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and *Diary of the Bad Year* (2007) through the adoption of what Jane Poyner terms as different "acts of genre". She asserts that these "acts of genre" accomplish two objectives: firstly, to prompt inquiries about authority and the ability of intellectuals to 'speak truth to power' (Said, Representations 85), and secondly, to cultivate a discerning readership that is compelled to actively engage with the text. (Poyner 3). However, raising the questions about authority alone does not lend authority to narration.

Additionally, there are concerns regarding the complicity of the white writer within the system and the challenges associated with identifying a viable speaking position. Coetzee has resolved the problem by adopting the feminine position. He portrays his marginality and the concept of "writing without authority" by employing women narrators who compose their texts from a marginalized standpoint in contrast to established literary forms and their masculine dominance. In relation with this, Fiona Probyn contends: "Certainly in the case of Coetzee's writing, the white woman narrator's containment within narrative serves to dramatize Coetzee's own containment within the industry of writing" (Probyn 7). Coetzee thus writes in the 'middle voice', that of a woman narrator. He characterizes his writing stance as "feminized," articulating his clear alignment with certain interests and emphatically declaring that the "position of weakness," associated with the feminine, is his own. Probyn in her article "J. M. Coetzee: Writing with/out Authority" maintains:

Although Coetzee insists that he is 'writing without authority' it is in his white women narrators that this no-position, outside the authority of writing and authorship, is realized.

The ambiguity and ambivalence of the speaking position of his narrators is reasserted by David Atwell, when he mentions in his study "*J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and Politics of Writing*" (1993) that "Coetzee's protagonists represent the ambiguous condition of postcoloniality that South Africa inhabits." They express a dual concern, addressing both the politics of representation and the political significance of language. In addition to portraying the identity crisis experienced by a postcolonial settler, the white woman is ascribed an ambivalent position overlapping the roles of the colonizer and the colonized. She asserts her (white) colonial status while undermining her power as a colonial through the assertion of her marginality as a woman.

Coetzee's use of women narrators became the focus of critical inquiry after the publication of J. M. Coetzee's novel *Age of Iron* (1990). Three of his novels to date have female narrators- Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*, Susan Barton in Foe and Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron*. The male writer's choice of female narrators raises complex questions related to appropriation and colonization. This article discusses how in *Age of Iron*, Coetzee's use of a female narrator, Elizabeth Curren, a white South African woman, has been viewed as a strategy to dramatize his own self-positioning with respect to his social and discursive authority as a white male author in South Africa.

Benita Parry criticized J.M. Coetzee for his detachment from the "politics of fulfillment" in his novel *Age of Iron* in her contribution to the collection *Writing South Africa* (Parry 1998: 162). According to Parry (1998), Coetzee does not effectively challenge the dominance of European textual power in colonial discourse. This is attributed to his decision to narrate the

story through the voice of Elizabeth Curren, a white ex-academic who maintains a position of "entrenched cultural authority" throughout the narrative. Parry finds it disconcerting that the victims of oppression in the book are portrayed by silence, a voice lessness that she continuously associates with cultural domination (Parry 1998: 158). Therefore, Coetzee is also culpable of replicating the same exclusionary imperialist gestures that he critiques.

Parry's arguments, though extreme, should be taken into account while examining the issue of narrative authority in *Age of Iron*. Curren, afflicted with terminal cancer and largely detached from the historical context as she approaches death, appears unsuited to make moral judgments concerning both the black revolutionary movement and the harshly repressive policies of a South African state in the midst of a severe crisis. Her criticisms appear to lack any genuine authority. But can a judgment be made from this distance from the struggle (even though Curren is occasionally only too present as a bystander at the scene of its enactment)? Throughout *Age of Iron*, Coetzee wrestles with the issue of narrative authority, and it is challenging to find a clear resolution in the text.

The way Coetzee uses female narration is complex which situates this text in the intersection between feminist and postcolonial discourse. Elizabeth Curren is represented as ambiguous colonial figure, whose position from which she speaks is compromised by her shame and complicity; a complicity from which Coetzee's own authorship suffers. Robin Visel addresses this in her article "A Half Colonization: The Problem of the White Colonial Women Writer." She highlights that the concept of "double colonization" for women in colonial and postcolonial contexts fails to differentiate between native colonized women and their settler "sisters," leading to a skewed perspective. According to her, the position of a colonized woman is distinctly different from that of a woman colonizer. She further elucidates: "Although she [the woman colonizer] too is oppressed by white men and patriarchal structures, she shares in the power and guilt of the colonists (Visel, 39). This distinction is vital to an understanding of the speaking position of Coetzee's women narrators. The failure to understand this difference and to come to terms with 'half-colonization' has led a number of commentators on Coetzee's work to an "elaborate dead end" (Kirsten Holst Peterson 251). Therefore, it may be more productive to carefully examine the position Elizabeth Curren occupies, as both colonized and colonizing. She struggles to find a "woman's voice" to set against patriarchal authority but her effort is complicated by her complicity in that authority and the language structures by which it is articulated. Elizabeth Curren's awareness of this double-bind in her speaking position is used by Coetzee to interrogate structures of power, language, voice, authority and authorship, giving his fiction a postmodern turn.

In the context of post-apartheid South Africa, long period of colonialism had a profound influence on the social and cultural fabric of the society. It relates to economic, political and social features of the South African society and the way in which they negotiate their colonial heritage. This also pertains to the colonizers, the white South Africans, who after their extended contact with alien societies and the eventual loss of their profitable possessions were adversely affected. It deeply influenced the course of their economic and cultural evolution. It is, therefore, inappropriate to contend that the experience of apartheid, was most deeply felt by non-whites. It is a shared experience and should not be limited on racial grounds. Coetzee has often portrayed the feeling of marginalization and estrangement caused by apartheid to people of any color and background in South Africa.

Martin Luther King described South Africa as home to "the world's worst racism". Harmony among the people of South Africa,

after the apartheid came to an end in 1994, was an impossible dream as the non-white races, especially the blacks had endured extreme brutality and turned violent in an act of revenge. While many of the conformist whites endeavored to adjust to the renewed convention of equal status with the blacks, several of the blacks were filled with vengeance for the centuries of barbarity and inequality inflicted on them. The decolonization of South Africa was, as Frantz Fanon explained, "a violent phenomenon" (Fanon, 2001:27). Amidst the disintegration of the apartheid policies and violence, there was a shift in identities of "self" and "other" with the collapse of the center. The suffering was extended to both blacks and whites who were driven to the verge of hysteria by their anxiety. There was an effort on their part to accustom themselves to new South Africa which no longer adhered to the hierarchical segregation of races. This led them through stages of enunciations in which they struggled to construct a new identity. South Africa witnessed a crisis in identification applicable to both the colonized and the colonizers. This can be explained through Bhabha's notion of the diaspora and hybrid identities. In reference to the end of colonialism, Bhabha contends that the border represents a place where "past and present, inside and outside no longer remain separated as binary oppositions, but instead comingle and conflict"(Mcleod 217). According to him, the border offers new possibilities especially for the notions of identification. What is important is that this new way of looking at identification rejects binary opposition and shifts from the old ways of looking at it. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* reflect this border crossing in terms of identity. Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron* is compelled to acknowledge that the way she has been thinking of identity has been incorrect and is no longer applicable to the new South Africa.

Due to the unique polarization and institutionalization of class and racial politics, and of apartheid and resistance, the discourses of post colonialism were mainly applied to the literature by whites. *Age of Iron* addresses the issue of how the white writers articulate this identity, which invariably is connected with the colonizer who generates the knowledge of the colonized to serve their interests. These concepts of nationality and identity however, may be difficult to conceive in the cultural traditions of the colonized people in a language which is not their own language. This dilemma faced by the white writers and the problem of authorship have also been stressed in her study *Pen and Power: a Postcolonial Reading of J. M. Coetzee and Andre Brink* by Sue Kossew when she says:

> Whatever the intentional stance or narrative strategies of individual writers or texts, white writing is necessarily caught in a double inscription between the binary oppositions set up by an apartheid society and the attempt to breach or dismantle those divisions through words which inevitably re-inscribe them. This dilemma characterizes the urgent ambivalence of oppositional white South African writing (Kossew 2).

Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, placed in the period of political turmoil in South Africa, brought to the fore by "the state of emergency" declared in 1985 clearly engages with the existing political situation of the period it is set in. The image of the country in transition suggests the amalgamation of real historical time and space with literature where according to Bakhtin time "becomes artistically visible" and "space becomes charged responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (Bakhtin 1981, 84). *Age of Iron* places white woman character, Elizabeth Curren in these historical times to analyze the issues of race, gender and power. The text of *Age of Iron* takes the form of a letter written by Elizabeth Curren, the protagonist dying of cancer to her daughter who has settled down in the US as an act of protest against the Apartheid. Elizabeth Curren, a retired classics lecturer begins writing the letter

on the day of the diagnosis of her terminal cancer. The letter is written over the period of three years during the most tumultuous years of apartheid. Curren's letter has been viewed as the epistolary confession by which Elizabeth Curren lays bare her soul as a white female narrator. The letter expresses Curren's sense of guilt and shame for the oppressive apartheid era. It becomes a means through which she seeks absolution from her guilt and shame for years of oppression and subjugation. The process of writing reshapes her ethico-political consciousness which culminates in her realization of her unwilling complicity as a white in apartheid oppression. She says: "Though colonization was not a crime I asked to be committed, it was committed in my name" (Age of Iron 164).

Elizabeth Curren's letter to her daughter also serves as a diary in which she records her experiences during the closing and the most turbulent years of Apartheid. The letter is addressed to her daughter and the vagrant Vercueil, whom she has requested to post the letter to her daughter after her death. It is implied here that the letter was not written to persuade her daughter to return home, it takes on the form of confessions of sorts, through which she endeavors to absolve herself of her shame and guilt of white complicity in the colonial crime. The letter written as a diary has the tone of self-accusation, she writes: "How I lived in these times, in this place" (Age of Iron 119). Elizabeth Curren exhibits awareness of the self-justifying nature of her letter. She recognizes her narrative to have the tendencies of "lies, pleas and excuses". She further understands that in the times that demand "heroism", she is just striving to be a good person "using shame as my guide" (Age of Iron 150). Elizabeth urges her daughter to remain objective in her judgment of her narrative and not allow her love for Curren, her mother blur her judgment of what she reads:

> … attend to the writing not to me. If lies and pleas and excuses weave among the words listen to them, do not pass them over, do not forgive them easily. Read all, even this adjuration, with a cold eye (Age of Iron 95-96).

Further, it is uncertain whether Curren intends to post the letter or the letter would ever be received by her daughter as Vercueil poses as unreliable messenger. Thus her letter is rendered the quality of a "message in a bottle". While addressing her daughter she expresses her uncertainty regarding the receipt of the letter and writes: "To me this letter will forever be words omitted to the waves: a message in the bottle with the stamps of Republic of South Africa on it, and your name …" (Age of Iron 28). The letter violates the ethics of gift of love from a mother to her daughter and just becomes a means of expressing Curren's agony, shame and resentment. Her writing thus appears to be inspired by self-interest. She is conscious of her own motive behind this writing which is inherently to arrive at awareness and discover the truth about her role in apartheid oppression. Curren acknowledges her actual motive behind writing when she says: "To whom this writing then? The answer: To you but not to you; to me; to you in me" (Age of Iron 5).

Parallels have been drawn between incurable cancer in the main protagonist and the decaying political and social system which has eroded all humanity in South Africa. Curren's sense of guilt and shame have also been linked with cancer as she believes that cancer's birth in her body is the result of accumulation of "personal and collective crisis of consciousness" about apartheid oppression (Poyner 112). She remarks: "I have cancer from the accumulation of shame I have endured in my life. That is how cancer comes about; from self-loathing the body turns malignant and begins to eat away at itself" (Age of Iron 132). The feeling of gathering shame arises from Curren's comprehension and acknowledgement of her complicity in black oppression. She refers to this when she writes:

> When I walk upon … this South Africa, I have a gathering feeling of walking upon black faces … millions of figures of pig-iron floating under the skin of the earth" (Age of Iron 115).

Elizabeth Curren's cancerous body with its implication of imminent death is symbolic of the current South African regime in throes of death. However, this understandably signifies the birth of a new nation. In an interesting image of homecoming of a new-born, Curren describes the news of cancer: "It was for me to take into my arms and fold to my chest and take home, without headshaking, without tears" (Age of Iron 3). The comparison itself expresses increasing consciousness on Curren's part of her role and complicity in the act of suppression under Apartheid regime. Dominic Head suggests that "Cancer here deconstructs the boundaries between self and other, private and public and inside and outside, thus complicating the concept of individual identity" (135). This requires the reconsideration of what falls in public sphere and private sphere and a conflict between them. Elizabeth herself concedes that in the face of her personal crisis of having to come to terms with cancer, her attention is all diverted from the outside to the inside of her body:

> The country smolders, yet with the best will in the world, I can only half attend. My true attention is all in word, upon the thing, the word, the word for the thing inching through my body. An ignonimous occupation, and in times like these ridiculous too, as a banker with his clothes on fire is a joke while a burning beggar is not. Yet I cannot help myself. "Look at me!" I want to cry to Florence- "I too am burning" (Age of Iron 36).

The need to reconsider notions of identity and the conflict between private and public sphere necessitates personal dissolution which involves relinquishing everything she lived with in South Africa and to acquire greater political understanding. This means she has to gradually disassociate herself with privileged status and accept her insignificance. The narration reveals that when situated in times of uncertainty as they prevailed in 1980s, the very intimate feelings of an individual in a near death situation are entangled with the public disgrace felt under apartheid. The regime adopted the policy of "total strategy" in order to redeem its diminishing power. In times like this the line between private and public blurs. Referring to Curren's letter, the detective searching the house announces: "This is not private, Mrs. Curren. You know that nothing is private anymore" (Age of Iron 157).

Curren's consciousness undergoes a transition forced by her personal experiences of the violent times and when the others invade her personal space. In confronting the oppressive forces of the state and the militant resistance in Cape Town during the 1980s, she gains a fresh perspective on the ethics and politics of that era. The letter meant for her daughter becomes a vehicle to getting her voice heard on matters she feels strongly about. Yet, as she writes the letter she discovers her consciousness and questions her authority to speak from the position of liberalism. In the historical context of the "age of iron," marked by the unyielding political determination of militants and the inflexible laws of the state, she finds it challenging to convey the truth candidly with grace. She therefore, succumbs to the position of cynicism and questions the possibility of telling the truth, as it is, in South Africa in 1980s.

Additionally, Curren experiences a physical detachment from the urgent reality of South Africa during the Emergency. She paints a picture of herself as a castaway on an island, separated from the rest of humanity, describing her letters as "words committed to the waves: a message in a bottle." Curren acknowledges that her sole connection to the outside world and its events comes from second-hand accounts of

what transpires in the townships. In the company of Vercueil, the transient who comes and goes freely, she relies on television to glimpse the external world, peering at it as if "down a pipe" (27). Curren recognizes that state broadcasts on television do not offer an accurate portrayal of external reality, presenting only a "land of smiling neighbors" while omitting reports of violence and social unrest. She further admits that her only way of learning about events in Guguletu is through Florence or by "standing on the balcony and peering northeast; namely, that Guguletu is not burning today, or, if it is burning, is burning with a low flame" (39). Thus, there is a sense of detachment from the real events and their potency can hardly be present to her. Following Curren's protest with Mr. Thabane on the phone, he characterizes her voice as "very tiny and very far away," suggesting its limited influence and authority over the discussed issues (149). Mr. Thabane's seemingly innocuous remark reveals Curren's marginalized position as a white outsider, whose perspective does not align with the rest.

Confrontation with the realities of oppression acquires political enlightenment which leads to a revisioning of Mrs. Curren's ethico-political consciousness. Her narrative is eloquent of her anxiety about her complicity as white in oppressive regime. Her experiences, particularly the deaths of Bheki (the fifteen-year-old son of her maid Florence) and his friend John, unveil the political realities to her. This newfound understanding allows her to perceive her own role in the political structure more distinctly. Though she does not completely relinquish her ideas and clings on to certain liberal notions held by her before the change, it is noteworthy that she relinquishes all sense of her authority. She realizes that she is insignificant in the new scheme of things and this assuages her complicity with dying colonial order. The realization also leads to her rejection of the idea to set herself ablaze in front of the parliament building as an act of protest. While the symbolic suicide might seem to lend authority to Curren's discourse, it fails to make an impression on African observers. Curren's narrative has been interpreted as aspiring to a form of ek-stasis, but her attempt at suicide serves as a public act of political defiance, contradicting that possibility entirely. The sight of her burning body would inadvertently position Curren's discourse within a competitive binary, where she asserts her own morality from the heart of the conflict. Curren's inability to articulate the meaning behind the act leads her to the conclusion that death is a private matter, meant to be experienced and interpreted away from the scrutiny of the masses. Furthermore, the public display of this death would be symbolic, and its interpretation would be beyond her control. As Hester Prynne's well-known marking suggests, the unfixed allegory of this hypothetically labelled act would grant the observer (the reader) interpretive freedom outside of authorial influence. In this way, Curren rejects being engulfed by the phallocentric discourse of binary political and social rivalry that self-immolation would inevitably intensify. By ultimately refusing to act without authority, declining to insert herself (her death) into the realm of the "big phallus," Curren may indeed maintain the fragile assertion of an authority beyond itself, a theme that Coetzee explores elsewhere (Duncan, 179).

The conflict between private and public sphere necessitates personal dissolution which involves relinquishing everything she lived with in South Africa and to acquire greater political understanding. Curren relinquishes her desire and love for her land as she understands that such a response is necessary to the acceptance of the process of decolonization. She writes:

> Now that the child is buried and we walk upon him. Let me tell you, when I walk upon their land, this South Africa, I have a gathering feeling of walking upon black faces. They are dead but their spirit has not left them. They lie there heavy and obdurate, waiting for

> my feet to pass, waiting for me to go, waiting to be raised up again…. the age of iron waiting to return (Age of Iron 115).

The 'age of iron' Curren refers to, is that of changing political scenario where the process of decolonization becomes imperative. Curren becomes aware of age-old repression in South Africa and of the means to establish and continue colonization. She realizes how the oppressive regime controlled the media to remain in power. There is an incident where she watches television and Vercueil watches over her shoulder through the glass, which explicitly conveys Curren's extreme outrage at and her condemnation of the regime and its ways:

> "So I turned up the sound, enough for, if not the words, then the cadences to reach him, the slow truculent Afrikaans rhythm with their deadening closes, like a hammer beating a post into the ground. Together, blow after blow, we listened. The disgrace of the life one lives under them, to open a newspaper, to switch on the television, like kneeling and being urinated on. Under them: under their meaty bellies, their full bladders" (Age of Iron 9).

In the context of abusive nature of language, Elizabeth compares Afrikaans language with its "heavy cadences" with the "atrocities of the apartheid regime" and "oppression" (Age of Iron 122). In fact, Afrikaans is used in hostile situations, where true communication becomes no longer possible. The detective uses Afrikaans while questioning Curren. She switches to Afrikaans when she informs the police "I stand on their side" (Age of Iron 140). Effective communication becomes unattainable in Afrikaans due to its association with the apartheid regime and Afrikaner nationalism. Curren attempts to find a language through which she can articulate truthfully. She describes her position, while struggling with words:

> [Words] may only be air but they come from my heart, from my womb. They are not. Yes, they are not. No. What is living inside me is something else, another word. And I am fighting for it, in my manner, fighting for it not to be stifled (Age of Iron 133).

The self-doubt reflected in the given lines, reflect that of Coetzee's as well. Curren's anger and sense of helplessness becomes instrumental in her personal evolvement. She is portrayed as the conscience stricken writer Coetzee often speaks about. This is evident in her letter which many critics have termed as her confession of guilt and her vehicle to unravel truth, both personal and political.

Yet another stage in the process of Curren's evolution is her realization that the only way to her "resurrection" (Age of Iron 115) can come through "loving the unlovable" (Age of Iron 115). She asserts: "That is my first word, my first confession … I want to be saved. How shall I be saved? By doing what I do not want to do … I must love, first of all the unlovable. [John] is here for a reason. He is part of my salvation. I must love him" (Age of Iron 124-25). Thus, relinquishing her older values, Curren feels compelled to establish a bond of love and trust with John and Vercueil: "Because I cannot trust Vercueil I must trust him… I give my life to Vercueil to carry over, I trust Vercueil because I do not love Vercueil. I love him because I do not love him. Because he is the weak reed I lean upon him" (Age of Iron 119-20). Curren thus, endeavors to redeem herself of political shame through building reciprocal relationship with others, an unimaginable possibility given their race and their alienation from her.

Curren consciously acknowledges otherness when she gazes upon an old family photograph captured in her grandfather's garden in 1918. She recalls the garden and is immediately overcome with the realization that the beauty she so fondly cherishes was not created by her grandfather but rather by

unidentified hands. "If not he, then whose was the garden rightfully? Who are the ghosts and who the presences? Who, outside the picture, leaning on their rakes, leaning on their spades, waiting to get back to work, lean also against the edge of the rectangle, bending it, bursting it in?" (Age of Iron 111) While the native gardeners aren't visible in the photograph, the confines of this particular picture are essentially filled by these men, much like the peripheries of South Africa's picturesque pastoral history are occupied by them. They symbolize the marginalized other, with whom Attwell perceives Curren is grappling to identify in *Age of Iron*. Curren envisions a photograph in which the "hidden" existence of her grandfather's black workers will be revealed, their rightful claim to the land restored, while their white masters gradually fade to the blurred borders of the image: the "day of wrath" when absence and presence will reverse themselves.

It is certain that even though Mrs. Curren may succeed in drawing her reader's attention to the existence of these occluded men, she is unable to speak for them or articulate their judgment, whatever it may be. While Mrs. Curren is undoubtedly constantly seeking out the "other" as Attwell correctly observes, her attempts to engage in conversation with this marginalized presence seem limited and incomplete. Her instinct is appropriate, but her strategy- where she uses a Western literary and religious tradition, and when she lapses into Latin—repeatedly fails miserably.

In the process of relinquishment, a complete reversal of Curren's conception of childhood is also witnessed. She contemplates on the disparity between her understanding of childhood and that of the young, black activists who are ready to sacrifice their lives for their cause. In stark reference to the age of iron, her maid Florence describes her children as – "They are good children, they are like iron. We are proud of them" (Age of Iron AI 46). Contrary to this, Elizabeth perceives the self-confidence of a ten-year-old boy in stark contrast to her own childhood: "a childhood of sleep, prelude to what was meant to be a life without trouble and smooth passage to Nirvana" (Age of Iron 85). Childhood, according to Elizabeth seems to have been lost and this realization leads to the relinquishment of her idea of childhood. However, Curren explains it as the circumstance of the inevitability of history. She traces the process back to European settlers and their hardness. She implies that the new generation has turned hard as iron in response to long years of subjugation and colonization. There was personal awakening in Curren when she sees the dead boys. She admits that "her eyes have been opened permanently to some hitherto concealed truth" (Age of Iron 95).

Despite this, she is in dissent with Mr. Thabane over the meaning of the word 'comradeship'. This reveals that the process of relinquishment of her ideas is not complete yet. Curren's sense of personal awakening seems to be marked by her sense of her own irrelevance and she acknowledges that her opinions are no longer relevant: "Now I ask myself: what right have I to opinions about comradeship or anything else? What right have I to wish Bheki and his friend had kept out of trouble? To have opinions in a vacuum, opinions that touch no one, is, it seems to me 'nothing'" (Age of Iron 148). In this context, Elizabeth Curren dramatizes her recognition of being a white colonizer and acknowledges the ineffectiveness of her voice when it opposes the voices of black revolution. This is abundantly clear when she tells Vercueil:

> et who am I, who am I to have a voice at all? How can I honorably urge them to turn their back on that call? What am I entitled to do but sit in a corner with my mouth shut? I have no voice, and that is that. The rest should be silence. But with this, whatever it is – this voice that is no voice, I go on. On and on (Age of Iron 14).

Curren's experience of voicelessness is similar to that experienced by white writers in South Africa who reflect their powerlessness during Apartheid in the sense of not having enough authority to speak. There is a wide gap between the voices of the colonizer and the colonized. Sue Kossew has interestingly compared the voice of the colonized in *Foe*- "a slow wordless release" with that of the colonized voice in *Age of Iron*, where it has converted to a "shout" or "slogan". The representation of the colonized in terms of their body alone as portrayed in *Foe* is in total contrast to the violent uprising and the slogans of the black revolutionaries during the closing years of oppressive Apartheid regime. Curren realizes that her own voice has been rendered outmoded and lacks the same value as black voice. She describes her writing as "bleeding on the paper" and compares her blood which she describes as "thin" with that of blacks which she feels is "so dark, so thick, so heavy" (Age of Iron 125). The comparison draws on the powerlessness of her voice against that of blacks.

There is an additional challenge of the inadequacy of the language used by the colonizers, characterized by Eurocentric classical allusions. The colonized with their language that is unsophisticated and down to earth do not place value to colonialist language which they feel is evasive and does not truly represent them. Curren, being an etymologist and classical lecturer, tailors her language to meet her needs, drawing criticism and opposition from black activists. Coetzee recognizes that language generate uncritical thinking: "One can unconsciously project the structure of one's language out on to the stars and then believe that the resulting map is a true picture of the universe" (DP 184). Like Coetzee, Curren expresses distrust in language of the contemporary politics. According to her, language has become meaningless and corrupt. The revelation of the abusive nature of language, leads Curren to revising her position through self-scrutiny.

In the incident where she drives Florence to one of the squatter camps outside Guguletu and witnesses firsthand the violence occurring in the streets, she grapples to find words to condemn the injustice. She is consistently rendered speechless, and the words she eventually manages to pen are tinged with self-doubt. Furthermore, when Mr. Thabane insists that Curren "finds the name" for the burning down of the shanty town by the army, it exposes the gap between the language of the colonized and the colonizer. Elizabeth Curren attempts, albeit unsuccessfully, to find appropriate words for the "terrible things":

> These are terrible sights …. They are to be condemned. But I cannot denounce them in other people's words. I must find my own words, from myself. Otherwise, it is not the truth. That is all I can say now… (Age of Iron 91).

Curren's words to the crowd mean crap, as one of the men responded that "this woman talks shit" (AI 91). The words of white colonizer have no weight so far as the blacks are concerned. Curren also ascertains this when she says she "would need the tongue of a god" to describe the terrible things she has witnessed (Age of Iron 91). This also brings forth the dilemma of white South African writers who reel under the inadequacy of their language to represent the times.

Ineffectiveness of Curren's words and their lack of impact on others have also been linked to the question of gender, age and race. Vercueil, to whom Elizabeth confesses, does not behave like the 'ideal confessor' by being receptive to her ideas. He remains indifferent and seems not to be listening to what Elizabeth says. She is infuriated that her words fall on deaf ears. Vercueil's race has not been mentioned in the novel, though it is assumed that he is a black vagabond. Curren further feels the gap in her communication with the younger generation of black community. She feels it is easy to communicate with alcoholic Vercueil who does

not respond or judge than to communicate with the new generation of blacks, "the new guardians of the people" (Age of Iron 42).

These new guardians are not open to her discourse: "While to the rising generation, who do not drink, I cannot speak, can only lecture. Their hands clean, their fingernails clean. The new puritans holding to the rule, holding up the rule, abhorring alcohol, that softens the rule, that dissolves iron … suspicious of devious discourse, like this" (Age of Iron 75).

Curren discovers that her words lack impact on "new puritans" represented by Bheki and his friend. When Curren visits John in the hospital, she entreats him to "be slow to judge" but he does not seem to understand what she means: "Yet in his case, I was sure, the incomprehension ran deeper. 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" (Age of Iron 72). Here, Curren emphasizes her status as a white for the hostile and indifferent response she receives from John. She envisages John's anger at what he perceives as a hollow speech by a white which reverberates with South African liberalism:

> Talk, talk! Talk has weighed down the generation of his grandparents and the generation of his parents. Lies, promises, blandishments, threats: they had walked stooped under the weight of talk. Not he. He threw off the talk (Age of Iron 132).

Nevertheless, Curren recognizes the significance of discovering a voice, despite being cognizant of the ethical dilemmas it may entail. She grapples with the legitimacy of speaking about and representing others. While she perceives her voice as "the true voice of wisdom," she acknowledges that her right to speak is compromised by white privilege: "Who am I, (who am I) to have a voice at all? I have no voice, I lost it long ago, perhaps I have never had one" (Age of Iron 149). In this context, Curren alludes to the issue of authority present in each of Coetzee's works. Her questioning of the authority of her discourse echoes the doubt and anxiety expressed by Magda and Susan Barton. As is understood, these women occupy an ambivalent position as women colonizers. They themselves occupy a subjugated position under the authority of patriarchy, yet as whites, they find themselves in the role of authority figures as "mistresses" to black servants. Their position is different than that of black women who are doubly colonized. Robin Visel has coined the term "half colonized" for the white colonial women, a position of one who is simultaneously colonizer and colonized. A distinct feature of the discourse of all the women narrators in Coetzee's fiction, including Curren, is their awareness of this ambivalence of their position. Dorothy Driver emphasizes that white women's "sympathy for the oppressed and their simultaneous entrapment within the oppressive groups on whose behalf they may desire to mediate, complicates their narrative stance" (Driver 13). Coetzee has perhaps employed white women narrator to explore the contradictions of white settler's identity.

Curren replicates this contradiction in her reflections on her real motive behind setting herself ablaze in front of the House of Parliament which she refers to as "House of Shame" to express her solidarity with black resistance. She is doubtful of the genuineness of her motive and realizes that it too is motivated by self-interest. She concedes that the decision is not inspired by her sense of public duty but as a solution to her personal pain. Moreover, she recognizes the futility of the gesture as political protest. She says: "The truth is, there was always something false about the impulse, deeply false, no matter what rage or despair it answered … Will the lies stop because a sick old woman kills herself?" (Age of Iron 29). The contradictions inherent in a colonizer's mind are once again visible when Curren refuses to accept the blame for her role, even though she expresses her

anger at the representatives of white power for establishing present conditions and her sense of shame at their actions:

> Why should I be expected to rise above my times? Is it my doing that my times have been so shameful? Why should it be left to me, old and sick and full of pain to lift myself unaided from this part of disgrace? (Age of Iron 107)

When addressing the matter of narrative authority in *Age of Iron*, Michiel Heyns' 2002 essay titled "An Ethical Imperative in the Postcolonial Novel" appears to approach the truth most closely. Heyns perceives Curren (and consequently Coetzee) as confronting the complex task of writing to undermine their position as white individuals in South Africa (Heyns 2002: 107). He interprets Curren's frequent inability to speak as a failure to grasp the conflicting "cultures of survival" that shape the political landscape she occupies. In order to reconcile herself with the cultural other, she is unable to disregard her own cultural ideology. Heyns contends that the novel is conscious of its narrator's limitations but struggles to transcend them. He emphasizes Curren's depiction of a time outside the conventional timeline as "misbegotten and monstrous" to illustrate an ethical void that destabilizes the liberal-humanist concept of humanity ingrained in her thinking (Heyns 2002: 108-109). *Age of Iron* presents a world beyond the binaries of good and evil (reminiscent of Hesiod's age of iron), where the ethical imperative of respecting the demands of the other falls short. According to Heyns, it serves as a case study in ethical imagination and an "act of faith in the face of despair" (Heyns 2002: 113). Heyns seems to be heading in the appropriate direction. On a philosophical plane, Coetzee seems to be challenging the boundaries of the liberal-humanist approach to dealing with suffering, ultimately finding it somewhat inadequate (Heyns 2002: 109). However, considering Coetzee's reputation for being reclusive and maintaining a lack of a clear political stance, what other options are available to him as a writer? It appears that Coetzee is not firmly asserting the authenticity or legitimacy of Curren's account, but he is also not strongly critiquing her effort to write herself into a comprehension of the events around her (and despite of her). Coetzee is very eager about making this effort successful.

In his study titled "Narrative authority in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*," Ian Duncan has determined that the presumed privileged position of objective truth-telling may not actually exist. He goes on to argue that speaking the truth is only achievable through the subjective discourse of storytelling. Importantly, this form of discourse, despite being a completely personal act of witnessing, maintains its authority. He suggests that the purpose of storytelling isn't to create an impartial record of events but to transport the reader to a particular place and time, viewed and felt through a singular consciousness (Duncan 2006: 184). Curren acknowledges the authority she asserts in the act of writing, though it's not an authority over objective truth and historical reality; instead, it is authority over her own narrative. This article, however contends that if Curren's records are read as truthful confession, it can lend authority to the text in terms of objective truth telling and in confirmation with historical realities.

While writing the letter, Curren feels she gropes in the dark trying to unravel the truth and discover herself. She feels ignorant and confused and seeks awareness through uncovering the truth. Curren writes, "I may seem to understand what I say, but believe me, I do not. From the beginning, when I found him (Vercueil) behind the garage in his cardboard house, sleeping, waiting, I have understood nothing. I am feeling my way along a passage that grows darker all the time. I am feeling my way towards you, with each word I feel my way" (Age of Iron 120). She compares the letter with a tangled web, out of which she cannot find her way. She asserts:

> This letter has become a maze, and I a dog in the maze …. Why do I not call for help, call to God? Because God cannot help me. God is looking for me but he cannot reach me. God is another dog in another maze (Age of Iron 126).

Dominic Head referring to Curren's writing asserts that it is a secular maze in which God cannot be found. Such a godless maze is the appropriate metaphor for the "untainted confession in which the self is alone with the self, without comfort or pity". He therefore, concedes that this sense of closure is appropriate for the novel written during apartheid era. The "heroism" demanded of the time, as Curren suggests is bestowed on her by Coetzee in the form of "the status of the confessant as a hero of the labyrinth" (Doubling the Point 263). The awareness and embracement of the damaging truth culminates into difficult self-knowledge. Curren accepts the self-damaging truth in her way to relinquishment of all that was hers and her self-importance. She accepts the truth of her imminent death when she writes that cancer "was mine, for me, mine only, not to be refused" (Age of Iron 3). Head suggests the relinquishment of her ideas and self-importance lends authority to her narrative. He further asserts: "Mrs. Curren becomes an authoritative narrator because, having lost all stakes in life, she has no other kind of authority left. Even so, much of her narrative has to do with the process of relinquishing personal authority which is matched by an inverse accumulation of narrative authority" (137).

In his essay "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky" (1985), Coetzee asserts that the ultimate purpose of confession is to reveal the truth to oneself (Doubling the Point 291). While the letter is notably composed as a self-justification, intended for delivery posthumously, it remains fundamentally a confession made by and for the self. For a confession to occur there has to be a notional confessor, a role fulfilled by the unresponsive Vercueil. He does not engage in any dialogue with Curren. However, for her writing to have authority one should establish truthfulness of her confession. In Coetzee's understanding of the conclusion of confession, Curren's truthfulness arises from the fact that it is not communicated directly: the truth, the self-awareness, is generated through Vercueil's ineffectiveness as a confessor and his probable unreliability as a messenger.

Head suggests that the process of self-relinquishment and Curren's realization of her own irrelevance ensures a more truthful confession. Coetzee has also asserted that willingness of the confessant to confront that which is worst within himself, lends authority to secular confession (Doubling the Point 263). In direct contrast to the Dostoevskian confessant, who according to Coetzee indulges in 'self-unmasking' (Doubling the Point 280), Curren's sincerity is not in doubt. Coetzee asserts that the impending death of the confessor adds gravity to the truthfulness of the confession. He argues that "The sincerity of the motive behind last confessions cannot be impugned …because that sincerity is guaranteed by the death of the confessant" (Doubling the Point 284). Coetzee describes how a dying confessant is lent sincerity: The urgency instigated by the crisis (the confrontation with his own death), the unyielding nature of the process stripping the self of its comforting fictions, and the unwavering dedication to the quest for truth collectively contribute to the concept of sincerity (Doubling the Point 262).

If we interpret Curren's letter as an endeavor toward sincere confession, a process motivated by personal dissolution that entails letting go of everything she lived with in South Africa to gain deeper political insight, we cannot dismiss the definite authority inherent in Curren's narrative. It is not the potentially contested legitimacy of Western or European cultural heritage, but rather the authority of an underrepresented individual voice. This voice, through its gradual relinquishment of all

authority, paradoxically amasses the narrative authority of the text it creates.

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