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Irony, Ethics, and Humanism: The Politics of Irony and Moral Resistance in Coetzee's *Age of Iron*

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines the politics of irony and moral resistance in J. M. Coetzee's Age of Iron *focusing on role of irony in both a narrative and ethical strategy to critique apartheid South Africa. Through textual and thematic analysis, supported by the theories of irony, ethics and humanism the research particularly explores how Coetzee employs irony to expose racial violence, moral complicity, and the possibility of human transformation. The novel's protagonist, Mrs. Elizabeth Curren, embodies Coetzee's moral vision as she confronts her own complicity and gradually develops empathy toward the marginalized black population. Based on the notions of the "said and unsaid" this paper illuminates how irony destabilizes dominant discourse, while humanism and ethics of responsibility underscore the novel's call for moral awakening through recognition of the other. The analysis reveals that Coetzee's irony bridges the divide between fiction and history, transforming personal suffering into a collective ethical inquiry. Ultimately, Age of Iron stands as a moral allegory of guilt, empathy, and redemption, demonstrating that literature can act as a historical intervention, one that exposes injustice, challenges indifference, and reaffirms shared humanity in the face of oppression.*

Keywords: Apartheid, ethics, humanism, irony, moral resistance

INTRODUCTION

This paper has explored the role of irony in transforming the white supremacy into moral and ethical route by applying the humanistic behavior for the marginalized victims in Apartheid South Africa. By analyzing the post-colonial novel, *Age of Iron*, the research has tried to sightsee the moral allegory of guilt, empathy, and redemption to challenges dehumanization against marginalized victims. In line with Alexander et al. (2004), the discussion illustrates how collective and societal trauma emerges through processes of discourse, collective memory, cultural institutions, moral meaning, and social responsibility for mainstreaming the marginalized victims.

J. M. Coetzee's novel *Age of Iron* (1990), written between 1986 and 1989 represents a significant shift in the author's portrayal of violence during the turbulent years of the late 1980s in South Africa. Set in Cape Town, the novel serves as a witness to the atrocities committed under the apartheid regime and exposes the brutality of the state security forces. At the same time, Coetzee portrays the emergence of militant youth groups within black townships, who rise from years of oppression to challenge apartheid through protests, school boycotts, and the broader struggle for liberation (Coetzee, 1990) to fight against dehumanization of the blacks under apartheid regime. The primary objective of this study is to analyze how J. M. Coetzee employs irony as both a narrative and ethical strategy in *Age of Iron* to critique the moral corruption of apartheid and to promote humanistic and ethical consciousness through the transformation of his protagonist, Mrs. Elizabeth Curren.

The story is narrated by Mrs. Elizabeth Curren, an elderly white woman and retired lecturer who is dying of terminal bone cancer. The narrative unfolds through an extended letter she writes to her daughter, who has left South Africa for the United States to escape the moral burden of living under apartheid. Mrs. Curren's letter reflects both personal and political turmoil as she confronts her own complicity in the system she condemns (Coetzee, 1990). This epistolary form allows Coetzee to intertwine the private voice of confession with the public voice of protest, revealing the deep moral introspection of a society fractured by racial injustice.

Shortly after learning of her illness, Mrs. Curren encounters an alcoholic, homeless black man whose name, origins, and background remain uncertain. She names him Vercueil and offers him shelter, and over time, he becomes her companion and caretaker. Alongside

Vercueil, Mrs. Curren employs Florence, a black domestic worker, and interacts closely with Florence's three children. Through these relationships, she begins to reflect deeply on her moral position and emotional connection to those she once viewed through the lens of privilege. Her reflections reveal both guilt and maternal tenderness, as shown when she writes to her daughter: "Why do I give this man food? For the same reason I would feed his dog (stolen I am sure) if it came begging. For the same reason I gave you my breast" (*Age of Iron*, p. 7). In another moment, when she finds Vercueil asleep in her living room, she recalls the affectionate language she once used with her daughter: "Come, my darling, it's time to get up!" (*Age of Iron*, p. 5). Through Mrs. Curren's reflections, Coetzee explores the intersections of personal decay, social injustice, and moral awakening. The novel uses illness as both a literal and metaphorical condition, representing the sickness of apartheid-era South Africa and the fraught conscience of its privileged citizens.

Mrs. Curren experiences a profound moral awakening after witnessing the violent deaths of two black youths, Bheki and John, in Coetzee's *Age of Iron*. She is deeply shaken by the brutality she observes, describing the scene with vivid and disturbing imagery: "Florence slid a hand under Bheki's head. Slowly he sat up. One shoe was off; a trouser-leg was torn open and wet with blood" (Coetzee, 1990, pp. 56–57). After Bheki's death, her grief and despair are expressed in stark, repetitive language: "Bheki is in the ground,' I said. 'He is in a box in a hole with earth heaped on the top of him. He is never going to leave that hole. Never, never, never'" (p. 131). Reflecting on the wider social and political violence of her country, she generalizes the event by calling South Africa "a country prodigal for blood" (p. 57) and "a land that drinks rivers of blood and is never sated" (p. 58). This moment encapsulates Coetzee's critique of apartheid as a system that normalizes death and moral decay, transforming personal loss into a metaphor for the collective suffering of an entire nation.

These painful encounters accelerate Mrs. Curren's moral and political transformation. She begins to recognize her own complicity within the structures of apartheid and the colonial history that created such suffering. Through reflection, she understands that the violence and moral decay of late 1980s South Africa are rooted in Afrikaner nationalism and the legacy of colonial oppression. Coetzee frames this recognition within an "age of iron," a metaphor for a society where human relationships are corroded by political conflict. The irony of this "age" lies in the emergence of ethical awareness from moral decay, as Mrs. Curren attempts to reassess and redefine her relationship with the oppressed and marginalized (Coetzee, 1990). This transformation illustrates Coetzee's broader humanistic vision, where self-realization and

ethical renewal can only arise through confronting the moral failures of one's own privilege and history.

Mrs. Curren perceives South Africa as a chaotic and unsafe space. She recalls, "Three years ago I had a burglary (you may remember I wrote about it). The burglars took no more than they could carry" (pp. 24–25). As a result, she installs bars on her windows "as a precaution against future burglaries" (p. 25). This act of self-protection makes her feel imprisoned, comparing herself to "a dodo quaking in her nest, sleeping with one eye open, greeting the dawn haggard" (p. 25). Through this metaphor, she expresses a sense of extinction and insecurity, likening her condition to that of an endangered bird trapped within its own cage.

The environment around her further reflects the disorder and moral decay of the apartheid regime. She describes a familiar place to her daughter: "There is an alley down the side of the garage, you may remember it, you and your friends would sometimes play there. Now it is a dead place, waste, without use, where windblown leaves pile up and rot" (p. 3). This image of decay mirrors the moral and social desolation of apartheid South Africa, a landscape rendered barren by systemic violence and inequality.

Mrs. Curren's confrontation with political oppression and death transforms her understanding of human life and suffering. Her illness, terminal bone cancer, serves as both a personal affliction and a metaphor for the nation's moral sickness. Facing her own mortality, she develops empathy for the oppressed and realizes that the value of life is universal. Ironically, it is through her impending death that she achieves a deeper moral awareness, recognizing the shared humanity that apartheid sought to deny.

The diagnosis of Mrs. Curren's cancer under Dr. Syfret's examination in Coetzee's *Age of Iron* symbolically parallels her realization of the moral decay within South African society. Her illness mirrors the destructive nature of the apartheid regime, which acts as a "cancer" eating away at the humanity of the nation and its people. Through this metaphor, Coetzee (1990) equates Mrs. Curren's physical deterioration with the spiritual and ethical decay caused by systemic oppression.

Mrs. Curren internalizes this reality after encountering the vagabond Vercueil. Observing his destitute condition, she reflects on his emptiness: "Of having no children in the world but also of having no childhood of his past" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 10), as though he has entered "our world from an absolutely foreign sphere" (Levinas, as cited in Jordaan, 2004, p. 23). Vercueil symbolizes the marginalized black South Africans, dispossessed, invisible, and alienated

within their own land. He represents the archetype of the colonized "other," a man without a home, identity, or sense of belonging.

Claire Colebrook (2004) comments on this dynamic of representation and irony in colonial discourse, noting:

> "… the image of the other is always decided, collected, and determined from a governing and colonially complicit point of view. However, this decision to present the colonizing gaze ironically, by repeating all its demeaning and objectifying images, failed to achieve its aim; many of the indigenous viewers of the exhibition saw the images as one more presentation of the Western view of its others" (p. 155).

While connecting this reference to *Age of Iron*, Coetzee subverts the colonial gaze by presenting it through irony and empathy, exposing how apartheid defines black identity from a position of white dominance. The black people under apartheid era in South Africa were viewed as Other whatever talents and capability those people had possessed. The white ruler seems to have imitated the western colonial gaze to view the East under colonialism.

Recent scholarship on J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* highlights the novel's intricate negotiation between ethics, political irony, and the historical trauma of apartheid. Attridge (2004) emphasizes Coetzee's "ethics of alterity," suggesting that his fiction compels readers to confront the humanity of the marginalized through moral discomfort. Head (2009) also argues that Coetzee's writing embodies a "literature of responsibility," where irony becomes a means to expose the complicity of white liberalism in systemic violence. Gallagher (1991) views *Age of Iron* as an allegory of witnessing, where the protagonist's illness mirrors the moral decay of South African society. Attwell (1993) situates the novel within Coetzee's broader legacy of postcolonial meta-fiction, claiming that his self-reflexive irony enables him to question both historical truth and narrative authority. Poyner (2009) extends this discussion by suggesting that Coetzee's ethical irony resists ideological closure, creating a space for multiple voices and uncertain meaning. Cornell (2009) interprets Mrs. Curren's transformation as a feminist re-reading of humanism, where care and vulnerability replace domination as ethical foundations. Similarly, Kossew (2012) asserts that Coetzee's narrative irony humanizes history by turning silence, pain, and guilt into forms of testimony that resist both political propaganda and moral indifference. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that Coetzee's *Age of Iron* transforms irony into an ethical and political practice, using narrative ambivalence to bridge the gap between fiction and moral truth. Generalizing the novel's theme Oh (2022) opines that in Coetzee's novel, societal illness is produced and forged by a racially segregated politics, an

unequal economic system, and strident messages in the context of apartheid South Africa, which intersect with the protagonist Mrs. Curren's personal disease.

While existing scholarship on *Age of Iron* has largely focused on its political allegory and representations of suffering, relatively little attention has been paid to how irony functions as an ethical and humanistic force that redefines resistance. This study fills that gap by integrating Hutcheon's theory of irony, Marais's humanism, and Levinas's ethics of responsibility to reinterpret Coetzee's narrative as a moral intervention against apartheid's dehumanizing ideology. This study contributes to postcolonial and ethical literary criticism by revealing how Coetzee's use of irony transcends mere stylistic function to become a vehicle for moral resistance and human empathy. It emphasizes the transformative role of literature in bridging the gap between oppressor and oppressed, fiction and history, and self and Other, encouraging readers to reconsider the ethical responsibilities inherent in witnessing social injustice and tries to answer the research question: How does Coetzee use irony in *Age of Iron* to expose racial injustice and moral complicity while fostering ethical awakening and human solidarity within the context of apartheid South Africa?

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study uses textual and thematic analysis to explore how Coetzee theorizes irony in *Age of Iron*. Through a qualitative approach, it examines key moments where Mrs. Curren confronts racial violence, moral complicity, and personal transformation. The method combines close reading with contextual interpretation, situating the novel within late-apartheid South Africa and broader postcolonial discourse. Hutcheon's (1994) theory of irony serves as the main interpretive framework, supported by Marais's (1996) humanism, which redefines humanity through shared vulnerability, and Levinas's (1969) ethics of responsibility, which locates true ethics in the face-to-face obligation to the Other. Juxtaposing textual evidence and criticism, the paper shows how irony functions as a transformative force bridging fiction and history, and reconciling oppressor and oppressed.

Linda Hutcheon's theory of irony, which is the principal analytical tool of this paper, emphasizes that irony is not just a linguistic or stylistic device but a social and interpretive act that depends on context and shared understanding. According to Hutcheon (1994), irony arises within a "discursive community," meaning it gains meaning only when both the author and the audience recognize the gap between what is said and what is meant. She argues that irony involves two levels, the "said" and the "unsaid", and the tension between them produces critical meaning. For Hutcheon, irony is interactive. It requires interpretive labor from readers

who uncover hidden meanings through awareness of cultural and political contexts. In this sense, irony becomes a political and ethical tool, capable of questioning dominant ideologies and revealing suppressed truths. Applied to Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, Hutcheon's theory helps explain how the novel's subtle contradictions and silences expose the brutality of apartheid while inviting readers to interpret its moral and humanistic implications.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the apartheid era, the future of black South Africans was dictated by white authority. In the novel, the education system functions as a tool of ideological control, enforcing Eurocentric values while excluding African traditions. Bheki, a black teenager in the novel, expresses his frustration and says, "They are after everybody, I have done nothing but anybody they see they think should be in school, they try to get them. We do nothing; we just say we are not going to school. Now they are waging this terror against us" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 61). His statement becomes a protest against a repressive system that devalues black identity and imposes white norms. Coetzee's narrative thereby exposes the futility of such oppression, revealing how domination dehumanizes both the rulers and the ruled.

The metaphorical "wall" that separates Mrs. Curren from understanding black South Africans represents the moral and psychological barrier created by apartheid ideology. As a white woman, she embodies the conflicted consciousness of liberal whites sympathetic yet complicit, aware yet paralyzed. Her encounters with Vercueil and Florence challenge her to confront this confusion and re-evaluate her moral position. During a car journey with Vercueil, she reflects on his state of deprivation:

> The worst of the smell comes from his shoes and feet. He needs socks. He needs new shoes. He needs a bath every day; he needs clean underwear; he needs a bed; he needs a roof over his head; he needs three meals a day; he needs money in the bank. Too much to give: too much for someone who longs, if the truth be told, to creep into her own mother's lap and be comforted (Coetzee, 1990, p. 17).

This passage reveals Mrs. Curren's growing compassion and her longing for human connection amid social fragmentation. The phrase "mother's lap" carries symbolic weight, signifying both maternal comfort and the idealized motherland she yearns to reclaim, one grounded in equality and shared humanity. Through her awareness of Vercueil's needs, she symbolically identifies the fundamental needs of the nation itself: security, care, and moral restoration.

Ultimately, Coetzee's politics of irony lies in this transformation. Mrs. Curren, initially a representative of the privileged white South Africans, evolves from confusion and detachment to moral clarity and empathy. Her relationship with Vercueil becomes an allegory for reconciliation and ethical awakening. By humanizing the oppressors through moral self-examination, Coetzee reimagines the possibility of a just and compassionate society emerging from the ruins of apartheid.

Mrs. Curren's limited understanding of the black community arises from her education within a predominantly European tradition and her confinement to white-only neighborhoods in apartheid South Africa. Her worldview, shaped by racial segregation, blinds her to the complex social realities among black South Africans. Initially, she assumes that black individuals would naturally support one another rather than engage in violence against each other an assumption that exposes her ignorance of the divisions within the black community and her naive belief in a uniform black solidarity. In the course of the novel, however, she becomes both student and observer in a harsh new classroom where the lessons are oppression, violence, and poverty. The "text" she learns to read is not a written one but the suffering inscribed on black bodies. After witnessing the brutality of apartheid, she remarks, "I thought: This is the worst thing I have witnessed in my life. And I thought: Now my eyes are open and I can never close them again" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 102). Her "open eyes" symbolize an awakening to human value and the profound dehumanization produced by apartheid.

Historical research supports this depiction of systemic manipulation. Brewer and Cawthra (as cited in Hoegberg, 1999) note that "South African police made a policy of using or encouraging black 'vigilantes,' generally those blacks who stood to gain most from the status quo or to lose most from radical upheaval" (p. 36). Mrs. Curren gradually understands this state strategy: the regime exploited divisions within the black community, turning the oppressed against themselves for short-term gain. This realization deepens her transformation and moral clarity regarding both the rulers and the ruled.

Her growing empathy reflects Coetzee's ironic method of exposing the moral contradictions of apartheid. Mrs. Curren's transformation from detachment to compassion symbolizes Coetzee's call for white South Africans to adopt a more humane and inclusive outlook. Through her, Coetzee gives voice to the voiceless, allowing the silenced to speak through her moral awakening. She encourages Vercueil, "You have to become someone other than yourself" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 109), suggesting the need for self-reinvention and renewal on both personal and national levels.

Coetzee's *Age of Iron* emphasizes the preservation of humanity amid the cycles of violence that defined apartheid South Africa. The title itself, "Age of Iron," connotes hardness, rigidity, and moral decay symbolizing the inflexible cruelty of the regime. Yet, within this imagery of iron, Mrs. Curren's desire "to dissolve the iron" metaphorically expresses her wish to reshape this destructive force into something constructive and life-affirming.

Through the figure of Mrs. Curren, Coetzee constructs a surrogate author who articulates the unrecorded voices of the marginalized. Her letter to her daughter functions as both a confessional and a historical document an alternative narrative that resists official state history. As Marais (1996) observes, "*Age of Iron* therefore does not retreat from history; it merely refuses to supplement it. Instead, the novel seeks to revise history through acting upon the South African reader in history" (p. 20). Mrs. Curren is aware of the fragility of this counter-history, expressing fear that her testimony might never reach its audience: "If Vercueil does not send these writings on, you will never read them. You will never even know they existed. A certain body of truth will never take on flesh: my truth: how I lived in these times, in this place" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 119). For her, writing becomes an act of survival and moral witness. She asserts the living power of her words, declaring, "This is my life, these words. These words as you read them, if you read them, enter you and draw breath again" (p. 120). This quote highlights how the author transforms writing into both a means of endurance and a testament to truth, imbuing her words with a vital, almost resurrective power.

Coetzee's irony lies in this duality: fiction becomes history, and writing becomes resistance. Mrs. Curren's letter is not merely personal but serves as an ethical act that seeks reconciliation between blacks and whites in a fractured nation. As Marais (1996) further explains:

> *Age of Iron* portrays its putative writer's rehabilitation of self as a metamorphosis into the text. It is consequently an ontogenetic novel which does not so much speak of its own coming into being as of its protagonist's becoming an oppositional text, one which counters that of the state (p. 16).

Marais's view reflects his post-structural humanism, where identity emerges through ethical engagement rather than fixed essence. The protagonist's transformation into text embodies this dynamic selfhood grounded in responsibility to the Other. Thus, writing becomes both an act of self-formation and moral resistance against oppressive structures. Thus, Coetzee's text itself becomes a political act, a reimagining of history from the perspective of moral responsibility and empathy.

The novel also engages with the tension between fiction and history, exploring the ironic overlap between imagination and truth. Traditionally, fiction is understood as imaginative, while history is factual and documentary. However, under apartheid, official histories were themselves distorted, excluding the suffering of the oppressed. In this sense, *Age of Iron* exposes the falseness of such "official" histories. Geertsema (2007) highlights this complexity by arguing that "…the terms 'reality' and 'history' refer to the same thing … reality may be said to inhabit history, in a way similar to the habitation of both fiction and history in language" (p. 99). History, therefore, becomes a constructed narrative its truth determined not only by facts but also by the moral imagination of those who tell it. Through irony, Coetzee's fiction restores the humanity erased from history and redefines what it means to bear witness in times of moral collapse.

Coetzee identifies a profound gap between South African history and lived reality. He perceives a crisis in representing and textualizing the "real" history, one that remains unwritten, existing outside dominant narratives. This excluded history is that of the subaltern, the marginalized, the voiceless, and the nameless. Through *Age of Iron*, Coetzee (1990) seeks to fill this void by bringing to light the silenced experiences of apartheid's victims. His writing functions as an act of historical recovery, urging readers to confront the brutal realities of their society, to reflect on the suffering of the oppressed, and to recognize the necessity of preserving human dignity and rights. From this perspective, *Age of Iron* can be read as a work of historical fiction that captures the moral and psychological dimensions of the apartheid era in South Africa.

Within this framework, Mrs. Curren becomes the narrator of a history that is both unimaginable and indispensable. Her narrative seeks justice within an unjust system, revealing how freedom itself appears unattainable under dictatorship. As she tells Vercueil, "I have no idea what freedom is, Mr. Vercueil. I am sure Bheki and his friend had no idea either, perhaps freedom is always and only what is unimaginable" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 150). This reflection captures the paradox of freedom under apartheid: it is both a moral necessity and an impossible dream. Geertsema (2007) expands on this idea, asserting that "imagining the unimaginable would be to colonize it with meaning and reason; to be able to imagine the unimaginable would be to destroy that unreachable sphere of freedom and make it part of the realm of necessity" (p. 91). Coetzee's irony here lies in showing how the very desire for freedom is constrained by the language and structures of oppression that define apartheid itself.

In *Age of Iron*, irony becomes Coetzee's principal literary strategy to critique the dehumanizing and exploitative mechanisms of the apartheid regime from the perspective of its victims. Irony destabilizes oppressive authority by exposing its moral contradictions. The author targets the abuse of state power, particularly the violence inflicted on black South Africans, including schoolchildren, by the apartheid government. The racial position of both Coetzee and his protagonist, Mrs. Curren, adds complexity to this critique. Despite being white South Africans, both articulate the moral outrage and human suffering of the black population, positioning themselves as ethical witnesses rather than complicit beneficiaries. Mrs. Curren demonstrates moral courage in condemning the political system she inhabits, describing its effects through an ironic etymological reflection as:

> To stupefy: to deprive of feeling; to be numb, deaden; to stun with amazement. Stupor: insensibility, apathy, torpor of mind. Stupid: dulled in the faculties, indifferent, destitute of thought or feeling. From *stupere*, to be stunned, astonished. A gradient from stupid to stunned to astonished, to be turned to stone. The message: that message never changes. A message that turns people to stone (p. 26).

Here, Mrs. Curren's linguistic meditation exposes how apartheid produces emotional paralysis, a state of moral and intellectual numbness. The regime's repressive control dehumanizes its subjects, rendering them indifferent, silenced, and inert. Her metaphor of people being "turned to stone" captures both the psychological deadening and the political helplessness imposed by systemic oppression.

The same dehumanizing imagery continues when Mrs. Curren likens the oppressed to animals: "Rabbits,' I said, 'they used to my domestic's son. Creatures that can't talk, that can't even cry" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 18). Such comparisons reveal her confrontation with the moral decay of her society. Set during the final, most turbulent years of apartheid, marked by anger, violence, and fear Coetzee's narrative exposes the breakdown of moral order and social trust. The pervasive sense of uncertainty and disillusionment is captured when Mrs. Curren observes that the entire social system deserves "the benefit of the doubt" (p. 73), suggesting that even basic truth has become unreliable.

Through *Age of Iron*, Coetzee historicizes the lived experience of the powerless while apartheid still persisted. His audacity lies in using fiction as a moral intervention, one that aligns itself with the oppressed and challenges the state's authority. Mrs. Curren herself reflects on the cyclical nature of human civilization and its moral regression: "The age of iron, after which comes the age of bronze. How long, how long before the softer ages return in their cycle, the

age of clay, the age of earth?" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 46). This reflection becomes a lament for lost humanity and a hope for renewal, a yearning for a gentler, more compassionate world beyond the hardness of iron.

Historically, the Iron Age symbolized a time of hardship when people had limited resources to ease the difficulties of life. In contrast, life in apartheid South Africa became deliberately complicated through state control and the systematic restriction of individual freedom. The regime's oppression created suffering for innocent and compliant citizens. Mrs. Curren recalls Florence's haunting testimony and says:

> But do you remember what you told me last year, Florence, when these unspeakable things were happening in the townships? You said to me, 'I saw a woman on fire burning, and when she screamed for help, the children laughed and threw more petrol on her' (p. 45).

Such inhuman acts, Mrs. Curren observes, have become normalized under apartheid. Compassion and solidarity in the face of suffering have vanished, replaced by fear, hostility, and indifference. The state's violence and dehumanization affect both blacks and whites, as many white South Africans turn against the black population. These victims are not "dead souls" but living people deprived of dignity and hope by restrictive residency and employment laws. The irony that Coetzee constructs is that he employs a white narrator, Mrs. Curren, to awaken empathy among whites who once viewed black citizens as their adversaries. Thus, the politics of irony in Coetzee's fiction functions as a moral strategy, challenging apartheid by humanizing both the oppressors and the oppressed, urging recognition of shared humanity.

Mrs. Curren's daughter's emigration to the United States leaves her mother isolated in South Africa and inadvertently draws Mrs. Curren into closer contact with the black community. Her daughter's departure can be interpreted as an act of escapism or even selfishness. Although born into the privileged white population, the daughter refuses to engage in South Africa's political and social crises. Ironically, if she represents the broader white population, their sense of national responsibility is shallow and insincere. Mrs. Curren's terminal cancer, her loneliness, and her dependence on figures such as Vercueil and Florence place her in an ambivalent position regarding love and attachment. She confesses, "I love you but I do not love him. There is no ache in me toward him, not the slightest" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 132). Here, her emotional conflict reflects a deeper fragmentation between familial love and humanistic compassion. When she refers to her daughter as "flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood, bleeding every month into foreign soil" (p. 59), her words blend bodily imagery with

maternal longing, symbolizing separation both physical and emotional. Here, Linda's theory of political irony supports to frame Curren's divided affection to her daughter, the gap between personal emotion and the political realities shaping her relationship. In this sense, her maternal longing and selective attachment operates as ironic commentary on a world where emotional duty and ethical responsibility no longer align.

This fragmentation can be understood as a division between secular and maternal forms of love. As Mrs. Curren's physical strength declines, she begins to recognize the essential value of human closeness and interdependence beyond racial and social boundaries. Her daughter's distant affection cannot meet her immediate needs, compelling her to rely on the compassion of black individuals such as Florence and Vercueil. The more her illness weakens her, the more she realizes that authentic love and solidarity transcend caste, class, or ethnicity. Mrs. Curren's maternal and humanistic reflections, therefore, mirror South Africa's broader political crisis. Her narrative embodies a moral appeal for empathy and reconciliation. As Yeoh (2003) observes:

> Though humanistic discourse is prominent in her narrative, it is her maternal discourse that is pre-eminent. *Age of Iron* is replete with familial imagery, especially of mother and child, and Mrs. Curren's maternal rhetoric occurs not only in relation to her daughter but, in seeming omnipresence, permeates her engagement of emergency politics (pp. 109–110).

Just as Mrs. Curren's love for her daughter remains unfulfilled due to distance and separation, the black population's hope for love and justice from the apartheid government is equally unattainable. Under a regime of systemic inequality, both familial and political love are distorted and withheld. The mother's idealization of her distant daughter parallels the state's misplaced devotion to colonial and Western ideals that suppress the rights of its own people. Both forms of attachment are impractical and detached from reality.

Although Mrs. Curren's daughter leaves because of political instability, the root cause of alienation both personal and collective, is the apartheid system itself. The emotional distance between mother and daughter mirrors the government's refusal to build genuine connections with marginalized citizens. The politics of irony in *Age of Iron* thus seeks to make both oppressors and victims aware of the necessity of solidarity across racial and social divisions. Coetzee succeeds in formulating a humanistic ideology that asserts mutual compassion as the foundation of national healing.

The role of irony, as theorized by literary scholars, illuminates this dynamic. According to Pandey (2010):

> Irony arises from the said and the unsaid. The unsaid is related to the repressed, marginalized, and colonized…The unsaid does get said in hidden ways as the negative residues of a repressed history. Discursive irony can thus be linked to the question of writing alternative histories and unearthing repressed trauma (p. 266).

In *Age of Iron*, the "said" refers to Mrs. Curren's explicit narration of apartheid's brutality, while the "unsaid" resides in the reader's recognition of the deeper moral and psychological implications of her words. As Hutcheon (1994) explains, "The said and unsaid take on meaning only in relation to one another. Admittedly, this (like most) is not a relation of equals: the power of the unsaid to challenge the said is the defining semantic condition of irony" (p. 57). This observation underscores how irony derives its critical force from what remains unspoken, allowing hidden meanings to subvert dominant narratives and expose deeper truths.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Through this interplay of irony and empathy, Coetzee and his narrator align themselves with the marginalized, allowing irony to subvert dominant ideology and expose the silenced trauma of apartheid. The unsaid dimensions of *Age of Iron*, the emotional truths beneath the surface, reveal the moral decay and psychological violence of racial oppression. In this sense, Coetzee's political irony not only denounces apartheid's injustices but also calls for moral introspection among white South Africans. Ultimately, *Age of Iron* transforms the private story of an ailing woman into a moral allegory of guilt, compassion, and redemption. Through the politics of irony, Coetzee dismantles white supremacy's moral arrogance and restores dignity to the marginalized. The novel's dual voice, what is said and what remains unspoken, invites readers into ethical self-awareness and historical responsibility. Mrs. Curren's suffering and awakening symbolize the nation's potential for healing through empathy and recognition of shared humanity. In broader terms, Coetzee demonstrates that literature can function as an ethical intervention, transforming indifference into compassion and injustice into understanding, a timeless reminder that storytelling can become an act of moral restoration and social critique.

ETHICAL DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the information, data and analysis and other sources incorporated in the

article are true and authentic to my knowledge. I have been conscious about the ethical values as a researcher and have followed the norms that a researcher has to do in a research work.

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