

TROPES OF DISABILITIES, MOTIFS OF SURVIVAL IN JOHN MAXWELL COETZEE'S *AGE OF IRON AND DISGRACE*

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Abstract

Readers and critics of South African Literature, until 1990, are very familiar with the literature of that country which gave due attention to the malaises of chronic racial abuses and other vices that prevailed while the apartheid system subsisted. With the official closure of that regime in 1994, the engagement naturally diverts to the survival of a nation that was coming out of decades of social injuries and strife. This paper, in an intertextual study of *Age of Iron* (1990) and *Disgrace* (1999), picks out John Maxwell Coetzee as one of the writers of South Africa descent that has responded to the experiences of the nation in the aftermath of the apartheid experience. The paper interrogates Coetzee's uses of tropes and motifs in his concern about the survival of his nation in the nascent post-apartheid era as reflected in his mirroring of the crimes of apartheid and its ramified consequences. After isolating the diverse tropes deployed by the novelist to objectify the inhuman experience and the consequent personal and national traumas of that era, the paper concludes by aggregating the tenets of acceptance, forgiveness, and atonement as core indispensable values for a nation in search of healing.

Keywords: *Maxwell Coetzee, tropes, motif, atonement, healing*

Introduction

South Africa, including its literature and writers, has always attracted a central position in the evolution of modern African literature. The first pace setting landmark, which puts that nation in a visible position, was the production of pioneer literary writings in Africa by its writers such as Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje who did an historical fiction he titled *Mbudi: An Epic of South African Native Life a Hundred Years Ago* (1930) and Herbert Isaac Ernest Dhlomo's *The Girl Who Killed to Save: Nongqause* (1935). However, the historical reality of the apartheid era, which ended in the country in 1994, has since made South Africa one of the nations in the world whose political history has elicited interventions by authors within and outside that country. The polarities of writers, in that era, into strictures of indigenous white (settlers) and black writers, writers within or outside South Africa notwithstanding, the clamour against the crime of apartheid became the rallying point.

Few examples may suffice here. While we had "home grown" mimesis in works such

as Peter Abraham's *Mine Boy* (1946), Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night* (1962) and Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (1972), voices of writers from outside that country were also vociferous. In Nigeria alone, we had interventions, mostly in poetry, through the expressions of John Pepper Clark, Wole Soyinka, Ogaga Ifowodo and Sam Omatseye in *Mandela and Other Poems* (1988), *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems* (1989), *Madiba* (2003) *Mandela's Bones and Other Poems* (2009), respectively. The mediation that came through writers, in Nigeria, whose nation had encounters with colonial dispensation and its relatedness with the South African apartheid experience is brought to bear when Blessing Diala- Ogamba says:

In South Africa, colonialism took the form of settler colony, where land was forcibly confiscated and the owners reduced to the status of wage- earning labourers. The settlers, in order to perpetuate their authority over the Africans, devised several means of subjugating the indigenes. It is in response to this that writers like Alex la Guma, Peter Abrahams, Arthur Nortje, Dennis Brutus and others have attacked the oppressors in their various works. (115)

The demarcation between those two experiences and the texture that defines subsequent literary writings in South Africa, giving it its uniqueness, is isolated by Lewis Nkosi thus:

In other parts of Africa the conditions of independence have enabled the writer to turn back to the past in a more leisurely exploration of his precolonial heritage. In South Africa the pressure of the future is so enormous that looking backwards seems a luxury. The present exerts its own pressures which seem vast immanent, all- consuming. [Making] All the elements which have fertilised the African novel elsewhere, the proverb, myth, legend and all other linguistic procedures which gave their own peculiar stamp to social relationship in a traditional African setting appear as a kind of distraction in the urban environment of South Africa. (79)

Further on this, Sophie Ogwude (105) contextualises this assertion drawing on a predominant impetus that ramifies the tone of writing of the post-apartheid era conceding that: "South African writing from the 'pioneers' to the 'moderns', ...since before 1994 have had to walk on a tightrope of having to use art to divulge issues". In "divulging the issues", however, David Attwell and Derek Attridge, (2012:1-2) noted that [though] "South African writers, while not averse to an occasional celebrating moment [have] persist [ed] in examining the significant challenges that face the reborn nation at both the national and international levels". In other words, while the future of the nation remains the stake, post- apartheid narratives, such as what we have in Coetzee's texts under study, have refused to be divorced from the ugly past thereby using those horrors to seek reinvention of a new nation.

John Maxwell Coetzee's Space and the Critical Issue of Nationalism

Biodun Jeyifo's (281) inquiry into the works of Coetzee comes with a verdict that classifies the novelist "in the cohort of postcolonial writers...who consistently submit

the metanarratives of the emancipation of colonized societies and subaltern groups to a severe and sceptical inspection which is sometimes lucid and funny but also often grimly sardonic and even nihilistic". However, Coetzee's works locates within the expansive field of postcolonial literature because of the author's constant mirroring of complexities and deformities that have ruptured human relationships which, in Africa, was initialised under colonialism but exacerbated under the apartheid arrangement that subsisted in South Africa. The overall motivation in Coetzee's writings has been put forward by Christabel Aba Sam who contends that Coetzee makes "effort at creating a level ground for both whites and blacks primarily in the exercise of their fundamental human rights [within the context that] requires a reorganisation of the spaces of shame and pride" (69). Without prejudice to his other titles, dominant responses on the import of our primary texts in this study have isolated themes, characterisation and the aesthetic. For example, Graham Huggan distils the themes of *Age of Iron* when he says:

There is raw energy in *Age of Iron*: a sense of emotional as well as intellectual anguish that is arguably missing from Coetzee's earlier work. It would be a mistake, nonetheless, to see *Age of Iron* as representing a departure from Coetzee's five previously published novels. The novel is better seen as a continuation – indeed, in a sense, as a culmination- of Coetzee's oeuvre. The familiar themes are all there: the unmasking of liberal humanist ideology; the interrogation of colonial/ imperial myths; the translation of a twisted cultural politics into the psychopathology of family relationships; the foundering of European metaphysics on African soil. (194)

In another vein, the issue of aesthetics is the concern of Laura Wright (77) whose appraisal of *Disgrace* reads:

Through their free indirect discourse and dialogic nature, many of J.M. Coetzee's novels ask explicit and literal questions of the reader as, for example, the question put to us of David Lurie in *Disgrace*... after his daughter is raped and David tries to imagine her experience, the narrator asks, 'does he have it in him to be a woman?' (160). In that they ask such questions, Coetzee's novels require engagement with the debate that such questioning engenders, and while such dialogism might prepare the way for some sort of activist change, most of Coetzee's characters remain only ever on the edge of change, about ready to change, but unable to enact change.

But Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson problematise the understanding of Coetzee's works while making the following salient points:

For an understanding of Coetzee's work, it is also worth remembering that the tendency of human beings to think in deadening, and even deadly, binary opposites- black/white; friend/enemy; aesthetics/politics- is seldom more irresistible than in situations of extreme racial polarisation and political struggle. This tendency has been all too evident in the critical debate surrounding Coetzee's work in South

Africa. Unlike many critics and reviewers elsewhere in the world, a number of South African critics, particularly those belonging to the political Left, have sought to attack Coetzee's novels in terms of an opposition that has sometimes approached the crudeness and reductiveness of racial thinking. Given the priority that these critics attached to political struggle, they were to charge him with an aestheticism which they considered politically irresponsible, or simply irrelevant; they demanded of him an explicit form of commitment which his novels evidently eschewed. Although later critics...were to counter- argue that Coetzee's narrative strategies involved a radical questioning of the very discourses of power that upheld brutal and unjust social systems... (3-4)

This paper, while attenuating those isolated ingredients in Coetzee's works, engages with his peculiar use of tropes or motifs. In *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (2005), M. H Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham define motif as "a conspicuous element, as a type of event, device, reference, or formula, which occurs frequently in works of literature...[it] is also applied to the frequent repetition within a single work, of a significant verbal or musical phrase, or set description, or complex images... applied to a general concept or doctrine , whether implicit or asserted, which an imaginative work is designed to involve and make persuasive to the reader" (229). This, no doubt, is a critical aesthetic that the novelist has deployed in his engagement with the subject of nationhood and survival.

Nationhood, Social Condition and Narrative Impulses in *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace*

No doubt, one visible aesthetic element, which attracts the reader to the texts under study, is the author's use of the epistolary style. The style, which was pioneered by Samuel Richardson in *Pamela* (1740), has since been deployed by many other African writers such as Mariama Ba in *So Long A Letter* (1980) and Gloria Ernest-Samuel in *Dear Kelechi* (2005). However, this style takes two dimensions of predominance and sparse usage, respectively, in the works of Coetzee under study. Gloria Chimeziem Ernest-Samuel, making a case for the merits of the epistolary method against its demerits notes that although many critics see the style as too subjective in that it:

tells a one-sided story; is artificial as it stretches the ability of the writer to produce a realistic narration; involves repetition in narration, as well as denying the author an association with his readers and it does not allow for the author to comment on the story or characters... the epistolary method give room for easy reading, keeps readers spellbound on account of the encroachment into the intimate matters that are discussed through that narrative style. She lists the typologies of narrative styles as: "the whole story in a single letter, the story by means of letters from many correspondence, enclosure of the narrative in a journal or diary, the unfolding of the narrative by a letter writer in position of the "facts" about the hero's adventures, the exchange of letters between two characters whose stories are of equal importance and incidental use of letters in stories carried forward mainly by direct narration. (100)

Age of Iron is a letter of Mrs Curren to her daughter who resides in the United States of America with her husband and two children. The protagonist is Mrs Curren, a retired University don whose medical diagnosis, from her physician Dr Syfret, reveals a cancer condition. Mrs Curren lays aside the doom of the news of her terminal illness setting out her objective of writing to her daughter thus: “The first task laid on me, from today: to resist the craving to share my death. Loving you, loving life, to forgive the living and take my leave without bitterness. To embrace death as my own, mine alone” (AOI: 5). The resignation which enveloped Mrs Curren coincides with the disabilities in Mr Vercueil, a vagrant Whiteman. The introduction, at first notice, reads: “Inside lay the man, his legs curled up, and a dog beside him that cocked its ears and wagged its tail. A collie young, little more than a pup, black with white points. A horsy weather beaten face with the puffiness around the eyes of an alcoholic. Strange green eyes. Unhealthy” (AOI: 5-6). It is interesting to note the symbolic representations in the colour of Mr Vercueil’s dog and the hospitable aura of Mrs Curren’s house. While the latter encapsulates the metaphorical hospitality of blacks who accepted the visitors, the former, with its mostly black colour and white spots symbolises the coming of white settlers into South Africa. In their editorial in “Dogs in Southern African Literatures,” Dan Wylie and Joan-Mari Barendse explain that the material and immaterial essences of dogs in African literature. which contextualise Coetzee’s symbolism:

If you look at almost any late eighteenth- or nineteenth-century painting of early urban settlements like Cape Town or Port Elizabeth, or depictions of African rural life or of trekkers hauling their wagons into the southern African interior, there in a corner, or sitting at someone’s feet, or just sloping discreetly along ... is a dog. This is the common status of the dog in our literary texts, too: ever-present but seldom centralised, remarked upon, or explored—let alone accorded agency or a voice. Yet the dog’s very ubiquity raises a host of questions.
(1)

From the foregoing, it is safe to deduce that with the white and black colour of Vercueil’s dog, Coetzee is laying the foundation for an inevitable hybrid texture of the nation after its rise from anarchy.

Mrs Curren’s incurable act of goodness is entrenched in the novel through her empathy for the oppressed and her receptiveness and hospitable nature which makes her house open to all races and class. Not only this, she disregards her dwindling health condition and unwittingly throws herself into perilous situations. For instance, she abandons her home and travels in circus to hospitals in search of John, Bheki’s friend that was knocked down by the policemen and offered to follow Florence to Guguletu in search of Bheki. Mrs Curren has enough reasons to dislike her solace seekers, especially Vercueil, a drunk and a prodigal who is associated with filth, in fact:

The worst of the smell comes from his shoes and feet. He needs socks. He needs new shoes. He needs a bath. He needs a bath every day; he needs 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... to creep into her own mother's lap and be comforted. (17)

Notwithstanding, Mrs Curren gives Vercueil succour and defends him. This is seen in the assault by Florence and her children who want Vercueil sent packing from the house. Florence has said Vercueil "is rubbish" but Mrs Curren disagrees asserting that "He is not a rubbish person' ... there are no rubbish people. We are all people together' (AOI: 44). With finality, she rescues Vercueil saying that 'He is my messenger' he is going to carry messages for me... Tell the boys to leave him alone...He is doing no harm (AOI: 44). Her good nature is also extended to Bheki's friend, despite being unlovable:

I did not like him. I look into my heart and nowhere did I find any trace of feeling for him. As there are people to whom one spontaneously warms, so there are people to whom one is, from the first, cold. This boy... has no charm. There is something stupid about him, something deliberately stupid, obstructive, intractable. He is one of those boys whose voices deepen too early, who by the age of twelve have left childhood behind and turned brutal... (71)

At the end of the novel, Mrs Curren's infirmed condition does not get better. Similarly, her good nature seems to have been submerged by the negative traits of the unlovable as Mr Vercueil remains her only confidant and roommate and her dislike for his filth has fizzled away.

In *Disgrace*, there is Professor Lurie, a 52-year-old university don who teaches at the Technical University, Cape Town and "existed in an anxious flurry of promiscuity. He has affairs with the wives of colleagues, he picked up tourists in bars on the waterfront or at the Club Italia; he slept with whores" (7). His weekly escapade with Soraya and other whores at Discreet Escorts prepares the ground for the scandal that involves him and one of his students, Melanie Issacs. Melanie's truancy and failure to write a mid-semester test that was scored 70 percent by Lurie becomes a scandal which led to mass withdrawal of students, including Melanie, from Lurie's class.

The novelist is quite assuming in his use of Byron's lessons which Lurie dispenses to foreshadow his tragic flop taking into account that Byron's life was punctured by his notoriety and serial scandals. The consequence of Lurie's moral flop exposes him to odium among his students. For instance, Ryan, Melanie's boyfriend, not only tags him Lucifer in the class but also orchestrate series of harassments. The scandal also becomes the subject of interest to the media and becomes concern of gender groups such as the Women Against Rape (WAR). As consequence, Lurie loses his reputation among parents as read in the terse indictment from Mr Isaacs, Melanie's father, who earlier thought Lurie could help remedy his daughter's retrogression at work:

We put our children in the hands of you people because we think we can trust you. If we can't trust the university, who can we trust? We never knew we were sending our daughter to a nest of vipers. No, Professor Lurie, you may be high and mighty and have all kinds of degrees, but if I was you I'd be very ashamed of myself. (38)

Lurie receives a memo of interdiction from the office of the Vice Rector charging him under article 3 specifically sub section 1 under the code which “addresses victimisation or harassment of students by teachers” (39). Lurie’s guilty plea on the two charges of sexual harassment and falsification of records does not suffice for the members of the committee who, in farcical attempts to save Lurie, want to extract an apology which Lurie is not ready to give. Mr Mathabane, a member of that committee, also fails to convince Lurie in a private discussion to make him accept what he calls a “plea mitigation”...which the Rector will be prepared to accept in the “spirit of repentance” (58).

I acknowledge without reservations serious abuses of the human rights of the complainant, as well as abuse of the authority delegated to me by the University. I sincerely apologize to both parties and accept whatever appropriate penalty may be imposed. (57)

After his forced resignation from work, Lurie decides to visit his daughter, Lucy, who resides in Eastern Cape Town where she makes money by keeping dogs, “from kennels and from selling flowers and garden produce” (61). The cosmopolitan texture of Eastern Cape Town is made visible in the array of nationalities and the collaboration between Lucy and her black business partner, Petrus. But, Lurie has hardly settled in with his daughter when the serenity of Lucy’s life is truncated by a rape incidence. The gory incident is summarised in this account to the police:

There were three men... two men and a boy. They tricked their way into the house, took... money, clothes, a television set, a CD player, a rifle with ammunition. When her father resisted, they assaulted him, poured spirits over him, tried to set him on fire. Then they shot the dogs and drove off in his car. (108)

Like the condition of terminal disease with the serial hallucinations about death, the thought of hopelessness and the suicide in Mrs Curren, the trauma of rape triggers psychological tension in Lucy and her protective father. The tension escalates as Lucy is not interested in pressing charges even after sighting Pollux, one of the perpetrators of the crime who is revealed as a relative of Petrus’ wife and would be living with Petrus who is just taking over his portion on the farm. But the idea of inviting the police seems best to Lurie:

...I plead with you! You want to make up for the wrongs of the past, but this is not the way to do it. If you fail to stand up for yourself at this moment, you will never be able to hold you head up again. You may as well pack your bags and leave. As for the police, if you are too delicate to call them in now, then we should never have involved them in the first place. We should just have kept quiet and waited for the next attack. (133)

This entreaty does not yield the expected result and further exchange between Lurie and Lucy reveals different perspectives. Lurie is first to write trying to convince his daughter to leave the farm to protect her ‘honour’ but Lucy, born to him by his first wife Evelina, replies:

Dear David. You have not been listening to me. I am not the person you know. I am a dead person and I do not know yet what will bring me back to life. All I know is that I cannot go away.

You do not see this, and I do not know what more I can do to make you see. It is as if you have chosen deliberately to sit in a corner where the rays of the sun do not shine. ...

Yes, the road I am following may be the wrong one. But if I leave the farm now I will leave defeated, and will taste the defeat for the rest of my life.

I cannot be a child forever. You cannot be father forever. I know you mean well, but you are not the guide I need, not at this time. (161)

A visit to his former place of work after the rape incident reveals that Lurie has been locked out of access to key facilities and his former colleagues still stigmatise him for his moral sleaze. Rosalind, the second woman who divorced Lurie, tries to bring into Lurie's consciousness the condition of his status:

...You have lost your job, your name is mud, your friends avoid you, you hide out in Torrance Road like a tortoise afraid to stick its neck out of its shell. People who aren't good enough to tie your shoelaces make jokes about you. Your shirt isn't ironed. God knows who gave you that haircut, you've just got – ... You are going to end up as one of those sad old men who poke around in rubbish bins. (189)

The future and survival of Lucy, which represent the survival of white settlers in the new environment, becomes a concern to her father who gives an escapist counsel of relocating her abroad or giving the farm on loan to Petrus. However, father and daughter are not on the same thought on this, Lucy offers to keep the pregnancy that resulted from the rape, she is ready to marry Petrus and to release the farm to him. Prof Lurie's condition gets worse, he continues in his promiscuous life style, with Bev Shaw but his differences with Lucy forces him out of the house, he alters his identity to secure a small apartment in Grahamstown and ends up as a voluntary attendant at Bev's Veterinary Clinic.

Disability Tropes in *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace*

J. R. Miller (1999) has defined a trope as “the use of figurative language via word, phrase or even an image for artistic effect” (9). However, the connection between trope and disability is drawn in by Sunday Ayodabo in “Disability as a Trope in Selected Nigerian Children Novels”. Citing Ato Quayson as one of its premises, Ayodabo explains the metaphorical essences of disability by reifying its manifestations in African literature to encompass “the first one is the Lacanian conceptual apparatus for theorising what happens in an encounter with the disabled. The second is the discursive ways in which the disabled people are depicted and characterised...and the third is the contextualisation of disability” (324). *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace* present milieus that are in disabled state such that crime, anarchy, lawlessness and other dastardly acts prevail not only in Guguletu, the suburb occupied by blacks, but in Cape Town where policemen are on the prowl of innocent

citizens and homes are serially attacked by rampaging blacks and security agents. Not only this, the space is soaked with blood as lives of blacks do not matter to security agents, anarchy becomes the order fuelling distrust between citizens and institutions expected to cater for citizens' welfare. After the police induced accident, for example, Bheki, informs Mrs Curren, who is trying to contact the hospital to find out about his friend that was knocked down, that "They [the hospital] work with the police... They are all the same, the ambulances, the doctors, the police". On why the police are after children not in school, Bheki reveals that. "They are not after me. They are after everybody... 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. They are terrorists" (61). The children carry arms or use improvised weapons to retaliate or unleash terror, their steel stance concretise the index title, *Age of Iron*. But the root of the tension, which goes unreported in the media, is traced by Mrs Curren in her introspection that reads:

A crime was committed long ago. How long ago? I do not know. But longer ago than 1916, certainly. So long ago that I was born into it. It is part of my inheritance. It is part of me, I am part of it.

Like every crime it had a price. The price I used to think, would have to be paid in shame in a life of shame and shameful death, unlamented in an obscure corner (149).

In the same perspective, the disabled condition of Eastern Cape Town in *Disgrace* is seen in the overwhelmed and ineffective security force, festering crime and inability to apprehend perpetrators of crime. Unlike *Age of Iron*, the victims here are whites who have chosen to stay back in the evolving milieu. The novelist leaves no one in doubt that the milieus are infirmed and in dire need of healing.

The hospital space in the novels also complements this trope, especially as it relates to the condition of citizens in *Age of Iron* where hospitals have not only become ubiquitous, the number of citizens, across race and age groups, on admission and needing medical attention, is alarming. Mrs Curren's cancer ailment is perhaps the most grotesque, then we have Mr Vercueil, whose failure as a sailor has turned him into a vagrant enmeshed in.

But, in *Disgrace*, we have a situation of moral disability in Lurie and a queer disability of Lesbianism in Lucy and her friend, Helen. The reference to Lucy actually exposes the fact that the children in the texts by their actions, such as their disregard for parents and adults, assert their freedom by taking laws into their hands. Their "comradeship", which is a resort to barbarism and disorder, epitomises disability of the same degree seen in the adults.

The trope of disability also extends to inanimate objects in the texts. Coetzee's house tropes, for instance, present Mrs Curren's house as desolated, invaded, porous and vulnerable such that at the end of *Age of Iron*, the house has lost all its protective features. The house, which her daughter had advised should be converted into a boarding facility, is unkempt, overgrown with weeds and is associated with loneliness, emptiness and dull echo. Mrs Curren says of the house:

This house is tired of waiting for the day, tired of holding itself together. The floorboards have lost their spring. The insulation of the wiring is dry, friable, the pipes clogged with grit. The gutters sag where screws have rusted away or pulled loose from the rotten wood. The roof tiles are heavy with moss. A house built solidly but without love, cold inert now, ready to die. Whose walls the sun, even the African sun, has never succeeded in warming, as though the very bricks, made by the hands of convicts, radiate an intractable sullenness. (13)

In the same vein, the condition of Mrs Curren's house can be linked to other properties or houses that have been abandoned in the transition period.

I think of those abandoned farm houses ...on the west coast, whose owners decamped to the cities years ago leaving fronts boarded up, gated locked... A land in the process of being repossessed, its heirs quietly announcing themselves. A land taken by force, used despoiled, spoiled, abandoned in its barren late years. Loved too, perhaps, by its ravishers, but loved only in the bloom time of its youth and, therefore, in the verdict of history, not loved enough. (22-23)

Furthermore, in *Disgrace*, the affinity with house trope continues with Professor Lurie's house in Cape Town. Like Lucy's house, Lurie's house comes under invasion then becomes overgrown with weeds and rendered inhabitable after Lurie's short visit to Lucy. More than these, the house is slated for auction as the story winds down. There is also an insinuation that the apartment Petrus is putting up, which is symbolic of the imminent failure of the new nation that excludes whites, would not stand the test of time. Cars in the novels also come under the same scrutiny, in *Age of Iron*, the condition of Mrs Curren's car gets from bad to worse, the car could not start without a push, its key got lost and its windscreen got shattered. Interestingly, the car keeps moving. But Lurie's car got stolen and was not recovered while Lucy's bus remains intact at the end of *Disgrace*. In total, the failing health of Mrs Curren, the condition of houses and cars are signals of the imminent end of a phase. At the end of the novels, the material spaces occupied by white characters are reduced but this is not to the advantage of Petrus who does not have the wherewithal to put up an enduring structure.

Identity Crisis and Generational Representations in *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace*

Largely, the characters in *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace* can be easily polarised into generational and racial lines. Like the adults, the children are divided along these lines in a way that reveals the conditions oppression and victimhood. The catalogue of the children in *Age of Iron* shows an array of children that have been stilled on account of injustice and the gory ordeal of the past. Mrs Curren's protests in different encounters in the novel only seem to aggravate the condition of injustice of bloodshed and labour extortion, for example. Ironically, she is also a victim on account of the disposition of her daughter who has vowed never to return to South Africa, her land of birth. The extra judicial killing of John, Bheki and other five children are traumatic indices of the crime against blacks which, on the surface, justify anarchy, lawlessness and weaponisation of the youths. Like their

parents, the black children have no identity, they have either taken names outside their culture or have no name at all. The significance of prospect symbolised in the names of Hope and Beauty, siblings of Bheki, is eclipsed by the rudeness, dishonesty, callousness, heartlessness loss of morals and barbaric actions of children fighting in the hinterland of Cape Town. Even though Florence blames the decadence on the whites in the milieu that rapidly breeds a “generation [that] are afraid of nothing” (45), Mrs Curren links the moral degeneration to failure in parenting:

I keep thinking of what you said the other day: there are no more mothers and fathers. I can't believe you mean it. Children cannot grow without mothers and fathers. The burnings and killings one hears of, the shocking callousness even this matter of beating Mr Vercueil – whose fault is it in the end? Surely the blame must fall on parents who say, “Go, do as you wish, you are your own master now. I give up authority over you... [when] you wash your hands of them ...they turn into the children of death (45)

The accumulation of trespasses, on all sides, turn the space into a “land that drinks rivers of blood and is never sated (58)”, where “the spirit of charity has perished” (19). The situation is made worse with the hard stance and a sadistic camaraderie posture on the opposite divides that justify crime. Mrs Curren, in expressing her concern to Mr Thabane over the action of children, laments:

Mr Thabane, let me make one thing clear to you. I am not trying to prescribe to this boy or to anyone else what he should do with his life. He is old enough and self-willed enough to do what he will do. But for this killing, this bloodletting in the name of comradeship, I detest it with all my heart and soul. I think it is barbarous (136)

But Thabane replies with his understanding of comradeship which, unfortunately, reveals that the adults have lost control:

...When you are body and soul in the struggle as these young people are, when you are prepared to lay down your lives for each other without question, then a bond grows up that is stronger than any bond you will know again. ..My own generation has nothing that can compare. That is why we must stand back...for the youth [and] stand behind them (136-7)

With the rape of Lucy in *Disgrace*, the whites become victims of crime. Like the black children, she lost her queer identity of a lesbian and her racial status is compromised on account of the rape incident which leaves a hybrid seed in her womb. The same goes for her father who changes his name from Lurie to Lourie to secure a small apartment.

The Paradox of Rape and Reconciliation in *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace*

John Maxwell Coetzee in the *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace* balances the scale by presenting entrenched disabilities in both blacks and whites associating all races with the victim

syndrome. This is predicted on rape. Rape according to Wikipedia “is a type of sexual assault usually involving sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual penetration carried out against a person without their consent. The act may be carried out by physical force, coercion, abuse of authority, or against a person who is incapable of giving valid consent, such as one who is unconscious, incapacitated, has an intellectual disability, or is below the legal age of consent”. Even though rape is always seen as related to sexual violation, critics are beginning to re-examine the complexity of the crime in a wider perspective. Citing Allinson, J and Wrightsman, I. (1993) in *Rape: The Misunderstood Crime*, Oluyomi Oduwobi’s dissection in “Rape victims and victimisers in Herbstein’s *Ama, a Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade*” distils the complexity and corollary of rape with the history of slave trade and social systems of patriarchy and racism. This critical words in the definition of rape ... “without consent... coercion” place the crime of apartheid on the same scale with rape. However, while Coetzee uses rape to illuminate on a wider range of crime, he uses it also as the compass to navigate the anarchy that is settling on his milieu. The future of the new nation, which had taken off since the beginning of apartheid, is reinvigorated in the rape of Lucy. Even though Lucy’s safety on the farm is guaranteed, the immediate gains may not be seen in her “marriage” to Petrus but in her unborn child who would be accepted as “a child of this earth” (216). In other words, the child would grow with the child in the womb of Petrus’ second wife to form a future community where all barriers of race would expectedly be vanquished. Lucy’s rare concession is hinged on the novelist’s pedagogy on sacrifice and love, a Wordsworthian ideal that he has laundered with his naming of two characters as Lucy and Rosalind.

Conclusion

This paper has examined two novels of John Maxwell Coetzee, *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace* which focus on the future of South Africa. The paper aggregates the crimes against humanity in the texts and elucidates the novelists’ tropes which have been deployed to mirror social conditions. In highlighting the complexity of rape, the paper expands its context to cover other crimes against humanity in the novels. However, the redemption that the society needs, for the author, lies in forgiveness, forbearance and sacrifice as precursors to an egalitarian society devoid of diatribe and other racial inhibitions.

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