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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Reverberation of History of Apartheid in *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace*

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Abstract:

Literature mirrors the society and a particular age. No writer ever writes other than his own epoch. Therefore, the piece of literature is bound to reflect contemporary age of the writer. Coetzee too, has confined his pen to South Africa and the period he belongs. He has acutely observed apartheid and post-apartheid, the inextricable components of South African history, by his naked eyes. His novels, especially, *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace* reveal the same. But his optimistic approach shifts the reader's attention from atrocity to love and humanity and gives a solution to bring two parted races, black and white South Africans, together.

Keywords: apartheid, post-apartheid, atrocious, failure, solution, love, sympathy.

Introduction:

John Maxwell Coetzee is an eminent South African novelist, essayist, linguist and translator. He has also tried his hands at fictionalized autobiographies, criticism and poetry as well. *Duskland* is his first fictional work. His *Waiting for the Barbarians* is set with the colonial background while his *Life and Times of Michael K* is set with the background of Civil War. But he is more famous for his novels *Age of Iron* (1990) and *Disgrace* (1999) which deal with the atrocious apartheid and post-apartheid epoch. He has won the Booker Prize twice, first for *Life and Times of Michael K* and second time for *Disgrace*. It is *Disgrace* that has won for him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003.

The seed of apartheid, the inextricable component of South African history, was sowed in the end of the Boer War. On the one hand the feeling of nationhood and desire for emancipation progressively taking birth in the throbbing heart of black South Africans, while on the other hand, antithesis to that revolution for emancipation, the South African National Party was established in 1911 which "laid the foundation of apartheid" (South African Party) to infringe the political rights of the native.

Apartheid means apartness. It is an atrocious racial segregation. It confines the people to certain circumscribed area of residence or separate institutions like schools, churches; and facilities like parks, playgrounds, restaurants, restrooms etc., on the basis of race or alleged race. It provides a means to maintain the economic advantages and superior social status to the politically dominant group. It has been practiced all over the world where there are

multiracial communities. But as legal segregation, it is practiced as an occasional social discrimination except in the Southern states of the U. S. In South Africa it was employed by white populations to maintain their ascendancy over other groups by means of legal and social colour bars. Thus, binary opposition is universal. *Encyc. Britannica Online* marks the year 1948 as the beginning and the year 1994 as the end of apartheid officially, but unofficially it has continued as it is deeply entrenched in the psyche of the white South Africans. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and *Age of Iron* depict this scorching issue and raise voice against it to bring changes and these two races together.

Age of Iron shows the dreadful apartheid from the matured, intellectual and solemn eyes of Mrs Curren who had only heard about its eeriness, but at closing of the final chapter of her life she has its firsthand experience. The novel begins revealing the outcome of apartheid:

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. (Age 3)

This beginning divulges that time has taken toil. Exuberance of the life is lost. Everything is utterly out of shape. Only reminiscence—musing of the bygone days is left. Social, economic and cultural framework of the *Nation* is altered and it seems that Mrs Curren is waiting to grieve over the devastation. The words mentioned above are the first words that come to her mind when she returns home after receiving the revelation of the day that her life has reached to the irredeemable stage of cancer. It is the time when she feels an intense need of someone's solidarity. But what she finds is sterility and assassinating solitude. She has a daughter, but she is not with her in this grievous period as she has left South Africa forever taking a vow that she would never come back because of her dissatisfaction with the government for its partial and tyrannical treatment to the black South Africans which has made the life chaotic and insecure. She hates South Africa so much that she shakes the dust of her country before she leaves for America in 1976. Her last words, "Do not call me back, Mother. . . because I will not come." (Age 139) reverberate even after years in the conscious and sub-conscious mind of the mother and intensify her pain. The year she left South Africa shows that the colonizers are not responsible for this devastation but the governing body which has learnt from the colonizer how to get benefit from the diversity and dependencies; and followed the colonial policy to sustain their autonomy as "Whatever lofty sentiments may inspire pronouncements on colonial policy, its practical application is coloured and conditioned by interest" (Furnivall 458).

The novel depicts a generation that grapple to end apartheid. Bheki, fifteen year old son of Florence, shows the appalling apartheid to Mrs Curren. He has left Guguletu as the schools have been closed. Students have put many schools on fire. Many of them have become activists protesting against the brutal apartheid and hounding police force and claiming for their fundamental rights of freedom, equality and fraternity. An "arrogant, combative" (Age 47), insolent, insurgent, and insensitive generation has emerged out from this social havoc which is capable of laughing and throwing petrol on seeing a woman on fire

screaming for help. Coetzee raises a question, “But who made them so cruel? It is the whites who made them so cruel!” (Age 49). They consider the police as the terrorists as they forcibly send them to school. Bheki has his own mindset for the school. He says, “What is school for? It is to make us fit into the apartheid system” (Age 67). Mrs Curren is taken aback by Florence’s pride for her son’s such attitude. She wonders how Florence can allow him to wander here and there on the street killing time till apartheid comes to an end. She believes that apartheid is not going to die all of a sudden. It may never go from the psyche of the people. She is worried for Bheki’s future. However, she fails to answer Bheki’s question,

What is more important, that apartheid must be destroyed or that I must go to school? (Age 68)

In order to destroy apartheid so many children of Bheki and John’s age join the communist activity leaving books and pens aside and taking guns in their hands. At the age of fairy tales and nursery rhymes, they are fed with the terror, animosity and sadism of apartheid and prepared to protest against it. This has destroyed the incorruptibility of their age. Bheki’s sudden disappearance leads Mrs Curren to five dead bodies neatly laid out against a wall. Bheki’s eyes were open and staring. His mouth was open, too. The rain had been beating on him and on his comrades. Their clothes and hair had a flattened, dead look. There were grains of sand in the corners of his eyes. There was sand in his mouth. Mrs Curren wants to know the person who did it. “Who did it?” replies Mr Thabane, Bheki’s uncle, “If you want to dig the bullets out of their bodies you are welcome. But I will tell you in advance what you will find. ‘Made in South Africa. SABS Approved’” (Age 103).

This unambiguously indicates the failure of maintaining the sovereignty which has been achieved after prolonged slavery from the foreign rule, exploitation and lots of struggles. For such internal crises, according to Coetzee, one cannot blame to the colonizer. They are like Mrs Curren’s cancer the germs of which go on multiply with every moment; that never let her to forget that she is dying gradually with each advancing and passing moment; never let her to live the last moments peacefully even when she knows that they are, like sand, elapse out from her fist. Racism is a worm that nibbles the *Nation* without letting the citizen about her being liquefied. This is a common problematic issue of all those countries the citizen of which are divided by such narrow domestic walls, where the prevailing social and cultural issues are the responsible factors in intensifying the breach between the two distinct communities. Mrs Curren says,

What might happen to me no longer mattered. . . . My life may as well be waste. We shoot these people as if they are waste, but in the end it is we whose lives are not worth living. (Age 104)

The words mentioned above sound like a confession of a white South African writer on behalf of his class which is exploiting the black South Africans. They are enjoying the privileges which actually belong to the black South Africans. He is worried for the future of *Nation* and for the generation to which Bheki and John belong. He considers their comradeship “a mystique of death” (Age 150).

John hides himself in the darkness of Florence's room. His eyes are wide open envisioning the moment of glory when he will arise when the fiery flower will unfold and when the pillar of smoke will rise. He has held a bomb on his chest like a talisman: as Christopher Columbus lay in the dark of his cabin, holding the compass to his chest – the mystic instrument that would guide him to the Indies, the Isles of the Blest. But what this bomb will guide this boy is a mystic to the reader. Mrs Curren, "in a fog of error" (Age 136), feels that she hates neither Bheki nor John but the form they have turned into. She is not able to accept this growing generation, to Bheki as now "he is not loveable", Coetzee asks, "But did you not have a part in making him unlovable?" (136). These confessional words speak a volume of the writer's courage to tell his community that they are responsible for the animosity the black South Africans have nurtured for them. Bheki and John become the victim of the police and lose their lives in a police encounter. Coetzee writes,

Poor child! Poor child! From somewhere tears sprang and blurred my sight. Poor John, who in the old days would have been destined to be a garden boy and eat bread and jam for lunch at the back door and drink out of a tin, battling now for all the insulted and injured, the trampled, the ridiculed, for all the garden boys of South Africa! (Age 151)

Thus, everything is utterly changed but this change is annoying one. Mrs Curren belongs to the class of subjugator; and Florence, Bheki and John represent the class of subjugated. What Coetzee anticipates for is an optimistic change between these two classes and two races but what he finds is "a time out of time" (Age 50). The time about which Coetzee talks, carries a crime and in Mrs Curren's words,

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 its price. That price, I used to think, would have to be paid in shame: in a life of shame and a shameful death, unlamented, in an obscure corner. (Age 164)

Mrs Curren's cancer represents the crime of exploitation of the black South Africans. Though Coetzee is a white South African writer, he wishes coherence between them. He believes, "There are no rubbish people. We are all people together" (Age 47) and with this intention he has portrayed Mrs Curren who has soft corner for the black South Africans.

Disgrace is the story of David Lurie who represents the apartheid and his daughter, Lucy who represents the consequence of apartheid. Thus, David represents the past and Lucy represents the present of political history of South Africa. Lucy becomes the victim of a gang rape and the rapists were the black South Africans. She feels that it was done with personal hatred. She speculates about why they hate her when she had never set her eyes on them. But David has an answer:

It was history speaking through them A history of wrong It may have seemed personal, but it wasn't. It came down from the ancestors. (Disgrace 156)

During apartheid the black South African women were subjected to the animal spirit of the white South African men. Even after legal ban on apartheid, it has continued its atrocious *Rudra Tandava* (a dance by Shiva in a violent mood that brings destruction) of havoc. Just the tables have turned and the history is reversed. Petrus is a hand at Lucy's farm. He belongs to the subservient strata of South African society. But, Lucy never maltreats him. His indirect possible role in the burglary cannot be denied, as his abrupt evaporation from the place raises many questions to which only history is answerable. The most shocking revelation is that one of the rapists, Pollux, is Petrus' brother-in-law who is only sixteen and as he is not of the marriageable age, Petrus offers his own hand for the marriage as it would be a springboard for him to climb up the upper strata of South African society and credit him the possession over Lucy's life and land where he is merely an assistant. In David's words, "Petrus has a vision of the future in which people like Lucy have no place" (Disgrace 118).

Lucy has to accept the offer to become the third wife of Petrus with no other option, as the result of the gang rape takes form in her womb. Moreover, she knows that the women are safe nowhere – neither in Salem where she lives and she is raped by the black South Africans nor in Cape Town where David lives and rapes the girls like Melanie. The burglary and Lucy's tragedy both provoke the reader to rethink about the security of the people after independence. It seems that the security is an illusion in the 21st century. Change in the social strata of David and Petrus, and Lucy and Petrus show how the tables have turned in the political history of South Africa. It raises many questions like: Do the white South Africans deserve this change? Were the black South Africans waiting for the tables to turn? How long would this atrocious history continue its existence? Why are women subjected to the history?

Bheki and John's tragedy reveal their claim for their fundamental rights which the government denies while Lucy's rapists reveal their vengeance against the white authority and the government. But why women are used as an instrument to that vengeance and sexually harassed. Why it is sexual harassment instead of murder? The rape survivor may think in that way also. Instead of counting rape cases that have taken place during apartheid and post-apartheid in South Africa, Coetzee focuses on the fact that in these political and racial crises and in the periods of white-peril and black-peril women of both the races suffer. What he reveals is that apartheid cannot be brought to an end in that way. The idea of apartheid is emerged from the horizon of mind, which is made authentic by the government by giving it the form of policy. He is worried for the way the young generation of South Africa throwing away its life for the "liberal and humanitarian" (Hayes 131) revolution, before it knows what life can be. In spite of his sympathy for Bheki and John, he opposes their fair revolt as he believes that life is meant to live. He writes,

I detest these calls for sacrifice that end with young men bleeding to death in the mud. War is never what it pretends to be. Scratch the surface and you find, invariably, old men sending young men to their death in the name of some

abstraction or other. . . . it remains the war of the old upon the young. *Freedom or death!* Shout Bheki and his friends. Whose words? Not their own (Age 163).

Coetzee uses escapism to reveal the dissatisfaction of the people. He does not like the way Mrs Curren's unnamed daughter escapes from South Africa. He believes that escapism cannot demise the problem. Problems are inevitable elements of our life and they are bound to come without any warning. If the person is not satisfied with society he dwells in, then he must have courage to give a fight to it or to endure or to confine himself to his own corona. But he can neither escape from that social realm nor live an isolated life. Mrs Curren's daughter gets settle down in America to express her wrath for the South African government. Here, Coetzee makes the reader muse if her decision has brought any change to the government policy. Instead it is proved to be a punishment to her mother who has to remain alone in the most crucial period of her life.

Booker truly says that Coetzee's novels reveal that "the end of apartheid did not magically solve all social, political, and economic problems in South Africa" (151). But while reading them in between the lines, one can certainly find that they also reveal solutions to the problems. When we scrutinize them, we realize that they are more than about violence, rape, animal cruelty, or racial cruelty. They are about "a microcosmic examination of the failures of sympathetic imagination that make these things possible" (McDunnah 23). One solution to all problems, in Coetzee's view, is love and sympathy for all. For instance, Lucy might have gone for abortion. Instead she boldly and heartily accepts the child of the rapists as she does not want to make it unlovable like Bheki and John are. Her pregnancy and social security of her 'would be child' compel her to become the third wife of Petrus, her black hand. However, rape and marriage are not the solutions that Coetzee reveals, nor does he suggest for the "historical reconciliation" (Poyner 159) between the two races or between the raped and the rapist, but cordial relation and mutual acceptance, "the unflinchingness" and "the forgivingness" (Attwell 29), which can only be the solution to bridge these long parted races and to establish security, peace and harmony in South Africa. He seeks for the equality and believes, "What there is must go into circulation, so that everyone can have a chance to be happy for a day" (Disgrace 98). This is how peace and harmony can be established in restless South Africa. This perception shows Coetzee's love for humanity and introduces him to the world as a philanthropist.

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