

Chapter IV

Chapter IV

Age of Iron- Metaphor of Apartheid South Africa

Age of Iron published in the year 1990 authentically depicts the cruelties of apartheid. *Age of Iron* was well received and it brought many laurels to the author. *Age of Iron* depicts the picture of South of Africa during the Apartheid regime. African people were separated in terms of race which was called as Apartheid. The novel *Age of Iron* realistically depicts the problems between the general public and the people who were in power during the hard era of apartheid. It also states the extreme violence incited by the police on the native people in order to ‘enforce’ law and discipline in the town.

... as a response to the degradation of life under apartheid where Coetzee weaves the personal with the political and presents the marginalized characters but does not attempt to speak for them. He addresses the painful questions of guilt and responsibility felt by a white liberal in South Africa but their awareness is subtly ironized. (Nistandra 23)

Set in 1986, the novel depicts the anti-apartheid movements. *Age of Iron*, the title refers to the period of brutality and segregation. Normally, Iron Age was a prehistoric time where the implements used were made out of Iron. But here *Age of Iron* suggests the protagonist’s observation that she is living through the era of hatred and hard-heartedness. Though, J.M. Coetzee belongs to the dominant race he has portrayed the cruelty shown by the white people towards the native people, during the period of apartheid which acts as a proof for his anti-apartheid strand.

In *Age of Iron*, the portrayal of damaged life in South African society ultimately serves merely as a backdrop for Coetzee's depiction of a fragile, nascent community which, in its respect for the particular, suggests the possibility of a non-appropriative relationship between subject and object. Importantly, too, the emphasis in this novel falls not so much on the deformed nature of apartheid society, as on the cognitive process of deformation. (Marais, *Standpoint of Redemption* 231)

The entire novel is narrated in the first person by the protagonist, Mrs. Elizabeth Curren. This is an epistolary novel written as a letter by the protagonist Mrs. Curren to her unnamed daughter who is settled in U.S.A. The letter gives the protagonist the opportunity to say all the things she might not be able to express over the phone. In this letter she narrates the most important incidents in her life with exact details and expresses her sympathy for the native people.

Few white people pity the condition of the natives in the apartheid South Africa. But they don't have power to change the prevailing system. Homi K Bhabha explains that identity is formed and maintained through segregation. "The move away from the singularities of 'class' or 'gender' as primary conceptual and organizational categories, has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions - of race, gender, generation, institutional location geopolitical locale, sexual orientation -that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world" (Bhabha 41-42).

Mrs. Curren develops a new perception regarding the natives and understands that compassion is essential for a peaceful society. The apartheid society makes Mrs. Curren to empathize with the colonised people but the natives are not ready to accept the sympathy

or charity of the ruling majority. "There is a fact: White men consider themselves superior to native men. There is another fact: Black men want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect" (Fanon, *Black Skin* 03). Thus, native and white contradict each other in aspects such as culture, values and ideas.

Mrs. Elizabeth Curren is a retired Professor of Classical Language and she lives in Cape Town. She is diagnosed with cancer and is counting her last days. The protagonist suffering from cancer is a metaphor of apartheid which has caused political unrest in South Africa. Turmoil and violence in South Africa was very high during the time when the story happens. Though a white woman, she was thoroughly opposed to the apartheid system. While spending her retired life fighting with cancer, Mrs.Curren describes the weird events of her last days and she spends her time silently watching the political and social situation around her. She finds it difficult to digest the inhumanity around her though she lived an isolated life.

The cancer in her body was eating her like the cancer in the society which eroded humanism in the name of apartheid. Mrs.Curren's cancer is the symbol of the cancer in the society which caused violence. Native people sacrificed their life for getting freedom. Even small children were engaged in the political struggle and Mrs.Curren wonders how small children will face the atrocities of the ruling class. Native people are tortured and they are brutally murdered by the police and soldiers of the apartheid government. Edward Said comments on the policy followed by the colonisers. The division of race is the main reason for the enmity between people.

Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions,

societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly? By surviving the consequences humanly, I mean to ask whether there is any way of avoiding the hostility expressed by the division, say, of men into "us" (Westerners) and "they" (Orientals). For such divisions are generalities whose use historically and actually has been to press the importance of the distinction between some men and some other men, usually towards not especially admirable ends. (Said 45)

The story begins with her letter where she addresses her daughter. She describes the neighborhood to her daughter who has left Cape Town many years before. She says, "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" (AI 03). The 'You' refers to Mrs. Curren's daughter. She vividly describes the alley because at the end of the alley, she found a man huddled inside. Mrs. Curren says,

...I came upon a house of carton boxes and plastic sheeting and a man curled up inside, a man I recognized from the streets: tall, carious fangs, wearing a baggy gray suit and a hat with sagging brim. He had the hat on now, sleeping with the brim folded under his ear. A derelict, one of the derelicts, who hang around the parking lots on Mill Street, cadging money from shoppers, drinking under the overpass, eating out of refuse cans... An unsavory smell about him: urine, sweat wine, moldy clothing, and something else too unclean. (AI 03-04)

Mrs.Curren discovered the news from her doctor Syfret that she is having cancer. She thanks the doctor for being frank in telling the fact. Mrs.Curren sadly says “The news was not good, but it was mine, for me, mine only, not to be refused. It was for me to take in my arms and fold to my chest and take home, without headshaking, without tears” (AI 04).

Mrs.Curren entered her house which was empty without people. She longs for company and to be cared. The following passage expresses the yearnings of an old woman.

How I longed for you to be here, to hold me, comfort me! I begin to understand the true meaning of embrace. We embrace to be embraced. We embrace our children to be folded in the arms of the future, to pass ourselves on beyond death, to be transported. That is how it was when I embraced you, always. We bear children in order to be mothered by them. Home truths, a mother’s truth: From now to the end that is all you will hear from me. So: how I longed for you! How I longed to be able to go upstairs to you, to sit on your bed, run my fingers through your hair, whisper in your ear as I did on school mornings.... “Giving mommy a big hug” for she would not die but live on in you. (AI 05-06)

These beautiful lines of J.M. Coetzee, expresses a mothers longing to be with her daughter. The meaning of filial love is lost in this post-modern scenario. Human relationship has turned absurd. People don’t give importance to familial values and sometimes even mother and daughter relationship is also estranged. Her daughter does not wish to come back to South Africa because she wanted to live a peaceful life devoid of racism and civil war. Mrs.Curren remembers each and every thing regarding her daughter’s childhood. Mrs.Curren, often remembers her daughter’s body which was

warm and her milky breath. The immaculate love of a mother is evident through Mrs.Curren's reminiscence. Through this incident it is proved that a mother's love is pure and they sacrifice their life for the sake of their children.

To live! You are my life; I love you as I love life itself. In the mornings I come out of the house and wet my finger and hold it up to the wind. When the chill is from the northwest, from your quarter, I stand a long time sniffing, concentrating my attention in the hope that across ten thousand miles of land and sea some breath will reach me of the milkiness you still carry with you behind your ears, in the fold of your neck. (AI 06)

Mrs.Curren says that she writes this letter, not necessarily for her daughter to read but to pacify her need to share her feeling and the need to be loved. This is an example of an absurd situation. Mrs.Curren says, "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" (AI 06). Mrs.Curren, as a mother tries to forget the pain in her deathbed by remembering her love for her daughter. These loving memories are solace to her in her deathbed. Irony of life is that it is the native people Mrs. Florence, the house keeper and Mr.Vercueil a stranger who help Mrs.Curren in her last days.

Virtues such as love, compassion, humanism, universal brotherhood becomes a humbug in the war torn South Africa. *Age of Iron* at the societal level depicts apartheid, opposition between native and white, civil war as the tools which make people devoid of compassion. At the personal level depicts the mother daughter relationship as an example

of estranged relationship. Her daughter forgot the sacrifices done by her mother and left her alone to suffer in her last days.

Mrs.Curren instructed Vercueil not to make any fire or to create any mess over there. His face was weather-beaten and his eyes looked that of an alcoholic. Mrs.Curren took him to kitchen and offered him a sandwich and coffee. She also offered him a job in the house. “You are wasting your life,” I said. “You are not a child anymore. How can you live like this? How can you be around and do nothing all day? I don’t understand it” (AI 08). But he ignored her advice and did a shocking thing of spitting at Mrs.Curren and left the house. This incident reveals the kind nature of the old white woman Mrs.Curren.

Spat not upon me but before me, where I could see it, inspect it, think about it. His word, his kind of word, from his own mouth, warm at the instant when it left him. A word, undeniable, from a language before language. First the look and then the spitting... A look without respect, from a man to a woman old enough to be his mother”. (AI 08)

When Mrs.Curren had a severe attack of pain, the man appeared and he carried her to the house. She explains to him that her cancer has spread to the bones so it was very painful and unable to bear. The compassion of a stranger whom Mrs.Curren considers to be less than a human being helps her at the time of her need. Even a good for nothing fellow a vagabond is able to share or create bondage with a dog but Mrs.Curren is unable to create loving bond with her daughter. Though Mrs.Curren loves her daughter dearly, even more than her own life she was unable to give up her ego and to make a meaningful relationship with her daughter.

Apartheid has made white people to feel insecure in South Africa and so Mrs.Curren's daughter immigrated to America. Mrs.Curren suffered from extreme pain and she with the help of the pain killers subdued the pain. Initially her cancer started from the breast and now it has spread all over the body. When the stranger looks at her collections of music Mrs.Curren says in a vague voice "Only rubbish, I wanted to whisper to him – rubbish and dead memories: but the fog in my head closed in again" (AI 14).

Mrs.Curren goes for a drive and with the stranger and shares her childhood memories. She was continuously talking after many days. This reveals the lack of friendly relations among the white minorities in the colonised state. She says, "Hunger, I thought: it is a hunger of the eyes that I feel, such hunger that I am loath even to blink. These seas, these mountains: I want to burn them upon my sight so deeply that, no matter where I go, they will always be before me. I am hungry with love of this world" (AI 18). Mrs.Curren longs for human company and starts crying.

Suddenly there were tears in my eyes. From not blinking, I told myself. But the truth was, I was crying, Hunched over the wheel, I abandoned myself, first to a quiet, decent sobbing, then to long wails without articulation, emptying of the lungs, emptying of the heart. "I am so sorry", I gasped; and then, when I was calmer: "I am sorry, I don't know what has come over me. (AI 19)

During the drive they almost got into an accident and he shouts at her for being careless. Mrs.Curren was shocked to see the compassion of a stranger towards her. They returned to the house and she tells the man that she can pay him if he cleans the house and the yard. She also adds that she will not give money if he doesn't work.

Mrs.Curren says that they cannot proceed further on charity. The stranger demanded money from her. He took an amount of thirty rand and some coins and went away.

He came back after getting a drink. Mrs.Curren comments:

That I should turn this house into a boarding house for students. Well, there are better things I could do with it. I could turn it into a haven for beggars. I could run a soup kitchen and a dormitory. But I don't. Why not? Because the spirit of charity has perished in this country.... What is the point of charity when it does not go from heart to heart?... It is as hard to receive as to give. It takes as much effort. I wish you would learn that. I wish you would learn something instead of just lying around. (AI 22)

According to Mrs.Curren charity should come out of interest but not of compulsion. "Curren's admission that the crimes of colonisation and apartheid have determined her authorial self reflects her slow and shifting realization that her response to the crimes of apartheid is always delayed and always insufficient" (Walsh 169).

Mrs.Curren used to spend her time in listening to classical music. She compares her life in South Africa like living aboard of a sinking ship. Mrs. Curren's statement is an absolute reference to apartheid.

There I lay in the dark, listening to the music of the stars and the crackling and humming that accompanied it like the dust of meteors, smiling, my heart filled with gratitude for this good news from afar. The one border they cannot close, I thought: the border upward, between the Republic of South Africa and the empire of the sky. Where I am due to travel. Where no passport is called for. (AI 23)

The thought about death often crosses her mind even when she tried to concentrate on some other things. She worries about leaving the house after she dies in the state that is at present. She wants to know who will take over her house and property after her death. Mrs.Curren is worried about death and after life.

There is no truth but the shock of pain that goes through me when, in an unguarded moment, a vision overtakes me of this house, empty, with sunlight pouring through the windows onto an empty bed, or of false Bay under blue skies, pristine, deserted – When the world I have passed my life in manifests itself to me and I am not of it. My existence from day to day has become a matter of averting my eyes, of cringing. Death is what I cannot bear to think. At every moment when I am thinking of something else, I am not thinking death, am not thinking the truth. (AI 26)

The narrator Mrs. Curren's memories date back to the good olden days. She thinks of South Africa in its present situation and compares it with the past happy days. "A land in the process of being repossessed, its heirs quickly 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 bloomtime of its youth and therefore, in the verdict of history, not loved enough" (AI 25-26). These lines bring forth the comparison of Mrs.Curren's cancer and the state of South Africa.

Mrs.Curren suffers from insomnia and she switches on the television. She also feels like an animal in the zoo because three years before there was a burglary in her house. The burglars took everything what she had in her house. She later installed bars on

her windows as a precaution against future burglaries. Watching television bored her because the media was influenced by the apartheid government and authentic news was censored.

Television. Why do I watch it? The parade of politicians every evening: I have only to see the heavy, blank faces so familiar since childhood to feel gloom and nausea. The bullies in the last row of school desks, raw-boned, lumpish boys, grown up now and promoted to rule the land. They with their fathers and mothers, their aunts and uncles, their brothers and sisters.... Why, in a spirit of horror and loathing, do I watch them? (AI 28)

Mrs.Curren has Television as a substitute for family and friends. She correlates the scenes shown in the television with death.

Fascination: the homage we pay to our death. Between the hours of eight and nine we assemble and they show themselves to us. A ritual manifestation, like the processions of hooded bishops during Franco's war. A thanatophany: showing our death.... Death to the young. Death to life. Boars that devour their offspring. The boar war. (AI 29-30)

Mrs.Curren is worried about her property. So, she asks the stranger to send some important papers to her daughter by post after her death. J.M.Coetzee symbolically tells that whatever legacy is inherited from the forefathers, only memories are left to our progeny.

Mrs. Curren's house keeper Florence came back along with her two girls and fifteen year old boy Bheki. Mrs. Curren introduces Florence to Mr.Vercueil. Florence tells her that conditions were becoming worse in Guguletu. The schools have been closed

and so she has brought her children here. Florence doesn't seem to approve the man's presence there.

Florence's daughters Hope and Beauty played with Vercueil. The names Hope and Beauty are symbolical of the assurance that their generation will change the system of apartheid. Mrs.Curren was irritated by the noise made by Bheki and she asked Florence to instruct her son to be quiet. Florence says that children have changed a lot and they even end up burning schools. "It is all changed today. There are no more mothers and fathers" (AI 39). This incident reveals the condition of children in a war affected country. Children also join the revolution demanding freedom.

Mrs.Curren envies Florence for being surrounded by her three children. She says that Florence has everything whereas she has lost her daughter, husband, health, life, and everything. Florence's husband William worked in a chicken center and she once went with her to see him. His work is to kill and clean the chicken. Mrs.Curren comments on his work as "A universe of labor, a universe of counting: like sitting in front of a clock all day, killing the seconds as they emerged, counting one's life away" (AI 44). Here the author compares human life with animal life. William's job is to kill animals for eating. Only animals kill other animal to eat. But human beings also do the same.

Florence's son Bheki brought his friend to the house. These young boys are against the system of apartheid and they involve themselves in the political struggle. Mrs.Curren thinks that the boys possess so much of self-importance. The boys attacked Vercueil and Mrs.Curren asks them to stop. She tells that she cannot encourage violence and hatred in her home. Mrs.Curren tells Florence that he has no right to hit Vercueil in his own home and also he stays here so this is his home. Florence replies that the man is

rubbish. But Mrs.Curren says that “There are no rubbish people. We are all people together” (AI 47). The novel’s theme and concept is centered in this line. Mrs.Curren tells that all the people are equal and she being a white woman supports the native people. She also advises Florence that it is wrong to let Bheki and his friend to ill treat poor people. Mrs.Curren admonishes Florence that: “You told me you admire your son’s generation because they are afraid of nothing. Be careful: they may start by being careless of their own lives and end by being careless of everyone else’s. What you admire in them is not necessarily what is best” (AI 48).

Mrs.Curren warns Florence to teach children good values. Florence accuses the white people who make the boys to behave cruelly. She feels happy that her son and his friend are fighting against the apartheid system. She tells that these boys are selfish and they do not give respect to the elders and may forget to look back upon their parents. Mrs.Curren says, they forget their filial gratitude and responsibility towards their parents and may consider parental love especially mother’s love for granted. Mrs.Curren doesn’t like the attitude of Florence and advises her to take care of her son.

Curren’s adoption of a maternal voice is aligned with her (mis)reading of her servant Florence, a mother whose children are targeted by apartheid police. In Curren’s descriptions, Florence is a condemning figure rather than an affectively maternal one; repeatedly referring to her as “the Judge,” Curren thinks of Florence as an allegorized figure of justice who could evaluate her acts of atonement but only acknowledges her motherhood in order to characterize it as emotionally hardened. (Walsh 172)

Florence answers that the children are cruel because their parents have raised them in that way. And Mrs.Curren is worried by her reply and wants to make clear the misconception of Florence.

Do you think the cruelty will leave them? What kind of parents will they become who were taught that the time of parents is over? Can parents be recreated once the idea of parents has been destroyed within us? They kick and beat a man because he drinks. They set people on fire and laugh while they burn to death. How will they treat their own children? What love will they be capable of? Their hearts are turning to stone before our eyes and what do you say? You say, ‘This is not my child, this is the white man’s child, this is the monster made by the white man’ Are you going to blame them on the whites and turn your back? (AI 49- 50)

Namrata Nistandra comments on the attitude of Mrs.Curren and Florence towards the children as:

Mrs.Curren differs sharply in her attitude from her maid Florence who takes pride in the children of iron. They frequently debate the reason of this stone-heartedness: is it the failure of black parents to exercise authority or the cruel oppression of the whites? Mrs.Curren finds these children obdurate as pig iron or lead. These children have lost all touch with human values and emotions. (24)

Mrs.Curren thinks that how hard- hearted the world has become and how lucky her daughter is to be settled in America away from the inhumanities prevailing in South Africa. She further adds “Children of iron.... The age of iron. After which comes the age

of bronze. How long, how long before the softer ages return of their cycle, they age of clay, the age of earth? A Spartan matron, iron-hearted, bearing warrior sons for the nation” (AI 50). The phrase ‘Age of Iron’ relates to the hard – heartedness of the people during the apartheid.

The humanizing ability of “love” is also apparent in the novel’s designs on its South African reader. In this respect, the effect of the change which Mrs. Curren’s relationship with the “children of iron” undergoes on the letter which she writes to her estranged daughter- who is also characterized as a child of iron – is significant. (Marais, *Places of Pigs* 91)

Mrs.Curren dislikes violence and instructs Bheki and his friend to attend school and live peacefully. She tells that their attitude will initiate lot of problems. “Aggressive reactions form a continuous series, from the violent, unmotivated outburst of the act, through the whole range of belligerent forms, to the cold war of interpretative demonstrations” (Lacan, *Ecrits* 90).

Hence, Mrs.Curren warns Florence to raise her son in a good manner. The youth of South Africa are brought up in an aggressive manner to fight against the existing discrimination in the society.

Mrs.Curren constructs a maternal version of the prelapsarian narrative where the womb is the transcendent site of fullness, unmediated bonding and love now irrecoverable to the adult. Her moral appeal towards South Africa’s warring factions is based not only on the grounds of a common humanity, but also the transcendence of the familial maternal bond.... The bond with mother, as opposed to the bond of universal humanity,

could be the ultimate generator of human plenitude. (Yeoh, Love and Indifference 110)

J.M.Coetzee in his novels describes the atrocities committed by the colonisers against the colonised people. He describes the situation which prevailed not only in South Africa but everywhere in the world. The police van's door swings open and hits the children on the bike. Bheki's friend was badly injured. These types of inhuman and cruel activities of the police against natives were common in South Africa. The apartheid government has given utmost power to the police, so they take the native people for granted and torture them. Even the white people like Mrs.Curren cannot do anything to save the natives from such atrocities. Mrs.Curren on seeing blood at the accident site thinks about her cancer and says it is a kind of pregnancy. She says

For twenty years I have not bled. The sickness that now eats at me is dry, bloodless, slow and cold, sent by Saturn. There is something about it that does not bear thinking of. To have fallen pregnant with these growths, these cold, obscene swellings; to have carried and carried this brood beyond any natural term, unable to bear them, unable to sate their hunger: children inside me eating more every day, not growing but bloating, toothed, clawed, forever cold and ravenous. (AI 64)

Mrs.Curren asks Bheki that why he is not going to the school and he says that "What is school for? It is to make us fit into the apartheid system" (AI 67). This denotes the national uprisings against the oppressive system and even children are involved in the guerilla warfare. Namrata Nistandra echoes the political scenario in South Africa thus:

The political imbroglio of the 1980's has been seen as one of the most important revolts against the white rule. The Western Cape Student Action Committee had boycotted the schools when emergency was declared in 1985. The boycott intensified as the parents, teachers and student organizations also got involved in the turmoil.... The protests described in the novel reflect the struggle of black people against their marginalization. (24)

Mrs.Curren says that she is too old for all these things and adds "I can't believe you want your son out on the streets killing time till apartheid comes to an end. Apartheid is not going to die tomorrow or the next day. He is ruining his future" (AI 67- 68). But Florence says that the destruction of apartheid is more important than attending school. Mrs.Curren gets emotionally attached to her native live-in servant Florence's son Bheki and his friend. It was through them Mrs. Curren realizes the need for self- respect and love the native people are fighting for. J.M.Coetzee through the small children portrays that dignity, self-respect and pride for their ancestry is essential for every individual. The native people strive to uphold their lost dignity and pride through violent revolutions.

Mrs. Curren, Florence, Bheki and Vercueil drove to the Woodstock hospital and searched for Bheki. A man at the desk asked them to try at Groote Schuur. So, they went there and Mrs.Curren says, "I was seeing too many sick old people, and too suddenly. They oppressed me, oppressed and intimidated me. Black and white, men and women, they shuffled about the corridors, watching each other covetously, eyeing me as I approached, catching unerringly on me the smell of death" (AI 69). Mrs.Curren understands that old age, sickness and death is common for everyone and comments about her life in South Africa.

We who marry South Africa become South Africans: ugly, sullen, torpid, the only sign of life in us a quick flash of fangs when we are crossed.

South Africa: a bad-tempered old hound snoozing in the doorway, taking its time to die. And what an uninspired name for a country! Let us hope they change it when they make their fresh start. (AI 70)

Mrs.Curren shares her thoughts to Vercueil and thanks him for coming into her life. “I didn’t choose you, but you are the one who is here, and that will have to do. You arrived. It’s like having a child. You can’t choose the child. It just arrives” (AI 71).

This refers that Africa didn’t choose the colonisers. The colonisers arrived and they converted the natives into slaves. She tells Vercueil that she has not informed about her cancer to her daughter. Till now, her daughter knows that she is sick, but not about this deadly disease. Mrs.Curren tells Vercueil that she doesn’t want to disturb the peaceful married life of her daughter in America with her husband and two children. Mrs.Curren didn’t want her daughter to come back and get into trouble because she says, “Let me remind you this is not a normal country. People can’t just come and go as, they wish” (AI 74). Derek Attridge in *Literary Form and Demand* says:

The motif of shattered childhood is a pointer to the social depravity of the country. Mrs. Curren’s daughter has vowed not to return until the people responsible for the policy of apartheid are thwarted. She would celebrate the occasion but before that happens; her ties with her mother are not strong enough to bring her back. Mrs.Curren conceals the news of her terminal cancer from her daughter and annihilates all chances of their reunion.

The mother daughter bond has lost all significance. (qtd in Nistandra 25)

Mrs.Curren tells him that her daughter has promised her that she will come back only if the things change in South Africa. “She is like iron” (AI 75). Iron is the word used by a mother to describe her own daughter. But Vercueil remarked that Mrs.Curren is also like ‘iron’.

Florence informs Mrs.Curren that Bheki was in trouble. They visited Florence’s cousin Mr.Thabane’s house and they started to search for Bheki. They went to a place which seemed to be very dangerous. The place was full of rioting, screaming, some houses were burnt and broken glasses were scattered everywhere. Even Mrs.Curren was also attacked by a young girl who addressed her very badly.

Terror- stricken Mrs.Curren had a hard time running because she suffered from pain. Mrs.Curren and Mr.Thabane went in the search of the car. There were lots of people running everywhere. Mrs. Curren wondered, “How could I get away from this terrible place? Where was the pond I waded across, where was the path to the car? There were ponds everywhere, pools, lakes, sheets of water; there were paths everywhere, but where did they lead?” (AI 96).

They also heard a sound of gunfire and they found the car. They also discover that Florence’s son Bheki was dead. Mrs.Curren says, “I was shaking: shivers ran up and down my body, my hands trembled, I thought: what did he see as his last sight on earth? 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” (AI 102-103). Mr.Thabane was angry regarding the injustice done to his family. He tells her that if the bullets are taken from the bodies we can see the country’s rage over the native people. Mrs.Curren couldn’t answer to his query and she moved to her car. Later in the letter she says:

It is through my eyes that you see; the voice that speaks in your head is mine. Through me alone do you find yourself here on these desolate flats, smell the smoke in the air, see the bodies of the dead, hear the weeping, shiver in the rain. It is my thoughts that you think, my despair that you feel, and also the first stirrings of welcome for whatever will put an end to thought: sleep, death. To me your sympathies flow; your heart beats with mine. (AI 103)

“Curren pathologizes the black activists, failing to consider how the continuing history of police-state violence has traumatized black South African families. Instead, she attributes the political struggles of the antiapartheid revolutionaries to parental neglect” (Walsh 173). Mrs.Curren saw Vercueil and cried for Bheki. “Do the dead know they are dead?” (AI 109). She asks herself and tells that all these days had not done anything to improve the condition of her country.

A doll? A doll’s life? Is that what I have lived? Is it given to a doll to conceive such a thought? Or does the thought come and go as another imagination, a flash of lightning, a piercing of the fog by the lance of an angel’s intelligence?... Can a doll know death? No: dolls grow, they acquire speech and gait, they perambulate the world; they age, they wither, they perish; they are wheeled into the fire or buried in the earth; but they do not die.... (AI 109)

She dreams about her childhood when she tended a beautiful garden. Her mind longed for those peaceful days. She has dressed up well as she has planned to commit suicide. But Vercueil changes her mind and takes her for a ride. She expresses her fear of death thus:

I have not seen black people in their death before, Mr. Vercueil. They are dying all the time, I know, but always somewhere else. The people I have seen die have been white and have died in bed, growing rather dry and light there, rather papery, rather airy. They burned well, I am sure, leaving a minimum of ash to sweep up afterward...

Whereas these people will not burn, Bheki and the other dead. It would be like trying to burn figures of pig iron or lead. (AI 124)

War time death and destruction in South Africa is depicted here. Mrs.Curren feels sympathetic for the native people and also more for Bheki who lost his life in the riot. She blames the system for the misery happened. Her concern towards the native is revealed thus:

You must understand, it is not just a personal thing, this disturbance I am telling you about," I pursued. "In fact it is not personal at all. I was fond of Bheki, certainly, when he was still a child, but I was not happy with the way he turned out. I had hoped for something else. He and his comrades say they have put childhood behind them. Well, they may have ceased being children, but what have they become? Dour little puritans, despising laughter, despising play. (AI 125)

Namrata Nistandra describes Mrs.Curren's love towards the boys as:

She uses maternal love as resistance against the political impasse.

She associates Vercueil with her daughter and also attempts to love John and Bheki who are strangers to her. She is aware of her strange bond with

these boys and knows she has no right to grieve for their death. With all her sincerity she fails to achieve any sincere reciprocity with the black people. (26-27)

Mrs.Curren feels sad that children like Bheki are dead and thinks, “The age of iron waiting to return” (AI 126). Mrs.Curren is upset, but expects to get over her sorrow very soon. Mrs.Curren wonders if she had gone to visit her daughter in America when she was invited, she would have avoided this trauma. She thinks of all the white South Africans who immigrated to other countries. She remembers her last telephone to her daughter and promises not to haunt her after her death. But Mrs.Curren was in a dilemma whether to trust Vercueil or not for delivering the letter. “I give my life to Vercueil to carry over. I trust Vercueil because I do not trust Vercueil. I love him because I do not love him. Because he is the weak reed I lean upon him” (AI 131).

Mrs.Curren finds Bheki’s friend in the kitchen. She writes in the letter, “So this house that was once my home and yours becomes a house of refuge, a house of transit” (AI 136). She also finds her letter getting more lengthy and abstract. The letter is the metaphor for the novel. “...the blood tug of daughter to mother, woman to woman. But with everyday I add to it the letter seems to grow more abstract, more abstracted...” (AI 137). She talks about her weird dreams to her daughter and reasons that the abstractions in her writings may be because of the pain and medications.

Mrs.Curren thinks that her end has come and records her pain as; “The truth is, there was always something false about that impulse, deeply false, no matter to what rage or despair it answered. If dying in bed over weeks and months, in a purgatory of pain and shame, will not save my soul, why should I be saved by dying in two minutes in a pillar

of flames?" (AI 141). Mrs.Curren wonders about the concept of heaven, God and deliverance of the soul after death.

Mrs.Curren was disturbed from her thoughts by Bheki's friend who came asking for an antiseptic. She then cleaned his wound and dressed it up. She advises the boy not to involve in political activism and to attend school. She loved the native boy and she tried to maintain a healthy relationship with the natives.

Their discipline is very good. What holds them back from exterminating every male child, every last one of you, is not compassion or fellow feeling. It is discipline, nothing else: orders from above, that can change any day. Compassion is flown out of the window. This is war. Listen to what I am saying! I know what I am talking about. You think I am trying to lure you out of the struggle. Well, that is true. That is what I am doing.

I say: wait, you are too young. (AI 144)

These lines reveal the stark reality of the situation. She feels pity about these boys and also for all the children in South Africa. Mrs.Curren voices her concern towards the native people.

Police came to her house. Mrs.Curren tells them that "Don't do anything yet, he is just a child!" (AI 152). She pleaded them to give a chance to speak with the boy. They wanted her to go out of the house because she didn't allow them to proceed further. The woman police carried her with her quilt and she cried in pain. They consider the teenage boys to be terrorists and shot them. This incident reveals the human rights violation during the civil war.

Mrs.Curren moved and got into the ambulance along with the dead boy. She got down from the ambulance on the road under the overpass and sat down to take rest. She was assaulted by three boys who came to her in search of money. They used a stick to search inside her mouth to find if she had any gold teeth. Finally they sprayed some dirt over her face and moved away. Mrs.Curren witnesses all sorts of violence she empathized with the native people. People lack humanism and given a chance they would reiterate their humiliation to other people, therefore peaceful co-existence becomes a question mark.

Age of Iron questions the role of the white liberal in troubled times.

The sense of complicity and the accompanying feeling of guilt in the course of Mrs. Curren's life. Her cancer is a metaphor for shame and the battle fought with the forces within. As the narrator approaches the end of her life, the cancer of apartheid is eating away the vitality of the nation and spelling its doom. (Nistandra 25)

Mrs.Curren was found by Vercueil. She starts crying upon seeing him and he carried her home. Mrs.Curren informs Vercueil that the young boy had been killed by the police ruthlessly. Everything was damaged in her home when she returned and it was worse than the burglary which happened three years before. She saw her filing cabinet and personal papers have been lost.

The police enquired her about 'Johannes', who was shot dead and she gave only vague answers. He asked about the pistol and the detonators the boy had. She said that the pistol was hers and she gave it to them to safeguard themselves during the attack. The officer says her that she has committed a crime and will be charged. She asked the

police about her missing papers and he replied that she will receive it only at the end of the enquiry. They asked her about Vercueil and Mrs.Curren says that he was her right hand man. Mrs.Curren sympathizes with the natives and hates the apartheid system, the ruthless police and the prejudiced government of the whites.

But how I ask myself: what right have I to opinions about comradeship or anything else? What right have I to wish Bheki and his friend had kept out of trouble? To have opinions in a vacuum, opinions that touch no one, is, it seems to me, nothing. Opinions must be heard by others, heard and weighed, not merely listened to out of politeness. (AI 163)

Marais comments about Mrs.Curren's views regarding human rights as "After Bheki's death and her visit to Guguletu, however, Mrs.Curren appears to realize that the system of Western values and ethics in terms of which she judges and acts has lost all validity and relevance in the historical context in which she finds herself. Thus, she comes to question her right and ability to judge at all" (Places of Pigs 89).

It is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that 'men' 'represent to themselves' in ideology, but above all it is their relation to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there. It is this relation which is at the centre of every ideological, i.e. imaginary, representation of the real world. It is this relation that contains the 'cause' which has to explain the imaginary distortion of the ideological representation of the real world. (Althusser 164)

Mrs.Curren doesn't want to commit suicide which was the only solution to get away from the pain. She wanted him not to take her to the hospital and put her in drug

induced coma, because she wanted to dream or think while dying. She got new set of pills that too didn't subside her pain. Vercueil supported her during her traumatic condition.

Mrs.Curren asks Vercueil what he will do after her death and she advised him to get married to live a good life. She says "I would promise to watch over you, except that I have no firm idea of what is possible after death" (AI 188). They both shared the bed every night now and lay down folded up on one another. Mrs.Curren later completes the letter and signs it as Mrs.V. He took complete care of her by even washing her underclothes like a good husband. "*Age of Iron*, for instance provides the reader with an "intimation" of "love"-that emotion which bridges the gap between the subject-object power relation" (Marais, *Places of Pigs* 92). Mrs.Curren's life is the metaphor of white minority in a colonised country. Mr.Vercueil is the metaphor for native people in South Africa. Mrs.Curren's cancer is a symbol of the apartheid system.

She tells him about the pain as "When the pain bites deepest and I shudder and go pale and a cold sweat breaks out on me, he sometimes holds my hand. I twist in his grip like a hooked fish; I am aware of an ugly look on my face.... He does not like that look; he turns his eyes away" (AI 191). Mr.Vercueil suddenly asks her to teach Latin. Mrs.Curren replies that if she had time she would have taught it before itself. Latin is a dead language. It indirectly means that humanism is dead. J.M.Coetzee through the character of Mrs.Curren strives to revive humanism.

Mrs.Curren thinks about her daughter and grand children and says that there is no relation between them because they are very far away. "The time is nearly upon me when I will have to depend on help for the most intimate things. High time, then, to put up an

end to this sorry story. Not that I doubt Vercueil would help” (AI 196). This incident emphasizes that interdependence of both the races will become inevitable in future.

Mrs.Curren addresses her daughter as, “I am going to release you soon from this rope of words. There is no need to be sorry for me. But spare a thought for this man left behind who cannot swim, does not yet know how to fly” (AI 197). The daughter who never appears in the novel refers to the readers. The author asks the readers to empathize with the downtrodden people. “Mrs.Curren writes in order to be able to die or, at least, to sustain the illusion of the possibility of death. Interestingly enough, this novel ends with a strong allusion to Mrs.Curren’s death. Throughout the novel, she toys with the idea that Vercueil is an angel of death” (Marais, *Literature & Labour* 121). Mrs.Curren loses her breath in the hands of Mr.Vercueil. Her death indicates that when South Africa comes into the control of the natives, apartheid or pain causing cancer will come to an end.

Mrs.Curren understands and gets used to Mr.Vercueil. Interdependence and mutual love and concern is achieved in the end between Mrs.Curren and Mr.Vercueil. The novel ends with Mrs.Curren’s remark: “The curtains parted; he came in beside me. For the first time I smelled nothing. He took me in his arms and held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush. From that embrace there was no warmth to be had” (AI 198). Vercueil supports her when she suffers from pain. When the cancer spread to her bones and her body became fragile she depends on Vercueil for help.

Mrs. Curren feels that she doesn’t have any power to control the system. She just regrets for the victims. Through the letter she writes, expresses her worries, fears and prejudices in an honest and frank manner. And throughout the novel she broods about her impending death and tells her condition is worse than before. “*Age of Iron* takes up the

most immediate sense of Mrs. Curren's *indifference* towards others, though it further enacts as abundant, dizzy play of the tropes of indifference and nothing, which haunt and subvert its discourse of love" (Yeoh, *Love and Indifference* 126).

In her seventy years of life witnessing the death of two adolescent boys John and Bheki, pained her more than her cancer. Gilbert Yeoh echoes on Mrs. Curren's maternal response to the death of the young boys as:

The politics of Mrs. Curren's maternal discourse can be seen in her response to Bheki and John's politically motivated murders, two key events in the novel that are both filtered through her maternal epistemology. The two episodes illustrate how Mrs. Curren's maternal discourse mediates the representation of Emergency events. Mrs. Curren endeavors to imagine their state of mind of both Bheki and John in the moment prior to death. (*Love and Indifference* 123)

While counting her last days, the prevalent violence was too much for Mrs. Curren to accept. She patiently waited for the death to embrace her. She narrates the agony of the natives and the violence perpetrated upon the native people by the white race, her own race. She doesn't seem to have any attachment towards any other white people in the novel. Mrs. Curren has developed a state of hatred towards the racial prejudice created by her race.

Thus, J.M. Coetzee has written this novel as a realistic representation of the conditions prevailing during apartheid. It is not the blood related daughter who holds her hand in her death bed but a native man whom the South African whites have detested. This is the irony of the situation. But the relationship of Mrs. Curren and Vercueil

indicates that enmity between the natives and whites will soon come to an end.

J.M.Coetzee ends the novel with a positive note. As a white woman, living in a world where whites are the oppressors, her sense of guilt increases and also a deep hatred for the unjust world around her.

J.M.Coetzee through Mrs. Elizabeth Curren's day to day life outlines the changes that are taking place in South Africa. The native people struggle to free themselves from the torturing hands of apartheid. Even the white majority are aware that the system of apartheid is on the verge of decline still they try to assert their superiority. By portraying violence and inequalities towards the native people in *Age of Iron* J.M.Coetzee proves to the world that he genuinely wants to put a full stop to this racial segregation. J.M.Coetzee also wishes that everyone belonging to the white race should act like Mrs.Curren by empathizing with the native people.