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Post-Apartheid Violence in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*

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Abstract

Racism and its destructive effects on the lives of the black and coloured members of apartheid South Africa lead to a hike in crime and violence in the society. Many South African writers who have taken time to satirize the society by exposing the evil effects of apartheid in their works focus on only the blacks as the victims excluding the whites. Through textual analysis, this study exposes J. M. Coetzee's representation of post-apartheid violence in his *Age of Iron* (1990) with the aim of exposing how both the white and black South Africans are victims of apartheid and how to provide a lasting solution to their wounds and pains caused by the violence. The study also aims to buttress that going back to the traditional and cultural African values of accepting one another as brothers and harmonious co-existence of Africans, disparity and racism would be eradicated in the society. This will in turn reduce insecurity in the society.

Keywords: Apartheid, oppression, post-apartheid violence, insecurity, textual analysis, acceptance

Introduction

J. M. Coetzee is one of the prolific writers in South Africa and a recipient of 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature. Coetzee is white (a Boer) but has carefully written about the evils of apartheid operation in South Africa. *Age of Iron* (1990) is a symbolic

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novel and its symbolic undertone lies in the time of setting his novel, few years before the dying of apartheid. Just like apartheid had 3-4 years to its death, Mrs. Elizabeth Curren, the protagonist of the novel, is also dying in few years. Therefore, the novel is a kind of mirror showing what happened in apartheid South Africa. It is the age when people are inflexible and have hearts that have become hardened like iron; because of that the dying apartheid is destroying more people before it dies. Many other South African novelists like Solomon Tshekisho Paatje, Peter Abraham, Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer and some others have written on apartheid but Coetzee creates a dying white woman as the protagonist of the novel to buttress how both the black and white South Africans are victims of apartheid policy. He also exposes how the people are suffering the consequences of the evil practice till present.

Textual analysis is adopted for this study. Textual analysis is a methodology which involves understanding and interpreting the language, symbols and/or illustrations in a text to gain information regarding the text. Coetzee in *Age of Iron* represents the day to day human activities in South Africa from 1990 to 1994 and understanding the text lies on the understanding what happened during the dying period of apartheid in South Africa. Irek (2017) in support of this asserts that "there exists a symbiotic relationship between the arts and the society" and "the society provides a resource pool from where the artist draws his materials for his creative work" (119). The essay aims at buttressing the fact that migrating to Europe and America for safety is not a solution to the increasing insecurity as a result of the apartheid policy. It also promotes coming together of Africans to bear one another's burden which can only be possible through social belongingness that comes by accepting one another to form a stronghold for national development.

The Apartheid Period, Origin and Policy

Coetzee, in *Age of Iron,* represents in the highest degree the South African peculiar problem of apartheid. This is why the historical background on the information relating to South Africa and the social conditions of South Africans is important for a better understanding of the novel. Initially, the Zulu and the Khoe-San or Xhoisan people lived in South Africa but in 16th century, around 1652, groups of white people from Holland in Europe in a kind of an adventure were sailing, to go and sell their goods/ products and buy raw materials (History/South African Government). European merchants sailed to places that period and in some places, they came, killed the whole people and took over or colonized the places. When they came to South Africa, they discovered that it is so beautiful – the vegetations, mounts, landscape

and weather were perfect to them. After their business, they decided to leave some of their own people to stay in South Africa, plant vegetables so that when they come again, they would see what to buy. These people they left settled in Cape Town. In 1835, thousands of Boers began a mass migration to new lands to the north and east in South Africa and they established their own free states, called Boer republics (www.ducksters.com).

This is how they started building, farming, enslaving and oppressing the owners of the land. They started migrating from the Cape to the hinterlands. They were meeting stronger people like the Zulu and Solos who fought them but because the whites have more sophisticated arms and ammunitions, they overcame them. As they kept defeating them, they kept moving inwards and the displaced natives shifted to the hinterlands as the whites appropriated the fertile land. They made laws that favoured the whites. For instance, the 1913 Land Act which limited native African's land ownership to 7%. Thousands of blacks' families were forcibly removed from their land by apartheid government. Later, through 1936 Native Trust and Land Act of South Africa the land ownership was increased to 13% (//www.gov.za).

When the Boers started their own administration after appropriation of the natives' land and enslaving them, other people from different parts of Europe started coming to South Africa. The British people fought the Boars to stop the slavery - there were the First and Second Boer Wars. First Boer war is literally known as 'First Freedom War' 1880-1881 and Second Boer War called 'Second Anglo-Boer War' 1899-1902 (https://www.sahistory.org.za/). The British defeated the Boers and also established their own British administration. The British treated the natives better; as human beings. They were allowed to go to school but when the British were leaving South Africa, they handed the government to the Boars who again wanted to marginalize the Blacks permanently so that they would be treated as slaves in their entire lives.

South Africa is called 'Rainbow Nation' because it is inhabited by people of many colours and races. The Boars also marginalized the coloured – the Indians and the Mulattos. The black people were the worst treated; classified in the bottom of the hierarchy of races. Urama points out that the blacks were the worst marginalized because of the white's notion that they are descendants of Ham; the cursed son of Noah who mocked Noah's nakedness and received a curse which has placed them as slaves or in servant's position forever (2016:2). In 1912, three years after South Africa gained independence, a controversial Land Act, in which more than 80% of South Africa's land was set aside for the white minority, was

passed (www.britaannica.com). At Bloemfontein on 8 January 1912, the opponents of this Land Act formed the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) which later became African National Congress (ANC). The organization was renamed to ANC in 1923 (www.anc1912.org.za). Seeing themselves as the superior race is therefore what made the whites deny the blacks of humanity and identity and treat them as sub-humans. Not minding that 80% of the people are blacks while the remaining 20% are whites, the government classified South Africa by race: whites, coloured and the Bantu (black Africans). They banned marriages between the whites and blacks. The black majority could not be allowed to move to the cities unless they carry Passes. The blacks who resisted were arrested and imprisoned.

Apartheid policy of discrimination against the blacks in South Africa was introduced as a State Policy in 1948 and the segregation policy continued until 1992, when the rule of the majority was enthroned (Urama 2016: 89-90), therefore apartheid laws remained effective in South Africa for about 50 years. Apartheid entrenched discrimination between blacks and whites in all areas of life and placed the black people in an inferior position. The government removed blacks from their indigenous homelands to pack them in places known as Bantustans: This was done following the promotion of Bantu Self-Government of 1959 in which the whites created 10 Bantu homelands to separated the blacks so that they would not be unified to form one black national movement for fighting for their freedom. They sold the homelands at low prices to white farmers. "From 1961-1994 more than 3.4 million people were forcefully removed from their homes and deposited in Bantustans where they are plunged into poverty" (www.history.com). The Blacks moved about with Passes, ate in dirty hotels, lived in secluded and squalid areas and could not converse with the whites on equal basis.

The whites did not end at displacing the blacks but they also killed them violently. The worst examples of violence during apartheid are: the terrible waste of lives and attacks on the inhabitants of SOWETO – 'South West Township', an African homeland on Bantustan, the largest ghetto in the whole world (Urama 2008: 31; Urama 2016: 77). In 1960, the black people organized a 'sit at home demonstration' because the blacks did the donkey works and the system could not operate if they refused to work. The whites came out and started shooting them. Blood flew like river in the shanty massacre. Some British people still supported the whites because of what they gained from them - gold. This implies that minerals were also one of the significant factors that aided the growth of apartheid in South Africa.

The whites preached love but they were the same people who perpetrated racial discrimination in South Africa. The blacks were not allowed to study professional courses so that they would not fight for their rights. In addition to this, movements of the blacks to the urban areas where the whites lived were restricted with stringent conditions so that the black would remain in the ghetto. The condition that could allow the blacks to get into some of the white areas was their readiness to work in the mines as miners – a very deadly option. Out of frustration most of the blacks started living as drunks and drug addicts carrying out deadly acts that made Soweto fearful. Most of the blacks that lived in Soweto worked in city and commuted to Johannesburg everyday. Most of the working blacks who lived in Soweto minister to the domestic, social and economic needs of the whites' community of Johannesburg. Urama rightly asserts that "the heart desire of the people becomes regaining their individual and native self in their own fatherland" (2016:79-80).

Anti-Apartheid/Opposition of Apartheid and the End of Apartheid

South Africans resisted apartheid in many forms. In 1952, the opposition to apartheid groups together with ANC organized a congress and the attendees of the congress burnt their passbooks. In 1955, a group of blacks that called itself: '"Congress of the People', adopted a Freedom Chatter that South Africa belongs to the people who live in it. The Government broke into their meeting arrested 150 people and charged them with high treason" (www.history.com).

Many countries too formed Anti-Apartheid movements as the whites became increasingly wicked to the blacks. Not only that, the blacks were not allowed to vote but their agitators for freedom were killed and imprisoned. In 1960, the police opened fire at the township of Sharpeville on unarmed blacks associated with Pan-African Congress (PAC), an offshoot of the ANC and at least 67 blacks were killed and more than 180 wounded. Senanu and Vincent confirm that "in the town Sharpeville, in South Africa, on 21 March 1960, 67 black and coloured people, protesting against the pass laws, were shot dead by the South African police and several others were wounded" (1988:119). In 1961, Nelson Mandela was captured and imprisoned because he was the founder of 'Spear of the Nation – Umkhonto we Swize' – the military wing of the ANC: "As a result of the establishment of apartheid, its aversion to dissent by Black people and the brutal crackdown of political activists, the ANC together with the SACP formed a military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation/MK) in 1961" (www.sahistory.org.za). Mandela was incarcerated from 1963-1990.

In 1976, the whites decreed that English language and no other language would be taught in South African Schools not minding that the blacks were about 30-50 million and the whites were just 4 million (Urama 2016:79-80). They allowed Afrikaans, language of the Boers, to dominate other African indigenous languages. This is because they knew that one cannot talk about freedom without a language. The black people, mostly school children went to the streets to demonstrate that they would not speak Afrikaans and the whites started shooting innocent children. Blood of these innocent children flew like river and it drew international attention and help from anti-apartheid individuals, organizations and governments. These were too much and the "United Nations Secretary Council voted to impose a mandatory embargo on the sale of arms to South Africa" (www.history.com); the United Nations began to isolate South Africa from the activities of the world, like Olympics. Arch Bishop of Canterbury headed the Anti-Apartheid Movement in UK. The same Anti-Apartheid Movement was organized in other nations of the world. In 1985, United Kingdom and United States of America imposed economic sanction on South Africa.

South African government started negotiating for peace and in February 11, 1990 Nelson Mandela was freed by F.W. de Klerk after 27 years in prison because of his patriotism. He went to UK and Nigeria because Nigeria was at the forefront of fighting apartheid in South Africa. He came to Nigeria to thank Nigeria for the role they played in bringing apartheid down. In 1991, President F.W. de Klerk began to repeal most of the legislation that provided the basis for apartheid. When election was conducted, ANC won the election and Mandela became the first elected black President in 1994, four years he was released from the prison.

J. M. Coetzee's Ideas of Apartheid, Violence and Insecurity in Post-Apartheid South Africa

In *Age of Iron*, Coetzee explores the evils of apartheid and the effects on individuals (the black South Africans) who are its victims. His skilful use of symbolism in the novel to reveal more about apartheid and its social, economic and political effects on the victims few years to the death of apartheid in South Africa brings out his outstanding success as a writer. The basic factor that provides the superstructure of *Age of Iron* is racial discrimination. The effects of much injustice on the black people of South Africa by the white overlords continue to the present day South Africa because we cannot deny people their right and think that injustice would stop. It is natural that violent people will die in violence and that is why there are increase in violence and incessant killings in South Africa. Huggan points out that:

> *Age of Iron* is set in turbulent period of South African history; years which were to witness the tragic deaths of members of Coetzee's own family – his mother, Vera, his father Zachariah and his son Nicolas to whose memory the novel is dedicated – but also in violence of cataclysmic proportions, the deaths of thousands of black in the cities and townships of embattled Republic. *Age of Iron* is an elegy; an attempt, through narrative to come to terms with the grief of personal loss while morning the collective losses of war-torn society. (2006:191)

The blacks who work in white people's homes move from the townships to the city. They carry their 'Passes' because of the tensions derived from the physical separation of the blacks and the whites due to apartheid. The black people become angry because there are no jobs, no food and they are frustrated. They are turned into monsters killing people every day. In the novel, the whites live in fear because the blacks come to steal and attack them just as the blacks live in fear of being arrested, tortured or killed by the white police officers. Black violence, rape, domestic violence and robbery keep on increasing. Most young hungry and homeless blacks turn to drunks and sexual abusers that an average of 16 women is raped every minute, while people have electric fences in South Africa. They rape children, adults and aged people alike. Apartheid that dehumanized them has actually taken humanity from them. Even in the contemporary South African society some of them still believe that if they make love to virgins, their HIV infection would be cured. They keep violating innocent children. All these emanated from the dehumanization of apartheid. Their hearts have really turned to heart of iron or stone due to the physical, mental, psychological and emotional trauma of apartheid. Mrs. Elizabeth Curren, the narrator in the novel, emphasizes her fear on seeing the homeless man around her house to prove that everybody lives in fear and bondage.

> There were not so many of these homeless people in your time. But now they are part of life here. Do they frighten me? On the whole no. A little begging, a little thieving, dirt, noise, drunkenness; no worse. It is roaming gangs I fear, the sullen-mouthed boys, rapacious as sharks, on whom the first shade of the prison house is already beginning to close … (7).

Coetzee employs symbolism in the novel and he uses this technique to capture the events of the moment. Mrs. Elizabeth Curren, the protagonist of the novel, represents South Africa; the cancer she has that is eaten deep into her bones is the apartheid that is dying in South Africa which has eaten deep into the country. Detels affirms that Mrs. Curren's cancer "is the shame of Apartheid, a terminal cancer that compels

her engagement with truth-telling" (2009:19). The cancer/crab eaten deep inside the woman highlights that the cancer will die with the woman showing that the dying apartheid is destroying more people before it dies:

> I was on my way out to the shops, in the act of opening the garage door, when I had a sudden attack. An attack: it was just that: the pain hurling itself upon me like a dog sinking its teeth into my back. I cried out unable to stir. Then he, this man appeared from somewhere and helped me into the house.
>
> I lay on the sofa, on my left side, in the only-comfortably posture left to me. He waited. 'Sit down.' I said. He sat. The pain began to subside, 'I have cancer,' I said. 'It has made its way into the bone. That is what hurts' (10).

Mrs. Curren begins to love the homeless man whom she does not even know his name after he helps her into her house. His cares and love makes her accept him as she accepts her natural daughter and all other whites. She is so happy and writes to her daughter about him:

> Six pages already, and all about a man you have never met and never will. Why do I write about him? Because he is and is not I. Because in the look he gives me I see myself in a way that can be written. Otherwise what would this writing be but a kind of moaning, now high, now low? When I write about myself. When I write about his dog I write about myself; when I write about the house I write about myself, Man, house, dog: no matter what the word, through it I stretch out a hand to you (9).

> I gave 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 (131).

This man reciprocates the love she first showed him by feeding him and his dog. This she portrays in her letter to her only daughter in America: "Why do I give the man food? For the same reason I would feed his dog (stolen, I am sure) if it came begging. For the same reason I gave you my breast" (7), and this gives her comfort in enduring her pains till she dies. Purcell asserts that:

> The arrival of Vercueil sends her thoughts to the biblical teaching she has known since childhood. Vercueil, in her mind, could be an angel. The fact that her angel is far from being perfect moves her to contemplate the nature of charity and its basis, the love of another person (2013:4).

The author, through expressing this love and care, Mrs. Curren and Vercueil develop for each other, brings us to the symbol of the blood. As Mrs. Curren's love for the blacks – Florence, Vercueil and all blacks – continues to grow, they are bonded together because every human being has the same blood flowing in his vein. This is portrayed by the thick blood flowing when John is shot by the police officer. This thick blood is significant because Mrs. Curren notices that both the blacks and the whites' blood is the same; everybody shares the same blood. This is why Mrs. Curren describes how horrific the blood flowing when Bheki's friend, John is shot by the police is:

> 'It was the same when that friend of his was bleeding in the street. There was the same heaviness. Heavy blood. I was trying to stop it from flowing down the gutters. So much blood! If I had caught it all I would not have been able to lift the bucket. Like trying to lift a bucket of lead.'
>
> 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…' (124).

It is acceptance of having this one blood or sharing the same blood with the blacks that transforms Mrs. Curren before she dies. This proves that Africans, whether black or white, need to accept one another and detest the master (superiority) or slave (inferiority) relationship for the sustainability of development of Africa. This sharing in one blood is also highlighted in Mrs. Curren dreaming of Florence as a goddess who has the supernatural power that transforms someone.

> I am intent on Florence. Her dark coat, her dull dress have fallen away. In a white slip ruffled by the wind, her feet bare, her head bare, her right breast bare, she strides past, the one-child masked, naked, trotting quickly beside her, the other stretching an arm out over her shoulder, pointing.
>
> Who is this goddess who comes in a vision with uncovered breast cutting the air? It is Aphrodite, but not smile-loving Aphrodite, patroness of pleasures: an older figure, a figure of urgency, of cries in the dark, short and sharp, of blood and earth, emerging for an instant, showing herself, passing
>
> From the goddess comes no call no signal. Her eye is open and is blank. She sees and does not see.
>
> Burning, doing my show. I stand transfixed. The flames flowing from me are blue as ice. I feel no pain. (178).

This implies that if the people of South Africa, whether blacks, coloured or whites and other people in other African countries accept themselves as one, a people that shares one blood, they will be united for the development of Africa rather than killing themselves. Xenophobia, looting and destruction of life and property will become a thing of the past.

Mrs. Curren who is formerly lonely finds friendship, companionship and comfort that help her to bear the pains of dying from the dreaded cancer in Vercueil, the homeless man. This decision to accept black, especially the homeless man as a real human being and not a subhuman, makes Mrs. Curren experience a lot of changes as the novel progresses; her experience with the blacks as the homeless made her become aware of the situation that she is shielded from almost all her life because she lives a life of privilege. She is white and rich and has been living in luxury but the migration of her only daughter to America and the loneliness associated to that, the cancer and pains associated to it made her accept these blacks who become part of her life. She is made to feel their pain. This buttresses the point that it is going back to the traditional and cultural values of accepting one another as brothers, harmonious and peaceful co-existence that would heal Africa from violence and insecurity.

Moreover, the police is always there to protect the whites from the life of the black, suffering. Coetzee, just like other writers, has carried out the role of the writer which is to expose what is happening in South Africa for the world to see, to explore the situation without the authorial intrusion. This is the major reason why *Age of Iron* is selected for this study. It is not that a black South African writer is writing out of sentiments but a privileged Boer writing to expose the realities of the situation. Mrs. Curren is also symbolically encouraging Florence to speak out what the system is doing to the blacks. She represents those whites who are against apartheid encouraging the blacks to rise up and speak out. As the story progresses, the police turned against Mrs. Curren because they see her as protecting the blacks. She protects John and did not betray him: "'Wait!' I said. 'Don't do anything yet; he is just a child!'" (152). She talks kindly to John: "'Open the door, my boy,' I said. 'I won't let them hurt you. I promise'" (152). They want to search for the arms in Florence's room. The reason why the police offices command Mrs. Curren to leave her house for their inspection is because she supports the blacks. She only tries to make the police not to take justice into their hands by killing blacks without trial. They even try to carry her out of the house by force but she shouts:

> '*I have cancer*,' I screamed. '*Put me down*!'
>
> *Cancer*! What a pleasure to fling the word at them! It stopped them in their tracks like a knife. (155).

The police officers come back later to ask her questions about the pistol she lends to John. She boldly defends John and tells them that she acquired the pistol for so long a time when nobody talked about licenses:

> 'And do you know how these arms came into his hands?'
>
> 'What arms?'
>
> A pistol. Three detonators.'
>
> 'I know nothing about detonators. I don't know what a detonator is. The pistol was mine.'
>
> 'Did they take it from you?'
>
> 'I lent it to them. Not them to the boy, John.'
>
> 'You lent him the pistol? Was the pistol yours?'
>
> 'Yes.'
>
> 'Why did you lend him the pistol?'
>
> 'To defend himself.'
>
> 'To defend himself against who, Mrs. Curren?'
>
> 'To defend himself against attack.'
>
> 'And what kind of pistol was it, Mrs. Curren? Can you show me the license for it?'
>
> 'I know nothing about kinds of pistols. I have had it for a long time, before all this fuss about licenses' (172-173).

John running inside the house and locking up himself in the room portrays fear created in hearts of the blacks by apartheid; everybody is apprehensive. No one knows what would happen any time and so fear gripped everyone because violence is everywhere in the land. South African police are all over the streets hunting for blacks to kill. It is worthy to note that the police hunting for the black and killing them did not stop the violence. Crime keeps increasing everyday because injustice begets violence and insecurity. South Africa is still known for violent killings even in post-apartheid era.

Most of these blacks are homeless even in this contemporary South African society. That is why they are frustrated and sometimes attack and rob people. It is true that the blacks do the donkey jobs like mining and hard labours in the farms but many young men are drunks out of frustration. Women in the lives of such men are mostly domestic workers, sale girls in supermarkets owned by the white South Africans and labourers in farms owned by the white farmers. These frustrated young men not only attack the whites, but they are also antagonistic to foreigners. They claim that these foreigners have taken the jobs that should have been theirs while their young men are too lazy to work as most of them are drunks and drug addicts. They transfer aggression to their black women who actually do the labour. The lazy young men forcefully take the wages collected by women in their lives and spend them on drinks and drugs claiming that they are the men of the house. The worst aspect of it all is that due to the patriarchal nature of the society, men's show of masculinity is usually toxic and this makes it difficult for women to walk out of toxic relationships. Violence has increased in South Africa to the extent that if a woman quits a relationship with a man, the man will not attack the woman alone but all the members of her family. This leads us to gender inequality and female degradation in African society and how women are the most vulnerable in an oppressed society. This makes women to be tolerating men in their lives while they die in silence.

Young men also attack foreigners who are in relationship with South African women. They claim these foreigners have taken their women from them. The actual reason why foreigners attract South African young women is because they respect women and show them love. This jealousy in South African young men is one of the major reasons for increased xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa. Most South Africans are disillusioned because of how the contemporary political leaders who are supposed to be fighting for peace and stability are guilty of corruption that takes the country back into poverty, hardship and more violence.

It is clearly depicted that apartheid came into existence due to racism and discrimination at the highest level. Bantustan or different living areas for the whites, the coloured and blacks have not been taking care of to the present day South Africa. The whites being so much afraid that the blacks will be attacking them for retaliation still live in the cities; the blacks live in townships while the coloured live in between the whites and the blacks. It is a strategy; the white South African adopts for protection; the coloured would be attacked first before it comes to them and that would give them the opportunity to prepare to fight back or run for their lives. Most

homeless blacks still roam around in the cities committing one crime or the other. Peter Abraham has also exposed the evil of Bantustan in *Mine Boy* (1946). Coetzee in support of him satirizes the society for a change. Coetzee is of the opinion that if only South Africans should be wise to accept one another and forgive the deeds of the past, peace will be restored in the country and the issue of Bantustan, cities and townships for specific races should cease with the harmonious co-existence of South Africans.

Mrs. Curren becomes wiser in her acts of accepting the blacks but it is too late as she is already dying, but it is better than not being wise at all. Coetzee represents this to encourage African political leaders who have in one way or the other exploited or oppressed the masses to repent, apologize and do what is right for Africans to rebuild a violent free Africa. This is the only way the wounds created in the heart of the people would be treated to heal and it would promote the development of a better African society. Mrs. Curren becomes kinder, more understanding as she thinks about the privileges the whites enjoy which these homeless black Africans do not have. She begins to feel for them and understand more while they always smell:

> 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 clean underwear; he needs a bed, he needs a roof over his head, he needs three meals a day, he needs money in the bank. Too much to give: too much for someone who longs, if the truth be told. To creep into her own mother's lap and be comforted (19-20).

Purcell rightly affirms that "at this point Mrs. Curren is quite conscious of the fact that the welfare of her soul is dependent upon her relationship with another, particularly Vercueil ... she see her salvation in her relationship with Vercueil and she must first love to be saved" (2013:7). She understands more that these black people need help and grant Vercueil the help he needs despite of the smelling:

> He lay down at my back, on top of the bedclothes. The smell of his dirty feet reached me. He whistled softly; the dog leapt up did its circle dance, settled between his legs and mine. Like Tristan's sword, keeping us honest (185).
>
> We share a bed, folded one upon the other like a page folded in two, like two wings folded: old mates, bunkmates, conjoined, conjugal. *Lectus genialis. Lectus adversus*. His toenails, when he takes off his shoes, are yellow,

> almost brown, like horn. Feet that he keeps out of water for fear of falling: falling into depths where he cannot breathe (189).

This acceptance, friendship and relationship help her to die more peacefully instead of dying horrifically in pains with no one caring for her. Mr. Vercueil who is reluctant to sleep on the same bed with Mrs. Curren at first, seeing that she is so lonely and needs this companionship most to keep her till she dies accepts to be sleeping on the same bed with her to keep her warm:

> Gnawing at my bone now that there is no flesh left. Gnawing the socket of my hip, gnawing my backbone, beginning to gnaw at my knees. The cats, if the truth be told, have never really loved me. Only this creature is faithful to the end. My pet, my pain
>
> I went upstairs and opened the toilet door. Vercueil was still there, slumped in his deep sleep. I shook him. 'Mr. Vercueil!' I said. One eye opened. 'Come and lie down.'
>
> But he did not. First I heard him on the stairs, taking step at a time like an old man. Then I heard the back door close (112-113).

When Vercueil starts keeping her warm, she defends him with all the strength remaining in her from the Police Officers:

> 'Who is Mr. Vercueil?' And the quite a different tone: '*Wie is jy*?'
>
> 'Mr. Vercueil takes care of me. Mr. Vercueil is my right-hand man. Come here, Mr. Vercueil.'
>
> I reached out and found Vercueil's trouser leg, then his hand, the bad hand with the curled fingers. With the numb clawlike grip of the old I cling to it. (173)

There is a tendency that she can even will her house to Mr. Vercueil who is taking care of her at her dying moments especially as her daughter has vowed never to come back to South Africa. The smell also symbolizes the state of black South Africans life which Mrs. Curren is getting used to; a kind of love/hate relationship. She senses the smell and tolerates it. She continues to tolerate the smell until she stops perceiving the smell and that is at the point of her death (198).

Mrs. Florence Mkubuketi, Mrs. Curren's domestic worker, represents black South Africans who see their jobs as a real job; the donkey jobs that help in the development of the nation. Florence runs out in the night under the rain in search of his missing son, Bheki. This happened on one of the nights the police hunt and shed the blood of

innocent blacks. She represents all the black women; mothers who loose their children at any slightest provocation of the police officers. Mrs. Curren goes to street too to look for Florence and Bheki because they are now part of her family. She exposes herself to the danger of being attacked by gang of criminals. As she is forced to witness the danger, people are exposed to in Guguletu township, she feels more the pains of Florence and other blacks: She is devastated when she finds out that Bheki has been shot dead: "The inside of the hall was a mess of rubble and charred of beams … The body in the middle was that of Florence's Bheki. He still wore the gray flanned trousers, white shirt, and maroon pullover of his school, but his feet were bare" (102). When she sees the five dead bodies of black boys shot dead by the police she could not hold her tears: "'Have you seen inside the hail?' I asked in my cracked voice. Now the tears were beginning to come" (106). She also boldly advices the police officer to drop their guns because their job of killing innocent people is the worst one: "'Why don't you just put down your guns and go home, all of you?' I said. Because surely nothing can be worse than what you are doing here. Worse for your souls, I mean'" (107). Shivering in pains she tells them that she knows one of the people they have killed:

> I was shivering from head to foot. My fingers, curled into the palms of my hands, would not straighten. The wind drove the sodden clothing against my skin.
>
> 'I know one of those dead boys,' I said. 'I have known him since he was five. His mother works for me. You are all too young for this. It sickens me. That is all' (107).

Purcell asserts that: "salvation is at the centre of *Age of Iron*. For Mrs. Curren to be saved she must recognise her sins and connect with the souls of those around her'". He also emphasizes that: "her journey through Guguletu makes her painfully aware of her sins" (2013:9). Curren also wants the white South Africans to acknowledge their sins and confess them; this is why she advices the police officers. Detels affirms that: "search for truth sends Mrs. Curren to the township of Guguleta so that she will have a truth to tell. At Guguleta she looks upon the dead body of her housekeeper's son Bheki and is challenged to find words for the crime of Bheki's murder" (2009:19). Vercueil looks for her, finds her and brings her home.

She still goes to see Florence to console her and cheque for her. She encourages her to speak out for the injustice meted on the blacks. Florence has her right to speak her mind even though she is a domestic worker. Vercueil continues to take

care of her till she dies. Florence's son, Bheki, and his friend, John, represent the upcoming rebellion of apartheid. The actions represent or indicate loss of innocence. Children are supposed to be protected. Bheki and John have become adults but as little children they struggle to survive. Mrs. Curren narrates the story of childhood experiences right from the generation of her grand mother and this clearly portrays the disparity between the black and white South Africans:

> When my mother was still a child, in the early years of the century, the family used to go to the seaside for Christmas. This was still in the age of ox wagons. They would travel by ox wagon all the way from Uniondale in the Eastern Cape to Pettenberg Bay at the mouth of the Piesangs River, a journey of a hundred miles taking I don't know how many days along the way they would camp at the riverside (17).

White children enjoy holiday trips with their parents. Whites plan when they are having children; they usually have one child or two children they can take proper care of. They make sure their children enjoy the pleasure of life and they are also well trained in good schools. Violence in the society has made black children become inflexible and hardened like iron or stone. They are not properly fed because of poverty and instead of being protected and enjoying their sleep at night, they hide because of violence. They became violent earlier in life because of segregation creating boundaries everywhere: The death of Bheki affects Mrs. Curren so much that she gets drunk. She emphasizes she gets herself drunk with alcohol not to release herself of pains from her sickness but to get over the shock of Bheki's death. She explains to her daughter that Bheki's death is turning her into a talkative:

> 'Let me tell you finally,' I said. 'What set me off was not my own condition, my sickness, but something quite different.' …
>
> 'Florence's boy was shot on Tuesday.' ...
>
> 'I saw the body,' I went on, taking another sip, thinking: Shall I now grow loquacious? Lord preserve me! And as I grow loquacious will Vercueil grow loquacious too? He and I, under the influence, loquacious together in the little car: (123-124).

Mrs. Curren feeds John and advises him to keep away from anything that will bring him into the hands of the police again. She tries to make him see the reality of the police being out to kill children through Bheki's death (164). When she finds out that John is searching for something under the floor in Florence's room, she reports to

Mr. Thabane, Florence's cousin, that John might be in possession of arms (168), but when a pistol is got from him she defends him and testifies that she lends it to him to protect himself. She laments that the South African police officers kill black children who have actually done nothing wrong. This implies that the actual criminals are the government that enthroned the apartheid policy and the police that kill innocent people. She recounts how John is shot by the police and he is hospitalized and how she informs him how Bheki is killed:

> There was some on the kitchen and it was not Vercueil. Whoever it was did not try to hide. My God, I thought Bheki! A child ran through me.
>
> In the eerie light cast by the open refrigerator he confronted me, his forehead with the bullet wound covered by a white bandage.
>
> 'What do you want?' I whispered. 'Do you want food?'
>
> He spoke: 'Where is Bheki?' …
>
> 'Florence isn't here anymore.' I said . I turned on the light. …
>
> 'How is your arm,' I asked.
>
> 'I must not move the arm.' He said. …
>
> 'Where is Bheki?'
>
> 'Bheki is dead. He was killed last week while you were in hospital. He was shot. He died at once. The day after the affair with the bicycle.' (133-134)

The death of Bheki and John and other innocent citizens enables Mrs. Curren judge herself from her past sins of not having any feeling of sympathy for the blacks. Even though she describes children of that era as 'children of iron', she has come face to face with the realities of the innocence of some of these children when Bheki tells her the reason why the police kill boys.

> 'Why are the police after you?'
>
> 'They are not after me. They are after everybody. I have done nothing. But anybody they see they think should be in school. They try to get them. We do nothing, we just say we are not going to school, Now they are waging this terror against us. They are terrorists.'
>
> 'Why won't you go to school?'
>
> 'What is school for? It is to make us fit into the apartheid system.' (67)

She realizes her error of not accepting the black as equal to the whites. She confesses her sins to her daughter in the letter that she has decided to love and take care of

John, a black boy whom she has refused to take care of and show love before, and gets ready to die a happy woman. According to Purcell she must recognize and confesses her sins (2013:9) but Detels adds that "a secularized sacrament of confession is simple not going to get Curren saved, rather she craves to love and be loved" (2009:18). To Coetzee, this realization is what every South African needs:

> That is my first word, my first confession. I do not want to die in the state I am in, in a state of ugliness. I want to be saved. How shall I be saved? By doing what I do not want to do. That is the first step: that I know. I must love, first of all, the unlovable. I must love, for instance, this child. Not bright little Bheki, but this one. He is here for a reason. He is part of my salvation. I must love him. But I do not love him. Not do I want to love him enough to love him despite myself (136).

Many South Africans migrated to Europe, America and other countries of the world because they did not like what was happening in apartheid South Africa. Mrs. Curren's daughter, her only child, migrated to America and vowed that she would never come back to South Africa: "I was born in South Africa and will never see it again" (78). Mrs. Curren even confesses that her love for South Africa has died: "Now that desire, which one may as well call love, is gone from me. I do not love this land anymore. It is simple as that" (121). When Curren realizes that she is about to die, she writes this letter to her daughter to assure her that she will get the truth about South Africa since she left to America from the latter. There are more crimes and violence she does not even know exist in the country: "If Vercueil does not send these writings on, you will never read them. You'll never even know they existed. A certain body of truth will never take on flesh: my truth: how I lived in these times, in this place" (130). She asks Vercueil to post the letter to her in America because if the letter is not posted, it would just be there. He refuses at first but later agrees to post it to her daughter: "It means that if you don't mail the letter to my daughter I will have a hundred years of misery (192). When she finds out that Mr. Vercueil is reluctant to post the mail to her daughter she persuades him as a friend he is. In concluding her letter, Mrs. Curren laments again that her only daughter and two grandchildren are far away at a time she needs them most – her old age and dying moment. She emphasizes the unending joy of having Mr. Vercueil and John around her as her only true family. Her natural daughter and her grandchildren have abandoned her because of the evils of apartheid:

> Last night, growing terribly cold, I tried to call up to say good-bye. But you would not come. I whispered your name. 'My daughter, my child.' I

> whispered into the darkness; but all that appeared to me was a photograph: a picture of you, not you. Severed, I thought: that line severed too. Now there is nothing to hold me (197).

Coetzee in representing this portrays that the blacks and the whites are all victims of apartheid. This implies that oppression and violence affects the rich and the poor, the leaders and the led in the society. This should be a strong reason for Africans to fight corruption, oppression, exploitation, marginalization, violence and live peaceful for sustainable development of Africa.

The novel ends as Mrs. Curren peacefully dies in the arms of Mr. Vercueil, the homeless black man, who God has given her just as God has chosen for her and he arrives like her child.

> It is hard to be alone all the time. That's all. 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. (71)

Vercueil becomes even more than a child to her because he is also her friend and lover and they both accept each other. He even does what her natural daughter could not do her by taking care of her at the most critical moments of her life. She smells nothing at this point of her life because it is only in death that she gets her salvation from the destruction of cancer and unavoidable destruction from the system of operation in her country. Ducan posits that Mrs. Curren, the narrator, speaking about her own death instead of the narration ending before her death proves the Coetzee presents Vercueil as an angel of death (2006:182). Mrs. Curren emphasizes:

> I got back into bed, into the tunnel between the cold sheets. 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 (198).

Conclusion

Coetzee, in the novel, *Age of Iron*, offers an innovative and critical perspective that an effective way to curb violent and incessant killings to bring positive change in South African society is for Africans to accept one another no matter their colour of skin. Accepting one another promotes a strong spirit of belongingness in both the black and white South Africans and strengthens their morality. *Age of Iron*, therefore, is a social reality; a representation of the socio-political and human experiences of the apartheid era which aims at guiding the people to the right path and harmonious

co-existence. Accepting one another will lead to the eradication of disparity and racism in the society, heal the wounds of apartheid carried into this post apartheid South Africa and reduce insecurity drastically. With the novel, Coetzee accomplishes the function of a writer as a teacher; it is left for the audience to redirect their steps to the right path by accommodating one another rather than running away to Europe and America looking for a safer abode. Literary texts like this which are geared towards sensitizing and impacting the restoration of cordial human relationships among the citizens of African societies are needed in African literature to promote unity and sustainable development of Africa.

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