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Mothering the Land: Maternity and Nationhood in Coetzee's *Age of Iron*

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ABSTRACT

J.M. Coetzee's novel *Age of Iron*, set in South Africa of the 1980s, depicts the brutality rampant in its society and the various repercussions of a nation-state in violent transition. Maternity is a recurring trope in the novel and one of the chief principles along the lines of which Mrs Curren curates a sense of her own self and the body politic of South Africa. Curren's cancer-ridden White body comes to represent the ravages of Apartheid within the South African landscape and its people, both afflicted by a disease fostered and nursed within its own body. The perverted motherland which anchors itself to the corrupt system of Apartheid can only further the systematised bigotry. This necessitates a complete and absolute rooting out of the previous ethos and its adherent's their engenderers to make space for the new. The figure of the dying mother is linked to the figure of a motherland reordering itself as the older order is cast off to beget engendering a new ethical and political system within the country. Coetzee deploys the conventional mother-land dialectic and reorients it within the Apartheid-ridden South Africa to allegorise the nation-state and its people losing their antiquated moorings in the face of rebelling and the unsettling change it effects.

KEYWORDS

Apartheid; Postcolonial; Motherhood; Colonialism; Illness; Sexuality

Introduction

J.M. Coetzee's novel *Age of Iron*, set in South Africa of the 1980s, depicts the violence rampant in its society and the various repercussions of a nation-state in violent transition. Coetzee was born to Afrikaner parents and witnessed the empty rhetoric and repressive politics seen during the Apartheid. *Age of Iron* is written as an address by Mrs Curren, who is a retired classics professor, to her daughter who has re-located to the United States of America having decisively shunned the Apartheid-ridden motherland. The very reception of this letter is kept ambiguous which further bolsters the themes of unsettled moorings in a society where the previous order and its oppressions are continually being challenged and confounded. Mrs Curren attempts to inscribe her maternal self into the words of the letter. That this very letter might be unreceived, marks the futility of the classical ideals of motherhood as embodied by Mrs Curren. Maternity is a recurring trope in this novel and one of the chief principles along the lines of which Mrs Curren curates the sense of her own self and the body politic of South Africa. Mrs Curren's cancer-ridden White body comes to represent the ravages of Apartheid within the South African people, each afflicted by a disease fostered within its own body. The perverted motherland which anchors itself on the corrupt system of Apartheid can only further the systematised bigotry. This necessitates a complete and absolute rooting out of previous ethos and its bearers to make space for the new. Mrs Curren – who has unconsciously reaped the benefits of her privileged subject position in Apartheid-ridden South Africa – becomes an unwilling representative of this dictated ethical system which makes the South African landscape a palimpsest of colonial desires. The figure of a dying mother is linked to the figure of a motherland reordering itself as the older order is cast off to beget a new ethical and political system within the country. This liminal stage of violent transition is a stage of possibilities where the normative is challenged and the radically new is imagined.

At the beginning of the novel, Mrs Curren clutches on to her liberal humanist ethos which has long been rendered ineffectual in the hardened and hardening age of iron. Maternal ethics are an essential part of her humanist apprehensions, bearing upon the ways in which she engages with the pervasive violence surrounding her. She employs time-worn maternal ethos as a lens through which to view and judge the world around her – a synthesizing principle where contemporary affairs trace their lineage to classical moorings and attempt to lead towards a stabilizing centre. Mrs Curren's training has been such that this manner of living is deemed rightful and principled. It also poses as a universal and all-encompassing ethical system. Mrs Curren adopts this posture of de-hierarchised order in contrast to her environment where the Apartheid systematically disenfranchises sections of the society.

Moreover, as a retired professor of the classics, Mrs Curren herself has promulgated these ideals through institutions under the aegis of the South African government. As the novel nears its end, Mrs Curren finds it impossible to cling to the neatness of such defining principles and their linear genealogy, consequently wishing for and bearing witness to her own decline. Her daughter's dogged refusal to return, the ambiguity regarding the very reception of the letter, the deaths of John and Bheki who Mrs Curren attempts to assimilate under the fold of her maternal understanding, all testify to the failure of western humanist traditions-primarily Mrs Curren's discourse on maternity, within the socio-politics of South Africa. Maternity had been rejected by the brutalized body politic of the nation much before Mrs Curren was accosted by its unsettling absence: before the Black mothers themselves pronounce, "There are no more mothers and fathers" (Coetzee 39), there are the "grim-faced, tight-lipped Afrikaner children...vowing to die for their fatherland" (Coetzee 51), aspiring death and decay instead of the life-affirming genesis deemed intrinsic to maternity.

Corrupting the 'Mother' and the 'Motherland'

The theme of maternity is linked to the idea of the Apartheid-ridden motherland. Both are corrupt, antiquated systems against which uncontrolled offensives are now being mounted. Mrs Curren's body is old and fighting the growth of cancer cells while the Black rebel forces brewing within the South African body politic, resist and struggle against the institutes bolstering Apartheid and its people. The conflation between the mother and the motherland is a much-employed trope in literature. J.M Coetzee takes this age-old trope often used for nationalistic uproar and parodies it. In his essay "Apartheid Thinking", Coetzee elaborates that for those who actively built and fuelled divisions along the lines of race, the need to control women's sexuality was integral to the project of dictating the "purity" of a race: "...feminine chastity is in itself no guarantee of continuing blood-purity, and the *Afrikanermoeder* (Afrikaner mother) will be the protector of the race only as long as she, too, is protected" (Coetzee 169). The fear of "bastardization" and "blood-mixing" resulted in the heavy policing of the female body. The mother determined and sustained the motherland's demographic divisions and was compelled to surrender her sexuality and desires to those deemed the protectors of the exclusive and exclusionary ethos of the nation. Coetzee's linking of the mother and the motherland derives its mooring from this hackneyed nationalistic and divisive trope. In parodying it, Coetzee calls into question and reorients the ethics of both maternity and nationalism. The liberal humanist mother is depicted as someone who has outlived her times, having unconsciously reaped the benefits of

her privileged subject position. She is now awkwardly caught in a state of uncertain flux. Coetzee reveals the ineptitude of universalised humanist conceptions, baring to the readers the discrimination inherent within such principles and expressing the need to weed it out completely from the South African political landscape. Mrs Curren embodies the principles of Western humanism under the garb of which the Black community in South Africa and their culture was belittled and rubbed out of the colonialist historiography. The restrictive definition of both the humane and the cultural excluded the native African ways of being from its paradigm. At one point in the novel, Mrs Curren remarks- "Death by fire is the only decent death left...to burn and be gone, to be rid of, to leave the world clean. Monstrous growths, miscarriages: a sign that one is beyond one's term. This country too: time for fire, time for an end, time for what grows out of ash to grow" (Coetzee 65). It is the corruption of the mother through cancerous, monstrous growth which serves to symbolise the corruption of the South African landscape and its ethos through oppressive dictums- both vying for renewal.

Motherhood and the ethics of substituting the self through Levinas's 'The Other'

Mrs Curren theorization of her own self is largely predicated on her status as a mother. Mrs Curren's daughter, though estranged, is deemed to be a part of her own identity. The act of writing the letter is one which inscribes her subjecthood into a narrated maternity- "To whom this writing then? The answer: to you but not to you; to me; to you in me" (Coetzee 6). Motherhood then becomes an act of care and benevolence where the self is able to surpass the limitations of mortality and acts as a means of connecting to the ancient past and the pristine future. Mrs Curren hopes to pass on her truths to her daughter through the letter – which is the only remaining link between the mother and her daughter living in a foreign soil. Micheal Marias considers Coetzee's novels as exemplifying the Levinasian principle of substituting the self for the other and engendering an ethical relationship based on responsibility (159-170). Motherhood can be easily rendered into tropes which exemplify this Levinasian principle of self-substitution. Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha too posits motherhood as the culmination of Levinasian ethics and writes-

> Mother is and is not a part of, and precedes, the foetus. It is an asymmetrical relationship, where the other, in her alterity, is detached from the subject and not dependent on the subject. It is in fact a relationship where the self comes to realize that she is not only responding to the other, but also is in fact responsible to and for the other. (249)

While Coetzee does subscribe to the ethics of such responsibility, he posits it contextually where the binary of giver-taker crumbles. The various aspects of Mrs Curren's identity- a mother, a

woman, a white person, an aged and diseased body, allow her to embody and access varying roles in the South African society. Rachael Ann Walsh reads Coetzee's depiction of both the self and the other as being contextually defined, which goes beyond Levinas' transcendental self and the other which cannot be pinned into a familiar and historicised definition. This is Coetzee's confrontation with the "ethnocentric failures of universal humanism" (Walsh 174). These humanist abstractions are intrinsic to Levinas' theory of the Other. Coetzee problematizes Mrs Curren's attempts to employ maternity and the image of her daughter as a redemptive refuge from the historicised effects of colonization. The Other cannot be abstracted and disembodied beyond the material and cultural reality it inhabits. The lack of a familiar signifying system, in the case of Coetzee, does not renege into an assertion of transcendental subjecthood but reveals the lack of universal humanist traditions. Mrs Curren clutches on to her liberal humanist leanings as a point of stability and hopes of narrativising herself and her position within Apartheid-ridden South Africa by employing these tropes of motherhood. Yet, they do not lead her to a stabilising centre. She emerges as a coloniser in spite of herself and is conflictingly propelled to demand for her own extinction. It is only when the universalised Western humanist tropes disappear that the Black native cultural ethos will find the space to emerge. Hence, her body comes to embody the body politic of South Africa which must die to regenerate a purer form of the South African nation.

Amor Matris: Universalising motherhood

Coetzee's portrayal of the cancer attacking Mrs Curren's breast as its primary site, symbolises cancer as a dysfunctional form of pregnancy which attacks the maternal space and organ. It signifies the need for renewal preceded by complete destruction. Mrs Curren's attempt to transcend the depraved ethos of her times by deploying her maternity is vain and impotent; she soon realizes: "Though it was not a crime I asked to be committed. It was committed in my name" (Coetzee 164). This links her subject position inextricably to the social landscape of South Africa. From the very start of the novel, Mrs Curren considers motherhood as an offer to give. Robbed of its natural object in the absence of her daughter, Mrs Curren's maternity looks for substitutes and stand-ins, interpellated by the strong impulse towards mothering and providing for those around her. Yet, this substitution, in contrast to Levinas' equalising and de-contextualised responsibility towards the Other, is "radically incapacitated" (Ravindranathan 398). It is steeped in biases both overt and covert. Her interpretations of maternity reflect her subject position within the South African body politic which transcends it in one unifying and universalising sweep. Here, Coetzee

critiques universal humanist tropes and of the inadequacies of a comprehensive and all-encompassing *Amor Matris*. Mrs Curren dismisses Florence's maternal ethics in the beginning of the novel; remarks- "The more you give in, Florence, the more outrageously the children will behave" (Coetzee 48).She is unable to comprehend a motherhood which relinquishes its authority over its children and has accepted the stern severity which has come to define the age, hoping only that her children survive. Mrs Curren instructs Florence to not consign her children to the hardness of the age, vacuously resorting only to rhetoric which sits uneasily within the realities of Florence's life. Walsh calls this the failure of the "Maternal I" and writes- "Her inability to incorporate Florence into her maternal and humanist framework suggests how her schema is shaped by her comparatively sheltered position in the geopolitical landscape of South Africa" (Walsh 176). Coetzee prises the ethics of maternity out of a humanist historicity. Maternity is central to Mrs Curren's classical, liberal framework, but as the novel progresses, this instability calls into question the very idea of Mrs Curren's selfhood. She begins to see her subjecthood as more deeply embedded in history and unravels her inbred complicity in the ravages of Apartheid. While she attempts to narrate herself into the letter she writes to her daughter, the authorial self is unable to account for the history which preceded it. She begins to grow wary of the self she attempts to render into words for her daughter –words which are meant to be unpacked and consequently, absorbed. When her ethics of maternity can no longer be only life-giving and cast into tropes of immaculate genesis, she begins to question her being. She sees how divorced her experiences are from the socio-political realities of South Africa. There are inadequacies in the Afrikaner understanding of native Black lives. The neatness of her experiences which could rely on systems of family and humanism is contrasted against the ravages of Apartheid which Mrs Curren encounters when she visits the Black townships. The evident attempt of the Afrikaner government to compartmentalise the Black community and move it beyond the ambit and purview of the prosperous Afrikaners signifies the divisions which marked South African society. Mrs Curren calls herself a doll – ventriloquised, artificial and unnatural. She writes, "From the cradle a theft took place: a child was taken, and a doll left in its place to be nursed and reared, and that doll is what I call I" (Coetzee 109). Her own link to her childhood is traced through her mother. The cogent genealogy of maternity imbued with life-sustaining qualities unravels and fails to hold as her body, gestating the cancer cells which slowly kill, begins to parody motherhood- "To have fallen pregnant with these growths, these cold, obscene swellings" (Coetzee 64).

The parodying of maternity and linear genealogy reveals the gaping inadequacies of universalised Western humanism within the South African landscape. Coetzee makes evident that all that is spawned within the hardened corruption of the "age of iron" can

only be a flimsy proxy of growth. Mrs Curren's daughter, now "bleeding every month into foreign soil" (Coetzee 64), breaks away from inheriting both her mother and her land and refuses to mother either of it. She roots herself and her family in the foreign land, which is strange to Mrs Curren, severing connections which emerge from a commonality of experience. The daughter fosters a land which Mrs Curren can only imagine. Uprooting herself from the South African landscape is deemed impossible by Mrs Curren who culls her selfhood from within the thoroughfares of her South Africa. The children which are engendered in such a regime and who are emerging from the corrupt body politic of South Africa, do not know the innocent fun of childhood and grow before their years. In addition to a redundant mother, there also exist a shunned childhood. The fallibility of maternal tropes and the maternal self becomes crucial in signifying the non-compensatory and non-sublimating nature of liberal humanist tropes.

Parodying maternity through cancer

In the case of Mrs Curren, cancer blurs the distinction between the colonised and the coloniser. It festers into a thing she cannot give birth to and symbolises the violence which the Apartheid regime systematically meted out upon the Blacks and the consequent rebellion against this institutionalised brutality. Mrs Curren becomes a coloniser who is herself in the throes of being ambushed by cancer cells. Mrs Curren's narrative 'I' begins by being blindingly tied to her humanist liberal conceptions. At the onset of the novel, she instructs Florence- "There are no rubbish people, we are all people together" (47). But these become but paltry defences, failing to embrace and assimilate the black population of South Africa into its purported collective. As the novel nears its end, Mrs Curren realises that her words are but "the words of a woman, therefore negligible; of an old woman, therefore doubly negligible; but above all of a white. I, a white" (79).She acknowledges the privileges and disadvantages which emerge of the nexus of her diverse subject positions, no longer credulous and believing in the all-embracing transcendence of maternity and its unfaltering substitutability. Mrs Curren's cancer brings in its critique of the Western humanist ethos within the South African landscape, eating at all that lies within it. She realises that her subjecthood and narrative 'I' are inextricably tied to the colonial history of South Africa and the plunder of its land and its people by the White colonists. When she rages against the crimes of the White and their sluggish, unfeeling hearts she knows that "when in my rages I wished them dead, I wished death on myself too" (164).

Cancer is linked to notions of shame in the novel. Mrs Curren maps her shame onto her body throughout gestation but is unable to purge the shame from her body. Her corporeal

metaphors symbolise the body politic of South Africa which has engendered the conditions of its own destruction. The repression and shame within a body politic where childhood is despised and which has made heroes out of tyrants, is transposed onto Mrs Curren's body as cancer. Cancer lends itself easily to symbolics of topographical invasions. The cancer cells begin to gnaw at the body and render other cells ineffective. The growth of the cancer cells is an act of claiming the limited space. Susan Sontag in her book *Illness as Metaphor* writes "Metaphorically, cancer is not so much a disease of time as a disease or pathology of space. Its principal metaphors refer to topography (cancer "spreads" or "proliferates" or is "diffused"; tumours are surgically "excised)." (Sontag 16). The body of the mother – the engenderer, the fountainhead – is vectored along the lines of the Apartheid-ridden landscape while both are wrecked and under regenerative attack. The narrative is replete with motifs of colonial invasion. The land which had been taken from the native Blacks by force and plundered was now in the violent process of being taken back. In tow comes the cultural reassertion of native ethos which had been censured and delegitimized. Linking colonial metaphors to the symbolics of cancer, Susan Sontag writes that the metaphors of cancer

> "... are drawn from the language of warfare: every physician and every attentive patient is familiar with, if perhaps inured to, this military terminology. Thus, cancer cells do not simply multiply; they are "invasive." Cancer cells "colonize" from the original tumor to far sites in the body, first setting up tiny outposts ("micrometastases") whose presence is assumed, though they cannot be detected. Rarely are the body's "defences" vigorous enough to obliterate a tumor that has established its own blood supply and consists of billions of destructive cells" (Sontag 53).

Tracing identities to land in *Age of Iron*

As Mrs Curren's body undergoes the process of being invaded by cancer cells emerging out of her own flesh and bones, the corpus of South Africa accounts for the crimes of its own history. Corruption begets corruption in a manner preordained and uncontrolled. Within the spatio-politics of South Africa, history exerts its force in ways both metaphysical and tangible. Mrs Curren's body and her narrative 'I' fail to transcend the perversions of their times and the mother body becomes the site of destructive renewal. Mrs Curren is rooted within the South African land, and it is here that her childhood is spent. She traces a link to her own mother and asserts it as a proof of her being. She confesses that if one were to drive to the Eastern Cape, she would find the place which birthed her: "the place of the navel, the place

where I join the world", laced in the stories which her mother shared with her (121). The land would serve as her "mother" and sustain her, imbued with the spirit and story of her ancestors. Mrs Curren's humanist sense of self is embedded within the South African cultural and historical developments which includes the repression and the violence. When Mrs Curren remarks that she no longer loves the land of her childhood and her ancestors, her own selfhood is implicit in the disgust she now feels towards the South African body politic and its age of iron. Her identity as a mother further problematizes this chain of links where her motherhood is rendered inept because she is cut off from the sources of her own ethical and cultural sustenance. Instead of rendering the once dear landscape inexplicable, Mrs Curren's confronts the effects of Apartheid on the Black community and refuses to turn a blind eye towards the consequences of her idealised ethical anchors. She bears witness to the police brutality upon Blacks, including children like John and Bheki. This propels her to dig deeper and discern the forceful silencing of black lives and histories from the sanitised Western liberal narratives. She initially hopes to find her identity through the links which connect her to the South African landscape – through her mother, her childhood, her daughter – but soon realises that the profusion of her anchored past and its chastity was in fact built on the backs of Black labour. She reviews the photographs of her childhood and questions, "Who are the ghosts and who the presences? Who, outside the picture, leaning on their rakes, leaning on their spades, waiting to get back to work?" (111)? The silencing of their narratives within the expanses of Western humanist traditions is made eloquent. This further explicates the spurious assertion of universality by Western humanism.

The mother is rejected and ravaged by its own to signify the need for rebirth and renewal. The mother's body – the body of the 'engenderer' and nurturer of the white corpus – embodies the turmoil within the South African landscape and is afflicted by it. The topography of the nation becomes linked to the topography of the body which is confronting forces of destruction. Mrs Curren realises the need for such demolition which would attempt to level the South African political landscape and bring the softness Mrs Curren also yearns for. She becomes caught up in her subject position and its need for death as motherhood ceases to be life-affirming and instead harbours and begets only corruption. Mrs Curren and her own body, which is ravaged by cancer cells nursed within it, await the renewal. This renewal is contingent upon the extermination of her current way of being. The familiar tropes of motherhood are defamiliarized and the universalising principles of Levinas' discourse on the responsibility towards the other gives way to a symbiotic exchange where the other is loved within its historicised alterity. It refuses to be moulded into a transcendental, formless and harmless Other. The body of the mother reflects the ravages of the motherland as history runs its

due course, never allowing Mrs Curren to retreat into the synthetic innocence of her liberal humanist past. In Mrs Curren, Coetzee depicts the epistemic and physical violence which a repressive regime and its ethos perpetrated upon its subjects. Maternity is parodied and rendered defunct. The oft-repeated trope of mother as the preserver of national culture is itself portrayed as a product of the degenerative age of iron – the lofty rhetoric of first defining and then preserving national culture is predicted on the need to control women's sexual mobility. A parallel is drawn between the mother and the motherland as they grapple with forces intrinsic to their own historicised composition, as the renewal towards the promised softer age of clay makes necessarily the destruction of the engenderer.

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[4] The use of Nature here is to emphasize Crake's dematerialization of nature by claiming, "I don't believe in Nature…Or not with a capital N" (*OC* 242).

BIO

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