

Damnation and redemption in coetzee's age of iron



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In J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, Mrs Elizabeth Curren recounts the life-altering events of her last days battling cancer in a letter to her estranged daughter. The novel is set in Cape Town, South Africa in 1986-89 – a time of division, injustice and revolution. Mrs Curren, who has lived a relatively quiet life, becomes entangled in the brutalities faced by her servant's family and community after she takes Mr Vercueil, a homeless man with a loyal dog, into her home. Throughout this time, Mrs Curren undergoes a drastic metamorphosis from an indifferent, isolated old woman, to someone who actively engages in the world around her. This change rescues her from a solipsistic damnation, and grants her personal redemption and peace. She re-evaluates her fears and beliefs regarding love, her sense of being, her interpersonal relationships and her country – and through understanding, surrender and acceptance, she is able to redeem herself.

Mrs Curren is portrayed as a woman capable of a deep and sincere emotion, and the novel itself is “conceived as a catalogue of love.” (Yeoh, 2003, p. 3) Through intense reflection and experiences with those around her, her love evolves from being felt exclusively for her daughter, to one which encompasses not only kin, but strangers as well. In the early stages of the novel, Mrs Curren expresses her desire to “embrace [and] to be embraced” (Coetzee, 1990, p. 5) by her daughter. Mrs Curren is consumed by an apparently unreciprocated longing that slowly shifts to include resentment toward her only child for abandoning her. She finally understands that her feelings of love are towards the idea of her daughter that has remained in Mrs Curren's heart, but not towards her actual child. She is “hungry with love for this world” (Coetzee, 1990, p. 18), yet she has nothing and no one to

love. Her initial feelings of contempt towards Bheki's friend, John, lead her to second-guess the love she feels for her daughter. Although she was damned by her inability to provide John with *amor matris*, she feels a surge of protectiveness and an aching to embrace him when she fails to save his life from police officers in her house. In her letter, she originally describes Mr Vercueil as nothing more than an unclean, scavenging derelict and sends him on his way, after which he returns and subsequently gets involved in her life, and eventually even shares her bed. She learns to care for him. Even though Mr Vercueil does not blatantly return her feelings, Mrs Curren finally surrenders to the desire to let the current of her love flow freely and embraces the opportunity to "love what is to hand, as a dog loves" (Coetzee, p. 190). Her desire is finally realised by Mr Vercueil, who squeezes the breath from her in an embrace from which there was "no warmth to be had" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 198). She redeems herself in her death by redefining love to include those most resistant to it, and allowing it to kill her.

Having lived a sheltered life, Mrs Curren is wary of breaking out of the familiar comforts of her home and isolation, but soon questions whether or not she has only been living "a doll's life" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 109). She saves herself through abandoning her self-importance and selfishness, and instead choosing to exchange the safeties of her old habits for the truth. Mrs Curren states that even though she knows her country is in shambles, her attention is turned inwards to her cancer. This self-centredness distances her from others, including Florence, whose acceptance and validation Mrs Curren so desperately craves. She wants Florence to acknowledge that she is burning too - just like the town of Guguletu - set alight by the malignant

tumour in her hip (Coetzee, 1990, p. 39). She is preoccupied with the gnawing worry that she will be dying without succession, and yearns to be immortalised through her daughter's love for her. This changes when she meets Mr Vercueil and becomes exposed to the horrors of the civil war, and is no longer safe behind the bars of her blissful ignorance. Awakened to the truth that her hardships are insignificant compared to the agony felt by those caught in the struggle for equality, she no longer avoids reality, but actively seeks to bring about change in whichever way she can. She envisions herself sending a powerful message in front of the House of Lies through the act of self-immolation. (Coetzee, 1990, p. 113) She finds that through forgetting herself, she is able to find herself. Mrs Curren achieves a sense of grace through the realisation that she is not merely a childless mother, but a woman whose life may still serve a purpose in saving those of others. She is redeemed through her desire for redemption.

Another facet of her ultimate redemption, is the radical movement from isolation to integration into a community. From indignance and irritation, Mrs Curren emerges as compassionate and understanding towards those deemed “unlovable” in the past, and thus becomes more ‘gracious’. Her habitual discourse evolves into one of heartfelt interest and truth. Mrs Curren initially has no desire to communicate with anyone other than Bach and her daughter, both of whom have the same likelihood of returning her call (Coetzee, 1990, p. 25). She makes an island, or *isola*, of herself through merely making use of superficial small talk and comments, the “ritual phrases”, when speaking to Florence, the only other person in her day to day life (Coetzee, 1990, p. 36). She negates Florence with the word ‘nonsense’

when Florence speaks – a complete failure of language as well as communication. John's head injury acts as the catalyst that sets Mrs Curren's change in thinking in motion. As she tries to stem the flow of blood, she speaks of a vision of a dam of blood, gathered under a bright sky – one lake comprised of the shared blood of a nation (Coetzee, 1990, p. 64).

During her time in Guguletu searching for John, she is made aware of the true tragedy of the war and the effect it has on the people; she feels true sympathy for those involved and acknowledges them as people who are suffering. Although she tries to distance herself from it, she explains that her eyes have been opened and will never be able to close again. She asks herself about the people who have always existed outside of the frame of the photo, the ones who “clipped the hollyhocks” and got no recognition for it. This reinforces the idea that there have been more people involved in her life than she has not allowed herself to see (Coetzee, 1990, p. 111). She realises that isolation is equal to damnation, and seeks to escape it. Her discourse grows to include others for the first time since her daughter left the country. Her curt replies transform into honest communication, illustrated through her admission to Vercueil that she would rather “not be alone.” Her initial suspicion of Vercueil sleeping next to her garage also changes into complete trust when she implores him to act as her messenger to deliver the letter to her daughter. She also refers to him as an angel that has come to lead her – his eyes open and hers shut, a sign of complete and utter trust. This trust becomes her saving grace by allowing her to finally become a part of a community comprised of more than just her immediate family.

Lastly, Mrs Curren undergoes major development regarding her thoughts on her country and the people 'protecting' it. She distances herself from the police officers whom she once trusted, and therefore also their acts of injustice towards the inhabitants of Guguletu. Whereas in the beginning of the novel she turned to them for help, she soon realises that they are fully aware of the brutalities of the war and intent to carry it through. After Mr Thabane opens her eyes to the death and destruction of their community, she makes a conscious effort to condemn the police and the state of the country. She admits to not being indifferent to the war, but rather claims that it is a part of her, just as she is a part of it. She maintains an air of dignity and grace through disassociating herself from them with the words, 'I do not stand on your side' or "ek staan nie aan jou kant nie" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 153).

J. M Coetzee's Mrs Curren is a character capable of great indifference, but also incredible strength. She uses writing as a method of 'righting' the wrongs she has committed. The letter itself could be seen as a personal confession and consequently, forgiveness and redemption in different aspects of her daily life. Yeoh writes that if Mr Vercueil does not post it, her letter will be rendered completely useless (Yeoh, 2003, p. 128). One could instead argue that even if Vercueil decided to discard the letter, it would have served the purpose of granting an old woman a sense of grace in her death.

Sources:

COETZEE, J. M, 1990. *Age of Iron*. Penguin Books, London

<https://assignbuster.com/damnation-and-redemption-in-coetzees-age-of-iron/>

YEOH, G. 2003. " Love and Indifference in Coetzee's Age of Iron." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 38(3), pp 107-134.