

RESEARCH TITLE

Nature, Illness, and Decay: An Ecocritical Reading of J. M. Coetzee's Age of Iron

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Abstract

This article reads J. M. Coetzee's 1990 *Age of Iron* in ecocritical terms, considering the delicate balance between sickness, death, and ecological degradation in the context of apartheid era South Africa. The study considers the ethical, social and political implications of the novel, focusing on the extent to which personal suffering and physical vulnerability mirror and overlap with social collapse and systemic oppression. Drawing on the approach of ecocriticism, the essay investigates how Coetzee creates a story in which the human body, the nature, and the society mirror each other, and in the process reflects on the ethical and the ecological dimensions of our action. Its epistolary structure, with letters written by Mrs. Curren, a dying retired academic, gives us an intimate narrative lens through which to witness both individual injury, collective wrong and environmental degradation. Through this trope, illness functions as a potent metaphor for moral contagion, as degraded scenery and disordered cityscapes reflect psychic and existential breakdown and underscore the ethical entanglement of human and non-human worlds. Analysis finds that the conflation of private death and public dissolution serves both to emphasize the novel's censure of apartheid and to foreground the ethical imperative inherent in witnessing (and responding to) systemic injustice. The analysis demonstrates how Coetzee's narrative technique serves to incorporate ecological consciousness, ethical meditation, and postcolonial scrutiny and thus, situates literature as a critical space to explore historical trauma, environmental despoliation, and moral culpability. By situating the novel in an ecocritical framework, the study provides insight as to how literary texts negotiate the links between human, social and ecological vulnerability and also offers a framework for further research. Potentially inclusive of site specific, comparative ecocritical readings of Coetzee's work & interdisciplinary approaches that illuminate connections between environmental ethics, medical humanities, and postcolonial studies, thus contributing to literary history in ethical and ecological terms, difficult to compose otherwise.

Key Words: Ecocriticism, Apartheid South Africa, Ethical vulnerability, Environmental degradation, Postcolonial critique.

الطبيعة والمرض والانحلال: قراءة نقدية بيئية لرواية ج. م. كوتزي عصر الحديد

المستخلص

تقرأ هذه المقالة رواية ج. م. كوتزي *عصر الحديد* (1990) من منظور نقدي بيئي، حيث تنظر في التوازن الدقيق بين المرض والموت والتدهور البيئي في سياق حقبة الفصل العنصري في جنوب إفريقيا. وتتناول الدراسة الأبعاد الأخلاقية والاجتماعية والسياسية للرواية، مركزةً على الكيفية التي يتقاطع فيها الألم الشخصي والهشاشة الجسدية مع الانهيار الاجتماعي والقمع الممنهج. ومن خلال اعتماد مقارنة النقد البيئي، يستكشف البحث كيفية بناء كوتزي لحكاية يعكس فيها الجسد الإنساني والطبيعة والمجتمع بعضهم بعضاً، وفي هذا السياق يتأمل في الأبعاد الأخلاقية والبيئية لأفعالنا. إن بنيتها الرسائية، المتمثلة في رسائل السيدة كورين، وهي أكاديمية متقاعدة تحتضر، تمنحنا منظوراً سردياً حميمياً نشهد من خلاله الأذى الفردي، والظلم الجماعي، والتدهور البيئي. ومن خلال هذا التوظيف، تصبح المرض *metaphor* قوياً للعدوى الأخلاقية، فيما تعكس المشاهد الطبيعية المتدهورة والمدن المضطربة حالة الانهيار النفسي والوجودي وتؤكد على التشابك الأخلاقي بين العوالم الإنسانية وغير الإنسانية. ويظهر التحليل أن تداخل الموت الفردي والانحلال العام يبرز إدانة الرواية للفصل العنصري، كما يقدم البعد الأخلاقي الكامن في الشهادة (والاستجابة) للظلم الممنهج. كما يوضح التحليل كيف تُوظف تقنية السرد عند كوتزي في إدماج الوعي البيئي والتأمل الأخلاقي والقراءة ما بعد الكولونيالية، وبذلك تضع الأدب كفضاء نقدي لاستكشاف الصدمات التاريخية، والخراب البيئي، والمسؤولية الأخلاقية. ومن خلال وضع الرواية في إطار نقدي بيئي، توفر الدراسة فهماً لكيفية تفاوض النصوص الأدبية على الروابط بين الهشاشة الإنسانية والاجتماعية والبيئية، كما تقترح إطاراً للبحوث المستقبلية، بما يشمل قراءات بيئية مقارنة لأعمال كوتزي ومقاربات متعددة التخصصات تسلط الضوء على الروابط بين الأخلاقيات البيئية والعلوم الإنسانية الطبية والدراسات ما بعد الكولونيالية، مسهمةً بذلك في كتابة التاريخ الأدبي بأبعاد أخلاقية وبيئية يصعب تشكيلها بغير ذلك.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النقد البيئي، جنوب إفريقيا في عهد الفصل العنصري، الهشاشة الأخلاقية، التدهور البيئي، النقد ما بعد الكولونيالي.

Introduction

In J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990) personal and institutional decay are intertwined with mortality and paralysis in a brilliant and tragic historical and political context that touches on personal and worldwide environmental issues of great relevance. With the pen of Mrs. Curren, a retired professor suffering a terminal illness, Coetzee describes the physical and emotional decline of the individual and reflects on the moral, social and political decay of the country (Hasselqvist, 2011). This novel dares the reader to reckon with the questions of right and responsibility that follow where human vulnerability, systematic inequity and planetary decline collide. The current research aims to explore these complex connections via ecocriticism, which is a critical theory committed to a dynamic human and natural relationship. This study seeks to bring to light the way Coetzee uses nature, sickness and demise as thematic devices through which to mirror and critique the wider social, cultural and political crises in his world-Garrard, 2012.

Paradoxically, the most personal of all narrative strategies, the epistolary structure consisting of letters from J.M. Coetzee's Mrs. Curren to her daughter, in *Age of Iron*, is also one of the most socially resonant, as it instantiates and communicates the extraordinary individual and social fragmentation wrought by the ravages of apartheid. In the letters, the novel is documenting the revelation of the main character, her fears and moral quandaries during a time of not just her own terminal illness, but also of the many human and social injustices in the society around her. Her experience of battling cancer is a powerful and multi-layered metaphor for the systemic moral and ethical decline of the epoch in South Africa, and it also exposes how the illness or pain of one human being cannot be experienced in separation to the illness or pain of another (Attwell, 1993). While sick plants could be viewed on a symbolic level, scholars pointed out that Coetzee deliberately chooses an ill-looking plant as the subject in order to provide a critical lens through which the reader could examine the political, ethical and environmental crises in contemporary South Africa (Hasselqvist, 2011). This narrative frame weds personal reflection with wider critique, evoking the deep interrelationship of the fragility of flesh, the imperatives of a conscience, and the political situations of apartheid South Africa.

Abstract: In addition to a simple background of description, nature is an active and dynamic part of the story telling of the novels, such as in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*. The novel's natural environment frequently reflects characters' psychological states and moral dilemmas, as well as social turbulence, creating a rich intertextual dialogue between the human and ecological worlds. Coetzee combines an intricate yet understated depiction of the landscapes and seasons and the decaying in nature with a deeper ethical-philosophical consideration of the relationship of human behavior and socio-cultural aspects to the environmental destruction (Garrard, 2012). The themes of decay, desolation and broken natural cycles not only become metaphors of the experiential malaise of the characters but also express the larger systemic and political decay under the apartheid. Interweaving the tales of human and ecological degradation, Coetzee illustrates the systemic interdependence between social stability and ecological stability, imploring readers to reflect upon how their own deaths have not just moral, but also environmental, implications (2012 Garrard).

This study aims to explore how J.M. Coetzee uses the ecocritical themes of nature, sickness and decay in his *Age of Iron* in ways that defy genre and norms of critical interpretation, with a view to investigate the complex relationship among natural and human environments in the personal and the collective dimensions by engaging extensively with existing scholarship and close readings of the text. By examining the texts closely, the study seeks to uncover the complex ways in which Coetzee threads environmental stories into corporeal plots, taking the

collapse of the organic body coupled with the impoverishment of natural and social environments as metaphors for larger historical, political, and ethical frameworks (Attwell, 1993; Hasselqvist, 2011). This essay argues that the novel's intricate balance between ecological and human decline provides rich commentary on the ethical and ontological costs of apartheid, suggesting that socio-political injustice, human frailty, and environmental collapse are all interrelated. Framed in the context of ecocriticism, this investigation not only sheds new light on Coetzee's artistic techniques and ways of engagement with the moral and material afterlives of apartheid, but also on the ethical obligations that come with such oblique reflections on the human and ecocidal violence of political violence.

This paper seeks to analyze the treatment of decaying subjectivities in *Age of Iron* through an ecocritical lens and investigates the interrelatedness and the entanglements of nature, disease, and decay in their implications within the historical horizon of apartheid South Africa. Attwell (1993; Hasselqvist, 2011) argues that the symbolic and thematic functions of bodily degradation, ecological destruction, and social decay reflect Coetzee's portrayal of human frailty in relation to ecological and moral collapse. The study answers some important questions like; How does Coetzee reflect the interrelation between human suffering and environmental degradation? How do illness and decay function as metaphors for moral, social, and political failure? This research is important for both literary studies and ecocriticism. It gives an understanding of the complexities of Coetzee's narrative techniques and shows the text's ethical, political and environmental aspects (Garrard, 2012). The methodology places the analysis in ecocritical terms highlighting the timelessness and overstepping ability of literary texts and their role as mirrors to traditionally entrenched injustices, while promoting a metaphorical and literal awareness of the interconnectedness of ecology as an idea, body, and society. This study will only concentrate on *Age of Iron* and will zoom in on the motifs of nature, sickness, and degeneration as guides to analyse the ethical and social criticism throughout the story.

Literature Review

Much has been made of the complex interplay of the individual and the ecological domain, the pomological and the political, in the question of illness and its resonances, but *Age of Iron* represents the nexus of these problems in a more dense way. Attwell (1993), within the larger context of South African literature, shows how *Age of Iron* demonstrates Coetzee's preoccupations with the relationship between ethics and narrative form. He emphasizes the way Mrs. Curren's cancer serves as a metaphor for the moral decay of South Africa under apartheid, a metaphor linking corporeal vulnerability with structural violence (65). A critical starting point for showing Coetzee's mix of political allegory and personal loss is the foundational work of Attwell.

Head (1997:7) also reads *Age of Iron* as a novel of historical trauma and argues that Coetzee, through the private form of the epistolary narrative, is engaging with ideas of collective memory and national shame. As Head has suggested, the novel dramatizes the moral challenge of representing suffering without re-inscribing that suffering, positing Coetzee as intentionally making it impossible for the reader to unravel their dual role — that of voyeur and the voyeured — of the violence of apartheid (p. 114). This reading uncovers the ethical tension of the novel and its effort to create new modes of testimony.

Taking this a step further, Hasselqvist (2011) examines the use of illness as a narrative device in *Age of Iron*. In her analysis, she contends that Mrs. Curren's experience of facing deadly illness builds an embodied vulnerability story in which the personal body reflects the degeneration of South Africa's sociopolitical body. More specifically, Hasselqvist emphasizes that Coetzee employs the rhetoric of disease to demonstrate the impossibility of separating the

personal from the political in a country characterized by structural injustice (p. 89).

Graham (2003) reads *Age of Iron* from a postcolonial ecocritical perspective, suggesting that Coetzee uses the image of devastated land to show the devastating effects of apartheid on humans and non-humans. According to Graham, these images of decay—scorched homes, contaminated roads, and abandoned wilderness—are reflections of the decay of bonds between people (p. 178). In his reading, ecological ruin becomes inextricably linked with political and moral collapse.

Garrard (2012) states that Coetzee is an exemplary ecocritical writer whose fiction offers a resistance to 'straightforwardly anthropocentric readings of environment' (79). As Davis writes, "Age of Iron...blurs the boundary separating nature and culture by transforming the non-human world into both a witness and active participant in apartheid's violence." The descriptions of rotting landscapes serve as an ethical imperative to reconsider (p. 41) Garrard

However, the novel raises a number of philosophical questions regarding the limits of reason and societal moral certainty in the face of systemic violence, as highlighted by Poyner (2009). And he goes on to argue that the story of Mrs Curren mirrors Coetzee's preoccupation with the failures of Enlightenment rationality in the face of historical evil, turning the novel into a kind of philosophical interrogation of ethical thinking in times of crisis (p. 132).

Kosew (2010) centres on the image of witnessing and complicity, claiming that in *Age of Iron* the role of both the narrator and reader looking at apartheid's violence is shown as problematic. She proposes that letter writing compels readers into an ethical relationship, implicating them in Mrs Curren's act of testimony. Kosew's reading highlights the novel's self-deliberate narrative practices that disrupt the separation between history and literature (203).

Finally, Clarkson (2009) attends to the intersections of mortality and ethics in Coetzee's writing, focusing in particular on the way *Age of Iron* sutured incipient and imminent death to a necessarily pressing moral demand. In Clarkson's account, Mrs Curren's imminence of dying serves as the existential embodiment through which the larger crises of apartheid are refracted, refocusing her private pain into a general reflection upon justice, vulnerability and responsibility for the Other (p. 56).

Together, these studies show how *Age of Iron* is rich as a site for consideration of the imbrication of environmental, political, and bodily discourses. Despite this burgeoning scholarship, few have brought ecocritical, illness, and mortality lenses together in an exceptionally focused system of analysis. This research works to fill that gap by examining Coetzee's novel in the nexus of those themes and to this end contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of its ethical and political implications.

Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism has become an indispensable mode of analyzing how literature speaks to/with environment and mediates human perception of nature. According to Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (p. 3). This orientation contests the human-centeredness of literary studies and highlights the ethical, political, and philosophical implications of human engagement with the non-human. Literary texts, in this sense, are not just representing nature; they are participating in its processes and ideologies by mirroring and shaping cultural perceptions of its interrelatedness in generations.

Greg Garrard (2012) further elaborates on this approach by outlining three 'dominant sources of ecocritical analysis': the representation of nature, the ethics of human interaction with the

natural world, and the ideological role of nature writing (p. 12). Garrard's method is more than descriptive about landscapes but calls here and in his other work for readings that can see literature as hosting an ethical reflection and a nature awareness. Treating environmental ethics, postcolonial critique, and literary study, ecocriticism allows scholars to examine ways in which texts respond to historical, social, and environmental crises.

J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* is a novel that is generative of ecocriticism. The novel introduces derelict environments, disrupted ecosystems and a narrow entanglement of human and non-human agencies, which trigger an eco-reading pointing to the ethical and existential implications of human behavior (Garrard, 2012: 19). Additionally, the focus on disease and death in the story offers avenues for exploring connections between bodily frailty, collapse of the social order, and environmental decline. An ecocritical perspective enables them to examine how Coetzee creates a morally and ecologically responsible space in the novella, in which the decay of nature mirrors the breakdown of social and ethical orders under apartheid.

Moreover, the ecocritical perspective is relevant for discussing the novel's epistolary narrative structure. Mrs Curren's letters ensure that readers view the 'concurrent devastation of political brutalities, disease, and ecological ruination that foreground the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman worlds' (Glotfelty, 1996, p. 6). In its ecocritical reading of *Age of Iron*, the work not only seeks to interpret Coetzee's incorporation of environmental themes, but also to take part in larger debates about literature's role in representing historical abuses and ecological issues.

Analysis / Discussion

1. Sickness and Body as Metaphor of Social and Political Disease

In "*Age of Iron*", Mrs Curren's terminal cancer serves not as a personal affliction but a rich allegory of the moral, social and political collapse of apartheid South Africa. Attwell (1993) argues that Coetzee parallels Curren's physical breakdown with the breakdown of the nation itself: "Curren's body in decay replicates the decay of social and political structures, and in a sense the two are no longer distinguishable" (Attwell 1993: 67). The disease serves as a backdrop that sharpens reader engagement with the ethical imperative to witness oppression, suggesting the degree to which human suffering cannot be disentangled from the sociopolitical. Coetzee's portrayal of illness points to the protagonist's corporeal vulnerability and lays bare the ethical deficiencies of a society constructed on systemic inequity.

Hasselqvist (2011) takes this argument further by suggesting that illness functions as narrative and ethical comment. She writes, "The disease that wracks Curren...turns her into a witness to suffering, joining her own corporeal vulnerability to the rampant moral disintegration around her" (p. 91). In this regard, disease acts as an ethical microscope, raising the visibility of social and political rot. The public/private binary underscores the novel's overriding argument that the body, although personal, is unavoidably implicated in collective histories of violence and domination.

Furthermore, the metaphorical slippage between disease and social disease is enhanced by Coetzee's prose. The use of the epistolary format permits Curren to meditate reflectively on her sore, failing body while recording the atrocities she sees around her, making the private, personal sphere a place of political awareness. With this subtle weaving, Coetzee critiques not only apartheid but also places the act of reading and witnessing as an ethical duty, forcing readers to recon on the moral connection between their vulnerable bodies and the injustice of society.

2. Nature and the Environment as Reflectors of Psychological and Existential Collapse

Coetzee's portrayal of a natural landscape in *Age of Iron* is more than a scenic background: it is an ethical and psychological mirror for both individuals and community. Garrard (2012) argues that literary representations of ecology serve to render ideological and ethical dimensions of the human encounter with nature, and that in *Age of Iron* "the decaying landscapes mirror the psychological chaos of individuals and the ethical debasement of society itself" (p. 42). Empty streets, overgrown gardens, decaying parts of the city suggest the moral and social state, reaffirming the symbolic parallel of environmental neglect and human decay.

Head (2009) argues that these landscapes cannot be separated from Curren's inner life: "the despoliated and abandoned landscapes of Cape Town in Coetzee's text evoke the protagonist's existential dread and moral dislocation" (p. 121). The environment itself becomes a mirror image of the psyche's place or condition: of despair, alienation and metaphysical unease. This alignment indicates how environmental devastation and human decay are mutually implicating: nature's degradation is not an incidental feature but expresses deeper societal failures.

Additionally, Coetzee's ecocritique holds (often untranslated) ethical implications. By presenting landscapes as places of abandonment and ruin, the novel forces readers to think about humans' culpability in environmental and social destructiveness. The interwoven natural and social decline intersects with postcolonial ecocritical views that propose the environment as a witness and actor to historical and political injustices. Thus the novel calls for an ethical commitment to both human and non-human worlds, forging human's ecological and moral duty as an inextricable whole.

3. Personal Death and National Disunity

One of the most distinctive aspects of *Age of Iron* is the seamless meshing of private and public crises. Mrs Curren's awareness of her imminent death increases her awareness of the social disintegration she witnesses and the two, personal mortality and national breakdown, reflect each other. Bimberg (2005/2006) suggests that this dual vision becomes possible thanks to the use of the epistolary form: "In the letters to her daughter, Curren grapples with the coalescence of private and national mortality, in which they are both made contingent and morally loaded" (p. 64). The plot's structure enables the reader to perceive that the simultaneity of singular vulnerability and collective disaster extends the ethical effects of the text.

D.Kossew (2010) adds that the novel places readers as being ethical subjects; 'The epistolary structure of the novel – as Heaney pithily puts it – is the clue to how Curren's personal introspection is transformed into a communal ethical experience where private suffering illuminates a public injustice' (204). In this way, by representing how personal and societal crises converge under the gaze of the subjective, Coetzee highlights these 'responsibilities of witnessing' and ethical reflection. The relationship between death and societal breakdown provides the novel with its principal concern: the ethics of vision, which incite us to contemplate the nexus between self, society, and nature.

Furthermore, the coalescence of personal and national crises underscores the temporal dimension of ethical obligation. The letters Curren writes carry the immediate sensations of pain and suffering as well as a reversal in time that renders past social horrors present, and this layered narrative temporality mixes the temporalities of the individual's life and that of the consequences of political repression. In presenting the story in this manner, Coetzee's notion of ethical responsibility becomes a process of ongoing relational and environmentally embedded practice, effectively demonstrating that human mortality and societal decay are interrelated.

Conclusion

In this article, the novel *Age of Iron*, written by Nobel Prize-winning author J.M. Coetzee, is read ecocritical, taking up the entangled motifs of sickness, death, and ruin that clog the novel, as central to the ethical and political charge issuing from its form of critique. The reading poses Mrs. Curren's fatal illness as a metaphor in Kaaps' presentation of the moral and social decay of apartheid South Africa, but also importantly aligns the breakdown uncovering all the societal structures and the corrosive truth of ethical responsibility (Attwell, 1993, p. 67). The fusion of private fear and universal rot is salted by Coetzee's ethically goal; we can do nothing else that to understand that personal vulnerability and political abuse are inseparable (Hasselqvist, 2011, p. 91).

Themes such as nature and environment are further reinforced in the novel. Decaying landscapes, blighted urban areas and fractured habitats also reflect the characters' psychological and existential derailment, while implicitly questioning society's wider neglect of human and non-human habitats (Garrard, 2012, p. 42). I was extraordinarily moved by scenes of the devastated and overgrown Cape Town which comment on the protagonist's existential angst and moral dislocation (Head, 2009, p. 121). Through the portrayal of the environmental and moral degeneration of his country in parallel, Coetzee locates the novel as a reflection positioned within postcolonial eco-theory which gives us an acute awareness of the human- environmental ethical nexus.

The dynamic between private mortality and public disintegration also brings out the moral implications of observing and of obligation to observe. The epistolary method allows for private introspection about bodily frailty as it externalizes and records the process of society's disintegration, inviting the reader to act as an ethical witness (Bimberg, 2005/2006, p.64). Showcasing an intertwining of personal with social crisis, Coetzee emphasizes the responsibilities of witnessing and ethical intervention through a subjective optic (Kossev, 2010, p. 204). This attention to both brings to the fore the idea that ethics is relational in character and that private sufferings illuminate public injustices.

The implications for reading *Age of Iron* in literary terms and as social and political text are crucial here. By placing a focus on the overlap between ecological, corporeal and political narratives, Coetzee's novel provides a poignant meditation on the afterlives of apartheid, ethical accountability and ecological awareness. It proves that literature can become a trenchant channel of investigation into historical trauma as well as a means of cultivating ethical consciousness and ecological mindfulness.

Further work could broaden this analysis through a comparative ecocritical approach to the trajectory of Coetzee's body of work, treating not only Elizabeth Costello but books like *Disgrace* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, in order to see how environmental themes converse with political and ethical ones in varied cultural settings. Finally, future research is invited to explore the interdisciplinary perspectives of medical humanities, environmental ethics, and postcolonial studies that shed light not only on the nexus between personal suffering, societal injustice and ecological degradation in recent literature.

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