

A Maternal Narrative and Beyond: An Ethical Reading of Home Consciousness in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*

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Abstract In Coetzee's oeuvre, *Age of Iron* literally, and perhaps most explicitly, exhibits the idea of home in a maternal narrative with regard to both the narrative itself and the influence of Coetzee's authorship. By calling it a maternal narrative, this essay premises the argument not only on the fact that the story is told by a mother to her self-exiled daughter, but also on the recurring moments of motherhood, the prominent absence of a husband-like figure and the implication of the children's filial duty. Besides the fictional parent/child bond, there is also another narrative thread, the ethics of alterity. The novelist prepares a dual approach to alterity, with one part Vercueil while the other the black people, for readers to appreciate Mrs Curren's wrestling with her ethical predicament as a liberal humanism, namely, her sympathy with the blacks and complicity with apartheid. All these narrative techniques All these narrative techniques are used to effectively integrate the novelist's emotions, particularly his connection to liberalism in South Africa and his mother Vera, with the historical, ethical, and political context of the novel. This essay will try to test this assumption and dig out the influence of Coetzee's authorship behind these tensions.

Keywords a maternal narrative; ethical predicament; home consciousness; alterity; authorship

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In Coetzee's oeuvre, *Age of Iron* (*AI* for short herrefater) literally, and perhaps most explicitly, exhibits the idea of home in a maternal narrative with regard to both the narrative itself and the influence of Coetzee's authorship. By calling it a maternal narrative, I premise my argument not only on the fact that the story is told by a mother to her self-exiled daughter, but also on the recurring moments of motherhood, the prominent absence of a husband-like figure and the implication of the filial duty of the children. Meanwhile, the fictional parent/child bond serves as a channel to integrate the stream of personal feeling with the historical tide, ethically and politically. Differently put, the narrative transcends, as always, the personal losses and gains when dealing with the family issue by involving itself in, and placing a heavy weight on, different kinds of alterity within a highly political context. I will try to test this assumption in my following reading and dig out the influence of Coetzee's authorship behind these tensions.

Introduction

A maternal narrative, as the term indicates, should primarily attend to the parent/child relation, and there is actually no lack of discussions on familial bonds in Coetzee's fiction. Paola Splendore contends that the distorted relationship between parents and children in Coetzee's fiction acts as "a sub-text"(150), which lies under the surface of the narrative without explicit and full development. Her argument that Coetzee makes the ethical and political dimension of the familial relationship outweigh its familial bond is convincing enough, but she tries to attribute the generational conflicts in *AI* to "the failure of parental responsibility" (152). Similarly, in order to back up his argument on the idea of hospitality in Coetzee's oeuvre, Mike Marais remarks that when the protagonists in Coetzee's works seek to find "the lost child", a recurring "self-reflexive metaphor for the invisible" arises, in which "s/he bears a parental responsibility for the child"(xiv).

Gillian Dooley also has a chapter-length analysis of the relationship between parents and children in Coetzee's oeuvre in her book. By noting that Coetzee shows more interest in "the intergenerational bond" in his fiction instead of family ties (152), Dooley conducts a systematic and close reading of the texts from *Dusklands* to *Summertime* and takes issue with some of Splendore's points of view. One problem in Splendore's argument, according to Dooley, is that she categorizes all the family bonds in Coetzee's works as a 'sub-text', since three novels, *Foe*, *AI* and *The Master of Petersburg* "explicitly concern a parent who has lost a child in some way"(157). Dooley is surely correct in highlighting the blunt exposure of family feelings in these novels, but she, like other critics at that time, seems reluctant to

relate the narrative intensity to Coetzee's authorship.

In this regard, the study is much consolidated by Sue Kossew with her interesting essay on the parental punctum in Coetzee's novels, especially in *The Childhood of Jesus*.¹ Before moving on to the issue of language in this Jesus novel, Kossew observes that Coetzee's novels abound with strikingly touching and emotionally-rich but, in Barthes's words, "piercing" and "wounding", familial moments. Her analysis of the interrelation between the parental punctum and Coetzee's fictional autobiographies can be deemed an attempt to bridge the gap between Coetzee's life and his writings in respect of the influences of Coetzee's parents on his authorship. This relationship has been thoroughly explored by David Attwell in his recent book, where he makes full use of Coetzee's drafts to conduct a genetic analysis of the influence of Vera, Coetzee's mother, and Jack, the father, on the novelist's authorship.²

Familial Bond and Authorship

As the introduction shows, by developing the intricacy of the literary familial bond, critics reach a consensus that the family unit, arguably the most prominent field where the idea of home is practised and enacted, is dysfunctional in Coetzee's works: none of the protagonists seems to deserve a complete family.³ The fictional characters include not only the lost child but also the widowed parent. The dysfunction can always be ascribed to, and, in reverse, manifest the dynamics of, the ethical and political dimension interweaved with the familial bond. This explains, albeit partly, why it is so hard to resist the temptation of attending closely to the familial phenomenon in his works. Nevertheless, there is a tendency to generalize the feature of the familial bond in Coetzee's fiction. Take parental responsibility for example. It is true that some of the works, such as *Foe*, *The Master of Petersburg* and *Disgrace*, are profoundly concerned with parental responsibility, as what Paola Splendore and Mike Marais argue respectively, but the judgement will be problematic

1 The punctum is a term derived from Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* and refers to, simply speaking, the piercing and wounding effect caused by some photos on people's emotions. See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida : Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.

2 As for the role of Coetzee's father in his creative process, see David Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp.177-186.

3 Sue Kossew clearly traces the distorted parent/child relation in Coetzee's oeuvre from *Dusk-lands* to *The Childhood of Jesus*. See "J.M. Coetzee and the Parental Punctum." In *J.M. Coetzee's the Childhood of Jesus: The Ethics of Ideas and Things*, edited by Jennifer Rutherford and Anthony Uhlmann, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, pp.153-155.

when it comes to *AI*.

AI is a story about Mrs Curren, a single mother, who, upon being told that her breast cancer has reached an advanced and fatal stage after it spreads to the bone, writes a long letter to the absent daughter about her craving for familial care, her encounter with an unexpected derelict, Vercueil, and the township people, Florence's extended family, and John. There are, thus, at least two narrative lines: the family ethics and the ethics of alterity (to which I will return later).¹ As far as the family ethics is concerned, as I see it, it has more to do with filial duty than parental responsibility; that is to say, the tension that leads Mrs Curren to reminiscence about the childhood of her daughter, of herself, and of her mother lies in the filial duty of the younger generation. If there are any parental responsibilities in the novel, we should take the conflict of different attitudes to the young generation's response to apartheid, either self-exile or militant fight, into consideration.

If what I refer to as the dysfunctional family is also prone to generalization, in the following sections I will narrow down the topic and argue how the pervasive fictional motherhood is associated with the novelist's attachment to his mother, Vera.² Furthermore, it is because of the authorship's influence, or specifically speaking, the "historical guilt" of Vera's political standpoint (Attwell, *Life of Writing* 168), that the novel develops its second narrative line.

Motherhood

Although the distorted parent/child relationship is well discussed, one phenomenon that has received little critical attention is Mrs Curren's memory of the intimacy between herself and her daughter, which resurfaces frequently in the novel. My point of departure in approaching motherhood is, since Mrs Curren's clinging to these happy memories sounds most intriguing to me, to explore the interaction between these episodes and the novelist's authorship. Actually, at the beginning of the novel, upon hearing the tragic news of her terminal disease, Mrs. Curren trudges to the "empty house" (Coetzee, *AI* 4), though accompanied by a mysterious vagrant, Vercueil, who intrudes into her life (I will come back to this below), and outspokenly expresses her yearning for her daughter and the real meaning of home: "we bear children in order to be mothered by them. Home truths, a mother's truth: from now on to the end that is all you will hear from me. So: how I longed for you!"

1 By referring to it as the ethics of alterity, I am deeply informed by Derek Attridge's insightful reading of Coetzee, especially that of *AI*. See Derek Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004, pp. 91-112.

2 Attwell's analysis also indicates that the representation of Mrs Curren arises directly from Coetzee's engagement with the memory of Vera. See Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*, 161-176.

(5). This straightforward monologue, as we can see, extends across the narrative (50, 66, 72, 117, 127). Furthermore, Mrs Curren is frequently overwhelmed by scenes from her family life (minimizing the role of a father here), such as waking the daughter up in the mornings of the school day (5, 52), and rushing to the emergency department in the hospital when the daughter slices her thumb in the bread machine (57). All of these moments contribute to the novelist's endeavour of depicting the mother's longing for the daughter, but one will wonder why, if it is claimed that the dysfunctional family unit lies all over his oeuvre, Coetzee highlights these happy memories in *AI*. One reason, one may argue, is out of the necessity of the fictional plot, but, if we take Coetzee's authorship into account, the question may not as simple as it appears at first sight.

The dedication of the novel could be a good and first clue to the puzzlement. Since *AI* is one of the few to carry a dedication,¹ it is understandable that Gillian Dooley, partly based on this reminder, asserts that "*AI* was written in the shadow of personal bereavement and is dedicated to Coetzee's mother, father, and son"(162). Coetzee began to write a draft later developing into *AI* one year later than the time when Vera died in 1985, so the shadow, as Attwell advances, should mainly be attributed to the death of Vera; differently put, the novel was written for his mother so that it would revolve around the maternal narrative. Attwell's genetic criticism illuminatingly reminds us of the influence of Vera on the creative process of *AI*,² which I fully endorse.

The influence can be traced back to Coetzee's attachment to his mother which developed during his early age and continued to haunt him in his later life. The emotionally charged Nobel banquet acceptance speech, as one of the noticeable examples, stunningly betrays this feeling.³ However, it was Vera's death that became a direct trigger for Coetzee to begin this novel since it "revived the problem of historical guilt" (Attwell, *Life of Writing* 168). One may feel that this point of departure is quite ironic since it seems to contradict Coetzee's deep love for Vera, but the problem he addresses in the novel is the tension between love and shame over Vera's attitudes towards Africa and Africans (which I will turn to later). This tension serves as a foundation for the development of the narrative.

1 Kannemeyer notes that the other works with a dedication include *Waiting for the Barbarians* and the collected edition of Coetzee's fictional memoirs. See J.C. Kannemeyer, *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing*, translated by Michiel Heyns. London: Scribe Publications, 2013, p. 443.

2 See Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*, 167-176.

3 Both David Attwell and Sue Kossew have embraced the tribute the banquet speech paid to Coetzee's mother. See *ibid.*, 161-162. Kossew, "J.M. Coetzee and the Parental Punctum," 149-150.

What I want to emphasize here is that this foundation is inseparable from the explicit family bond on the surface of the narrative. Because the novelist, during his writing, “circled back repeatedly to the contradiction between love and ethical misgiving, as if the novel would have to be a family row in some sense” (Attwell, *Life of Writing* 169), it is not fanciful to claim that the intensity of Coetzee’s love for his mother has been translated into the personal feeling in the narrative expressed by the dying mother towards the self-exiled daughter. The motherhood is, thus, not “a sub-text” in the narrative (150), as Paola Splendore puts it, but a prequel, because the earlier draft began with the letters from a son to a departed mother.

I do not intend to establish any linear causality between these sequences and Coetzee’s attachment to his mother or, more broadly, between Coetzee’s writing and his life, because that is what the novelist objects to. Not only Mrs Curren’s learned knowledge in classical literature is transplanted from the novelist himself,¹ but also she is a more liberal figure than Vera was. Coetzee is a strong advocate for and adherence to impersonality, which, for him, is “a point of *arrival*” and “the result of a progressive writing-out of the self” (Attwell, “Reading” 375 emphasis original). Therefore, politically speaking, Coetzee is closer to his fictional creation than to his mother. The account of these fictional family intimacies is motivated by, rather than merely replicating, the novelist’s attachment to his mother. The traces of Coetzee’s wrestling with the maternal bond run through the novel, which enables us to witness its variations in several impersonalized ways. As Kannemeyer claims, the reader could “deduce a longing for the dead mother” (443).

Correspondingly, Mrs Curren’s remembering her mother’s childhood would make sense since it corresponds to, among many other things, the aforementioned happy moments and subsequently becomes integral to the maternal narrative. When our protagonist drives Vercueil along Boyes Drive to appreciate the scenery over Muizenberg, she tells the derelict the story of her mother’s childhood (Coetzee, *AI* 15). It is about Mrs Curren’s mother who recalls, during the family’s journey from Uniondale to Plettenberg Bay for their Christmas at the seaside, the nights she spends with her family at the ox-wagon in the open air. The episode gives the readers a vivid account of the mother’s worry about an accident caused by the uncontrolled wagon and the rolling stars, which is actually the fantasy of a carefree child. Mrs Curren, after witnessing the violence and Bheki’s corpse in the Guguletu

1 The European canons, including Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Hawthorne, Zola and Bach, etc., constantly appear in Mrs Curren’s narrative. For a detailed discussion, see María J. López, “Miguel De Cervantes and J.M. Coetzee: An Unacknowledged Paternity,” *Journal of Literary Studies*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2013, pp. 80-97.

township, reiterates the significance of the story to her, “I have held on to that story all my life. ... it is there that I come from, it is there that I begin” (110). Both Kannemeyer and Attwell have analysed how the biographical materials evolved into the above final version, so there is little point in turning over the soil again. Nevertheless, there is another popular interpretation which regards the reiteration as, in Dominic Head’s words, “the acceptance of the story of childhood insecurity” and, further, “an acceptance of complicity” with the dying colonial system (*J. M. Coetzee* 135). This view, to me, overemphasizes the political dimension of the novel and consequently takes less notice of the familial bond embedded in the story. Head casts a bright light on the mode of Mrs Curren’s confession, but it is too hasty to make a political inference here and attribute the recollection of these memories to her reluctance in relinquishing the “entrenched ideas” of liberalism—most typically about childhood (130), in spite of the political orientation gradually conveyed as the narrative develops.

Mrs Curren herself clarifies the reason why she attaches so much importance to the memory of her mother: “For if she did not give me life, no one did. I cling not just to the memory of her but to her herself, to her body, to my birth from her body into the world. In blood and milk I drank her body and came to life” (*Coetzee AI* 101). The blood-tie underscored in the impulse is indubitably a feeling translated from the novelist’s longing for his mother.¹ In the passages following this clarification, Mrs Curren delves into the memory of a family photo taken in her childhood. Head, by the same token, though conceding that the moment implies “a sense of lamentation for the loss of childhood innocence” and partly contributes to “the novel’s elegiac tone”, considers it as a reflection of Mrs Curren’s wrestling with the idea of the childhood which is further related with “her political progression” (Head, *J. M. Coetzee* 136). Again, I will not deny the connection between the episodes with Mrs Curren’s ethical and political awakening, but it is more existential and personal than political and confessional, which will subsequently strike a sharp contrast with the dysfunction of her nuclear family.

The following scene is another example of family moments which bear more relation to the authorship than to the confessional dimension. Mrs Curren, shortly after recounting her mother’s childhood memory along Boyes Drive, speaks out her love for the country directly: “These seas, these mountains: I want to burn them upon my sight so deeply that, no matter where I go, they will always be before me. I am hungry with love of this world” (*Coetzee, AI* 16). The gush of the emotion is of

1 Sue Kossew also holds a similar view when discussing this moment. See Kossew, “J.M. Coetzee and the Parental Punctum,” 155.

little relevance to Mrs Curren's complicity with, and confession about, the colonial order and the apartheid system; instead, it is "existential, and unrelated to unresolved questions of political morality" (Attwell, *Life of Writing* 172). As Kannemeyer puts it, "These words are reminiscent of Coetzee's own declaration of love for the meagre landscape of the Karoo and the rude beauty of the Cape Peninsula" (379).

As a maternal narrative, *AI* also features the absence of a husband-like figure. The novel makes little mention of Mrs Curren's husband except for some slight references to his situation. In their initial conversations, Mrs Curren tells Vercueil: "My husband and I parted a long time ago. ... He is dead now" (Coetzee, *AI* 10). Then after experiencing the violence in Guguletu and driving home with the shattered windscreen, Mrs Curren bemoans the fact that she is engulfed by coldness and loneliness: "sixteen years since I shared a bed with man or boy. Sixteen years alone" (99). To be a single mother means to deprive the daughter of the paternal care in her daily life. This echoes fatherless Michael K in *Life & Times of Michael K* and widowed Susan Barton in *Foe*, where there is also a lack of a fully-fledged paternal figure.¹ If the recurring memories of the maternal narrative are transposed from Coetzee's longing for his mother, it will be true to say that the absence of a paternal figure is also associated with the authorship. The exaggerated rift between the father and the son staged in *Boyhood* is the dimension of alienation in his ambiguous attitude to home, which minimizes the paternal role in the novel written within that period. Though the following novels, such as *The Master of Petersburg* and *Disgrace* pay consistent heed to fatherhood, it has more to do with Coetzee's feeling towards his children, rather than the feeling from the novelist to his parents. The gap between the father and the son in *Boyhood* could not be healed until *Summertime*, which is deemed "a restoration" of this relationship (Attwell, *Life of Writing* 186).

The lack of a paternal figure also has its significance at the narrative level: it makes Mrs Curren more vulnerable and exposes her to the outside world, since the protective role is traditionally, albeit stereotypically, assumed by men. Even though there is an imaginary paternal figure, he fails to fulfil what he is supposed to do: "'Father, can't you see I'm burning?'" implored the child, standing at his father's bedside. But his father, sleeping on, dreaming, did not see" (Coetzee *AI* 101). Though Coetzee, referencing Freud's dream of the burning child, depicted

1 Dooley pays attention to the phenomenon, but she infers that, based on the relative neglect of the paternal characters in Coetzee's fiction from the 1980s to the 1990s, the resentment disclosed in *Boyhood* may be due more to "the preoccupation of the author at the time of writing than with the actual attitudes of his younger self." See Dooley, *J.M. Coetzee and the Power of Narrative*, New York: Cambria Press, 2010, p.157.

Mrs Curren's inner life after she witnesses the burning amphitheatre and Bheki's corpse in an abandoned hall, the novelist did not confine himself to a Freudian interpretation of the dream, namely, to regard it as a wish-fulfilment to prolong the "life" of the dead child in the father's dream.¹ Rather, Coetzee might want to express "the Lacanian Real", as Slavoj Žižek observes, "the reality of the child's reproach to his father" (45).² It corresponds to what Mrs Curren says later: "That is the reason—I bring it forward now for you to see—why I cling so tightly to the memory of my mother" and then she immerses herself in recollecting the memory of her mother and the family photo (Coetzee, *AI* 101).

Given all these personal considerations in the maternal discourse, Mrs Curren reiterates the importance of children to mothers, such as, by giving birth to and raising a child, a mother prolongs her own life. When Florence and Bheki are looking for the injured John at Groote Schuur, she addresses Vercueil in the car,

I don't know whether you have children. I don't even know whether it is the same for a man. But when you bear a child from your own body you give your life to that child. Above all to the first child, the firstborn. Your life is no longer with you, it is no longer yours, it is with the child. That is why we do not really die: we simply pass on our life, the life that was for a while in us, and are left behind. (Coetzee, *AI* 69)

Ironically, the absence of the daughter, especially at this critical stage, paralyzes the value of bearing younger generations. That is why Mrs Curren, in the latter part of the novel, uses harsh words to blame her daughter: "Is this an accusation? No, but it is a reproach, a heartfelt reproach" (127). Several sentences later, the reprimand re-emerges: "Is this an accusation? Yes. *J'accuse*. I accuse you of abandoning me" (127).³ These words are the plainest expressions conveyed by an abandoned

1 See Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (Second Part) and on Dreams*, ed. James Strachey, 24 vols., vol. 5, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, London: Hogarth Press, 1953, p. 510.

2 There are also some allegorical interpretations of this reference. See Gallagher, *A Story of South Africa*, 205. Jane Poyner, *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2006, pp.124-125.

3 We should not ignore the term, *J'accuse*, before Mrs Curren's emotionally-charged monologue. The reference to Emile Zola's *J'Accuse* is one of several literary allusions in the fiction, which clearly indicates a much broader political context. See, Craig Smith, "Flinging Accusations into the Teeth of the Wind: J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* and Emile Zola's *J'accuse*," *English Studies in Africa: A Journal of the Humanities*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2013, pp.14-24.

mother, who is left alone to cope with the personal tragedy and national chaos. As Jane Poyner puts it, this blame is out of the “anguish of a neglected mother” (Poyner 119). The anguish is in ironic contrast to the happy moments in the novel, which manifests Mrs Curren’s failure to rejuvenate the family ethics—“I cannot live without a child. I cannot die without a child” (Coetzee, *AI* 127).

So what happens to the daughter? Why is she absent? Does she share the same family ethics with Mrs Curren? This is one of the most intense ethical conflicts in the narrative: the mother’s strong yearning for her daughter and the daughter’s absence. However, the daughter clears out of South Africa and settles down in America because of her resentment of the apartheid regime. In Mrs Curren’s words, “she had simply had enough. She went away” (69) and “she will come back when they [the apartheid governors] are hanging by their heels from the lamp-posts” (68). Recalling the moment when she sees her daughter off at the airport, Mrs Curren says: “you shook the dust of this country from your feet” (127). The daughter’s decisive determination to flee from South Africa diminishes the filial duty she should fulfil in her mother’s advanced years; that is to say, her resentment of the apartheid regime is the top priority in her decision-making, where she may have little thought of the prospect that the mother will be left alone in her final days.

I do not mean to draw an inference of, and then find fault with, the daughter’s callousness from this discussion. Nevertheless, it is Mrs Curren who refuses the idea (suggested by Vercueil) of telling her daughter the truth on the phone and calling her back; instead, she insists on trying to make her daughter read the posthumous letter, which can also be thought of protecting her daughter in a maternal way. Until now, to describe *AI* in this manner is to underscore the texture of motherhood, but this tension is one of ways in which the narrative goes beyond the personal struggle. To put it the other way round, the political dimension finds its way into the family ethics.

The informed reader will detect the intertextuality between the daughter’s escape from South Africa with Coetzee’s own case described both in the interview and his fictional autobiography. Shortly after the publication of *AI*, Coetzee states in *Doubling the Point* in a third-person perspective, “he departs South Africa, very much in the spirit of shaking the dust of the country from his feet” (393). Then in *Youth*, which came out over ten years later, the protagonist, sitting in the reading room of the British Museum, contemplates whether he can “[shake] the dust of the ugly new South Africa from his feet” (137). It is more interesting to look at the young generation’s reaction when they hear from their mothers. Though regarding the letter as the daughter’s “inheritance...coming from this country” (28), Mrs

Curren thinks, if she flies Vercueil to America to deliver it in person, then her daughter may murmur to herself with a sense of irritation, “I do not need this, ... this is what I came here to get away from, why does it have to follow me?”(178). In a similar manner, the fictional Coetzee from *Youth* also views the weekly letters sent from his mother as an annoying reminder of his connection with South Africa (98).

The episodes in which the younger generation free themselves from their home country, either in the narrative or in real life, show the youth’s alienation from South Africa. It also echoes what the novelist observes in the “Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech”. Before discussing how colonialism and apartheid corrupt literature, Coetzee firstly analyses such influences on people’s inner life:

The deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life. (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 98)

The “deformed and stunted inner life” leads to, and accounts for, the young generation exiling itself from the problematic political discourse. It is not difficult to find other examples in South African literature to attest this direct consequence. In *The Conservationist* and *Burger’s Daughter*, Gordimer tells the reader why her two protagonists, Mehring and Rosa Burger, respectively, escape South Africa due to the distorted human relationships under the apartheid regime. The disillusionment of Mehring, a wealthy white industrialist and dilettante farmer, in possessing the land without recognizing the legal rights of, and the equality with, the blacks forces him to leave the country, which displays the complicity of the white liberal with apartheid. Rosa Burger, who, despite being a descendant of political activists, is also a white liberal, temporarily goes into exile in France because, upon seeing an old black man mercilessly thrashing his donkey, she is aware of her inadequacy in the anti-apartheid struggle. It is from these flights that Gordimer registered the impotence of liberalism and thus she adopted, as we could see, a more radical attitude to the apartheid government, both in her life and her writing.¹

In this regard, though never declaring support for any political party, Coetzee also demonstrates the failure of liberalism, especially in his writings before the

1 As a member of the political party ANC (African National Congress) in South Africa, Gordimer adheres to the principle that the essential gesture of a writer is a “revolutionary” one. See Nadine Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics, and Places*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988, p. 296.

official demise of apartheid.¹ The novelist not only criticises Alan Paton and his “politics of innocence” displayed in *Cry, the Beloved Country* (Coetzee *Stranger Shores* 263), but also puts the issue on the table in *AI*. Thus, Coetzee’s description of the daughter’s exile, besides the familial dimension, also indicates the inability of liberal ways to cope with the problem.

However, different from Gordimer’s attempt to evoke a Marxist orientation and advocate revolutionary solutions to deconstruct the idea of home in her writing, Coetzee responds to the issue in a more ethical way where he invests, thematizes and performs different modes of alterity in juxtaposition with an interrogation of the idea of home. To readers who are either involved in or deeply concerned with the struggle against apartheid, Gordimer’s writing is, of course, an encouraging call to arms while Coetzee’s work is more like a ruthless interrogation of conscience with its pessimistic but penetrating intensity. This interrogation involves an adaptation of the inheritance of a European literary heritage in the South African context as well as technical narrative innovations.² In relation to *AI*, it is through Mrs Curren’s responses to alterity and her subsequent ethical awakening, without doing away with the connection with motherhood, that the narrative gains this intensity.

Beyond Motherhood: out of the Ethical Predicament

Let me move on to the other narrative thread, namely, the ethics of alterity, which, according to Derek Attridge, refers to the assumption that “the fullest acceptance of the responsibility to and for the other may indeed be to trust the other”(103-104). Attridge’s engagement with the issue of alterity is quite thought-provoking, but I would like to add two more points related to this discussion. To begin with, it seems that Mrs Curren is, before this responsibility is brought into being, not prepared to

1 For a general discussion of Coetzee’s challenge to the liberal tradition in South African writing, see Peter Blair, “The Liberal Tradition in Fiction,” in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, ed. David Attwell and Derek Attridge, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 488-89.

2 The debates about the relation between Coetzee’s writing and liberalism have never been rare in criticism. In his review of *Doubling the Point* and David Attwell’s *J.M. Coetzee and the Politics of Writing*, Jean-Philippe Wade prejudicially attributes Coetzee’s ineffective modernist attempt to, among others, resist the liberal tradition of South African literature to the novelist’s own liberalism. In his reply, Attwell perceptively points out the flaws in Wade’s accusation and underscores Coetzee’s endeavour to demonstrate the political, historical and ethical tensions with his narrative experimentalism. See Jean-Philippe Wade, “Doubling Back on J.M. Coetzee,” *English in Africa* vol.21, no. 1/2, 1994, pp.191-121. David Attwell, “The Naked Truth’: A Response to Jean-Philippe Wade,” *ibid.* vol.22, no. 2, 1995, pp.89-97.

welcome the vagrant, so there is a subtle change of her attitude to Vercueil, where her ethical predicament is enacted. Secondly, the home consciousness inherent in the narrative enables us to explain the change, which furthermore makes the narrative circle back to, among others, the maternal narrative.

With just a glimpse of the implication of his name,¹ his incomprehensibility (on most occasions we could only read Mrs Curren's monologues with little access to what is going on in Vercueil's mind) and his disfigured hand, we can recognize that Vercueil's explicit otherness is analogous to the tortured barbarian girl, the slow-minded Michael K, and the tongueless Friday in Coetzee's other novels. However, this alterity does not necessitate Mrs Curren's "responsibility to and for the other". Mrs Curren is repulsed by Vercueil, at least at the beginning of the story, in many different ways. Vercueil's intrusion into Mrs Curren's life is unexpected, as we could tell from the very beginning, which is further confirmed by Mrs Curren's opinions on Vercueil—"a man who came without being invited" (Coetzee *AI* 165). Our protagonist does not welcome the unexpected guest at first, so her account of this man begins with strong derogatory connotations. In Mrs Curren's eyes, Vercueil is 'an insect' (12), 'a ragged stranger' (13), and a thief who steals an obedient dog from a good family (17). She also raises some eyebrows at Vercueil's hygiene and his sluggishness.² These depreciative labels, though one may argue that these descriptions are attributed to Vercueil's otherness, suggest, to me, something stronger: Mrs Curren's repugnance for him.

Then it is rather abrupt and even confusing for readers when Mrs Curren, just after introducing the basic information about her family to Vercueil, springs the question of whether Vercueil can, after her death, send the letter she is writing (actually the novel itself) to her absent daughter. Attridge is correct to attribute the imprudence to the story itself, since it "happens to someone who accepts it, without

1 A few critics point out that "verkul" in Afrikaans means "to cheat" while "verskuil" means "to hide or conceal", which the name of Vercueil is assumed to originate from. See Head, *J. M. Coetzee*, p.140. David Attwell, "Dialogue' and 'Fulfilment' in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*," in *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995*, ed. Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.176. Poyner, *J.M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship*, p.116. Many names in the novel have the implication of alterity. John and Florence may be the fake names which are only used by the white people, as Mrs Curren says: "Perhaps I alone in all the world called her Florence. Called her by an alias. Now I was on ground where people were revealed in their true names" (93).

2 Mrs Curren makes lucid complaints or scolding on Vercueil: "the worst of the smell comes from his shoes and feet" (17); "you are wasting your life" (7) and "in the South Africa of the future everyone will have to work, including you [Vercueil]" (65).

calculation, without forethought”(Attridge 103), while my point is that, if we would do justice to this case, the idea of home inherent in this retired lecturer in Classics and, more broadly, in the narrative, must be considered.

Home consciousness entails an attempt to interrogate and reconstruct, whether it succeeds or not, the idea of home both literally and liberally. In terms of Mrs Curren, as one who is burdened with a fatal disease, a dysfunctional family and an apartheid-riven society, her wish to manipulate the interrogation and reconstruction is much stronger and more explicit than other characters in the novel. The coincidental arrival of Vercueil is the very option Coetzee arranged for his protagonist to deal with. It is by this option, then, that the alterity becomes, in Attridge's words, “a product of the identical constituting act that has produced the self/same which perceives it as other”(99). To put it the other way round, Vercueil is an essential part of Mrs Curren's world, primarily including her reflections on the daily routine and ethical values she is used to.

Then we can see that Mrs Curren's attitude to Vercueil changes from repugnance to, among others, reliance, to secure comfort and companionship. If the idea of home collapses in the dimension of the maternal narrative, one of the ways that Mrs Curren tries to reconstruct it is to trust Vercueil both as a messenger and a nominal family member. As López puts it, “If Mrs Curren's act of hospitality towards Vercueil is absolute and radical, it is because she has welcomed him as one welcomes a child”(274). Home consciousness underpins, thus, the ethical thinking around alterity in the novel.

There is a recognizable lucidity about Vercueil's substitutability in Mrs Curren's family life. Differently put, Vercueil interchangeably plays the role of Mrs Curren's daughter and her husband. Our protagonist is desperate to talk with her daughter: “There is no one I am ready to speak to except you and the fat man in the picture, the fat man in heaven; and neither of you will, I think, call” (Coetzee *AI* 22). The secular liberal does not believe in God and just awaits the long-expected call to soothe her loneliness. In their journey to look for the injured John in the hospital, Vercueil's response to Mrs Curren's talking about her absent daughter transiently relieves this solitude: “He was learning to talk to me, [h]e was learning to lead me on, I felt an urge to interrupt: ‘It is such a pleasure!’”(69). Mrs Curren also invites Vercueil to sleep with her in a platonic way and thinks that they are a couple. In this way, “the absence of a family is... reinvented through surrogate relationships” (Splendore 150). Mrs Curren compares their relationship to a familial one, symbolizing that Vercueil is on his way to becoming a nominal member in Mrs Curren's concept of family.

“I don't see what you need me for,” he [Vercueil] said.

“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.” (Coetzee, *AI* 65)

Coetzee prepared a dual approach to alterity for readers to appreciate Mrs Curren's wrestling with her ethical predicament. One part is, of course, Vercueil while the other should be the black people, including Florence's extended family and John. However, these two parts are different from each other, which, as Attridge critically observes, are revealed in the “hostility between the township people and Vercueil”(106). In addition to their physical and vocal conflicts, the distinction also lies in, narratologically speaking, the ways in which they play out the otherness. To put it differently, what marks the significance of alterity in the form of the black people from that of Vercueil lies in the historical and political tensions indicated in a series of encounters between the dying lady and the township community.¹ It is in this sense that “the alterity is given a social intensity” (Attwell, “‘Dialogue’ and ‘Fulfilment’ ” 168).

The sequence manifesting the hostility between the two modes of alterity, despite being engaged with the parent/child relation, is indicative of this social intensity. Mrs Curren feels irritated when seeing the physical attack on Vercueil initiated by the township boys, Bheki and John, who successively seek sanctuary in her house. Though the brawl is finally stopped with Florence's help, Mrs Curren later tries to challenge Florence's pride in, and indulgence of, the children's aggressive behaviour. However, Florence rebuts this preaching: “It is the whites who made them so cruel” (Coetzee, *AI* 45). Though the debate alludes, in Splendore's words, to “the failure of parental responsibility” (considering the blame Mrs Curren lays on Florence's acquiescence in the children's violence), the focus should be on the militant and rebellious young blacks under apartheid, who are “children of iron” in this ruthless “age of iron” (46). And then Mrs Curren compares her self-exiled daughter who settles down in a secure environment, and her own childhood when brainwashed by nationalist patriotism:

1 I will not deny the allegorical meaning in Mrs Curren's relation to Vercueil, but I would like to pay attention to the difference in their focuses. The political implication of their relation can be found in the following example. When Mrs. Curren and Vercueil sit together in the car while they are looking for the wounded black boy in the Groote Schuur hospital, Mrs. Curren compares her gradual adaptation to Vercueil's smell with her relation with South Africa: ‘Is this how I feel toward South Africa: not loving it but habituated to its bad smell?’ (64)

My only child is thousands of miles away, safe;...Did we not have Voortrekkers, generation after generation of Voortrekkers, grim-faced, tight-lipped Afrikaner children, marching, singing their patriotic hymns, saluting their flag, vowing to die for their fatherland?... How fortunate you [the daughter] are to have put all this behind you. (46-47)

The comradeship popular among the black community, according to Mrs Curren, bears a striking resemblance to Afrikaner nationalism dominant in her own childhood. In addition to the mother/daughter relation distorted by apartheid, this debate once more makes Mrs Curren's craving for her daughter transcend the private relationship and gain obvious ideological implications. The ethics of alterity in the form of the township people and the family ethics have integrated into one penetrating thread to expose Mrs Curren's ethical predicament.

The debate between Mrs Curren and the township people continues as the narrative proceeds. When finding John has escaped from the hospital with his injured head, Mrs Curren argues over the phone with Mr Thabane, the ex-schoolteacher, about comradeship as advocated by the township people. In her mind, John's case is not alone but stands for "the rising generation" to answer calls for sacrifice in the name of the truth and justice (74). It alludes to a slogan, namely "freedom or death", which also plainly appears in Mrs Curren's reflection on this debate with Mr Thabane (149). The slogan draws our attention to a special period in South African history, that is, the State of Emergency (SOE).¹

As Coetzee tells us at the end of the story, the narrative was set during the period from 1986 to 1989,² a time when South Africa was in a second SOE in the

1 Dominic Head also gives a brief introduction to this general background. See Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to J.M. Coetzee*, p.67.

2 There is another palpable clue to indicate the period the story writes about. On their way to finding out where Bheki is upon hearing the news that there is some violence in Guguletu, Mr Thabane tells Mrs. Curren: "I was born in 1943 ... I'm forty-three." (92). Thus, the time should be the year of 1986.

1980s.¹ As a draconian tool of the apartheid government, SOE was targeted at the widespread insurrection of the black people to counter the social chaos and disorder caused by their resistance. The chaos began with violence in townships where black people lived and extended to the school boycott in some parts of South Africa in 1985. The first period of SOE in South Africa ended with a short-lived lifting of the policy from March to June in 1986, but it was then extended to cover the whole country and remained in force until 1990 when the new president F.W. de Klerk came to office. Under SOE, the security police were granted extraordinary powers to detain and kill any suspects without resorting to the legal process, meanwhile, the coverage of the violence and SOE in the media was accordingly blocked.

It would make sense, then, that in the novel the township youth's attitudes and behaviours foreground their more militant actions to fight against the apartheid government, instead of Vercueil. Bheki is found to be involved in battles with the *witdoeke*, "a conservative black vigilante group known by the white strips of cloth that they wear to identify themselves" (Coetzee, *AI* 83). When Mrs Curren drives Florence and Mrs Thabane to look for Bheki in Guguletu, she experiences for herself the dreadful violence in the township: the burning shacks, the gunfire and the corpse of Bheki in a deserted building. John is later suspected of smuggling weapons and shot to death in the servant's quarters of Mrs Curren's backyard. All of these moments contribute to, and cannot be separated from, the social intensity of alterity.

To describe *AI* in this way is to highlight its political and realistic dimension, so a question arises: how does it lay bare Mrs Curren's ethical predicament? As noted previously, when remarking that she may not live long enough to see the horrendous scene of children throwing petrol on, and laughing at, a burning woman, Mrs Curren is reminded of the root of the indifference and callousness, namely, the whites' guilt. However, there is still a long way to go before Mrs Curren, as a white woman, recognizes this complicity. As we could see from the narrative, there is a sense of in-betweenness in Mrs Curren's responses to apartheid and to the black youth, and it is here that her ethical predicament lies, in addition to the change in her attitude to Vercueil. Mrs Curren is cognizant of the social chaos and inequality

1 There is another SOE in South African history in the 1960s following the Sharpeville massacre. At that time, Coetzee was in London. The second SOE was also triggered by something related to the Sharpeville massacre; or, specifically speaking, it was on the Sharpeville day that police killed twenty people who were in a funeral procession. It soon spurred school boycotts and clashes between the police and the black, especially the young. Then the president P.W. Botha declared a SOE. See Nigel Worden, *The Making of Modern South Africa: Conquest, Apartheid, Democracy*, fifth ed, Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2011, p.139.

caused by the implementation of apartheid, but it seems that she still set her hopes on justice prevailing over apartheid. The dying lady, upon the shattering of her illusion, initially holds the view that she may not be relevant, before she realizes her complicity with apartheid and makes a series of subsequent confessions.

It is worth elaborating on Mrs Curren's ambivalent attitude towards apartheid. On the one hand, she is modestly aware of the rampant social chaos within the apartheid regime. That is why she refuses to watch TV and read newspapers, which are no more than propaganda instruments for the authorities to whitewash their governance and policies. Thus what dominates the media are a staging of "the parade of politicians" (Coetzee, *AI* 25), glossing over the social disorder (36) and presenting "a land of smiling neighbours" (49). The ban on public access to this information in the media is just a direct reflection of the policy implemented during the second stage of 1980 SOE.

On the other hand, this awareness is compromised by the trust she puts in apartheid though she does not support the authorities. What she has experienced is reminiscent of friendliness and peacefulness before the chaos: "In my day, I thought, policemen spoke respectfully to ladies. In my day children did not set fire to schools" (48). After Bheki and John are seriously injured during their attempt to escape on a bike from a chasing police van, Mrs Curren insists that she lay a charge against the police and, more broadly, the "men in power", for their intentional or unintentional dangerous action (60). Florence does not agree with Mrs Curren's proposal and later Bheki also despises Mrs Curren's trust in the police. The police refuse to investigate the case since Mrs Curren is not one of the "parties directly affected" (77).

All in all, it is Mrs Curren's liberal humanism makes her inhabit such a position, which reduces her into a morally exiled state, albeit she is physically in South Africa. Vercueil, upon hearing Mrs Curren speaking of the reason of her daughter's absence, defines her daughter as an exile, but Mrs Curren denies the interpretation right away, saying: "she [her daughter] is not an exile, but I am" (69). To claim that she is an exile is to admit her in-betweenness, which her ethical predicament rests on.

The problem is also staged in her attitudes to the township youth, especially John. Though annoyed by John's trespassing on her property and his subsequent rebellious behaviours, Mrs Curren exerts herself to help him after seeing the bicycle accident (55-63). When she and Vercueil pay a visit to the hospitalized John, Mrs Curren feels quite upset by, and expresses her dislike of, the "stupid, obstructive, intractable" boy: "I look into my heart and nowhere do I find any trace of feeling for

him” (71). In the next scene, when the unrecovered John, who is unaware of Bheki’s death in Guguletu, returns to Mrs Curren’s house to look for him, Mrs Curren again admits that the boy “is not lovable” and she “want[s] him to go away and leave me [Mrs Curren] alone” (124). Paradoxically, when the police come to arrest and then kill John in her house, she desperately tries but fails to protect him from danger (138-142).

While the above moments suggest Mrs Curren’s in-betweenness, they conversely challenge, shake and subvert her liberal humanism. On their way to Guguletu to look for Bheki, it is the first time Mrs Curren has been confronted with so much violence. Mrs Curren is appalled at, and scared of, “this looming world of rage and violence” (89), so what she wants is to go home. When questioned by Mr Thabane if she knows where these people whose homes are burned out should go, Mrs Curren realizes that this is “my business, their business, everyone’s business” (90) and later reiterates that it is not “a personal thing” (114).

After Bheki’s death, Mrs Curren begins to reflect on the relationship between individual responsibility and collective guilt. When Vercueil closely follows Mrs Curren one morning in the house, she takes all her confusion and disgrace out on him: “But why should I bear the blame? Why should I be expected to rise above my times? Is it my doing that my times have been so shameful? Why should it be left to me, old and sick and full of pain, to lift myself unaided out of this pit of disgrace?” (107) Mrs Curren raises the issue of why she, as a dying individual, should inherit the guilt of colonialism and apartheid, because in her mind the ones who should be blamed are those “who have created these times” (107). Then she accuses those who have spoiled her life “in the way that a rat or a cockroach spoils food without even eating it, simply by walking over it and sniffing it and performing its bodily functions on it” (107). Again, Mrs Curren relates her personal life to the national situation and that is why her terminal disease is inclined to be interpreted as an allegory of the national fate, so to speak, the ending of the apartheid regime.

John’s death is the last straw for Mrs Curren’s liberal humanism. From then on, the narrative begins to enter into a totally confessional mode about complicity. She meditates,

A crime was committed long ago. How long ago? I do not know. But longer ago than 1916, certainly. So long ago that I was born into it. It is part of my inheritance. It is part of me, I am part of it. (149)

In her opinion, she, as a white descendant, has to pay the price not only “in shame; in a life of shame and a shameful death, unlamented, in an obscure corner” (ibid),

but also with a recognition of the impotence of her liberal humanism:

What I did not know, what I did not know... was that the price was even higher. ... It had something to do with honour, with the notion I clung to through thick and thin, from my education, from my reading, that in his soul the honourable man can suffer no harm. (150)

This confessional mode is to some extent a reflection of Coetzee's shame over Vera's attitude towards South Africa and South Africans. In a series of dialogues with the psychotherapist Arabella Kurtz, Coetzee reflects the "puzzling moral material" provided by the family in his childhood when Afrikaner nationalism was dominant in South Africa,

I think most immediately of my mother, whose relations with other human beings at a personal level were (I thought) morally admirable but who was nevertheless a supporter, if not of apartheid as a social system, then certainly of the people who ran the country. (Coetzee and Kurtz 110)

Since apartheid is notorious for its institutionalized racial discrimination and segregation, its supporters advocated inequality between human beings. What puzzled Coetzee is the incompatibility between Vera's amiability with people around her and her siding with "the people who ran the country". Vera's in-betweenness provokes the novelist to contemplate, as Attwell notes, "the problem of historical guilt" after her death (*Life of Writing* 168). It is reasonable, then, that in addition to the maternal discourse, *AI* will develop around another narrative thread, that of "historical guilt". As Kossew puts it, "his [Coetzee's] combination of moral ambivalence and emotional intensity in relation to mothers has left a subtle but discernible and affecting trace in his fiction" (154). Thus, as my argument tries to demonstrate, Mrs Curren's ethical predicament is consistent with the novelist's attachment to his mother, one of the most intense feelings in the idea of home, and what inches its way into the narrative is an impersonalized representation of Vera's moral ambivalence.

Conclusion

Coetzee's engagement with the representation of the dysfunctional family in his oeuvre, and especially with that of motherhood in *AI*, invites a maternal reading of home consciousness in this novel. The novel originates from Coetzee's deepest

feeling with his mother, Vera, as the previous argument demonstrates, but a more personal motivation and origin of the novels does not entail a traditional family drama. Coetzee's literary taste and intellectual pursuits (instead of merely representing his personal life in the novel) lie in introducing the flow of his bereavement and family crises into an ethical and political current, to eventually merge with the historical tide. It is one of the striking features of Coetzee's writing that his novels originate from, and revolve around, a single line of his personal relation with the issue of home, but end with a more complicated net woven by biographical, national, ethical and political factors.

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