



RESEARCH ARTICLE

TRAUMA AND POSTCOLONIAL ECOFEMINISM: J.M.COETZEE'S *AGE OF IRON*

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Submission Jan., 29, 2025</p> <p>Acceptance Mar., 17, 2025</p> <p>Keywords</p> <p>Trauma; postcolonial ecofeminism; witnessing; moral conflict; identity</p> <p>Corresponding Author 1178847023@qq.com</p>	<p>This paper examines the representation of trauma in J. M. Coetzee's <i>Age of Iron</i> through a postcolonial ecofeminist lens, highlighting the intersections of bodily suffering, colonial violence, and environmental degradation. It argues that trauma in the novel manifests as both physical deterioration and moral conflict, reflecting the enduring scars of apartheid and colonial oppression. Mrs. Curren's cancer-ridden body parallels the deterioration of the land, illustrating the entanglement of human suffering and ecological devastation. Through an analysis of trauma witnessing, ethical dilemmas, and the loss of identity, this study reveals how Coetzee intertwines individual and collective trauma within a postcolonial ecofeminist framework. By foregrounding the ecological dimensions of trauma, this paper expands existing postcolonial and feminist critiques, highlighting the underexplored intersections between bodily affliction and environmental violence. It further explores the rupture caused by ecological destruction and colonial dispossession, ultimately questioning whether healing and regeneration are possible within Coetzee's postcolonial ecofeminist vision. This study contributes to trauma studies, postcolonial criticism, and ecofeminism by elucidating Coetzee's critique of colonial legacies and the interwoven nature of trauma and ecological crisis.</p>

1. INTRODUCTION

J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990), set against the backdrop of apartheid in South Africa, narrates the story of Elizabeth Curren, a retired white female professor of classical literature diagnosed with cancer. Written as a first-person letter to her daughter in the United States, the

novel chronicles Curren's final days as she confronts her impending death and engages with the harsh realities of racial injustice and societal decay. The novel begins when Mrs Curren finds a homeless man, Vercueil staying in her garage. As time goes by, their relationship deepens and Vercueil becomes Mrs Curren's companion. Mrs Curren witnesses the cruel consequences of the apartheid. Through Mrs Curren's letter to her daughter, Coetzee displays the brutal realities and trauma caused by the apartheid and its lasting impact upon individuals and the South African society.

This paper examines the representation of trauma in *Age of Iron* from a postcolonial ecofeminist perspective. Postcolonial ecofeminism is a multidisciplinary framework, which examines the colonial and patriarchal oppression upon women and nature. Vandana Shiva (1988) and Maria Mies (1986) argues that the violence resulted from colonial and capitalist systems against women and nature is deeply interrelated. In *Age of Iron*, Mrs Curren's cancer is an analogy to the degradation of South Africa's natural environment, which intertwines Mrs Curren's personal sufferings with South African ecological degradation and displays that personal trauma within the postcolonial context is the result of the societal, historical and environmental oppression.

Trauma theory lays a fundamental framework for understanding Mrs Curren's experiences. Cathy Caruth (1996) argues "Trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival" (p. 11). Similarly, LaCapra (2002) distinguishes between historical trauma and structural trauma. He argued that historical trauma is bound to the specific events such as apartheid, whereas structural trauma bears the transhistorical characteristics, which may not be linked to particular events but reflects the broader and enduring conditions of human existence. Based on these concepts, Rothberg (2009) proposed the concept of "multidirectional memory", which focuses on examining the diverse historical traumas caused by colonial histories and their legacies. Craps (2013) further stressed the significance of exploring the unique experiences of the marginalized and colonized peoples like South Africans, who suffered a lot from traumatic experiences.

This paper examines the dual oppression of women and nature under apartheid by exploring the protagonist's traumatic experiences from a postcolonial ecofeminist perspective. Mrs Curren's personal trauma is interrelated with South African societal and ecological destruction, which resulted from its colonial history and patriarchal system. By Mrs. Curren's self-reflective narrative, Coetzee highlights the interconnection of personal sufferings and the environmental issues and reveals how colonial and apartheid violence devastate both individuals and the natural world. Ultimately, this study seeks to illuminate the complex and multifaceted nature of trauma within the colonial/postcolonial context, contributing to a deeper understanding of Coetzee's critique of apartheid and its enduring legacies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As a novel that deeply reflects the impact of violence and political turmoil during South Africa's apartheid period on individuals and society, *Age of Iron* has ignited enduring scholarly discussions since its release in 1990. Existing research has explored multiple dimensions,

including racial trauma, political violence, body and identity, ethical dilemmas, and postcolonial feminist perspectives. However, there remains a gap in systematically analyzing the intertwined relationship between female trauma and environmental destruction from a postcolonial ecofeminist perspective. The following sections review the key literature in these areas to provide a foundation for this study.

Scholars have extensively examined the representation of racial segregation and its violent consequences in *Age of Iron*. Jęczmińska (2022) analyzes the living conditions of white and black communities in Cape Town, arguing that the novel reveals the profound impact of racial divisions on social structure and visions of the afterlife. Similarly, Urama (2023) explores Coetzee's representation of post-apartheid violence, highlighting how both white and black South Africans are victims of apartheid. He emphasizes the novel's potential to guide readers toward harmonious coexistence, addressing the lingering wounds of violence. While these studies illuminate the socio-political dimensions of apartheid, they do not delve into the intersection of racial trauma with gendered or ecological concerns.

The body narrative in *Age of Iron* has received widespread attention. Belgacem (2018) asserts that Coetzee's representation of the body as subject to dismemberment counters the colonial representation of the other's body as exotic and erotically-charged. Helaly (2023) compares Mrs Curren's body and the apartheid system to the decay and downfall of South African and proposes displacement as a coping mechanism for the oppressed. Lin (2001) focuses on Coetzee's use of "simultaneity rhetoric" and argues that Coetzee aligns the colonial and postcolonial experiences within a single narrative framework. This technique enables a dialogue between history and contemporary reality and discusses the complex ethical issues such as power, resistance, and human relationship. These studies provide valuable insights into trauma from the physical and symbolic aspects. However, they ignore the interconnectedness between trauma and the environmental destruction or feminist concerns.

There are scholars who explore *Age of Iron* from Postcolonial feminist perspective. Salih & Janoory (2020) argue that Coetzee contributes to discourses on identity, resistance, and empowerment by partraying the black women's resilience and agency in the face of systemic injustice. Eze (2011) emphasizes the ethical responsibility implanted in maintaining memory and connections with others through examing the novel's exploration of empathy and moral judgment in the apartheid society. These perspectives stress the importance of female experiences in the novel, but they take no notice on the relationships between the environmental degradation and the female trauma.

Some scholars are attracted by Coetzee's ethical philosophy. Basing the argument on Levinas's ethical theory, Moosa-Mitha (2015) emphasizes the preservation of alterity by exploring the the encounters between the self and the Other in *Age of Iron*. Attridge (2021) explores themes of trust, betrayal, and human connection, using the protagonist's relationships to illuminate ethical responsibility toward the Other. Dong (2018) analyzes dysfunctional family dynamics and motherhood in the novel, interpreting Coetzee's portrayal of home as a complex interplay of biographical, national, ethical, and political factors. While these studies highlight ethical and

familial dimensions, they do not fully address the interconnectedness of trauma, gender, and ecology.

In summary, existing literature has extensively explored *Age of Iron* from multiple dimensions, including racial trauma, political violence, social injustice, and ethical dilemmas. However, research on female trauma, particularly from the perspective of postcolonial ecofeminism, remains limited. Few studies have systematically analyzed the intersection of female trauma and environmental destruction in the novel. This study addresses this gap by examining Elizabeth Curren's trauma through a postcolonial ecofeminist lens, exploring the deep connections between the natural environment and character trauma. By doing so, it not only fills a critical gap in *Age of Iron* scholarship but also contributes to broader discussions on the intersectionality of gender, ecology, and colonial violence.

3. DISCUSSION

In the special historical context of apartheid in South Africa, trauma not only permeates individuals' psychology and bodies, but also runs through the overall ecosystem of society, culture, and nature. J. M. Coetzee's *Iron Age* vividly depicts the interweaving of individual and collective traumas in a delicate and complex narrative style, as well as how traumas are generated, continued, and reconstructed in postcolonial and ecological contexts. This chapter aims to explore the manifestation and multiple dimensions of trauma in novels from the perspective of the intersection of trauma theory and postcolonial ecofeminism.

In *Age of Iron*, Mrs. Curren, as a witness to the violence of racial segregation, not only observes direct acts of brutality but also witnesses the broader devastation of apartheid society through group violence. These events profoundly impact her psyche, leaving her with a painful internal conflict between feelings of powerlessness, guilt, and a sense of moral responsibility. She endures the dual trauma of witnessing violence. On one hand, confronting the injustice and pain caused by racial violence; on the other, her role as a "witness" imposes moral and emotional responsibilities. As Cathy Caruth (1996) states, to study psychological trauma means to bear witness to horrible events.

In the novel, Bheki and his friends are pursued by the police for resisting racially segregated schooling. As they cycle down Skender Street, they are closely followed by a police car that had been tracking them. A shocking event then occurs: the police car deliberately chases Bheki's bicycle, knocking him and his friend to the ground before speeding away as if nothing had happened. Mrs. Curren is shocked and frozen. She "screamed in a shrill voice that, hanging in the air...wanted to move but could not. There was a coldness in my limbs, and the word 'fainting' occurred to me" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 55). Two children are injured, especially Bheki's friend, whose forehead wound bleeds profusely: "Blood flowed in a sheet into the boy's eyes and made his hair glisten; it dripped onto the pavement; it was everywhere (Coetzee, 1990, p. 57)". Mrs. Curren "stared at it, fascinated, afraid, drawn into a veritable stupor of staring" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 58). All these descriptions capture the physical and psychological freezing that violence induces in witnesses. Mrs. Curren's paralysis in the face of violence exemplifies the traumatic impact, as

Caruth (1996) argues: trauma not only affects the victim but deeply scars the psychological structure of witnesses as well.

In sharp contrast to Mrs. Curren's shock at the incident, Florence's response appears strikingly composed. When Mrs. Curren instinctively sought to provide assistance and informed Florence that an ambulance was on its way, Florence firmly refused: "We do not need the ambulance, said Florence (Coetzee, 1990, p. 57)... We do not want to be involved with the police, Florence repeated. There is nothing you can do against the police" (Coetzee, 1990, p.60). Her reaction underscores the profound trauma endured by black women under the apartheid system. Florence's refusal is not merely an individual response but a reflection of a broader historical reality in which interactions with state institutions, particularly law enforcement, often resulted in further violence and oppression for black communities. Her calm behavior in the face of crisis is actually a survival strategy shaped by systemic injustice, which displays South African women's distrust and fear that the colonial and apartheid history infused into them.

For Mrs. Curren, the ambulance represents the official medical assistance and the possibility of timely treatment for the boy. However, for Florence, the police and healthcare systems are the instruments of oppression and violence. Her rejection of official aid expresses the systemic trauma that the black women in South Africa have long endured. Florence's response is not only an immediate survival tactic but also a manifestation of deep-rooted historical trauma. This trauma extends beyond the direct violence inflicted by colonialism and apartheid policies to encompass structural injustice—black communities are systematically deprived of medical resources, state-sanctioned violence pervades daily life, and black women, in particular, are both witnesses to and victims of this pervasive oppression.

Felman & Laub (1992) suggest that witnessing violence is, in itself, a traumatic event, particularly when the witness feels powerless. This form of alternative trauma is also evident in Mrs. Curren's experience of witnessing brutal violence in Guguletu. As she describes:

A man in a black overcoat swung an axe. With a crash, a window burst. He attacked the door... a woman with a baby in her arms flew out of the house, followed by three barefoot children... A stone came sailing out of the crowd and fell with a clatter on the roof of the burning shack. Another hit the wall, and another landed at the feet of the man with the axe. He gave a menacing shout. (Coetzee, 1990, p. 88)

Upon witnessing these scenes, Mrs. Curren's "heart pounded, pains shot through my chest... I was gasping" (Coetzee, 1990, p.88). She cannot fully believe the horror unfolding before her. Mrs. Curren's reflection upon her experiences in Guguletu illustrates the ripple effect of suffering: the pain of others inevitably impacts those who bear witness (Eze, 2011). She was traumatized by her acute awareness of the pervasive suffering caused by apartheid, especially the destruction of lives and dignity.

The final stage of Mrs. Curren's direct confrontation with violence occurs when she learns of Bheki's death. She finds his body:

Against the far wall, shielded from the worst of the rain, were five bodies neatly laid out. The body in the middle was that of Florence's Bheki. The rain beat down on their bodies, and their eyes and mouths were filled with sand... His eyes were open and staring, his mouth open too... In the corners of his eyes there were grains of sand. There was sand in his mouth. (Coetzee, 1990, p. 94)

Felman and Laub (1992) argue that the psychological fragmentation of witnesses often stems from the contradictory mindset of wanting to take responsibility yet feeling powerless to change the situation. The death of Bheki deeply shocks Mrs. Curren. Wherever she turns, the image of the black boy lingers: "His eyes open in the look of childish puzzlement with which he had met his death" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 96). Reflecting on the deaths of the black children, Mrs. Curren declares, "This is the worst thing I have witnessed in my life... Now my eyes are open and I can never close them again" (Coetzee, 1990, p.93). She internalizes this conflict, even applying it to her own body: "It lives inside me and I live inside it... I thought: My life may as well be waste. We shoot these people as if they are waste, but in the end, it is we whose lives are not worth living" (Coetzee, 1990, pp. 93-96). This traumatic realization reveals her deep distrust and self-contempt for her white identity and its complicity in South Africa's colonial violence.

Faced with the chaos and violence in the townships, the corrupt of South African police force, and the indifference of security forces, Mrs. Curren's psychological suffering reaches a critical point. Our era, as Luckhurst (2013) points out, is one of witnessing. In this age, witnessing itself becomes a profound trauma. Although Mrs. Curren is not a direct victim of racial segregation policies, as a white witness, she is forced to confront the history and consequences of this violence. The trauma of witnessing does not stem solely from the events themselves but also from her empathy for the suffering of others and her reflection on racial inequality. Moreover, it highlights the psychological trauma caused by witnessing violence. K. T. Erikson (2012) emphasized that individual trauma often exists within the context of collective trauma, with the suffering of a group amplifying individual trauma through historical memory and social connections. Mrs. Curren, as both a victim of trauma (witnessing the helplessness of violence) and a perpetrator of trauma (through her complicity in oppressive systems), embodies Caruth's ethical responsibility of bearing witness to atrocities.

Herman (2015) asserts that witnessing the suffering of others creates a profound burden of conscience, especially when one is unable to intervene. In *Age of Iron*, Mrs. Curren's continuous exposure to violence and injustice leaves her tormented by guilt and shame. As Coetzee (2016) asserts, we have troubled histories behind us, which sometimes haunt us. Her emotional turmoil reflects the broader historical and ethical dilemmas faced by individuals who bear witness to systemic oppression, further highlighting the entanglement of personal conscience and collective trauma. Mrs. Curren recognizes her complicity in the apartheid system due to her privileged position as a white South African: "We all participated in this violence, whether by action or silence" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 45). Her acute awareness of her role as both a bystander and an indirect participant in systemic violence heightens her ethical conflict, epitomized in her lament: "I, a white... When I think of the whites, what do I see? I see a herd of sheep... milling around on a dusty plain under the baking sun" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 80). Coetzee's vivid imagery captures Mrs. Curren's existential struggle as an individual caught between moral responsibility and personal

impotence. In describing herself as “a dodo... the last of the dodos, old, past egg-laying” (Coetzee, 1990, p. 28), Mrs. Curren embodies not only a personal sense of obsolescence but also the tension between her fading moral aspirations and the oppressive forces that render her powerless. The “dodo” metaphor, traditionally representing extinction and irrelevance, becomes an existential symbol of a woman who feels detached from the transformative social movements around her, yet remains morally engaged, trapped in a conflict between self-awareness and the inability to act. The metaphor of “a locust horde... devouring lives” (Coetzee, 1990, pp. 28-29) starkly conveys the political and social devastation wrought by the apartheid system, suggesting a relentless force that consumes both individuals and communities. This emotional paradox, framed within the broader context of personal and national dissolution, underscores the tragic fate of a generation caught between historical trauma and the ethical demand for change.

Mrs. Curren's inner reflection on the violence of racial segregation reveals her acute awareness of historical trauma and her recognition of complicity within an oppressive system. However, her self-awareness does not alter the power asymmetry between her and the Black characters. Having long employed a black maid named Florence, she was accustomed to exerting dominance in their relationship. Mrs. Curren tries to alleviate her anxiety about her privilege through economic aid, seeking to show moral resistance to racial inequality. Yet, she cannot fully comprehend Florence's anger and struggle against racial oppression. When Florence speaks of the threats to her children due to racial violence, Mrs. Curren feels only “distant anger”, which demonstrates she couldn't fully comprehend Florence's anger, as her suffering is driven more by personal emotions than by a genuine critical reflection on the white supremacist system. As Walsh (2010) notes, Mrs. Curren struggles to comprehend or imaginatively appropriate the suffering across the apartheid divide, which reflects her internal conflict and her inability to fully empathize with the suffering of others.

Mrs. Cullen's interaction with Vercueil still remained within the framework of white centrism and failed to truly establish an equal relationship. In the novel, Mrs Curren's relationship with Vercueil is uncomfortable from the beginning. She is disturbed by “An unsavoury smell about him: urine, sweet wine, mouldy clothing, and something else too. Unclean”(Coetzee, 1990, p. 3), and “Green eyes, animal eyes” (Coetzee, 1990, p. 3). Nonetheless, the relationship between the two deepens. As she understands Vercueil more her attitude toward him begins to shift. “The worst of the smell comes from his shoes and feet. He needs socks. He needs new shoes. He needs a bath. He needs a bath every day; he needs dean underwear; he needs a bed, he needs a roof over his head, he needs three meals a day, he needs money in the bank.” (Coetzee, 1990, p. 17) The consideration of Vercueil's neediness moves Mrs Curren to a contemplation of salvation. However, this perceived “redemption” is not rooted in equality and respect but rather in the anxiety surrounding her own identity. Brennan (2013) *Emotional Exhaustion Theory* suggests that the privileged class often mitigates its own anxiety through expressions of “sympathy” toward marginalized groups. To some extent, such sympathy serves as a means of alleviating personal distress and inner conflict. Her moral anxiety and self-reflection position her as a “sympathetic witness” in her interactions with Vercueil and Florence. As Coetzee (1992) argues, the relationships shaped by colonialism create “deformed and studied” interactions that have psychological ramifications, and Mrs. Curren's struggles reflect this distorted inner life.

However, this sympathy does not alter the underlying power asymmetry between them. As Yeoh (2003) argued, the ethic ambiguities and prejudices underlying Curren's narration indicate that she is engaged in self-deception rather than adhering to a Levinasian ethics of responsibility to the other. In her conversation with Mr. Vercueil, she said "I am talking about resolve, about trying to hold on to my resolve and failing. I confess, I am drowning ... I am sitting here next to you and drowning" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 111). However, this confession did not prompt her to take substantive decolonization actions, which resonates with what Limes-Taylor Henderson & Esposito (2019) observe: a subject's recognition of her or his own complicity comes through an act of intuition or representation, but such recognition does not necessarily translate into action. Spivak (2023) criticizes the colonial discourse system for putting white liberals in a predicament when facing racial injustice - they realize their moral responsibility, but have never truly transcended their privileged position in the colonial structure. This also aligns with Arendt's (2006) concept of the "banality of evil". She argues evil does not solely stem from extreme malice; it can also arise from obedience, indifference, or the evasion of responsibility by ordinary individuals within systems of institutionalized violence. Although Mrs. Curren did not actively support apartheid, her compliance and silence rendered her complicit in its perpetuation. While she recognized the injustices of the system, her resistance remained confined to self-reflection rather than meaningful action. She attempted to show her concern for the black people. However, she could not fully comprehend the suffering of the black due to her perspective of the privileged class. Therefore, she could not alter her position within the colonial and apartheid system by the way of self-reflection.

As Hannah Arendt (2006) argues, the "banality of evil" stems from obedience, routine, and intellectual complacency in everyday life instead of obvious hatred. Mrs. Curren's former silence and apathy and present sense of powerlessness makes her a "passive conspirator" in the apartheid regime. Therefore, her dilemma lies on her failure to question and resist the oppressive system which provides her with the white privilege. Mrs. Curren's personal dilemma and trauma reflects the collective guilt of white South Africans when confronting the atrocities of apartheid. This sense of guilt prevents individuals from easily breaking off with the past and forces them to confront their roles in institutionalized violence, which as a result contributes to the continuity of trauma. Therefore, trauma refers not only to the experience of victims but also encompasses the perpetrators' and bystanders' moral dilemmas.

As Attridge (2021) describes, Mrs. Curren's guilt-stricken predicament occurs within a site of "acute ethico-political trauma" (2021), where individual struggles are deeply rooted in broader historical conditions. She strives to reconcile her cynical attitude towards the apartheid with her pursuit of ideal morality, which highlights the ethical dilemmas faced by the white privilege in South Africa. Attridge (2021) argues that a meaningful ethical response to such systemic violence is a "living-through" of the tensions it produces instead of condemnation or approval. As a result, Mrs. Curren's unresolved trauma and moral conflict serve as a microcosm of the postcolonial world's endemic value conflicts and represent the continuity of trauma upon the individuals.

In *Age of Iron*, the racial violences compel Mrs. Curren suffer from trauma and the ethical dilemmas and at the same time make her undergo a profound crisis of identity. E. Erikson (2005) argues in *The Eight Stages of Man* that identity is an ongoing process of construction throughout

an individual's life, especially during adulthood, when questions of self-recognition often arise in the context of societal and historical conditions. For members of the privileged white class, like Mrs. Curren, this struggle becomes particularly acute as they confront the intertwining of violence and moral conflict.

After witnessing the death of Bheki and his friends, who die in their resistance to apartheid, Mrs. Curren's internal conflict is further stirred by a debate with Mr. Thahane, which prompts her self-reflection:

But now I ask myself: What right have I to wish Bheki and his friend had kept out of trouble? To have opinions in a vacuum, opinions that touch no one, is, it seems to me, nothing. Opinions must be heard by others, heard and weighed, not merely listened to out of politeness. And to be weighed they must have weight. Mr. Thahane does not weigh what I say. It has no weight to him. Florence does not even hear me. To Florence what goes on in my head is a matter of complete indifference, I know that. (Coetzee, 1990, p. 148)

This monologue reflects Mrs. Curren's increasing sense of powerlessness in her ability to express meaningful views in a world governed by racial oppression. She recognizes that her opinions, as a white liberal, hold no real weight in the context of the black struggle. This reflects her sense of identity loss under apartheid. From the perspective of the theory of power, Mrs. Curren is not only entangled in moral dilemmas but also subjected to the regulation and suppression of her identity and discursive authority by entrenched social power structures. Foucault posits that power is not merely a mechanism of unilateral oppression; rather, it is internalized by individuals through discourse, norms, and social structures, fostering self-discipline (Foucault, 1975). Mrs. Curren's internalization of power manifests in a deepening uncertainty regarding her own beliefs and existential purpose. She experiences not only a sense of helplessness in relation to the black struggle but also an increasing loss of self within the broader colonial power system.

She confesses to Mr. Vercueil: "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" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 164). This awakening deepens her inner turmoil and leaving her unable to escape the moral weight of her actions. This crisis is further evident in her confession to her daughter, where she states, "I do not love this child, the child sleeping in Florence's bed. I love you but I do not love him. There is no ache in me toward him, not the slightest" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 136). Her confession underscores the extent to which colonial structures inscribe themselves upon the subject, not merely through overt oppression but through the subtle and pervasive mechanisms of internalized power. This condition reveals the insidious ways in which colonial discourse governs emotions, perceptions, and self-conceptions, compelling individuals to navigate an existential dilemma wherein their sense of self is perpetually torn between complicity and resistance.

Mrs. Curren's conflict is emblematic of the trauma she experiences. Her interactions with black characters and her attempts to understand their pain underscore the profound effect of racial violence on her sense of self. As Eze (2011) points out, "she sees the evil that was not meant

to be seen. Henceforth she can no longer claim ignorance; she is within the ambits of moral judgment; she is responsible. To know is to be responsible" (p. 31). Different from Mrs. Curren's philosophy identity crisis, Vercueil's homelessness signifies a powerful symbol of the erasure of the black people's identity. As a black, Vercueil is excluded from the white society, but at the same time, the black community thinks "he is rubbish. He is good for nothing" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 45). This demonstrates that the apartheid policies systematically strips his autonomy and sense of social belonging. Similarly, Bheki and John's resistance against the systemic oppression exemplifies the trauma of racial segregation and its reshaping of the youth's identity. The institutional violence reshapes their identity by making them the instruments of resistance, which they actually seek to dismantle. This dynamic displays that trauma, institutional oppression and the struggle for survival can lead to broken identities.

4. INTERPLAY OF TRAUMA AND POSTCOLONIAL ECOFEMINISM

In *Age of Iron*, except for exploring the trauma resulted from the apartheid violence, J.M. Coetzee examines how the destruction of the natural world deepens the protagonist's psychological trauma. As South African ecofeminist Denise Ackermann (2003) argues, environmental abuse in the country is interrelated to its social injustice. In her letter to her daughter, Mrs. Curren describes that "There is an alley... Now it is a dead place, waste, without use, where windblown leaves pile up and rot" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 1). She further describes, "The garden was left unpruned... the fruit was rotting" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 20). These descriptions contrast a once-thriving homeland with the current desolation through words like "dead place", "waste", "unpruned", and "rotting". From a psychological perspective, this depiction not only conveys the deterioration of the material environment but also reflects the cognitive and emotional effects of prolonged exposure to trauma. As Caruth (1996) argues, traumatic experiences profoundly shape an individual's emotions and cognition, manifesting in their perception and narration of the external world, thereby transforming the environment into a symbolic representation of their inner pain. Mrs. Curren's portrayal of decay—characterized by stagnant spaces and rotting fruit—mirrors her own internal suffering, as she remains unable to detach herself from the loss and violence that surround her. Moreover, this portrayal positions her as an ecological witness, with her trauma further compounded by the environmental destruction that unfolds alongside her personal disintegration.

This deprivation is also reflected in the decay of the house: "This house is tired of waiting for the day, tired of holding itself together. The floorboards have lost their spring. The insulation of the wiring is dry, friable, the pipes clogged with grit... cold, inert now, ready to die" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 74). The house, both a physical and symbolic space, mirrors Mrs. Curren's deteriorating mental state. Albrecht (2012) concept of "solastalgia" – the distress caused by the degradation of one's familiar environment – offers further insight into her psychological condition. The loss of the familiar landscape intensifies her emotional pain, heightening her sense of displacement and helplessness. As the natural world around her shrinks, so too does her hope, with the external world's destruction serving as a profound metaphor for her inner turmoil. The gradual decay of the house, like the surrounding land, parallels Mrs. Curren's experience of racial segregation and psychological violence, reinforcing her feelings of powerlessness and despair. In this way, both

her physical environment and her emotional state become inseparable, illustrating how the breakdown of one reflects and exacerbates the collapse of the other.

Environmental violence is particularly evident in black communities. Mrs. Curren is taken to a shantytown by Mr. Tabana, where she witnesses:

a landscape of scored earth, blackened trees... a continuous stretch of garbage and ash. Shreds of plastic, old iron, glass, animal bones scattered... the shanties started, the lowest-growing cluster surrounded by water, flooded. Some built sturdy of wood and iron, others no more than skins of plastic shearing over frames of branches . (Coetzee, 1990, pp. 86-87)

Coetzee portrays the environmental devastation inflicted on black communities by apartheid policies through images of plastic waste, polluted water, and burnt shacks. These destructions are not merely physical; they symbolize violence that exacerbates racial inequality by depriving these communities of resources and environmental control. Environmental psychology research suggests that prolonged exposure to degraded landscapes fosters *ecological grief*, a deep psychological distress linked to environmental loss (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). Mrs. Curren, witnessing this devastation, does not simply register it as an external reality but internalizes it, reinforcing her sense of helplessness. This is evident in her physical reaction: "My heart pounded, pains shot through my chest. I stopped, bent over, gasping" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 88). Research on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has shown that "fear and stress are triggered predominantly in response to a dangerous event, followed by a series of bodily changes, including increased blood pressure, heart rate, and breathing due to the release of adrenaline" (Ho et al., 2021). Mrs. Cullen's physical pain serves as a clear example of the "somatization" of trauma. This physical response extends beyond her individual experience, symbolizing how environmental destruction exacerbates social injustice, rendering it impossible for both the oppressed and bystanders to escape its effects. In other words, Coetzee illustrates through her bodily reactions how environmental violence contributes to the formation of "systemic trauma" within the context of institutional oppression. This trauma not only impacts direct victims but also permeates the broader social structure, affecting all individuals within it.

Coetzee also highlights the link between environmental destruction and racial oppression through the natural landscape. Mrs. Curren observes : "A land taken by force, used, despoiled, spoiled, abandoned in its barren late years" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 23). She also describes "a wildness of grey dual sand and Port Jackson Willow, and a litter of garbage and ash. Shreds of plastic, old iron, glass, animal bones" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 86). These scenes not only depict the exploitation of natural resources by colonizers but also metaphorically show how colonial power consolidates its dominance by controlling the environment. LaCapra (2001) emphasizes that trauma is symbolically manifested through the transmission of memory and history, with the deterioration of the environment often reflecting the internal breakdown of the traumatized individual. Mrs. Cullen's portrayal of South African society and its natural environment functions as a psychological projection, shaped by her prolonged exposure to trauma. The decline of the material environment and her internal suffering are intricately intertwined, illustrating the historical and emotional trauma from which she is unable to escape.

From the perspective of environmental psychology, her description can be understood through the concept of eco-anxiety, defined as "a chronic fear of environmental doom" (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020, p. 68) and "the generalized sense that the ecological foundations of existence are in the process of collapse" (Albrecht, 2012, p. 250). Eco-anxiety refers to a state in which individuals experience chronic stress and fear for their survival due to environmental degradation. Mrs. Cullen's sense of impending collapse—that both the land and the people have reached a critical point—is consistent with ecological trauma, where she mourns the irreversible damage inflicted on the surrounding environment. Simultaneously, she becomes aware that the pain she witnesses is deeply influenced by gender. The burning shacks, the piled-up garbage, and the chaotic resource management symbolize the social trauma resulting from colonial rule.

Ecological feminist theorists, such as Mies (1986) and Shiva (1988), argue that colonialism and patriarchy have historically exploited both women's bodies and natural resources, treating them as sites of extraction and control. This connection symbolizes the dual invasion of colonialism, affecting both individuals and the natural environment. In the novel, as Mrs. Curren reflects in her monologue, when she describes him, she describes herself; when she describes dogs, she describes herself; and when she describes houses, she describes herself. This reveals an intrinsic connection between people, land, and all living beings, suggesting that the experiences of individuals are inseparable from the world around them. Similarly, Mrs. Curren views her cancer as a physical mutation, describing it as:

The sickness that now eats at me is dry, moodless, slow and cold, sent by Saturn. There is something about it that does not bear thinking of. To have fallen pregnant with these growths, these cold, obscene swellings... to have carried and carried this brood beyond any natural term, unable to hear them, unable to sate their hunger: children inside me eating more every day, not growing but bloating, toothed, flawed, forever cold and ravenous. Dry, dry: to feel them turning at night in my dry body, not stretching and kicking as a human child does but changing their angle, finding a new place to gnaw. Like insect eggs laid in the body of a host, now grown to grubs and implacably eating their host away. (Coetzee, 1990, p. 50)

This metaphor of bodily mutation resonates with the colonial history of South African land. Through this vivid portrayal, Mrs. Curren compares the pain of her body to the uncontrolled growth of a tumor, symbolizing the unchecked spread of colonial systems. These "tumors" are not only foreign entities within her body but also represent the colonizers' brutal occupation of both land and people. In *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, Mies (2014) argues that colonial expansion views both women and land as resources to be exploited. Similarly, Vandana Shiva (1988) asserts that the degradation of nature parallels the exploitation of women under colonial and capitalist system. Therefore, Mrs. Curren's cancer represents the trauma of both colonial occupation and patriarchal oppression upon women and South African land.

Spivak (2023) argues that the trauma of colonial history is multilayered in social, historical, and cultural dimensions. Mrs. Curren's body is a microcosm of South African societal pathology and signifies the interconnectedness between her personal suffering and the colonial and apartheid system. In *Illness as metaphor and AIDS and its metaphors*, Sontag (2013) argues that

illness often symbolizes social disorder and traumatic memory. Mrs. Curren's physical illness signifies the profound and lasting impact of the colonial and apartheid legacies, which has caused multidimensional trauma upon the South African people and land. The decay of Mrs. Curren's body mirrors the deterioration of the nation itself, as she describes how her body is decaying inside, much like the land. This line not only conveys her awareness of personal trauma but also reflects her vigilance regarding the decline of the social and environmental landscape. For Mrs. Curren, her illness is intertwined with the nation's fate, as she acknowledges that cancer symbolizes not only the end of her life but also the end of the country. Her trauma, then, is not solely physical but represents the broader decline of South African society, history, and the environment.

Mrs. Curren's trauma is multidimensional, affecting both her physical and psychological well-being. However, healing from trauma is not merely a physiological process but a psychological journey of reflection and self-expression. She engages in self-healing through letter writing, which allows her to release personal emotions while reflecting on societal and historical issues. In one of her letters, she writes: "I am not writing these letters for you, but for myself, hoping to find some comfort" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 25). For Mrs. Curren, the letter to her daughter is actually a way of healing from the traumatic experiences. Her healing process is deeply intertwined with her reflection on the social and historical realities. She realizes the need for social and historical changes in South Africa.

5. CONCLUSION

By exploring the trauma from a postcolonial ecofeminist perspective, Mrs. Cullen's experience serves not only as a microcosm of historical trauma but also as a reflection of contemporary society's concerns about environmental degradation, identity anxiety, and historical responsibility. As the global ecological crisis intensifies, issues of environmental justice, racial restoration, and gender equality have become increasingly urgent. As Ackerman (1997) observe, "we are a society critically in need of healing in every aspect of our relationships: with ourselves, with one another, with God, and most urgently, with the earth" (p. 121). Mrs. Cullen's story reminds us that genuine restoration requires confronting not only the psychological trauma caused by historical violence but also addressing the deep-rooted issues of ecological trauma and social structural injustice. Therefore, literary criticism functions not only as a tool for text analysis but also as a vital means of examining reality, seeking justice, and healing social wounds.

CONFLICT STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

COOPERATION STATEMENT

Author contributed equally to this work and approved the final manuscript.

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