

## Ethical (Dis) Comfort in John Maxwell Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990)

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### **Abstract:**

*This article is concerned with making visible ethical (dis)comfort in John Maxwell Coetzee's Age of Iron (1990) as it unearths how feelings of comfort and/or discomfort shape the individual when associated with ethics across boundaries of inequality, racism, violence, poverty, injustice rather than with the development trust in government and public institution. The inference here is that one of or the two feelings are necessary found in the individual experiencing directly or indirectly the Apartheid system. Therefore, faced with the humanitarianism system, the ontological assumption that underpins the argument, named the characters involved in the situation of ethical (dis)comfort, rests on the embodied, situated, affective, and creative dimensions of their expressions. Leaning on Aristotle's rhetorical strategies of ethos, logos and pathos, normative ethical theory, axiology, and onomastics, the article analyzes the shift from moral dis-ease to normative ethics by uncovering the socio-psychological development processes and the creation of a space of consciousness and imagination through the author's (re)conciliation paradigm and multi-racial nation ideal.*

### **Keywords:**

*South Africa; Apartheid; (dis)comfort; ethics; race; psychology; (re)conciliation*

## **I. Introduction**

Set in the late twentieth century, South African novelist John Maxwell Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990) is a social, political, and cultural tragedy in South Africa which was plagued by Apartheid and racial discrimination. In fact, philosophically and metaphorically written, Coetzee's literary text is about Apartheid which was a political system that institutionalized racial discrimination against black people from 1948 until the early 1990s. The move resulted in the division of the people and their labelling based on their skin color. Therefore, when classified, the natives of South Africa were 'the Blacks', the people of mixed races 'the colored' and those who hailed from India, 'the Indians.' The prevailing politics of apartness had devastating effects in the lives of black South Africans, particularly children, who face more the consequences of poverty, racism, injustice, suffering, hatred, and violence, among other evil practices and feelings.

The devastating effects also generated psychological disorders, diseases, and dis-eases, physical and inner conflicts, and a mutual feeling of mistrust. Those politics of segregation-resulted facts are expressions of the trauma that affected both black and white people growing up in a divided society marked by political unrest, thus impacting on their social and psychological well-being and putting them in a situation of either ethical comfort and/or discomfort.

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behaviors (Verst, Kampmann & Eilers 2015). Therefore, according to Ludger Verst, Susanne Kampmann, and Franz-Josef Eilers, the field of ethics, along with aesthetics, concerns matters of value and the branch of philosophy called axiology (1966). As for Richard Willian Paul and Lind Elder, they define the term as “*a set of concepts and principles that guide us in determining what behavior helps or harms sentient creatures*” (Paul & Elder 2006, NP).

Why is then Coetzee resorting to ethics in relation to comfort and discomfort? How does he offer rational responses to the question of how humans should best live and resolve morality-related acts and actions by defending concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, justice and crime, well-being and ill-being, comfort and discomfort, violence and peace?

## II. Review of Literature

In that framework, the article regards ethics and politics as two interconnected elements though separated fields of study with the former examining the good of the individual (characters) and the latter the good of the city-state (South Africa). In so doing, it shows how South African novel prize winner Coetzee challenges the readers to come to grips with an emerging body of law in provocative analyses of critical decision and life-time experiences. The ontological assumption that underpins the argument, named the characters involved in the situations of either ethical comfort or ethical discomfort, rests on the embodied, situated, affective, and creative dimensions of their expressions within Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* (1990) which draws the picture of an inner journey of an aging and cancer-suffering classics professor Elizabeth Curren, known as Mrs. Curren.

Calling on Aristotle, for whom making things involved together form (*morphe*) and matter (*hyle*), the study draws on his rhetorical strategies of *ethos* (trust), *logos* (logic) and *pathos* (emotion) which Coetzee makes use of to display his rhetorical appeals and mode of persuasion against the Apartheid system. Therefore, leaning on normative ethics theory, axiology, and onomastics, the article surveys the shift from moral dis-ease to normative ethics by unearthing the socio-psychological development processes and the creation of a space of consciousness and imagination through the author’s (re)conciliation paradigm and multi-racial nation ideal.

## III. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 From Moral Dis-ease to Normative Ethics: Unearthing Socio-Psychological Development Processes

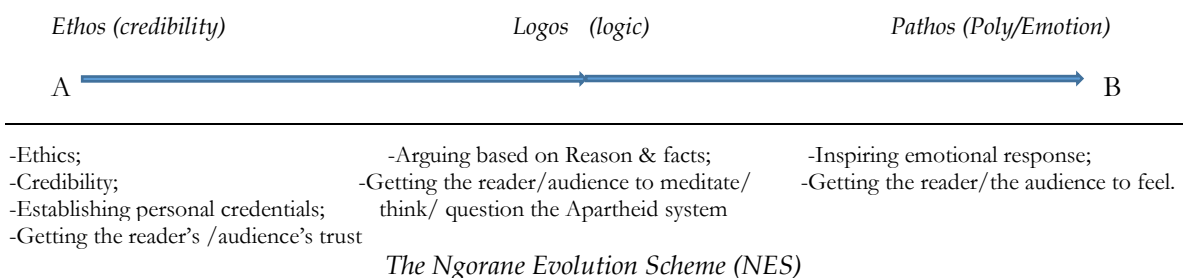
Like Nadine Gordimer (1990) who investigates the two levels of life in South Africa (Dione 2019, 84), John Maxwell Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* (1990) embarks the reader on the same trend by using cancer as trope for Apartheid to look critically at the obscenity and fatality of such a dehumanizing and derogatory political system directed against the black folk. Throughout the literary text, the author’s main character, Mrs. Curren has gone through several psychological states and it is in this context that should be approached her socio-psychological development processes which have recorded two phases. The first phase, known as the initial situation, is when she is innocent and is not aware of the prevailing discriminatory situation and violence as a white-privileged woman. As for the second or final phase, it is when she has become aware about the reality of racism and discrimination after

witnessing the killings of Bheki and John by the police that is supposed to protect all South Africans.

The philosophically written Coetzee’s masterpiece uncovers the prevailing racism, hatred, and violence under the South African Apartheid system. In fact, after the National Party gained power in South Africa in 1948, its all-white government started unfolding existing racial discrimination policies against black South Africans. Then, “from birth to death destiny is divided; South Africa is separated down the class and color line” (Clingman 1986, 16). It is under such a system of legislation that Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* (1990) draws the picture of the inner journey of the aging and cancer-suffering classics professor, Elizabeth Curren. The latter lives in the country and witnesses the prevailing atrocities and unhuman repercussions of Apartheid, a system instituted by her own people, the white folk, she ends up subverting intellectually. Her subversion starts after she weighs in up normative ethics and abnormative ethics, ethical comfort and ethical discomfort as she interacts with people undergoing the violent and unhuman discrimination policies. The city Cape Town (Coetzee 1990, 158) is an epitome of the legislative capital of the Republic of South Africa and of the prevailing separateness political system which has led to extreme oppression and confined the oppressed in “townships” (Coetzee 1990, 54). The black people are forced to live there after being evicted from the ‘white-only areas’ that hosts “Government Avenue” (Coetzee 1990, 113) where oppressive decisions are made, the House of Parliament, which Mrs. Curren negatively categorizes as “House of Lies” in her letter to her exiled daughter. The letter she writes is both a sign of nostalgia and regret in her life. That is why she refers to the “crab” (116) to compare her life to the movement of crabbed digit over the page and the cancer moving and gnawing her inside as an expression of a progressive disappearance.

In fact, Coetzee’s representation of *normative ethics* takes on a more practical purpose, which is to come to moral consciousness and standards, to making the difference between normalcy and abnormalcy. In so doing, characters like Mrs. Curren will be able to regulate right and wrong conducts, thus involving the articulation of the good habits that one should acquire and the human interactions one should adopt and display. In addition to these, there are the duties that one should follow, or the consequences of each one’s behavior on others. To operationalize these modes of interactions and ways of viewing and of being viewed, Coetzee activates a mode of rhetorical appeals and mode of persuasion against the Apartheid system through an appeal to reason (*logos*), to emotion, and sympathetic imagination (*pathos*) as a writer (*ethos*) playing his role.

*Aristotle’s Rhetorical Strategies & their Mode of Rhetorical Appeals and Persuasion*



Through Aristotle’s rhetorical strategies and their mode of rhetorical appeals and persuasion, as illustrated by the *Ngorane evolution scheme* (Dione 2022) which features how the character(s) evolve(s), going from point A to point B, with the former representing the initial stage and the latter the final stage, Coetzee engages the classics professor, Mrs. Curren, in

socio-psychological development processes. Thus, her disease, the cancer she is suffering from, stands metaphorically as both the 'disease' and 'dis-ease' of South Africa under the Apartheid regime. After finding that racism and violence are perpetrated by Whites against the Blacks, she starts changing her ways of thinking and begins to pay attention to what is going on around her and in the country. All her state of mind emerges the day when she gets home from a medical check-up and finds in the premises a homeless man, Mr. Vercueil.

South African novel leans on the word 'iron' which metaphorically uncovers people's heart-hardening state to feature the prevailing lack of love, solidarity, and interracial human interactions in South Africa. He also uses 'insect' to qualify it as a locust horde, a plague spreading in the country, munching without cease and devouring lives. The political unrest in Cape Town, marked by violence and police brutality, has contributed in shifting categorically Mrs. Curren's perception about her own country. In so doing, Coetzee presents her as the type of human being entitled to change her environment. Because of that status, she faces both internal and external conflicts. The former rests on her mind while the latter is related to the political, social, and economic environment in which she evolves. That is what accounts for her being under pressure to overcome the situation that is alien and unknown to her. The two forms of conflicts [internal and external] have motivated the protagonist's change of attitude as she struggles with both a tangible opposition and force within herself.

Being at the beginning silent and accomplice of the ill-treatments inflicted on the black people for a long time, Mrs. Curren's prejudices towards the black community stop after she has fully become aware of her country's ongoing discriminatory policies which uphold the rights of white folk and severely limit those of black one. She admits the fact in the letter she writes to her exiled daughter, saying that *"but I was calmer too because I no longer cared if I lived. What might happen to me no longer mattered. 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, 104). Mrs. Curren's words express regret, empathy, sympathy, and pity for the victims of violence. Her use of the inclusive personal pronoun 'we' displays her sentiment of shared responsibility in the atrocities among white people. The feelings of guiltiness, of pity and regret are further strengthened when she adds as an eyewitness to all the ongoing horror that:

I thought of the five bodies, of the massive, solid presence in the burned-down all. Their ghosts have not departed, I thought, and will not depart. Their ghosts are sitting tight, in possession. If someone had dug a grave for me there and then in the sand, and pointed, I would without a word have climbed in and lain down and folded my hands on my breast. And when the sand fell in my mouth and in corners of my eyes I would not have lifted a finger to brush it away (Coetzee 1990, 104).

She thinks of Bheki's *"open eyes and of what he saw as his last sight on earth"* (Coetzee 1990, 102). From her clear description of the violence which happens before her on a regular basis and is nothing but an expression of hatred, not personal but based on the ways one group views the other group, she intellectually subverts what she now considers to be unfair discriminatory racial policies. Her subversion starts after she has interacted with people like Bheki, John, Florence, and Mr. Thabane from Guguletu who suffer from the violent and unhuman South African-instituted discrimination politics. It is also after her examination of the interaction between body and politics, a social and political tragedy ravaged by Apartheid and racial policies that her psychological development grows. This growth stems from her witnessing and storing harmful events in her life, thus turning her feeling into moral

discomfort. Therefore, she wakes up from myth to reality, from selfishness to helpfulness, from self-mindedness to open-mindedness.

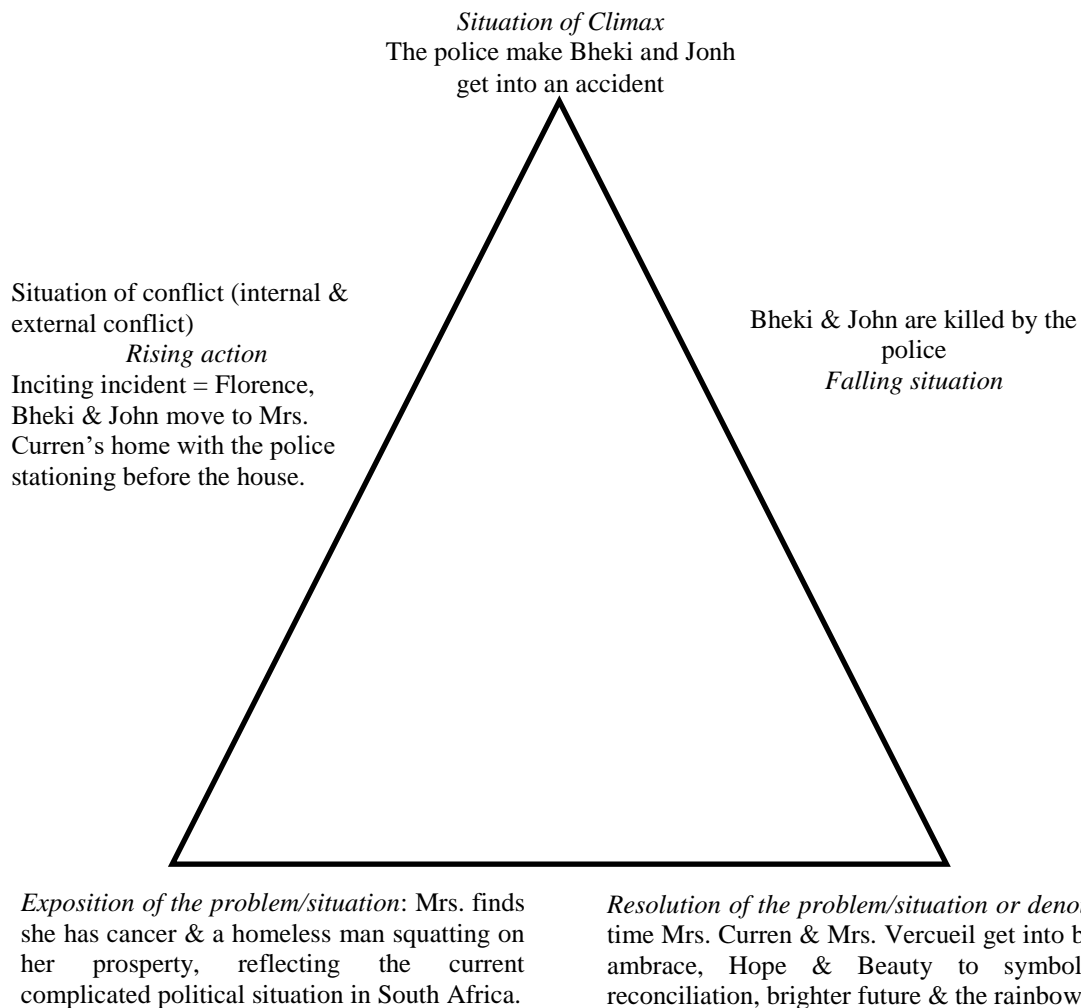
Consequently, Mrs. Curren, who once limited her life to her cats and house, and had no idea about what was happening outside, is now confronting reality. She becomes then a desperate woman who suffers from the burden of privileged-white woman status in a country where black people are discriminated, segregated, oppressed, dehumanized, and killed. She now carries new attitudes and behaviors never known to her before. The three main aspects that express Coetzee's Mrs. Curren's psychological development processes are the cancer she carries, which epitomizes her dying situation, the loneliness she faces through lack of interracial human interactions and staring stonily at each other, and the death awaiting her, representing both the ending and the beginning of a new day.

### **3.2 Creating a Space of Consciousness and Imagination: The (Re) Conciliation Paradigm and The Multi-Racial Nation Ideal**

John Maxwell Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990), as a narrative that touches on 'sensitive' areas is an elicited account that some readers may find distressing and threatening to their emotional and psychological behaviors. From then on, one can hold that Mrs. Curren's attitudes are learned ones in her socialization process, which explains her initial [racist] attitude for which she has to display an *I-do-not-care-attitude*. This represents her initially constructed attitudinal and behavioral normalcy and ethics. To her mind, it was then ethical and normal to hate everything and anybody that is associated with the black color. Through that, the South African writer offers a 'confessional tale' through which the reader considers the experiences of investigating to be a sensitive and painful topic from the perspectives of the principal investigator, Mrs. Curren. The latter is intimately acquainted with her field of investigation, her psyche, and consciousness. Her situations, both initial and final, affect her own life, family, and society though she had no prior experience of the substantive area. Coetzee's literary text just displays the characters' distress and pain as it paves the way for more human behaviors and attitudes based on humanistic and qualitative relationships and interactions that should be embraced to ensure and safeguard the ethical comfort and wellbeing of all folks, be they black or white.

Coetzee's featuring of the two phases in Mrs. Curren's psychological development processes raises the question of the ethical and the unethical in human relationships, behaviors, and interactions. Ethics being the attempt to offer a rational response to the question of how humans should best live, he underscores the practical importance of developing excellence or virtue of character as the way to achieve what is finally more important, excellent conduct, known as *praxis* which Mrs. Curren now adopts as a result of her situational experiences and physical interactions with suffering people.

## *The Freytag's Pyramid*



The Freytag's pyramid, which is even mostly used in dramatic structure proves that Coetzee approaches ethics and politics as two related but separate fields of study insofar as ethics examines the good of the individual (Mrs. Curren/Mr. Vercueil/Mrs. Curren's daughter, Bheki's mother, Florence), while politics examines the good of the city-state (South Africa), which he considers to be the best type of community (Cape Town/Guguletu). Thus, his writing strategies follow five principles which include: exposition of the problem or situation, the rising action, the situation of climax, the falling action, and the resolution of the problem or the denouement. The aim is to define the different evolutionary stages his characters have gone through.

Furthermore, for the author, the individual who possesses character excellence will tend to do the right thing, at the right time, and in the right way. In so doing, he engages her protagonist in attitudinal and behavioral changes, the main objectives of which are to build an example of character excellence or virtue for the white community and trigger empathy for the black one. Coetzee's final goal is to urge all his characters, both white and black, to lift themselves up to *Eudaimonia*, a Greek word often translated as wellbeing, happiness or human flourishing (Aristotle 1999).

Acting bravely and temperately are examples of excellent activities for the retired classics professor. Thus, virtue being practical and the purpose of ethics being becoming good, not merely knowing, Coetzee characterizes, in a much hidden way, his novel by resorting to characters whose names and actions embody and display first mistrust and lack of confidence between two groups of people: Blacks and Whites. He also depicts his characters using animal beings (dog, crab, insect) and popular places (setting/house, Cape Town, Gugeletu). Human beings are used to describe the social and political situations and how they are related to space whereas animal beings are used to show the link between humans and animals. Therefore, “*man*”, “*house*”, and “*dog*” (Coetzee 1990, 9) symbolize the connection between Mrs. Curren and some other characters. The house represents the ideal domestic harmony and the dog the loyalty and vigilance, acting as protector and guardian, are both associated with her tie to her daughter and country.

In so doing, Coetzee is both creating the conditions and setting a favorable environment for Mrs. Curren’s attitudinal and behavioral changes to materialize. To that end, he also paves the way for her to embrace virtue and make of it her life motto. In the same process, the South African novelist conceives of the classics professor’s home as a meeting place of all races and a place void of physical presence. The home (setting) then becomes an expression of space conciliation and reconciliation, and of the future as opposed to Gugeletu (setting) and Cape Town (setting) that are associated with racism, violence, hatred, and police brutality as must-be-expression-of-the-past-spaces. As for the dog, it is conceived of as the symbol of cohabitation and companionship between Blacks and Whites against the main character’s disease and cancer that stand metaphorically as the disease and dis-ease of South Africa under the Apartheid regime. Mrs. Curren is embarked on a journey in which she reaps some experience-based understanding of good and wrong actions, the final goal of which is to value noble and just actions to at least some degree (Burnyeat 1990, 71-72). To that end, she leans on a letter writing to her unnamed exiled daughter, who migrated to America in 1974, got married there and has two daughters. But the epistolary tool is not only addressed to her daughter, for any reader of the letter is also an addressee.

To voice out the need for attitudinal and behavioral changes, Coetzee borrows the philosophically salient features of the Aristotelian rhetoric in his constructing of a general theory of persuasion. Like Aristotle, the South African novelist applies numerous concepts and arguments to reflect his contextual logical, ethical, and psychological writings. In his theory of rhetorical arguments, he applies the doctrine of the *sullogismos*, composed of *sun*, *with*, and *logos*, whose purpose is to sow the seed for the dialectic, logic, and *in-group* formations. He further makes his own the theory of demonstration when resorting to the concept of emotions which he connects to ethics and unethics and comfort and discomfort through his cognitive representation of the novel’s language and style. Coetzee epitomizes the *sullogismos* spirit through the use of allegory and imaginary. He characterizes Florence’s two daughters, Hope and Beauty, to stand for a change of consciousness, situation, of and relationships, and for a harmonious cohabitation between Black and White in South Africa.

From Mrs. Curren’s narration, one realizes how she points out that these names stand for something larger than themselves insofar as she conceives of them like living in an allegory. Through naming, axiology, and onomastics, Coetzee represents Hope and Beauty as ideals that do not have a place in a world of suffering, violence, and hatred. For that, he has them disappeared from the story for some time right before stuff starts getting really tougher. This is proven by Florence’s taking the two children into a family member’s house before she, Mrs. Curren and all the rest get out to look for their children’s elder brother, Bheki, whose

dead body is later on found. The discover makes them lose all hope and the world become an uglier and sadder place to live in.

However, for Coetzee, even though Hope and Beauty have been made absent for a moment in the story, they are still here as little girls waiting to grow up and to be appropriated by all. The two characters then symbolize the glimmer of hope and brighter future the novelist paves and pleads for. For, he sees in their names the future in which all races will live, whose climate will be that of freedom and of discrimination, segregation, and oppression-free. The allegory, as an unreal fact and expression of disillusion and illusion, expresses the author's dream and desire. These are reflected in Mrs. Curren's imagination of 'heaven' as a hotel lobby with a high ceiling full of old people dozing and listening to some music while souls pass and repass before them, like vapors the soul of all and a "*place dense with souls clothed. Clothed? Yes, I suppose but with empty hands. A place toke which you bring nothing but an abstract kind of clothing and the memories inside you, the memories that make you. A place without incident*" (Coetzee 1990, 24).

Thus, Coetzee's protagonist is imagining a metaphysical world, the kind that South Africa might become after its periods of disease and dis-ease. Her inner wish is to see all South Africans living in peace, harmony, and brotherhood, only remembering their past [memories]. This allows the novelist to make his reader travel around two different worlds: the visible world made of real and palpable facts, and the invisible world encompassing metaphysical imaginaries and abstracts facts which only happen in Mrs. Curren's sub-consciousness. The narrator describes the fact as:

a vision from last night dream child but also from outside. Forever the goddess is passing, forever, cough in a posture of surprise and regret, I do not follow. Though I peer and peer into the vortex from which visions come, the woman who should follow behind not there, the woman which serpents of flame in her hair who beats her arms and cries and dances (Coetzee 1990, 8).

As a matter of fact, the writer leaves some space for the reader to also share their vision and opinion, free from any fingers pointing towards wrong or right, thus rendering the novel equivocal and opening it up for unfolded interpretations and reinterpretations of facts, acts, actions, and imaginaries. This has been admitted by Mrs. Curren when saying that "*when I write about him I write about myself! When I write about his dog I write about myself. When I write about the house I write about myself. Man, house, dog, no matter what the word, through it I stretch out to you*" (8). Coetzee's use of a poetic style is an expression of inclusiveness which refers to the *present-future* as opposed to separateness which alludes to the *forgotten-past*. The classics professor feels the same affection for Mr. Vercueil as for her unnamed exiled daughter and other people in South Africa. Coetzee has purposely silenced Mr. Vercueil's race identity and belonging, and made Mrs. Curren's home a meeting place of all races as a way of constructing his idealistic country where liberty, human interactions, and communal life will prevail. In the same vein, he resorts to setting, naming, and onomastics to create a space of consciousness and imagination as a way of reconciling South Africans, conciliating the once-unconciliable, and promoting the emergence of a multi-racial nation.

## IV. Conclusion

The article has brought to light how in *Age of Iron* (1990), South African novel prize winner, Joh Maxwell Coetzee, has used cancer as a trope for Apartheid to debunk the obscenity and fatality of the dehumanizing and derogatory political system of separateness that is marked by violence, hatred, and suffering. To that end, the author has engaged her protagonist, Mrs. Curren, in socio-psychological processes whereby she has to weigh in up normative ethics and abnormative ethics, ethical comfort and ethical discomfort so as to subvert the social, cultural, political, and economic tragedies in South Africa.

It has also unearthed how Coetzee's classics professor, Mrs. Curren has moved from illness through loneliness to death, from ignorance to awareness, from selfishness to helplessness, and from self-mindedness to open-mindedness after witnessing and confronting the atrocities and realities of Apartheid. The novelist has resorted to literary devices such as allegory, characterization, and imaginary to imagine a metaphysical world, a discrimination, segregation, and hatred-free world where all races will live together in peace and harmony. To operationalize his post-Apartheid imagination and desire, he leans on modes of interactions and ways of viewing and of being viewed by activating modes of rhetorical appeal and persuasion against the Apartheid system through an appeal to reason (logos), to emotion, and sympathetic imagination (pathos) as he plays his role as a writer (ethos). Coetzee has also combined reality and imagination by applying numerous concepts and arguments to reflect his contextual logical, ethical, and psychological writings. In his theory of rhetorical arguments, he has resorted to the doctrine of the sullogismos to sow the seed for the dialectic, logic, and in-group formations. The whole purpose of this is to create a space of consciousness and imagination in which he puts forward both (re)conciliation paradigm and a multi-racial nation ideal epitomized through two characters: Hope and Beauty. In his imaginative strategy, the novelist has made his own the theory of demonstration by displaying his characters' emotions which he connects to ethics and unethics and comfort and discomfort through his cognitive representation of the novel's language and style, and of his dream and desire of what South Africa should be after its periods of disease and dis-ease, thus making her subvert the prevailing established order and disorder.

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