CHAPTER - III
EXPLORING THE SELF: IN THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY and AGE OF IRON

This chapter examines another two novels of J. M. Coetzee which are IN THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY and AGE OF IRON. These novels are forceful investigation of the subject of Self identity and informed us about the historical and political conditions that govern the writing of fiction in South Africa.

In the Heart of the Country:

‘A powerful study of lust, degradation and fantasy’- Observer

In the apartheid South Africa the everyday life of people shows unbearable conditions to cope freely with the external world. This world is full of sorrows and agonies in which people have to confront and interact among them but this interaction fails to permit them to be turn to their own fantastic inner world. A number of characters in Coetzee’s fiction are failing in the pursuit of happiness through establishing relationships with others in general. Particularly this novel withdraws them from this world to other world. The reality of life disaffirms them the pleasures and satisfaction they seek from life and hence they create their own worlds of imagination in their minds. About Coetzee’s method of exploring such theme through his novels David Attwell aptly says:

Coetzee is a naturalist of Universal subtlety and fantasist of unusual clarity. These two strains cross repeatedly in his fiction, for his subject is most often the enigmatic borderland between innocence and depravity, and his characters are generally people who are cut off from the more or less normal life of humanity-orphans, invalids, Negroes, Spinsters, homosexuals, failed artists and other lost souls who have retreated into the weird logic of their illusions and privations, their pain and cruelty (123).
This novel is a clear picture of South African situation. It is a book about race, gender, and power. More clearly this novel explores the theme of Self identity. Magda, the protagonist of the novel is infact an imaginary being created by Coetzee. He sketched Magda through her unconscious conflicts and fantasies. Her compulsive monologue develops through a free association of ideas, analysis and interpretation of her dreams and repression of her sexual impulse.

The central character of the novel Magda is a lonely jealousy spinster. (Malpas 3)She is a sheep farmer’s daughter. Magda has revenge in her mind because her father has already found sexual satisfaction with the foreman’s black bride. She is tormented by this consciousness and becomes an isolated figure. She is haunted by this thought and drawn continuously into her own consciousness. This reality present in her diary, where she goes in for entries that are long and tedious.

Magda’s mother dies when she was an infant and evidently without brothers and sisters. She neither made relations with her neighbors nor visited the closest village. She has no human companions except Hendrik, her father’s black assistant and his young wife, Anna. As her only human bond is with her father, she grows murderously jealous of his evident desire for attachment to other women. Her anger at him is the chief stimulus for the series of imaginations that constitute the bulk of her monologue. Her fantasies commence dramatically with her to do murder of her father and continue with her painfully unsuccessful attempt to find companionship and love with Hendrik and Anna.

Magda considers herself as scattered in the country as many ‘melancholy spinster’s, like me lost to history.’(IHC 3)
Her ‘Self’ examining mind leads her to solipsism. (Wolfreys 80) Everywhere Magda record her thoughts with signs of doubt, erasure, denial and speculation. The opening section of the novel begins:

"Today my father brought home his new bride. They came to clip-clop across the flats in a dog-cart drawn by a horse with an ostrich-plume waving on its forehead, dusty after the long haul. Or perhaps they were drawn by two plumed donkeys, that is also possible... I am the one who stays in her room reading or writing or fighting migraines. (IHC 1)"

As a narrator she introduces to readers her father’s new bride at the same time declaring that her mother had died in childbirth. However as noticed, Magda later throws some doubts on the circumstances of her mother’s death and claiming to have been looked after by the woman before she died. After negating the existence of a step mother in her life, a few pages later she is stating as: ‘He has not brought home a new wife, I am still his daughter’ (IHC, 18) She repeats the description of that illusionary first arrival, admitting that the two people arriving to the farm that day were not her father and his second wife but Hendrik and Klein Anna.

As a writer Coetzee exposes the limits of the structures of South Africa’s settler colonialism and legacy of apartheid.

"South African literature is a literature in bondage as it reveals in even its highest moments, shot through as they are with feelings of homelessness and yearnings for a nameless liberation. It is less than fully human literature, unnaturally preoccupied with power and, the torsions of power, unable to move from elementary relations of contestation, domination and subjugation to the vast and complex human world that lies beyond them. It is exactly the kind of literature you would expect people to write from a prison. (98)"

Then following Coetzee, she also rejects the colonialism and its injustices. There are no actual events as such that take place in the novel. In the novel what takes place is an act of consciousness and
language. After that she, immediately goes on to admit that perhaps the dogcart was drawn by two donkeys. At last she is finally admitting to the truth of the matter that, in any case, she was not watching at the time. She was not sure for in which activity she was engaged in on that occasion. Magda invokes up several possibilities, before reverting to her original assertion that she was after all, watching. ‘More detail I cannot give unless I begin to embroider, for I was not watching.’ (IHC 1)

Hence she is not confirms on his own assertion, the words ‘that is also possible’ reflects the uncertainty of the act. According to the theory of Todorov, when the reader cannot decide whether an event in the narrative is simply metaphoric or actually happening, ‘the fantasy occupies the duration of this uncertainty.’ (Tzvetan 33)

In the novel it is difficult for the reader to decide whether the narrated story and the events in it by Magda, actually happen or is it her imagination. Appearance of her father’s new wife makes Magda reflect on her dead mother, who apparently dies when Magda was just an infant. She composes memories of her mother as frail and gentle, dying after the birth of child.

From one of the farthest oubliettes of memory I extract a faint grey image, the image of a faint grey frail gentle, loving mother, huddled on the floor one such as any girl in my position would be likely to make up for herself. (IHC 2)

She blames her father for her mother’s death.

Her husband never forgave her for failing to bear him a son… she was too frail and gentle to give birth to the rough rude boy heir my father wanted, therefore she died. (IHC 2)

The relationship of the daughter with her father has traces the fact of oppression which is sexual, physical, mental and emotional. Magda’s sexual impulses are subjugated by her over-bearing father
who has come to dominate her life to such an extent that he is the only male she can think of, ‘When I think of male flesh, white, heavy, dumb, whose flesh can it be but his? ‘(IHC 9)

She’s oppressed her sexual desires which are expressed through her imagination of her father and stepmother’s sexual union. Magda imagines her father’s new wife, her stepmother lying with her father in bed:

They sweat and strain, the farm house creaks through the night. Already the seed must have been planted. Soon she will be sprawling, about in her mindless heat, swelling and ripening, waiting for her little pink pig to knock. (IHC 10-11)

Magda has a series of imaginations and these leads to one other because she imagines the married couple’s sex and also her pregnancy. Magda thinks herself bearing a child, who would lead the ‘colored’ people in rebellion, and be shot down with them.

The occurrence of any event which she can never attain in real life find opening through her oppressed desires in the form of imagination. The childhood rape fancy, she carries over to such an extent that her relationship seems to be an incestuous one, whereas, in reality it is not.

But who would give me a baby, who would not turn to ice at the spectacle of my bony frame on the wedding-couch, the coat of fur up to my navel...who has never lost possession of herself? (IHC 11)

Her sexual imagination between her father and new bride leads to jealousy and she thinks to murder her father. The reason is that she never experienced a sexual life until her middle age, and so, her jealousy is due to Oedipus complex. (Freud 123) Freudian theory of Psychoanalysis works over here. Accordingly the female infant’s sexual desire to remove the mother and become the partner of the father, it is the agency for producing the female-male distinction.
Hence, the mother is loved as well as hated; she represents repressiveness, privilege, power, potency, the government or the state, religion, the establishment, the education system, languages and literature etc. The father, on the other hand, is desired but resented. Magda’s attempt to kill her father with an axe is described here in the following lines but her attempt may be just in her imaginary thoughts.

I bring not the meat-cleaver as I thought it would be but the hatchet, weapon of the Valkyries. I deepen myself in the stillness like a true lover of poetry, breathing with their breath. My father lies on his back naked, the fingers of his right hand twined in the fingers of her left .... The axe sweeps up over my shoulder. All kind of people have done this before me, wives, sons, lovers, heirs, rivals, I am not alone. Like a ball on a string it floats down at the end of my arm, sinks into the throat below me, and all is suddenly tumult. The woman snaps upright in bed, glaring about her; drenched in blood. (IHC 11-12)

Though Coetzee depicts her attempts to murder her father, but he is found alive in the remaining part of the novel. Hence it merely shows her strong intension to wipe away the image of her father so that she can live a peaceful and pleasant life. However this does not occur in reality and instead of this she questions herself as why she did not make friendship with her stepmother? Again ask questions to herself why is she drawn to such violent and deviant act and in what way will she dispose of the body of her father?

Throughout the narrative in the novel, there are questions, conjectures and uncertainties within the fictional world. Only an imaginary tale of the protagonist is the major part of the narrative. At a moment she is recalling her childhood, she wonders, perhaps there were step brothers, perhaps that explains everything, perhaps that is the truth, and it certainly has more of the ring of the truth. The word “perhaps” reflects the uncertainty of the events.
Of all adventures suicide is the most literary, more so even than murder...........Perhaps I strike out once or twice with wooden arm. Perhaps I sink a second time, tasting the water with less revulsion now. Perhaps I come to the surface again, still thrashing, but also waiting for an interlude of stillness to test and taste the languor of my muscles. Perhaps I beat the water now in one spot only.......... (IHC 13)

Above paragraph shows her perhaps imagination of unsuccessful suicide by drowning in the sea. Though Magda seems never to have seen the sea, she makes use of sea imagery and that of underground waters. She considers about suicide and imagines herself diving into an underground river. The image of sea is far remote from her actual life it may be as inappropriate to her. Her exaggerated imagination churns out in the absence of known or remembered data. This data is prefaced by ‘perhaps’ – a kind of linguistic trademark advertising the modal of Magda’s narrative. As Magda rightly acknowledges for herself as: ‘What I lack in experience I plainly make up for in vision’ (IHC 46) Though she is not quite able to recall the events of a particular day in her life, so she comes up with a series of five perhaps before acknowledging this: ‘There are, however, other ways in which I could have spent the day and which I cannot ignore.’ (IHC 87) It is a statement directly followed by a further sequence of five perhaps, which themselves precede her final undetermined word on the matter, ‘...... I suspect that the day was missing I was not there and it that is so I shall never know how the day was filled.’ (IHC 87) Actually “Perhaps” is itself just one of many signs by which Magda is known and by means of which she has herself come to ‘speculate about sign languages and their gaps and absences whose grammar has never been recorded’. (Brian 458)

Her imaginations of action tend to be dreams of rebellion against the convention of rural Afrikaans life, which is patriarchal and
racist. Magda’s, fantasies have three main focuses: herself, her father and the people who are employed on the farm such as Hendrik and Klein Anna. Another two servants, Jakob and Ou-Anna, are less important in the novel and are imagined as being sent away by Magda’s father. Hence much focus of the novel is on the two servants Hendrik and Klein Anna.

Magda memorizes Hendrik’s return to the farm with his bride six months previous. ‘Six months ago Hendrik brought home his new bride. (IHC 18) The farm laborer, Hendrik, brings home his new wife in a donkey cart. He bought her from her father for six goats and a five pound note and with a promise of five pounds more, or perhaps of five goats more, one does not always hear these things well. After marriage Hendrik’s marital home coming appears to deny the opening scene of the father bringing home her stepmother. If we make a comparison between above passage to the opening paragraph of the novel, then any one gets an uncanny sense of sameness and difference in both. We realize that Magda has a narrative scheme ready at hand to describe the new couple riding in a cart, then describe the man in terms of his clothes, finally describe the woman. Hence John Coetzee brings out the literariness of these moments as this is not how things really happened, but how Magda begins a story. At this point, Coetzee calls the attention to the act of fabulation from the distinct impression, the narrator is using in making up the story according to literary patterns that have become habitual to her.

In her imaginary world Magda views that Hendrik’s ancestors got married. A husband had two wives, in the earlier days when patriarchy existed, whereas now Hendrik has only one wife and old Jacob, the farm laborer also had only one,
In the old day, the bygone days ....... when ‘Hendrik’ was a patriarch bowing his knee to no one, he took to bed two wives who revered him, did his will, adapted their bodies to his desires, slept tight against him, the old wife on one side, the young wife on the other, that is how I imagine it. (IHC 19)

She also imagines the village from which Hendrik had brought his bride and provides the beautiful scenery of the impoverished settlement Armored where the servant Hendrik goes to bring his wife. Here, the description is offered in the form of a list, the slightly weary tone of which emphasizes the familiarity and typicality of the details as:

I have never been to Armoede, but with effort at all, this is one of my faculties, I can bring to life the bleak windswept hill, the iron shanties with hessian in the doorways, the chickens, doomed, scratching in the dust, the cold snot-nosed, children toiling back from the dam with buckets of water, the same chickens scattering now before the donkey-cart in which Hendrik bears away his child-bride, bashful, Kerchief, while the six dowry goats nuzzle the thorns and watch through their yellow eyes a scene in its plenitude forever unknowable to me, the thorn-bushes, the midden, the chickens, the children scampering behind the cart, all held in a unity under the sun, innocent, but to me only names, names names. (IHC 19)

In this imaginary scene the place name ‘Armoede’ is too perfect, too allegorical, match between the name and the scene.

As Magda’s Utopia is concern, Hendrik comes from the nearby township of Armoede, which she has never seen but is able to invent; having described the familiar social geography of poverty.

Magda then says that what keeps her going is her determination to get beyond the ‘names, names, names’ that separate her from this world, ‘to burst through the screen of names into the goatseye view of Armoede and the stone desert, to name only these, in despite of all the philosophers have said.’ (IHC, 19) Magda, as a mere character in a novel has never actually been visited any place or travel anywhere.
Hence everything that seems real to her is in fact her imagination, in that sense, the fullness of her existence is an illusion and hence a kind of emptiness. (Cantor 91)

J. M. Coetzee in his *White Writing: On the culture of letters in South Africa*, explores the white South African literary landscape, which consisted of few rival ‘dream topographies’ that mean one which was ‘a network of boundaries crisscrossing the surface of the land, marking off thousands of farms, each a separate kingdom ruled over by a patriarch.......’, the other which portrayed South Africa as 'a vast, empty, silent space...' The imperial born myth of the 'unsettled' land is thus the origin of a literature which is just as empty: white pastoral inscribes itself on the colonial South African imagination, but exhibits only a superficial topography an economic one, where black laborer is but a ‘shadowy presence to the settlers’ farm.

The scene appears in Magda’s speculative history or speculative geography, is one which must, remain hidden of the Afrikaner's dream topography is to be sustained (that is, in its mythical virtue).

Hendrik forebears in the olden days crisscrossed the desert with their flocks and their chattels, heating from A to B or from X to Y, sniffing for water, abandoning stragglers, making forced marches. Then one day, fences began to go up men on horseback rode up and from shadowed faces issued invitations to stop and settle that might also have been orders and might have been threats, one does not know, and so one become a herdsman and one’s children after one, and one’s women took in washing. (Barnard, 33-58)

The dream topography described above, follows an imaginary land that emerged from the desires of the protagonist.

In the second phase of the novel, John Coetzee exposes the hidden pathologies underlying the master and servant relationship in
the colonial family of South Africa. As Attwood says, ‘a principle of equivalence’ (Probyn, n.p.) is raised between the colonial family in the farm house and that of Hendrik, the black servant brings home his new bride Klein-Anna. As Attwood asserts, this equivalence creates a tension that is manifested in two scenarios, in the first, Magda’s father is substituted for the father in a quasi-incestuous relationship with Magda. She imagines that her father desires Hendrik’s young wife, Anna.

And standing here on the stoep six hundred yards away my father for the first time sees through his heavy field glasses the red kerchief, the wideset eyes, the pointed chin, the sharp little teeth, the foxy jaw, the thin arms, the slender body of Hendrik’s Anna. (IHC 28)

As Hendrik for the first time brings home his new wife, she is admired by Magda and her father, while she gets down from the cart. Hendrik’s bride, her sly doe eyes, her narrow hips, is beyond the grope of words until desire consents to mutate into the curiosity of the watcher. Words are coin, words alienate, language is no medium for desire, and desire is rapture, not exchange.

This novel portrays a world shot through with binary oppositions, father/child, master/ slave, white/black, man/woman, old/ young, European/native, human/animal, god/human and so on. In every case the first term is in opposition to the second, in particular by asserting its superiority over the other. Magda get the impression of this point in analyzing the sexual desire of Klein-Anna for her father.

Further more, as the novel progresses, her father is found to stay at home in the mornings. Her father often visits Klein-Anna in her husband’s absence. At one moment, the father offers candies and chocolates to Klein-Anna which she does not refuse to accept. The
Magda’s imagination concerns, her father wishes her absence, so that he can accomplish the relationship.

He wishes I and Hendrik and all other hindrances would go away....... What will they do together day after day? What can they have to say to each other? (IHC 37)

She understands the situation and tries to fulfills her father’s unspoken wish and pretend or may be really suffers with migraine. Magda stays alone in her room and lets them enjoy freedom in their seduction and alone then she enters into the world of stony desert in her imagination. Subsequent to return back to seduction fantasy, we find Klein-Anna and Magda's father in a closed room exchanging feelings and forbidden words.

Here the association of master and (women) slave is formed. As Magda imagines reproaching Klein-Anna for her cooperation with the old man, her language is the traditional vocabulary of virtuous women, pretending disgust for a sexually experienced woman.

After all days and nights pass and the sexual relationship between father and the servant girl becomes more and more embarrassing.

My father and Hendrik’s wife travel their arrow-straight paths from lust to capture, from helplessness to the relief of surrender. Now they are past cajolements and gifts and shy shaking of the head. Hendrik is ordered to the remotest marches of the farm to burn the ticks off sheep. My father tethers his horse outside his servant's house. He locks the door behind him. The girl tries to push his hands off, but she is awed by what is about to happen. He undresses her and lays her out on his servant’s coir mattress. She is limp in his arms. He lies with her and with her in an act. (IHC 39)

The postmodern effect of the novel goes deeper because one does not simply understands a sense of her creating imaginations. However in Coetzee’s fiction even the narrator herself is finally exposed to be a fiction. As a novelist John Coetzee draws upon
another strategy which he has learned from Beckett as his narrator begins to become aware of the fact that she is merely a figure in a novel. Most fictional characters never question their strange existence within the covers of a book that is; they act and speak as if they were real live human beings and not creations of an author’s imagination. For much of the novel Magda performs in this way, persuaded of her own reality as well as identity.

In its real sense the novel not stabilizes the sense of reality working to eradicate any clear and absolute distinction between the real and fictional world. One such example is of school, which had been lived in and deserted by the farm workers Jakob and Ou-Anna Magda imagines those days when the school house was used for its proper and when children came there to be skilled

The school house is empty.... Jakob and Anna are and one..... The school house, once upon a time this was a real school. Children came from the homestead to sit here and learn the three Rs.... But where has it all gone now, this cheerful submission to the wisdom of the past? How many generations can have intervened between those children chanting the six times table and my dubious self? Could my father have been one of them? What did he learn from Hansel and Gretel about father who lead their daughter into dark forests? (IHC 50)

Above long illustrative paragraph reveals her imagination of her father and herself being the children of the school. Magda also apologizes on her fate of living in a dark chamber that is given by her father in spite of his good education that he acquired in the school.

Magda’s childhood story spent in the school house learning the fundamentals of culture with the siblings of her daydream is chaotic in nature. These siblings degenerate quickly into cruel step brothers and step-sisters that ignore her. Speaking about her siblings, she like a good narrator decides to focus on one invented brother, the glorious Arthur:
But all of my stepbrothers and stepsisters it was Arthur I loved most. If Arthur had thrashed me I would have squirmed with pleasure…. But alas, golden Arthur never noticed me, occupied as he was with winning the race and catching the ball and reciting the six times table. The day that Arthur left I hid in the … wagon house vowing that never another morsel of food would pass my lips. As the years went by and Arthur did not return I thrust his memory farther and farther from me, till today it recurs to me with all the remoteness of a fairy-tale. End of story. There are inconsistencies in it, but I have not the time to track down and abolish them. (IHC 52)

From all of siblings, “Arthur”, is remembered as most favorite, although she explains that in fact he too, showed her nothing but indifference. Subtle touches like “alas”, “golden Arthur”, and “never another morsel” alert us to the discarded nature of this passage.

More clearly her story gradually goes down into collective culture and becomes steadily depersonalized in its association with fairy tales, such as the story of the Ugly Duckling and Arthurian Legends. In her imagination Magda finds her sitting in the school room and wishes for what, she had not learnt to read and was not compelled to think and create. Hence it shows that she is very much longs for school education in the city and also for brothers and sisters.

The technique in which, she imagines and then re-imagines the events and people that demonstrate the unsatisfactory nature of the world. Seeing that Magda reveals the scene where the father is having intercourse with the servant girl - Anna, she is totally rebuffed. She illustrates the whole incident in the following manner. There is a knock on the door and Magda opens it, she finds her father and he goes straight and joins Klein-Anna in the kitchen which she resents. The behavior of her father forces her to speculate that the promotion of Klein-Anna to the concubine meant her own downgrading to servant. She tries to talk to her father, who sends her away. He obliges her to go to bed. She searches in her mind for something she
can do. And so she shakes a ringing bell outside their bedroom in order to disturb them. But, father gets disgusted by her act and he beats her and disappears again, locking his door. She says:

The blow does not hurt but it insults. I am insulted and outraged. A moment ago I was a virgin and now I am not, with respect to blows. (IHC 63)

Magda feels the above insult which leads to the murder of her father, in her imagination. Magda’s father’s illegal relation with Hendrik’s wife forces her to face the harsh truth that the exogenous relations defined by her father’s colonial ruling cannot ensure equal and mutual relation between the races. However, this does not weaken the possibility of easy sexual satisfaction for the dominant white masters that is not governed by institutionalized forms of social exchange repelled by such hypocrisy.

In her imaginary world, she murders her father in the second phase of the novel. The act of parricide in the second sequence is symbolic of her revolt against the dishonesty of her father as well as the conventions of her social structure.

Magda’s imagination of her father’s remarriage with a young and sexually attractive wife, which is in terms of rural Cape Dutch/Afrikaner culture at least until the 1930s, would be normal and acceptable for a widower. The seduction of his “colored” farm man’s wife, on the other hand, is deviant, since strict prohibitions exist in the Africans community against cross-racial sex; but it is also a traditional act, according to the unacknowledged codes which were inherited from the days of slavery. (Lenta 166) Infact Magda, contrary to Freud’s most typical case studies of girls suffering from the Oedipus complex, dreams of killing her father (Freud 356-57) should therefore be interpret not simply as a reversal of the
dichotomy masculine / feminine but also as Freud’s the orisation of obsessional neurosis.

While reading the novel reader cannot get the first impression that Magda would kill her father because of he brought home a new bride and only later learns that she kills him because he was having sex with a black servant girl, but in a postmodern narrative the story has all equal possibilities. If we can imagine a Faulkner novel along those lines, then we may understand that the racial issue would gradually emerge as more important than the sexual but that is not how in this novel works because Coetzee don’t offers way for us to decide which account of Magda murders her father is true or not. As at the end of the narrative, he is alive. He has escaped from death. What does this mean? It is true that her father is not dead, but it is also true that she has replaced him with black servant hence at the end of the novel the father is sightless.

As the narrative of the novel is concerns the father seems persistently to represent history, chronology, and god. All her fascinations gave this “father” a solid identity which she is bent upon obliterating but seems to fail repeatedly. She kills her father, but he comes back again. He seems, to be omnipresent. This is at surface level. Though Magda can imagine the killing of the patriarch, her father, her world view is too strongly influenced by patriarchy, for her; to be able to believe in her own ability is to replace him. Even his burial is almost impossible for her, and she cannot believe that Hendrik or Klein-Anna would help her. Her father Johannes is one of the mythic fathers of Afrikaans government who refuses to be got rid of in spite of her imaginative efforts to fold him away for the night. She concludes,
But now I think that for some days after my death he will still lie here breathing, waiting for his nourishment.” (IHC 149)

It shows her desire to be free of her father, and the regime he represents, springs from her white liberal impulse to communicate with and be friend with her slave servants, Hendrik and Klein-Anna. Yet, the way in which she imagines and then re-imagines events and people demonstrates the unsatisfactory nature of a world.

The thought of “drifting habitation” is may be most applicable to this novel. It is most readily illustrated in those instances where the text seems to offer a scenic description. Of course, this is a novel whose problematic temporality strikes us immediately: we are never allowed to be convinced about when the events take place nor are we sure what really happened in the sequence of events but they are always in doubt. The same is true about the novels superficial setting, despite the realistic details of stone, the white washed homestead, the grave yard, the chickens, the dust, and the gleaming copperware.

Charles Larson states:

At the end of the narrative the author suggests that the entire story may have been the fantasy of a deranged consciousness, possibly none of these events ever happened but are only the troubled fantasies of a middle aged spinster bored with her mundane existence on the veld. (123)

Coetzee pays attention to the artificiality of the narrative in post modern fashion. Magda tries at first to explain the gaps in her life, but then begins to admit that something is strangely absent in her existence as:

But, to tell the truth, I am wary of all these suppositions. I suspect that the day was missing I was not there; and if that is so I shall never know how the day was filled. For I seem to exist more and more intermittently. Whole hours, whole afternoons go missing. (IHC 87)
As a writer Coetzee suggests readers to imagine what the convention of ellipsis feels like to a character within a novel, how jolting it must be to be whisked from a Monday to a Thursday with no glimpse of the intermediary days, perhaps as a result of a heartless editor’s blue pencil. (IHC, P.6, 7, 28, 97)

Magda imagines Hendrik and Klein-Anna discussing her and speculating about whether she could become “a woman”. She has never experienced sexual relationship. This sexual repression gives rise to the following imaginative exploration:

They sleep together as man, and wife, they have connubial secrets. In the warm dark they tie in each other's arm and talk about me. Hendrik says amusing things and Anna giggles. He tells her about my lonely life, my solitary walks, He tells her what I do by myself in bed. He tells her how I roam the house by night. He tells her what I dream. He tells her what I need. He tells her that I need a man that I need to be covered, to be turned into a woman. I am a child, he tells her, despite my years; I am an old child, a sinister old child full of stale juices. Someone should make a woman of me; he tells her, someone should make a hole in me to let the old juices run out. Should I be the one to do it, he asks her and make a woman of her and slip away before dawn? (IHC 94)

These imaginations can be said to be her inner voice which she has never experienced but wants them to happen in real life. The above stated lines explores that she is found to be in her room and the servants in their bedroom, discussing of Magda's lacking for sex. This pattern of proposing an account and then instantly calling into question its validity, is repeated again and again throughout the novel. Making it impossible for us to ignore the truth to which such narrational behavior emphatically points namely that the narrator is incapable of making the distinction between fact and imagination, chronicle and fabulation.

Magda the protagonist of the novel in spite of her personal experience appears to have internalized a positive and comforting
imagination of the idea of a family. There is some notion of a primary bond for that she still craves and she has created her own alternative families outside the human world. It is striking that this novel should end with the substitutive apparition of a family. The final sequence of the novel shows that she reconciled to herself fulfilling a maternal role towards her father, whom she feeds and whose nappies she changes as if he were a baby son. Magda apologizes at her birth as she is a cast away. Hence, she wants to take rebirth to the same father and have a life without restriction and full of relationships.

Oh father, father, if I could only learn your secrets, creep through the honeycomb of your bones, listen to the turmoil of your marrow, the singing of your nerves, float on the tide of your blood, and come at last to the quiet sea where my countless brothers and sisters swim, flicking their tails, smiling, whispering to me of a life to come! I want a second chance! Let me annihilate myself in you and come forth a second time clean and new, a sweet fish, a pretty baby, a laughing infant, a happy child, a gay girl, a blushing bride, a loving wife, a gentle mother in a story, with beginning and end in a country town with kind neighbors, a cat on the doormat, geraniums on the window ledge, a tolerant sun! (IHC 77)

Magda desires to be reborn as a happy child rather than a monster as she is now in her real life being an unnecessary being. She also longs her father to renew and love her.

Magda’s desire is to be a ‘different person’ which finds its most voluble expression in the list of demands and claims that she addresses to her biological father. It can be quite easily construed as a repulsive character that her literary progenitor has forced her to inhabit.

Above stated lines depict her longing; hence, it is just an imaginary world, where she can at least depict her expectations of her life.
But I have dreams. I do not sleep but I have dreams: how I manage that I do not know. One of my dreams is about a bush. When the sun has set and the moon is dark and the stars shed so little light that one cannot see a hand in front of one's face, the bush I dream of glows with an unearthly light. I stand before the bush watching it, and the bush watches me back through the depths of profoundest night. Then I grow sleepy. I yawn and lie down and sleep, in my sleep, and the last star goes out in the sky above me. But the bush, alone in the universe, but for me who am now asleep and therefore who know where, continues to shed on me its radiance. (IHC 79)

She dislikes the fact that she is the only active person on the farm; her creative imagination keeps everything in being. In the above lines Magda has a day dream of a burning bush. Her dream of the burnish bush, which clearly recalls the episode in the Bible when Moses was visited by God’s angel on Horeb, (Lang, 178) should certainly be interpreted according to the interpretation of dreams. In reality by stating ‘I do not sleep but I have dreams’ (IHC 79), Magda identifies this episode as a daydream or an imagination. Nonetheless, while acknowledging some differences between daydreams and nocturnal dreams, Freud himself equates these two types of dreams and Lacan himself tends to analyses fantasies as if they were dreams.

Magda’s vision can unquestionably be analyzed by invoking Freud’s interpretation of the night dreams. Here the farm worker Hendrik takes the benefit of Magda’s mental distortion and his anguish is raised and therefore he rapes Magda for five times. Omniscient narration comes under writer’s inquiring spotlight in an instance such as this:

“No!” I say. “Yes!” he grunts an ice form my ear, “Yes!....” I weep, the situation is shameful, I do not see how to get out if it, something is going limp inside me, and something is dying. He bends and fumbles for the bottom of my dress. I scuffle, but he finds it and his fingers come up between my legs. I grip as tightly as I can to keep them still. “No, please not, please, not that, only not that, I beg you, Hendrik, I will give you anything, only please not that! (IHC 115)
She presents her five imaginary versions of her rape by Hendrik. As a writer Coetzee is careful to repeat the rape sequence several times. The ultimate reference of this act would seem to be decolonization and nationalism, but indirectly registered through Magda’s fears. Magda’s efforts to get close to Klein-Anna, sexual intercourse with Hendrik all ultimately painfully fail. Coetzee chooses for his writing the wake of some rebellion, as to stress Magda’s failure to transcend her alienation. Coetzee said in an interview about Magda as:

*She lacks the stature to transform the ‘it’ into a ‘ton’, to so to speak create a society in which reciprocity exists.* (Atwell, 67)

Hence in the novel, readers are the witness for a reversal of roles in which Magda had already assumed a servile position in relation to her father, changes herself once again mistress of slave. The farm labor Hendrik begins to act as a master. He later apparently forces her to have sexual intercourse with him. In spite of Hendrik’s attitude, she accepts all that he does to her at night. The relationship between her and her servants changes when they become her father’s victim and she becomes their prey. She tries to make a relationship within this economy of rape, in exchange for the withdrawal of material goods, as if it were the foundation of social and sexual intercourse. Magda fantasizes her rape sequence when she feels insecure as she could no longer maintain her authority as mistress of the house.

Later in the novel, Magda is compensated to spend her remaining life in isolation. In solitude she also seeks to hear voices that come from machines which fly in the sky, and also able to speak Spanish language. They seem to keep to regular schedules and resemble airplanes. Although Magda doesn’t know Spanish, she tries
to communicate with the machines in a speculative language which she has to invent, first by shouting back at them then by writing and finally by means of ideographs.

The flying machines, which look like narrow silver pencils with two pairs of rigid wings, a long pair in front and a short pair behind, are about six feet long, but fly hundreds of feet up in the air, higher than most birds, and consequently seem smaller than they are. They fly from north to south on the first and fourth days and from south, to north on the second and fifth days,… What flies across the sky is more like a machine than an insect because its drone is continuous and its flight perfectly regular. I call it a machine. It is possible that it is an insect. (IHC 138)

They send messages but not obviously. The relevance of the message with reference to her has been described to a certain extent in Spanish language, all put together to sum up the narrative and Magda's own identity. Magda believes in this situation that she receives a series of messages, enigmatically reflecting on her past and present state of life.

As soon as Magda sees the first machines shouts, “ES MI”, “It's me.” But when this fails to elicit a response she lights a pyre to focus their attention and screams “ISOLADO”, “I’m isolated”. When speech proves an ineffective medium in communicating with the extra-terrestrial machines, she begins to use white washed stones to form the letters of the alphabet which constituted her messages.

The first such message she creates with the stones in reading it appears as: “CINDRLA ESMI” meaning “I’m Cinderella”. (IHC 144) Some other messages she builds are-“QUIERO UN AUTR” i.e; ‘They are isolated’. But when she receives nothing in response she tries to make her messages “more alluring” and begins to write “Twilight poems,” “POEMAS CREPUSCLRS”. The other lines of the poem are, “SOMNOS DE LIBERTAD”, “Dreams of Liberty”,

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AMOR SIN TERROR”, “Love without terrors, “DIL SIN FUROR”, “Day without rage” and “NOTTI DI AMITAD” i.e. “Night of friendship”.

She writes a second poem, which goes, “DESERTA MI OFRA”, “Desert of stone”, “ELECTAS ELEMENTARIAS”, “Elementary Choices,” “DOMINE OSSLAVA “Master of Slave” and “FEMM O FILIA MA SEMPRE HA DESIDER LA MEDIA ENTIRE” which translated roughly means, “Wife or daughter but always I wish between both”. (IHC, P.145)

The protagonist of the novel Magda, the lonely, isolated individual try to finds the attention of the flying machines whom she imagines to be her rescuers and hence calls herself Cinderella. When she fails to get an answer of her messages she makes use of the earth to write her messages by using stones which she paints white but her messages seem to be isolated for the gaze of the flying machines. She seeks to catch their attention by making the messages appear more interesting and the simple phrases makes way for her poems.

In the novel messages and her replies are either italicized or set in bold typefaces. On the page this stylistic devise clearly distinguishes them from the other words. She is restless about the voices because at one point she states that they are her own voices. She thinks to know the “pure meaning” and does she get to it? The consequence of pure meaning is discussed further in the novel.

She makes the messages in white pebbles. It shows her loneliness and her craving to be free from her present state and to be saved her life. At the end of the novel she exposes that she loves the farm and she did not want to escape with the sky-gods. Her final choice is to remain in the dying world of the farm.
Protagonist tries to speak with the sky-gods. This is an attempt to recover the lost relation, rather than the result of the falseness of humanity. The Aeroplanes carrying the sky-gods would seem to confirm this sense of failure before history. Although Coetzee is not concerned with the realistic depiction of period, the airplanes are astonishingly anachronistic. Hence she appears to be lost her history in a rather ordinary sense. It looks like a prisoner who does not know that the war is over.

In the novel the language of “pure meaning” uttered by the sky gods is a metaphysical discourse. It reflects on the insecurity Magda has demonstrated throughout the novel. At this moment Coetzee reconstructs the lines of argument from Hegel and Sartre. Those are deal with the problem of the presence of the subject to itself, the emergence of being for itself through separation and negation, and the dialectic of self and other.

Magda at the very end seeking transfiguration through recognition speaks back, first by shouting toward the sky and then by placing stones on the Veld. “ESMI”, she appeals, “VEDE!” Further, fearing that the sky gods will disregard to treat her as one of the ugly sisters instead of Cinderella herself, she writes, “CINDRLA ESMI” (144). Anxious about sky-gods superior complexity, she writes enigmatic and appealing poems, adding a line each day that each line implying invitation, reassurance, or conciliation to the flying airplanes.

By this novel, Coetzee would seek to give more realistic, sociologically coherent account of Magda’s life. Coetzee indicate in the final section of the novel, no greater reality than the narrative that his transparently fictional heroine has uttered in her own voice
throughout. (IHC, P.145). Truth to self is at least as important as an objective for a mimetic fiction which sets itself of creating a true life representation of the world.

What is important about Magda’s own particular penchant for fabulation is that it is paradigmatic of two important real life situations. At First she is constantly manipulating altering, reinterpreting the world through her stories. She represents the process in which, most white South Africans had been relentlessly engaged throughout their country’s colonial history. Bring to a halt, like Coetzee’s isolated heroine from the rest of humanity, the tormented Afrikaner population was locked in its own towering delusions, mythologizing the past and fictionalizing the present for the purpose of defending an indefensible future of their siblings. The equivalent between Magda’s uncontrolled fantasizing and the extraordinary myth making of white South Africa is instantly recognizable.

In this sequence secondly, in Magda’s repeated gestures, both crude and subtle, to the act of storytelling in which she is continually engaged. As a writer John Coetzee forefronts the role of digests in fiction and in doing so he unmask the process in which all novelists, including authors of mimetic fiction, are involved but it is not merely a theoretical point that he is making here. Coetzee has never indicated that he is ill at ease as a writer with the kind of social realism for which fellow white South African authors have been acclaimed.

To anticipate the political and moral criticism that his own fictional representation of South Africa would inevitably attract, the kind of literature he is interested in writing. If it is contrary to the claims made by mimetic fiction, he can show that the novel is not a
copy of the empirical world, nor does it stand in opposition to it. It is rather a continuation of that ordering, fiction-making process that is part of our normal coming to terms with experience. Hence logically, no work of fiction can be considered to be any more ‘real’ than his own, and all novels have to be recognized as being products of the same creative, and thus essentially artificial process, as that which Coetzee exposes with such firmness in the novel.

*Age of Irons*

*Age of Iron* is a novel by South African Nobel Prize winner writer J. M. Coetzee which appears in 1990. This novel is among his most popular works. It was the winner of 1990 Sunday Express Book of the Year award. Through this novel he paints a picture of social and political tragedy unfolding in a South Africa devastated by racism and violence.

This novel depicts the inward journey of Mrs. Curren who is an old classics professor. She lives in the Cape Town in the apartheid era. Here she is slowly dying due to cancer. Mrs. Curren has been philosophically opposed to the Apartheid regime throughout her life, but she has never taken an active stance against it. At the end of her life, she finally comes face-to-face with the horrors of the apartheid system. Mrs. Curren witnesses the burning of a black township and the killing of her servant's son. As well as the shooting by security forces of a young black activist whom she shelters in her house.

In opposition to a milieu of violence by whites and blacks alike, she remembers her past and her daughter, who left South Africa because of the situation in the country. The novel is framed as an extended letter from the mother to her daughter who is living in America. As the novel progresses, she makes a relationship with a
Vercuil, an old homeless man who happens to be sleeping in her driveway. At the end he becomes truly aware of Florence, her black live-in servant.

Mrs Curren is the first person narrator in this novel. As Mrs Curren addresses her daughter in her letters as "you", the reader also feels that s/he is also directly addressed by her.

‘To whom this writing then? The answer: to you but not you; to you in me.’ (AOI 06) Coetzee's novel can be interpreted as a coming-of-age novel. This novel is about Mrs Curren's perspective on the world. Therefore, coming-of-age is in this case not growing older but rather about development.

The title is not about the ‘Iron Age’ but ‘Iron’ represents the rough and brutal way of life in which Mrs. Curren and the people live in Cape Town. The first part where the term Age of Iron comes up as:

Children of iron, I thought. Florence herself, too, not unlike iron. The age of iron. After which comes the age of bronze. How long, how long before the softer ages return in their cycle, the age of clay, the age of earth? A Spartan matron iron-hearted, bearing warrior sons for the nation. (AOI 123)

Mrs Curren thinks that the brutality is not something a hand full of people takes parts in but is a very big part in the nature of the people in Cape Town. However, she underlines that just like every other era our planet Earth has gone through, this time eventually brutality and racism will come to an end.

As a novelist Coetzee brings together important themes in this book as: aging, the confessor as hero, narrative representation, the meaning of freedom, exploring the self identity and the position of the white liberal in Apartheid South Africa.

Mrs Curren an old lady is told that she has cancer and it has affected her bones. She has a daughter who is now living in the
United States, far from South Africa. In the novel the story is developed when Apartheid regime is taking place in South Africa. The very same day she gets to know about her illness and has a feeling of deep loneliness in her heart, she meets a black man, who is homeless and has found a place to sleep in her property. There start a close relationship between them. They are not friends, no lovers but they spend together those difficult personal and historical times.

Through his fine and delicate narrative, Coetzee deals with the violence that takes place during these times and with its impact on human beings in South Africa. South Africa's apartheid system shocks Mrs. Curren, when her maid's black son is murdered by police security forces. Florence, a black maid servant of Mrs. Curren asserts:

“Yes, I did say that, and it is true. But who made them so cruel? It is the whites who made them so cruel! Yes!”

[Florence] breathed deeply, passionately. (AOI 49)

Mrs. Curren is a retired professor dying slowly due to cancer and she writes letters to her long-gone daughter in a journal form. Though as a professor she is dedicated her life to books and culture but the recent murder of her maiden’s son opened her eyes to the horrors of apartheid regime in South Africa. That might be the beginning of an 'age of iron' after the ‘age of clay’ and ‘age of stone’ in which their slave parents were lived.

Mrs. Curren's depression turns into dead calm when she finds a beggar at her door, a man named Vercuil. He only wants food and drinks, but soon after he finds himself becoming fond of this old lady. He finally promises her to make sure that these letters written to her daughter in America will be delivered after she has passed away.

The novel starts off on a pretty rough day for our narrator, Mrs. Curren. She goes to the doctor only to find out that her cancer is no longer treatable and she's going to die soon.
This was the day when I had the news from Dr. Syfret. The news was not good, but it was mine, for me, mine only, not to be refused. It was for me to take in my arms and fold to my chest and take home, without head shaking without tears. "Thank you, doctor," I said. "Thank you for being frank." "We will do everything we can," he said, "we will tackle this together." But already, behind the comradely front, I could see he was withdrawing. Sauve qui peut. His allegiance to the living, not the dying. (AOI 04)

As if that weren't bad enough, she comes home from that visit to find a homeless man camped out in the alleyway beside her house. Mrs. Curren tells the man that he can't stay there and he paces out, but he comes back almost as quickly as he left. Giving up, Mrs. Curren invites him into her house for a bite to eat. She offers him work, which just ticks him off. He storms away in anger, but later on Mrs. Curren realizes that he's back when she spots him watching TV over her shoulder through the window. Their relationship seems kind of cemented when she has an attack of pain and he helps her back into the house.

I was on my way out to the shops, in the act of opening the garage door, when I had a sudden attack. An attack: it was just that: the pain hurling itself upon me like a dog, sinking its teeth into my back. (AOI 10)

Mrs. Curren and the homeless man start spending more time together, since that's what people usually do when random strangers start camping out in their yards – right? In fact, when neighbours start calling out of their concern that someone is apparently trespassing on Mrs. Curren's property, she tells them that he's supposed to be there – he "works" for her. It starts to become pretty clear that Mrs. Curren doesn't think of the man as an intruder anymore. In fact, she asks him a pretty big favour: she wants him to deliver some particular papers to her daughter in America after she dies. All he has to do is put it in the mail, but he hesitates. Finally, though, he agrees to take on the task.
Florence, Mrs. Curren's housekeeper, returns to Mrs. Curren's house with her three kids: her son Bheki (who apparently used to be named Digby) and her two daughters, Hope and Beauty. Mrs. Curren isn't used to having Bheki around, but Florence explains that he has nowhere else to go because all of the schools in Gugulethu, where they live, have been closed.

"Since when have the schools been closed?" I asked Florence. "Since last week. All the schools in Gugulethu, Langa, Nyanga. The children have nothing to do. All they do is run around the streets and get into trouble. (AOI 36)

We start to learn a little bit more about the political turmoil that our characters are living through. Florence doesn't seem to think too highly of the homeless man (whose name, we learn, is Vercueil). But Mrs Curren told Florence that: ‘He is not a rubbish person,’ I said, lowering my voice, speaking to Florence alone. ‘There are no rubbish people. We are all people together.’ (AOI 47) Bheki’s friend, whose name we don't find out right away, also starts hanging out at Mrs. Curren's house. Mrs. Curren sees that guy as a troublemaker, and she becomes even surer of it when he starts antagonizing Vercueil and the two of them end up getting in a physical fight. The boy disappears for a bit to go ‘lick his wounds.’

As the second boy, the friend, neared him, Vercueil struck out and hit him on the neck with the flat of his hand. The boy drew in his breath with a hiss of surprise: even from the balcony I heard i.... (AOI 45)

At one point, Mrs. Curren is in too much pain to go on, so she and Vercueil just sit in the car together. She reveals that her daughter has no idea that she's dying.

The first task laid on me, from today: to resist the craving to share my death. Loving you, loving life, to forgive the living and take my leave without bitterness. To embrace death as my own, mine alone. (AOI 06)
Mrs. Curren's attitude toward her death is a complicated one. Can anybody imagine how awful it would feel to know that you were dying while having to try to not bring everyone else around you down with you? Mrs. Curren is determined not to make her own mortality someone else's problem.

Vercueil encourages Mrs. Curren to talk to her daughter because her daughter will never forgive her for not telling her the truth. Pretty soon, Florence comes back in a huff – they've found Bheki's friend. She thinks it's totally inappropriate that he's stuck in a hospital among old people who are dying. Vercueil and Mrs. Curren go in to talk to Bheki's friend. She brings him some fruit. She notices how he seems to hate her, and she can't help but think that she also hates him.

When Mrs. Curren and Vercueil go home, she asks him if he wants to sleep on the couch and thinks about how nice it would be if he lived there. It starts to seem as though the person who was once such an inconvenience to her is actually becoming the very soul on whom she depends the most.

One night soon thereafter, Mrs. Curren gets a phone call in the middle of the night from a woman asking for Florence. It appears that Bheki is in some kind of trouble. Vercueil refuses to wake up and help, so Mrs. Curren ends up driving Florence, Hope, and Beauty over to Gugulethu. Mrs. Curren is introduced to Mr. Thabane, Florence's cousin, who gets into the car with them. He tells them that the place they're going to drive is really dangerous – and, as we find out, he's totally right. They go to an area that's exploding in chaos, full of burning buildings and screaming people. After a while, Mrs. Curren tells Mr. Thabane that she wants to go home. He calls her out
on her attitude – it's easy enough for her to turn her back on this scene because it's not her everyday reality. Nobody else has that luxury. This exchange ends with Mrs. Curren sort of making a fool of herself in front of a crowd of people as she tries to explain her point of view.

Mr. Thabane, Mrs. Curren, and a young boy drive on. They find Florence, who has managed to locate Bheki. Mr. Thabane goes to check out the scene and then comes back to tell Mrs. Curren that she should take a look at what they've found. We find out that Bheki and four others have been murdered and their bodies are now laid out against a wall for everyone to see. The rain beats down on their bodies, and their eyes and mouths are filled with sand.

Inside the hall was a mess of rubble and charred beams. 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. He still wore the gray flannel trousers, white shirt, and maroon pullover of his school, but his feet were bare. His eyes were open and staring, his mouth open too. The rain had been beating on him for hours, on him and his comrades, not only here but wherever they had been when they met their deaths; their clothes, their very hair, had a flattened, dead look. In the corners of his eyes there were grains of sand. There was sand in his mouth. (AOI 158)

We spend so much time immersed in thoughts of Mrs. Curren's death that we forget how fragile other people's lives are too – anyone can die. While Mrs. Curren's death is long and drawn out, Bheki's death is sudden and violent. He doesn't get the same opportunity to come to terms with his death – it just happens to him.

This is all too much for Mrs. Curren. She finds an officer and asks him if he knows about all of the horrible things going on. He simply shrugs her off. Mrs. Curren drives home, convinced that she'll never be warm again. The next day, Vercueil and Mrs. Curren go out for a spin in her car. When they get back, some ladies are there to get
Florence's things. They treat Mrs. Curren like she can't possibly understand how Florence feels.

The day after that, Vercueil asks Mrs. Curren if "today is the day," meaning that he's curious as to whether she intends to commit suicide. She tells him yes. The two of them go out in the car and Vercueil gives her a box of matches to set herself on fire. He also tells her that driving off a cliff might be a good idea. She doesn't want to go through with it, though, so they drive again. Vercueil buys some booze and the two of them start drinking. Mrs. Curren tells him about what happened to Bheki. She can't believe how horrifying the world has become. Vercueil encourages Mrs. Curren to get wasted on the cheap booze he bought. She gets really angry with him and tells him to get out of her car. He throws her keys out the window and storms off. We don't see him again for a while.

One night, Mrs. Curren wakes up to the sound of dogs barking and thinks that Vercueil has returned. She goes downstairs and finds Bheki's friend instead. He asks where Bheki is. She tells him that he's dead, but it doesn't click. She gives him something to eat and then sends him to bed. The next day, she cleans and dresses the boy's wound. He keeps asking where Bheki is. And so she keeps telling him that Bheki is dead – forever. The boy tells her that his name is John, but she's pretty sure that it's not actually his name. Later on, Mrs. Curren walks by Florence's room and realizes that John is up to something – he's pulled up one of the floorboards, and he stashes something under the bed when he notices her standing there. She calls Mr. Thabane and tells him that someone needs to come get John, but Mr. Thabane totally noncommittal and doesn't help her out.

The next morning, Mrs. Curren hears someone trying to come through the front gate and figures once again that Vercueil has
returned. Nope, this time it's the police. She hears a gunshot and
opens the door. She tells them not to hurt John – he's just a kid, after
all. She goes over to John and tells him that she won't let them hurt
him, but deep down she knows that she's powerless to save him. A
lady officer distracts Mrs. Curren. We hear some gunshots, followed
by silence. Mrs. Curren knows that they've killed John.

The officers tell Mrs. Curren it's OK for her to go back into her
house, but she wanders off because her home just doesn't feel
like home anymore. She lies down under a bridge and eventually falls
asleep. She wakes up to find a ten-year-old kid feeling her up, looking
for money. He and some other kids come back and start prodding
inside her mouth with a stick.

When Mrs. Curren wakes up, Vercueil is there. He picks her up
and starts carrying her home. She still doesn't feel like she can go
back, so they go to a wooded space, lie down on a piece of cardboard,
and fall asleep. The next day they go back to her place and find the
house in shambles. There is still a police officer scoping out her
place. He grills her about the gun that John had and her relationship to
him and to Vercueil. When he leaves, Mrs. Curren calls Mr. Thabane
and tells him to be careful.

Mrs. Curren's health really starts to weaken. She begins having
weird dreams. She gets a new kind of pain medication and Vercueil
encourages her to take more than the prescribed dose. He also offers
to suffocate her if she's looking for an easy way out of her pain, but
she begs him not to. Mrs. Curren and Vercueil start sharing her bed,
but in a non-sexual way – they just sleep together so that Mrs. Curren
can stay warm. We see Vercueil starting to take care of Mrs. Curren
in ways she (and we) never expected him to.
One day Mrs. Curren wakes up feeling cold. She asks Vercueil if it is "time." He doesn't say anything, but he gets into bed with her and holds her. The novel ends with Mrs. Curren remarking that there was no warmth to be had from his embrace.

How I longed for you to be here, to hold me, comfort me! I begin to understand the true meaning of the embrace. We embrace to be embraced. We embrace our children to be folded in the arms of the future to pass ourselves on beyond death, to be embraced. (AOI 05)

We find out that the narrator's cancer started off as breast cancer.

We sicken before we die so that we will be weaned from our body. The milk that nourished us grows thin and sour; turning away from the breast, we begin to be restless for a separate life. Yet this first life, this life on earth, on the body of earth – will there, can there ever be a better? Despite all the glooms and despairs and rages, I have not let go of my love of it. (AOI 13)

Mrs. Curren philosophizes about how the slow process of dying prepares one for death. We have to ask, though: has she ever thought about how other people die in quick, sudden ways that don't give them that opportunity to come to terms with their mortality?

"When I was a child," I said, "I used to do down hills on a bicycle with no brakes to speak of. It belonged to my elder brother. He would dare me. I was completely without fear. Children cannot conceive of what it is to die. It never crosses their minds that they may not be immortal." (AOI 16)

Now that Mrs. Curren is dying, she starts to reflect on other people's attitudes towards death, including children's views. She used to behave recklessly as a kid without thinking twice about the consequences. Doesn't it kind of seem like Mrs. Curren sees death all over the place now?

She tells the homeless man that her cancer has spread to her bones, which explains why it has become so painful. He tells her that her house is huge and that she should turn it into a boarding house.
"You told me," I said, "that I should turn this house into a boarding house for students. Well, there are better things I could do with it. I could turn it into a haven for beggars. I could run a soup kitchen and a dormitory. (AOI 22)

The narrator spends the whole next day in bed. The day after, she tries to get the car started but has to ask the homeless man for help. Then she asks if he wants to go with her on her drive. He joins her. She talks about her childhood. The narrator asks the homeless man some questions about himself but he doesn't volunteer too much information in return. All of a sudden she starts sobbing, but then realizes that he isn't even really paying attention to her. They almost get in an accident. He shouts at her to get her to drive. When they get back to her house, the narrator tells the homeless man that she can pay him to do things around the house and yard. She says she won't give him more money unless he earns it, though. When he asks her why, she says that he doesn't deserve it. He gets all philosophical and wonders, who really deserves anything? She gets mad and shoves her purse at him. The narrator goes to her piano and starts playing a bunch of selections of classical music. At some point in her playing, the narrator realizes that the homeless man is listening to her, so she ‘played Bach for him, as well as I could.’ (AOI 53)

The narrator puts on some music and listens. She looks out the window and sees a cigarette glowing in the dark. She realizes that the homeless man is listening to the music, too. She feels a kind of intimacy in the fact that they're doing the same thing in the dark. She imagines what it would be like if the two of them had sex. She feels like their souls are somehow intertwined. The next time she sees him, the narrator shows Vercuil photos of her daughter and her grandsons.

We find out the narrator's initials are E.C. E.C. remembers driving Florence to visit her husband William at work last year and
watching him kill chickens. We find out that Vercueil is a steady drinker. He pretty much drinks all day and is usually drunk by noon. We could go all "After-School Special" on you right now, but we won't.

She thinks about how she's gotten used to the evils in South Africa, too. E.C. sees a group of nurses and thinks about how great it would feel to just give herself up to their care at this point. E.C. reveals to Vercueil that she hasn't yet told her daughter that she's dying. As far as her daughter knows, she was sick but she's on the mend.

She says she's sick and tired of dealing with the thing growing inside her. They watch TV. E.C. makes some tea. When she goes back to watch TV with Vercueil, she notices that he's looking at one of her books. They look through it together. Vercueil reveals that he worked at sea before he came to live with her. E.C. tells him he can sleep on the sofa if he wants to. Vercueil seems to hesitate. E.C. thinks about how it might be nice if he moved into her house. E.C. tries to press charges against the two policemen but she can't because only people directly affected by an action can do so. E.C. tells Vercueil about how upset she is. He asks her for some money. One night, a woman calls E.C.'s house in the middle of the night and asks to speak with Florence. It turns out that something's wrong, and whatever it is, Bheki's involved. E.C. tells Florence that she'll take her and the kids to find Bheki. She tries to get Vercueil, who's still fast asleep, to join, but he uses some choice language and, well, let's just say that E.C. gets the vibe that he's not interested in joining. E.C. is terrified. Florence tells her that there's been more shooting. Some policemen approach E.C.'s car. She tells them she's taking her
housekeeper home. They let her go. Florence goes into one of the houses with Hope and Beauty. E.C. notices how it's like she's living in an allegory. This is one of those moments when the narrator really spells her metaphors out for us.

Mr. Thabane said he left Hope behind with his family. He left Hope behind. He is Hope-less. We get it. There must be some more allegory right there. Mr. Thabane also says that he doesn't have any idea where Bheki is. He Look like he's still Hope-less. Thank you, folks, we'll be here all night. Mr. Thabane gets in the car with E.C. and Florence. He tells them that the place they're going to will be really dangerous. They get out of the car and trudge through mud in an area full of broken glass and buildings that are falling apart.

As they come up a dune, they see a crowd of hundreds of people looking over a scene of total chaos: buildings are burning, there's junk everywhere, and everyone looks totally helpless. One particular shack has smoke pouring out of it. A man breaks the windows with an axe, and a woman and her children come out. The woman tries to go back into the house to save her things but the crowd keeps her from doing so. Someone throws a rock at the house. Then the man with the axe is almost hit, and he screams. He and a group of his men turn on the crowd swinging sticks and bars. Everyone else turns to run away. E.C. has a hard time running away because she's in so much pain. Some girl knocks E.C. off her feet as she tries to run away. Just as quickly as they started running away, the crowd starts running back. People scream. E.C. hears the sound of gunfire in the distance. Mr. Thabane finds E.C. and tells her to come along with him.

A young man comes up and tells Mr. Thabane that he wants to use E.C.'s car. She's like, uh, no way. Mr. Thabane tells her that the
young man is a friend of Bheki's, but E.C. makes it clear that she wants to get out of there. Mr. Thabane is like, OK, so you want to go home? Well, just think about all these people who want to go home but have nowhere to go because this is home. (OK, good point.) A crowd starts to gather around E.C. and Mr. Thabane. It's pretty clear that they're all waiting for her to say something for herself.

E.C. wakes up to find the next day has already come and gone. She walks into the bathroom to find Vercueil sitting on the toilet sound asleep. We don't have a good explanation for that, either. E.C. is like, man oh man what is my life becoming? E.C. breaks down and cries. Then she thinks about her family and starts describing a photograph of herself as a child. She goes back to the bathroom and tells Vercueil to come and lie down (presumably with her, though we're not totally sure). He doesn't respond, but later on she hears him leave through the back door.

The next day is a nice day. Vercueil takes E.C. for a spin in her car. When they get home, two women are there, one who happens to be Florence's sister. They have come to get all of her things. E.C. writes a check for them to give to Florence. The next day is beautiful, too. Vercueil asks E.C. if "today is the day," and he seems kind of excited in a weird way. E.C. says yes. Then in her letter she writes that she didn't go through with the thing she was going to do today since she's here writing. That is to say, she was planning to commit suicide but didn't go through with it.

She remembers her last telephone call with her daughter. She promises her now not to haunt her after her death. She thinks about how she has to trust Vercueil. If he doesn't send this letter on to her daughter, her daughter will never read it. She can't be sure that he'll do it, but she has no choice but to assume that he will.
She feels like nothing has been the same since she met him – and things haven't made all that much sense, either. A few days pass. E.C. catches a cold. She's in huge pain. E.C. realizes that she has to go shopping because she has no food. On her way home she has a "bad spell." She leans against a lamppost with food spilled around her feet. People stop and stare, but nobody helps.

One of the men, without warning, picks up Mrs. Curren. She feels a surge of pain. She screams to them to put her down – she has cancer, for goodness' sakes! Mrs. Curren really enjoys hurling that phrase at them. They ask her where the pain is, and she tells them that it's in her heart. This is one of those moments when she gets all deep and metaphorical.

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 unnatural term, unable to bear them, unable to sate their hunger: children inside me eating more every day, not growing but bloating, toothed, clawed, 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. (AOI 64)

Mrs. Curren has a tendency to describe her cancer as a kind of pregnancy. In most cases, pregnancy is a way to perpetuate life: a child grows inside a woman and then is born. Here, Mrs. Curren turns that image upside-down. The thing growing inside her isn't going to create new life; instead, it's going to bring about her death.

She realizes that while she's been speaking, Vercueil has passed out. She tells Vercueil that they can go home now. Then she's like, "hey, did you know I had a breast removed?" and he looks uncomfortable. Then she tells Vercueil she'd love to buy him a new hat. He smiles. They set off down the street, arm-in-arm. Mrs. Curren tells Vercueil that she had a dream about him. In her dream, he
looked totally different but she knew it was Vercueil. He was teaching her how to swim, but all of the water was turning into oil.

She tells him that the first time they met was the same day she found out that she was going to die. She has been wondering maybe if he's the angel who was sent to show [her] the way. When they get back to her place, the house is a disaster. There's still broken glass everywhere and everything has been moved around. Mrs. Curren notices that someone has gone through all of her filing cabinets and personal papers. She realizes that someone else is in the house now. It's an officer who says that he's just checking things out. He tells her that some detectives are on their way. Mrs. Curren lies down. Then Vercueil and a policeman walk into her room. She tells Vercueil to stay with her.

The policeman asks him how he came by this boy, "Johannes." Seems like names are not all that fixed in this book. The officer asks her about the weapons that John had. She says that the pistol was hers and that she lent it to John. She tells the detective that all of the people involved are dead now, so he might as well close the case. The officer grills her about Vercueil. Mrs. Curren says that Vercueil is her right-hand man. The officer leaves. Mrs. Curren calls Mr. Thabane and leaves a message with a little girl at his house that Mr. Thabane needs to be careful.

Mrs. Curren lies in bed trying to write but thinks about what happened to John instead. Mrs. Curren has a dream about Florence walking down Government Avenue with Hope and Beauty. In her dream, Mrs. Curren is supposed to be putting on some kind of public show, but Florence doesn't pay attention to her. As the dream continues, Mrs. Curren performs some tricks with fire. She notices
that Florence looks like a goddess—she's wearing a white slip and her feet are bare. She's pointing towards something. Mrs. Curren is covered in blue flames.

When she wakes up, Mrs. Curren tells Vercueil about her dream. He asks if it was real. Everything in the dream was a symbol of something else. She tells Vercueil that she doesn't want to go to the hospital because she figures they'll put her in a drug-induced coma and she won't be able to dream anymore. Later, Mrs. Curren asks Vercueil if he can fix her radio. He's like, why don't I just bring the TV into your room instead? She says no, but he brings in the TV anyway. He plugs in the TV and turns it on. They see a blue flag waving as the anthem of the Republic plays. Mrs. Curren tells him to switch it off. Instead, he turns the sound up. She yells at him to stop it. He starts doing a groovy little dance to the national anthem. She starts screaming "OFF!" with rage.

Vercueil turns off the TV and tells Mrs. Curren to chill out. She tells him that she's afraid of going to hell and having to listen to that song forever. Vercueil tells her that it's OK — all of this will be over soon. Mrs. Curren tells him that she doesn't have time to wait for that. Then he tells her that maybe she does. For whatever reason, Mrs. Curren gets sucked into the idea that she might actually survive. She and Vercueil grin at each other. Mrs. Curren writes about how she doesn't want to be put to sleep, but how sleep is the only break she gets from her suffering.

Still, she feels like she might be going nuts. She wakes up finding herself drawing all over the walls. She calls the doctor and asks for a different prescription. She gets some new pills and tells Vercueil that they don't work any better than the old ones. He tells her
to take more – who cares what the label says, right? Mrs. Curren asks Vercueil why he chose her. He says he didn't. She asks why he came to her house, and he said that she didn't have a dog and wouldn't make trouble. Vercueil is like, "if you want me to help you, I'll help you." He puts his hands around her throat. She tells him to stop and starts crying. She asks Vercueil if it's OK for his dog to sleep in her bed because she wants the extra warmth. Vercueil says that his dog will only sleep where he sleeps. Mrs. Curren tells Vercueil to sleep on her bed too – so the cozy friends sleep with the dog between them.

We learn that Vercueil lost the use of his fingers on one hand because they were crushed in a pulley when he was at sea and his boat got in an accident. He sailed in Russia. He also lived in China for a while. Piece by piece, Mrs. Curren starts to put together Vercueil's story. Mrs. Curren asks Vercueil what he'll do when she's dead. She tells him that he needs someone to watch over him. She'd volunteer to do it, but she's not yet sure what the afterlife has in store. Mrs. Curren worries about Vercueil. She's not convinced that he can take care of himself. Case in point: ‘his favourite thing to eat is white bread fried in egg with tuna on the bread and tomato sauce on the tuna’ (AOI 189). OK, we think this could be either really vile or surprisingly tasty. Just imagine it: *Top Chef: Vercueil*.

We learn that the two of them have been sharing a bed every night now, lying folded up on one another. The letter breaks off. Mrs. Curren signs it "Mrs. V." (AOI 190) Interesting… The letter picks back up on September 23rd. Mrs. Curren shows Vercueil some old photographs and he remarks that her house is like a museum. Vercueil helps Mrs. Curren wash her underwear. We learn that when Mrs. Curren has her worst fits of pain, Vercueil holds her hand.
Mrs. Curren asks Vercueil if he wants to go to the U.S. to deliver her papers to her daughter. She knows, though, that he won't go. She realizes that she has no relationship with her grandchildren. Mrs. Curren talks about how she needs Vercueil's help, yes, but Vercueil needs her help, too. The letter seems to break off—she writes, "I am going to release you soon from this rope of words" (AOI 197).

Mrs. Curren wakes up feeling cold. Vercueil is standing on the balcony. The wind is blowing. She asks him if it is "time." He doesn't say anything. She gets back into bed. He gets into bed with her, and for the first time she can't detect the faintest smell of him. He holds her tightly in his arms and she loses her breath. The novel ends with her remarking, "From that embrace there was no warmth to be had." (AOI 198)