

Body as a Site of Justice and Expiation in J. M. Coetzee's Fiction

Pavithra Tantrigoda
Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh

It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her. I look into the eye.... 'Tell me,' I want to say, 'don't make a mystery of it, pain is only pain'; but words elude me.

—J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 31

For white South African writers such as J.M. Coetzee, there has been “no consensus about the appropriate ethical response to the historical guilt of apartheid, just as there has been a deep anxiety to acknowledge the culture of violence in post-apartheid South Africa as part of the enduring legacy of apartheid” (Diala 50). The ethical problem of aestheticization of apartheid's historical guilt is a dilemma that Coetzee encounters head on in his fictional works. In interviews, Coetzee foregrounds his own speechlessness in confronting this moral impasse by “speaking of how he is ‘overwhelmed’” and how his “thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness” (*Doubling the Point* 248). While the reception of his fiction in a post-apartheid context has “inserted [his writing] into dominant moral representations of apartheid,” some critics argue that Coetzee's novels explore, but refrain from adopting normative politics and discourses of reconciliation (Barnett 300; Diala 51). While undertaking the task of representing historical injustices of apartheid, Coetzee attempts “to arrest the slide from remembrance to forgetting by refusing to translate such a history, by representing it as untranslatable” (Durant 450). In depicting the unrepresentable and untranslatable history of apartheid, Coetzee's fiction resorts to nuanced and layered allegories such as the body as a mediating trope that articulates historical injustices. Speech/language is cast as an inadequate tool in mediating and translating the reality of apartheid. Instead, Coetzee's fiction demonstrates a notable concern with ontology as offering an ethico-political praxis to supplant the failures of language and textuality. This turn to ontology, I suggest, becomes crucial in positing an alternative discourse of expiation in his fiction.

The centrality of an ontological discourse to attempts at reparation by white characters is particularly salient in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Age of Iron* (1990), and *Disgrace* (1999): novels that address the issues of justice and expiation in relation to a set of racialized, gendered, and sexualized encounters between the colonizer and the colonized, whites and blacks, or self and the other. As a means of making amends for the political violence that seems inherent in

these (uneven) encounters, in his novels, Coetzee deploys a discourse of justice that hints at the potentialities of reparation (to a large extent, at a personal level) located in the body, but, at the same time, he complicates such a possibility. This move by Coetzee to locate justice and reconciliation in the body is particularly important in a context in which reconciliation was primarily conceived in terms of language/dialogue/speech acts and confession in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa. The body becomes a cipher for Coetzee's white protagonists' guilt, shame, and the desire for expiation, albeit with its own limitations. Acknowledging the importance of body in Coetzee's writing, Jennifer Wenzel postulates, "Coetzee insists on holding the substantial body, the body in pain, on equal terms with the abstraction of language; in doing so he broaches alternative frameworks for reconciling language with history" (69). While I agree with Wenzel that the body presents an alternative paradigm in reconciling language with history in Coetzee's fiction, I argue that he is far from positing language on equal terms with the body. He consistently interrogates the very nature of truth and the adequacy of language as a vehicle for representing reality in his fiction. Indeed, his novels such as *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Foe* profess a preoccupation with the signifier (language) as an inadequate supplement for the real (suffering body) in a post-structuralist/post-modernist vein. More importantly, in Coetzee, language is held up to scrutiny through an ethical lens, only to be exposed as flawed as an instrument of power and oppression in South Africa. For Coetzee, political mediation and reconciliation through hegemonic languages such as English and Afrikaans are severely compromised. As the colonizer's tongue, English has been indicted as the language of historical injustice against non-white groups in South Africa (Parmegiani 2012). Afrikaans has also flourished despite the hegemony of English as a result of the strong political will of Afrikaners and the upsurge of Afrikaner nationalism. Thus, Afrikaans is also regarded as complicit in the linguistic oppression of non-white groups (Granville et al. 1998).

The Failure of Language to Achieve Justice and Reconciliation

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa was established by an Act of Parliament for the purpose of investigating the crimes committed under the apartheid regime from March 1960 to May 1994 (Norval 250). The TRC was motivated by a "restorative" interpretation of justice, prioritizing reparations for "victims" and granting amnesty to "perpetrators" (Moon 188). While restorative justice recognizes and compensates for the traumatic experiences of victims, it suggests that wrongdoers "should not be punished but 'reincorporated' into the community and their 'humanity' restored" (Moon 188). Although the TRC succeeded in curbing a violent backlash against white South Africans in post-apartheid South Africa, this model of forgiveness and reconciliation had serious limitations.

The TRC was critiqued for sacrificing justice for reconciliation in granting amnesty to those who publically confessed to crimes committed during apartheid.¹ While acknowledging that the TRC was potentially a heroic ethical project, David Attwell and Barbara Harlow maintain that it was, nonetheless, not without ambiguities: “Apart from the cost of giving amnesty to torturers and assassins, the militant youth culture of the 1980s . . . has left an uncomfortable legacy of seemingly apolitical crime and vigilantism” (6). They go on to observe that the TRC, in elevating forgiveness in the name of peace above justice, excludes natural justice; and that by “emphasizing individual acts of abuse, it has tended to obscure the systematically abusive social engineering that was apartheid” (Attwell and Harlow 2).

Speech/language was central to the TRC in South Africa, which offered both perpetrators and victims/survivors an opportunity to narrate their stories in public (McGonegal 55). In this exercise, language became an important mediating institution for victims and perpetrators in their quest for expiation. Since there were eleven languages officially recognized by the commission, a double mediation in terms of translations became necessary (Derrida 43). This absence of a shared language and the necessity of translation are seen as problematic by Derrida: “Can there be, in one way or another, a scene of forgiveness without a shared language?” (49). For Derrida, when the guilty and the victim share no common national language or idiom or “an agreement on the meanings of words, their connotations, rhetoric, the aim of reference, etc.,” it produces a form of aporia, inhibiting mutually transformative dialogue. Forgiveness seems lacking in meaning, when nothing common and universal permits them to understand one another (Derrida 49).

Similarly, in Coetzee’s writing, speech/language that attempts to mediate and translate the reality of apartheid is held up to scrutiny as an inadequate instrument. Coetzee constantly draws attention to the inadequacies and limitations of language, particularly in his representations of the interactions between white and black characters in his novels. Although some of these characters share the same language, they seem to hold distinct worldviews and idioms mediated by their differential experiential realities and modes of being in a country bifurcated by apartheid. For Coetzee, the privileging of the oppressor’s tongue remains an impediment to racial justice and intersubjective dialogue. In his oeuvre, the untranslatability of the reality of apartheid and forms of racial injustice are illuminated very clearly in the failed communication between the magistrate and the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Mrs. Curren and black South Africans in *Age of Iron*, and David Lurie’s and his daughter’s interactions with Petrus and his black relatives in *Disgrace* (1999).

Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* suggests the limits of the colonizer’s tongue to adequately represent the experiences of the colonized “other” in its representation of an encounter between a colonial magistrate of a far-flung outpost and a barbarian girl who is tortured by colonial officers. For the magistrate, the barbarian girl becomes an emblem of the suffering of the unknowable “non-white”

other under the colonial regime. He becomes engrossed in reading her pain and suffering to expiate the crimes of the colonizer only to encounter the limits of such an exercise. As Eckstein explains “as a man of the ‘first world,’ [the magistrate] is accustomed to assigning meaning to sentient signs, particularly signs of the (barbarian) ‘third world.’ He can make presence or absence as he chooses” (87). However, the magistrate finds the barbarian girl’s predicament unknowable and untranslatable due to the lack of a shared discourse to translate her suffering and a refusal to speak on the part of the girl. While the magistrate attempts to read her wounds for signs of truth, she withholds access to her inner self and her experiences, signaling a resistance to be read by the colonizer.

Confronted with the failure of language to communicate the truth of the barbarian girl’s suffering, the magistrate attempts to search for the signs of this truth on her body to gain full access to colonial law’s aberrations and dark excesses. Coetzee situates the magistrates’ enterprise of reading her body at the complex conjuncture of an ethical imperative and a problematic desire that remains opaque even to him. The magistrate’s aim is to counter the forceful, inhuman unraveling performed by colonial agents on the human body through a humanistic act of reading that carries a redemptive value. However, in undertaking to delve into her ontological truth to repair the injustices of colonialism, he discovers that such an endeavor carries its own flaws, risks and biases. Notwithstanding the ethical imperative that underlies such a gesture, the magistrate’s reading of the barbarian girl’s body for the signs of torture remains an act of power that appropriates it in the name of law and justice, thus subjecting her to its force and inscribing her within the hegemonic epistemological structures of the colonizer. However, troubled by the indeterminacy of the signs of her body and the “truth” about her “essential” self that remains opaque and elusive, the magistrate eventually turns to his own body to uncover this truth and expiate the crimes of the colonizer.

It is possible to locate the magistrate’s anxieties about reading the girl’s body for signs of “truth” at the intersections of post-structuralist, psychoanalytic, and postcolonial theory. At one level, it can stem from finding the woman he attempts to read as a “lack” that engenders desire, epitomizing the “feminine” in psychoanalytic discourse. For, in Coetzee’s depiction of this uneven encounter, he draws attention to the strange erotic nuances of the reading that is performed by the magistrate on the sexualized, female non-white body, only to problematize such a desire: “There is no link that I can define between her womanhood and my desire. I cannot even say for sure that I desire her” (49). Indeed, the ambivalence of colonial discourse that regards colonized women with both desire and revulsion is mapped onto the magistrate’s reading of her body, but only to complicate such a reading by indicating it as an effect of misreading. In a postcolonial reading, the barbarian girl emblemizes the gendered, racialized, impenetrable alterity that is subjected to an ethically suspect act of appropriation by the colonizer. At another level, the magistrate’s anxieties over misreading her body mirror the poststructuralist conceptions of the

sign that stands as an inadequate, unstable supplement, subjected to slippage and spillage, and therefore cannot be contained within the bounds of conventional meaning. As Jennifer Wenzel notes, “in allowing the girl to refuse translation of her tortured body into language, Coetzee presents the body as a ‘key to the labyrinth’ and a way out of the deconstructive wilderness” (66). In a postmodernist vein, her body could be read as full of surfaces, an effect of the play of signs without any interiority or depth. Such a reading that valorizes indeterminacy and opaqueness of the sign may appear reductive, for it undermines the materiality of the body. Nonetheless, it can interrogate the capacity of the text to stand in the place of the real - in this case, the readings imposed on a subaltern body by a colonial authority. In portraying the limits of knowing and translating the suffering of the “other,” Coetzee is problematizing the attempts to construct the colonized as objects of knowledge in a hegemonic colonial discourse, particularly when these attempts are located in a sexualized, female, “non-white” body.

Coetzee’s *Disgrace* similarly addresses broader debates on “the representational capacities of language, the constraints of analytic discourse, and the search for more accommodating registers of imagination” (Anker 255). David Lurie’s daughter, Lucy, who lives in the rural Eastern Cape during post-apartheid South Africa, gets gang raped by a group of black teenagers. When Lurie attempts to extract the truth from Lucy and the black teenagers who are suspected of the crime, he encounters their resistance not simply due to the absence of a shared language, but also as a result of the historical violence inherent in the discourse on rape - the narratives of “black peril” in South Africa that insist on the danger posed by black male sexuality for white women. The encounter between David Lurie and the black teenager, who is presumed to be his daughter’s rapist, captures the violence implicit in such unequal interactions, as well as the failure of reconciliation through language.

In front of the boy he (Lurie) plants himself... “I know you” he says grimly. The boy does not appear to be startled. On the contrary, the boy appears to have been waiting for this moment, storing himself up for it. The voice that issues from his throat is thick with rage. “Who are you?” he says, but the words mean something else: By *what right are you here?* His whole body radiates violence. Then Petrus is with them, talking fast in Xhosa. Petrus speaks, “He says he doesn’t know what you are talking about.” “He is lying. He knows perfectly well.” (*Disgrace* 132)

The tense and explosive verbal confrontation between Lurie and the black teenager is seemingly a subversive recasting of the model of forgiveness and reconciliation propounded by the TRC in post-apartheid South Africa. In an inversion of the TRC model, Lurie’s demand from the black teenager to acknowledge his crime does not produce an admission of guilt or a resolution, but rather fuels their anger and hatred for one another. Their communication fails partially due to the fact that the boy cannot speak fluently in English to articulate his rage and anger against whites. Nonetheless, the teenager’s body that “radiates violence” stands in the absence of words. In fact, Lurie observes that he appears to have “waited for this

moment” to voice his rage - a moment in which the power of white South Africans can be undermined without visible repercussions for blacks. Lurie, on the other hand, summons the power of the master’s tongue and its discursive representations of blacks, claiming to “know him.” He imposes the label of rapist on the black teenager without any hesitation, drawing on racist assumptions on black male sexuality. However, indicating an awareness of his status as a usurper in post-apartheid South Africa, Lurie interprets the teenager’s question, “Who are you?” as meaning “By *what right are you here?*” The attempt at eliciting the truth surrounding Lucy’s rape is overshadowed by a layered context of historical prejudices and injustices that taint the unveiling of such a “truth.”³

Despite his demands for truth from the teenager, Lurie is aware of the inappropriateness of English to relate stories of black South Africans such as Petrus and his nephew. Lurie ponders on historical iniquities built into language on a former occasion and recognizes the limits of English as a medium of self-expression for blacks. Interrogating the capacity of English to represent historically disenfranchised viewpoints, Lurie states,

He would not mind hearing Petrus’s story one day. But preferably not reduced to English. More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for *the truth* of South Africa... Pressed into the mold of English, Petrus’s story would come out arthritic, bygone. (117, emphasis added)

In an implicit critique of the language politics of the TRC in South Africa, Coetzee registers how the historical discrimination of blacks precludes the possibility of articulating their narratives of injustice in the master’s tongue. English not only accommodates historical prejudices against non-white communities in its discursive hierarchies such as white/black, culture/nature and self/other etc., but also, semantically, warps the variances in the rhythms of self-expression of blacks. For Coetzee, English is already tainted as the oppressor’s tongue to provide a truthful representation of reality, undermining the possibility of justice and reconciliation. Derek Attridge argues that *Disgrace*’s “negative portrayal of the relations between communities, coming from an author widely read in South Africa and internationally, can be read as a hindrance, not a support, of the massive task of reconciliation and rebuilding that the country has undertaken” (qtd. in McGonegal 148). Attridge’s critique echoes the utopian views of the TRC, ignoring the complex and dark realities of the historical legacy of apartheid impinging on post-apartheid South Africa that Coetzee captures in *Disgrace*. Rather than a negative portrayal of interracial relations, he indicates moments of rupture and ambiguity in attempts at truth and reconciliation within the conceptual/linguistic frameworks available for such a task. While pointing to the limits of language in establishing a dialogue between white and black communities in *Disgrace*, Coetzee reveals the possibility of reconciliation through an alternative discourse situated in the body.

Age of Iron, published almost a decade prior to *Disgrace*, registers the failure of language in representing the atrocities of

apartheid through its protagonist, Mrs. Curren, and her visceral responses to violence against blacks. Coetzee employs allegorical techniques in the novel “both to probe the metaphysical implications of history – to test ‘the concrete’ events of history against the ‘abstract’ principles of a philosophy of history – and to chart the more immediate connections between physical, psychological and linguistic disfiguration under an oppressive regime” (Huggan 192). A liberal white Classics Professor, Mrs. Curren fails in her attempts to communicate her desire for justice and reconciliation with black characters due to the complex interplay of hierarchies of race, gender, class and age. She realizes the futility of her endeavor in her interactions with a homeless black man named Vercueil, who lives in her garage and, later, moves into her house; “[m]y words fell off him (Vercueil) like dead leaves the moment they were uttered. The words of a woman, therefore negligible; of an old woman, therefore doubly negligible; *but above all of a white*” (emphasis added 79). Clearly, Mrs. Curren is speaking from both a privileged and marginal position. As an educated middle-class white, her words carry authority, but, since she is a helpless, aging woman, her desire to reconcile is undermined by Vercueil. Despite her wish to break down racial and class barriers, the social and cultural worlds that separate them do not permit a discourse on equal grounds.

Acknowledging her failure to communicate with blacks on an equal ground, Mrs. Curren articulates a powerful ethical dilemma in questioning her right and capacity to speak about apartheid. Her heightened sensibility to her complicity in apartheid seems to concur with her terminal illness. As someone with a humanistic outlook, she is ideologically opposed to the violence committed against blacks. However, she admits that she has “no voice” and not in a position to speak or become an arbiter of justice. “Yet who am I, *who am* I to have a voice at all? ... I have no voice; I lost it long ago; perhaps I had never had one...The rest should be silence” (164). This questioning of the legitimacy of her own voice can be read as emblematic of the complex and ambiguous position occupied by some liberal white South Africans during apartheid. While the position of liberal white South Africans is irreducible to a single stance—for their politics embodies diverse positions and has shifted over time in response to personal, socio-historical and/or political changes²—characters such as Mrs. Curren represent a faction of liberal whites who remained in an ethical dilemma about the various ways in which they remained complicit in apartheid. Although she is a beneficiary of white privilege such as its education system, Mrs. Curren is ideologically opposed to the oppression that provides the conditions of possibility for her privilege. Such contradictions that she sustains are at the core of her rejection by blacks that she wishes to reconcile with. Challenged with the question of how she would speak against the oppression of blacks, while her own race is responsible for these acts, Mrs. Curren says,

“These are terrible sights,” I repeated faltering. “They are to be condemned. But I cannot denounce them in other people’s words. I must find my own words, from myself. Otherwise it is not the truth.” “This woman speaks shit,” said a man in

the crowd..." "Yes," I said speaking directly to him. "You are right, what you say is true." He gave me a look as if I were mad. "But what do you expect?" I went on. "*To speak of this*"- I waved a hand over the bush, the smoke, the filth littering the path - "*you would need the tongue of a god.*" (99, emphasis added)

For Mrs. Curren, words cannot signify the scale of violence and injustice that she is witnessing, nor is she able to name the violence and render it in her own tongue without appropriating the tainted discourse of the oppressor. Subscribing to discursive and ideological codes that make the position of liberal white subjects tenable, Mrs. Curren tells the crowd that she must find her own words to speak about the atrocities of apartheid. However, the crowd's response to her rhetoric—that she speaks "shit"—leads her to concede that her words ring hollow and meaningless, which is a reflection of Coetzee's own views on the politics of representing a history of violence and injustice. For, "like the work of Beckett and Kafka, Coetzee's novels remain speechless before history" (Adorno qtd. in Durant 29). In *Age of Iron*, Coetzee's textual practice thus indicates both the failure of language to adequately represent scenes of death, disaster, and injustice perpetrated by the white colonial regime and questions the ability of liberal whites to render apartheid atrocities into a coherent expression, thus subversively rewriting what Benita Parry calls South Africa's "liberal novel of stricken conscience" (149).

The Body as a Site of Justice and Expiation

Admitting to the limits of language in facilitating inter-subjective communication between whites and blacks, Coetzee foregrounds the body as a site of justice and forgiveness. In his fiction, the body is represented both as a discursive site of meaning in embodying race and as bare matter stripped of all cultural/political signification. For, the body is precisely that which changes, grows, degenerates, dies, decays, that which is never stable, never fully predictable, that which is opaque, elusive, and unknown (McWhorter 608). Foucault regards the body as a discursive construct and a locus of power. In "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," he argues that the body is to be thought, "not as a stable, unitary volume or a constant set of rhythmic processes unaffected by historical change, but rather as a locus or point of intersection of historical matrices of power: The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration" (McWhorter 610). Coetzee's discourse on the body simultaneously marks it as apolitical and, also, as a discursive site of power; for instance, power that historically has been assigned to white bodies over bodies marked as black. What is interesting to note in Coetzee's novels is that his white protagonists repudiate and strip the white body of such politically and culturally invested power in their quest for expiation, reducing it to bare matter. Noting the complexity of Coetzee's treatment of the human body, Durant claims,

To say that Coetzee's bodies mark the site of "actual material history" is to say on the one hand that they are intensely material or "substantial" bodies, matter stripped of all cultural codes, "humanity" reduced to a meaningless "pile of blood, bone and meat that is unhappy" (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 85). On the other hand, it is to recognize the way in which these bodies are the site of a loss or a disappearance. Far from housing a soul or a subject, these bodies contain "a story with a hole in it" (*Life and Times of Michael K* 110), through which the subject seems to disappear. Coetzee's bodies attempt to mourn their own loss, to tell the story of their own eclipse. And in so doing, they open out onto a wider history of loss, a history that is not their own and that indeed cannot be owned, a history that ungrounds them as individual subjects. (439)

This sense of loss seems paramount in Coetzee's white characters who reject embodied power and experience a sense of loss through the denial of politically and culturally sanctioned authority accorded to white bodies. However, they articulate agency in this very enactment of loss and powerlessness, which stems from stripping their bodies off of culturally/politically authorized power of an oppressive white regime, thereby inserting themselves into an alternative discourse. Coetzee underlines the significance of the suffering body in South Africa from an ethico-political lens. In an interview with David Atwell, he states,

Let me put it baldly: in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body. It is not possible, not for logical reasons, not for ethical reasons (I would not assert the ethical superiority of pain over pleasure), but for political reasons, for reasons of power. And let me again be unambiguous: it is not that one grants the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body takes this authority: that is its power. ("Doubling the Point" 248)

The tortured body of the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Mrs. Curren's aging and sick body in *Age of Iron*, and Lucy's violated body in *Disgrace* assume an authority of suffering that translates into a discourse of reconciliation. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* underlines the significance of white male body for a discourse of justice and reconciliation. In his quest for the truth of embodied suffering of the "other," the magistrate becomes conscious of his own body as an allegorical site that can gesture towards a discourse of justice and reparation. He invokes the power of his racially, politically, and legally marked body to protest the acts of injustice against the colonized. Atoning for his inaction when the colonial regime tortured barbarian tribes, the magistrate subjects his own body to cruel punishments inflicted by Colonel Joll's associates. He submits himself to a severe flogging in public, vicariously experiencing the unspeakable suffering of the barbarian girl.

Blows fall on my head and shoulders. Never mind: all I want is a few moments to finish what I am saying now that I have begun...Not with that! I shout. The hammer lies cradled in the Colonels' folded arms. "You would not use a hammer on a beast, not on a beast" I raise my broken hand to the sky. "Look!" I shout. "We are the great miracle of creation! But from some blows this miraculous body cannot repair itself!" (105).

The magistrate falls prey to a similar form of physical violence and degradation that the colonized was subjected to, which strips his

body of the racially/politically-invested authority. He abandons his impulse towards self-preservation in speaking for the bodies of the “other” and their ontological integrity and wholeness. Here, Coetzee seems to participate in a discourse of expiation that resonates with Desmond Tutu of the TRC. In *No Future without Forgiveness*, Desmond Tutu, chair of South Africa’s TRC, locates his ideology of forgiveness *vis a vis* the concept of “Ubuntu” that is integral to Xhosa culture. While acknowledging the difficulty of translation, he offers the following gloss: that is to say, “My humanity is caught up, is inexorably bound up, in yours...We say, a person is a person through other persons...To dehumanize another inexorably means that one is dehumanized as well” (qtd. in McGonegal 55). The magistrate subscribes to a similar vision of intersubjectivity as expressed by Tutu by subjecting his body to pain and torture to assert his shared humanity with barbarians. Resisting colonial officers’ attempts at breaking his body in order to silence him, he renounces his corporeal self for the right and the ability to speak for the “other.” Despite the quest for expiation located in his suffering body, the magistrate is well aware of the limitations of his undertaking. His ailing and aged body makes its own humbling demands, undermining the attempt to translate his suffering into a potent form of protest. “In my suffering there is nothing ennobling. What I am made to undergo is subjection to the most rudimentary needs of my body: to drink, to relieve itself, to find the posture in which it is least sore” (112). The magistrate has to submit himself to the primary needs of his body, overruling his desire to transform his suffering into a noble cause. Further, he acknowledges the limits of the human body in its vulnerability and inability to withstand pain and torture. “They [magistrate’s torturers] were interested only in demonstrating to me what it meant to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well, which very soon forgets them when its head is gripped and a pipe is pushed down its gullet...” (113). The physical degradation that the magistrate is subjected to engenders an impulse of self-preservation, reducing him to nothing but his visceral self.

While corporeality is sublimated as a means of attaining justice and making reparations in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, there is also a recognition of its limits as a site of suffering and ungovernable drives and desires. Importantly, however, it is the opposition to racial injustice embodied in the suffering bodies of the barbarian girl and the magistrate and their resilience that provide the hope of a just future in the novel. As Jennifer Wenzel suggests, in the final image of the novel where magistrate dreams of children building an armless snowman, there is an awareness that “just as the tortured body cannot be subsumed to linguistic structures, the political system supported by these structures are incapable of completely appropriating the vulnerable human body and its voice, incapable of silencing the voice of protest, however implicated within the structure it may be” (69).

Disgrace similarly gestures at the possibilities of expiation through the motif of the racialized and sexualized body of the white female South African protagonist, Lucy. As Cornwell suggests, the

novel is not simply a mimetic representation of the fraught reality of post-apartheid South Africa, but certain momentous incidents such as Lucy's rape indicates "an underlying symbolic or allegorical tendency ...[that] emerges to subvert, or at least to stretch the credibility of the book's mimetic pretensions" (314). *Disgrace*, which largely relies on a realist narrative, resorts to symbolism and allegory in its depiction of complex gendered, racialized, and sexualized interactions between white South Africans who are gradually losing power in a post-apartheid setting and blacks, who are demanding retributive justice for the violence that was inflicted upon them during apartheid. The white female body of Lucy in *Disgrace* becomes a central motif for expiation and restitution of interracial peace, albeit, problematically.

Sex/desire is not simply a personal matter or a physical impulse as a result of the convergence of race, sex, and gender in South Africa's long colonial history, but rather a deeply historical and political phenomenon (Ogden 704). "Eros" is "loaded with historical significance in South Africa, where desire is connected to white phantasy and Black revenge" (Ogden 704). While alluding to racist stereotypes of the blacks and reinforcing the myth of "black peril" in South Africa,⁴ Lucy's rape invokes a larger discourse surrounding the female body as grounds for retribution in male struggles for power. Lucy's mute subjugation is seen "as involving the subjection of the female body, as part of a long history of female exploitation of which the narrative itself takes note" (Boehmer 344). Her sexualized, white female body becomes the site of struggle for power and possession, as well as retribution. As Dorothy Driver suggests, in an economy of exchange of black bodies (as slaves and prostitutes), white women stood as "signs" of that which cannot be exchanged between men of different racial groups (16). In post-apartheid South Africa, this symbolic value attributed to white women and their bodies as sites that perpetuate racial purity and privilege is challenged and subverted. Although as a liberal white South African woman, she did not directly participate in apartheid, Lucy's body is a discursive site of power that has been historically assigned to white bodies over bodies marked as "non-white." For her attackers, Lucy's body acquires a distinctly political character that is emblematic of the racial "other." Lurie suggests that "[i]t was history speaking through them. A history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps. It may have seemed personal, but it wasn't. It came down from the ancestors" (112).

Lucy's response to her rape remains opaque and layered, thus irreducible to a single interpretation.⁵ Lucy embodies the vision of the TRC in denying the punitive force of law in favor of a reconciliatory outcome. However, she rejects the public, truth-seeking model of the TRC, favoring instead a private, individualized solution. While Lurie attempts to render her daughter's violation in words and demand justice for it, for Lucy, it remains an unspeakable, unnamable act. Lucy says: "What happened to me is my business, mine alone, not yours, and if there is one right I have it is the right not to be put on trial like this, not to justify myself—not to you, not to anyone else" (133). Lucy refuses to be assimilated to the position of the victim or provide

meaning to her rape, asserting her right to deal with her predicament as she sees fit. Reading Lucy's silence as an attempt at expiation, Diala claims, "the point, of course, is that Lucy contemplates her attempts at self-crucifixion as a form of restitution": "what if *that* is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying?" (Diala 158). In so far as her silence and inaction can be construed as a selfless act of expiation, Lucy is seeking redemption for the past crimes of apartheid. Such a reading is problematic in that her selfhood is effaced and her gendered, sexualized body becomes the scapegoat for the wrongs perpetrated by her race. The resignation with which she bore her violation without seeking for justice or retribution may suggest that she passively accepts this role that has been thrust upon her. However, Lucy's silence can be construed as a way of navigating the fraught racial terrain in a post-apartheid context. While she may view her rape as a form of restoration, Lucy also regards it as a form of exchange—a price a female white settler has to pay for being able to live in rural South Africa. She refuses to go to the police despite Lurie's insistence, preferring a private form of settlement (becoming Petrus's wife) to guarantee her future safety. For, as a lesbian dependent on a gendered economy of farming in rural South Africa, she remains in a vulnerable position.

While not completely effacing the violence that is committed against her, the narrative indicates the potentialities of expiation through the body of Lucy. She decides to save the child that is a result of rape, despite her father's disapproval. Lurie attempts to understand her motives by invoking a discourse of private guilt and reparation. "Do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?" (112). By nurturing the child of a black man in her own body, Lucy is more than attempting to expiate for the crimes of the past—she is striving to create conditions of possibility to safeguard her own future in South Africa. Lurie not only fails to understand the politics of her choice, but also sees it as a self-effacement on her part. Further, Lucy attempts to step outside the discursive meanings attributed to her body in deciding to keep her child, whom she could have aborted. She strips the racial signification that her rapists imbue her body with and asserts her agency by allowing their child to grow in her body. It is possible to read Lucy's action as a way of privileging her motherhood over and above being a victim of racial hatred. Thus, rather than being marked or polluted, her body becomes a vehicle for motherhood of an interracial child, pointing to a future where the possibility of racial harmony reigns. Despite the problematic nature of such a resolution, the ambiguous agency accorded to the female body as a vehicle for forgiveness and expiation cannot be undermined. As McGonegal argues, despite the "bleakness and despondency of the novel's imagery... *Disgrace* composes a vision of a forgiveness and reconciliation as the fragile horizon of ethical relations" (149).

As Coetzee puts it in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, "all creatures

come into the world bringing with them the memory of justice, a memory that is perpetually at odds with the “world of laws” (139). His white protagonist, Mrs. Curren, in *Age of Iron* seems to embody this memory, invoking a desire in her to give expression to justice in a visceral manner. Although Mrs. Curren nurtures her own private honor and shame, she fails to act against violence and injustice of the apartheid regime. Her feelings of shame and guilt at her old age are exacerbated by the fact that she has acted like a “doll,” leading a life of inaction. In her failure to find her own language to articulate her shame and opposition to injustice, Mrs. Curren invokes her own corporeal self as a cipher that carries the burden of her culpability and her rage against injustice.

Despite her lack of political power, her racial and class identity in South Africa as a white professor has guaranteed Mrs. Curren certain rights and privileges over blacks. Her white body, which is invested with cultural and political power, can be a powerful weapon of protest against apartheid. In seeing the dead bodies of her housemaids’ teenage son and his schoolmates, she professes a wish for self-immolation as a form of resistance against injustice.

I thought of the five bodies, of their massive, solid presence in the burned-down hall...If someone had dug a grave for me then and there 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 the corners of my eyes I would not have lifted a finger to brush it away. (104)

Mrs. Curren attempts to expiate for the crimes committed against blacks by sacrificing her own body, which is marked by her privileged racial identity. Her acute sense of injustice at racial killings compels her to leave her home after a police raid as a mark of protest. She lies down in a street corner, exposing her body to the elements and refuses medication and the comforts of her middle-class existence. She sees herself as an “old animal” who is sensing its death and guided by the visceral self: “I was beginning to feel the indifferent peace of an old animal that, sensing its time is near, creeps, cold and sluggish, into the hole in the ground where everything will contract to the slow thudding of a heart” (158). In this instance, Mrs. Curren strips her body of the privileges associated with her class and race, reducing it to bare matter. As Spivak notes, “unlearning one’s privilege as one’s loss” marks the “beginning of an ethical relation to the other.” It is a way of learning about the other from below and also taking responsibility for “one’s privileges in the world, but never as a loss one should mourn” (154). Mrs. Curren is unlearning her privilege not only as a step toward an ethical relation with the “other” but also as a form of resistance against injustice, and thus as an act of agency. However, while contemplating the possibility of expiation and resistance through self-immolation, Coetzee’s narrative eludes the above path, allowing Mrs. Curren to succumb to disease. Expiation through self-immolation is shown as an ineffective response to the crimes that are committed during apartheid, since it reconstitutes Mrs. Curren’s body as powerful within a colonialist ideological framework.

The most forceful expression of her visceral response to the violence committed against blacks appears in the novel in the form of a cancer, which gradually consumes her. Mrs. Curren attributes her disease to shame and guilt that she has endured throughout her life as a passive witness of apartheid violence; “I have cancer from the accumulation of shame I have endured in my life. That is how cancer comes about: from self-loathing the body turns malignant and begins to eat away at itself” (145). With her failure to act or speak against the injustices of apartheid, Mrs. Curren’s guilt becomes embodied and displaced onto her ontological self. However, disease and mortality that converge in her body is also a part of the natural cycle of life, rendering an authoritative discourse of expiation located in a privileged white body untenable. While Coetzee explores the possibility of inserting the aging, sick, gendered white body of Mrs. Curren into a discourse of expiation, he refrains from a resolution that equates her body with a coherent expression of guilt and reconciliation. For, “the constructs of guilt and salvation or, in Curren’s narration, shame and maternity, are deeply suspect when they organize the incoherent and disorienting experience of witnessing the crimes of apartheid into a cogent story that ends with a repentant and therefore redeemed white subject” (Walsh 180). The ending of the novel signals the impossibility of coherent outcomes—of redemption and salvation—for a narrative of private guilt and shame of a white protagonist.

In Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Age of Iron* (1990), and *Disgrace* (1999), the body becomes a cipher for shame, guilt and the desire for reconciliation of the white protagonists in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. These narratives underline the centrality of the body as a layered and complex allegory and a potent alternative to language in facilitating a discourse of justice and expiation. In Coetzee’s fiction, the body is represented both as a discursive site of meaning and as bare matter, marked by unspeakable violence and horror during and after apartheid, as well as acts of resistance to it. However, these novels suggest the problematic nature of reading the suffering white body exclusively through a discourse of expiation, particular when sexualized female bodies are involved. While suggesting the possibility of a discourse of ethics and reconciliation located in the body, Coetzee refrains from presenting coherent resolutions in his novels. Coetzee’s “‘posthumanist humanism’ orients his text toward the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation even as it wakens it to the problems that would seem to make these ideals impossible” (McGonegal 149). While acknowledging an ethical duty to mourn and redress injustice in apartheid and post-apartheid contexts in South Africa, Coetzee abstains from projecting utopian visions of justice and reconciliation in his novels. Instead, Coetzee indicates how apartheid continues to haunt the very acts of mourning and reparation that his characters engage with— in the materiality of their bodies marked by attempts at reconciliation that guard against the erasure of historical memory.

Notes

1. Mahmood Mamdani in “Amnesty or Impunity? A Preliminary Critique of the Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa (TRC),” for instance, writes that “the Commission's Report did not just downplay apartheid, the “crime against humanity.” It also showed little understanding of the legal machinery through which this crime against humanity was perpetrated in the guise of a rule of law” (58). He further claims, “there was a strong tendency in the TRC not only to *dehistoricize* and *decontextualize* the story of apartheid but also to individualize the wrongs done by apartheid. Wynand Malan's minority report blamed this tendency on the religious messianism of the leadership in the Commission” (56). In “Narrative and Healing in the Hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” Sandra Young claims: “It was born in compromise, during the negotiations for a new constitution, in the hope of addressing the atrocities of the past without recourse to the criminal justice system which, it was anticipated, would prove unwieldy and divisive to South Africa's fragile social fabric” (147).

2. Describing the fraught socio-political context in post-apartheid South Africa that prevents amicable interracial relations, Mbembe writes: “In a country where very few apartheid-era atrocities have been prosecuted...the persistent denial of white privilege partly explains the acrimonious nature of the controversy. But so does the drive to assert a form of black identity predicated on the idea of victimhood. The two defensive logics of black victimhood and white denialism collide and collude, often in unexpected ways. Together, they gradually foster a culture of mutual resentment, which, in turn, isolates freedom from responsibility” (Mbembe 7).

3. The various kinds of positions occupied by liberal whites in South Africa is perhaps best illustrated by “the initiative championed in 2000 by the former African National Congress legislator and diplomat, Carl Niehaus, and a former president of the Black Sash, Mary Burton, to have whites collectively apologize to blacks for the sins of apartheid.” Reporting that only five hundred of South Africa's four and one-half million whites had agreed to sign the so-called “guilt list,” Chris McGreal notes that the statement was “hardly more than an acknowledgement by whites of what for blacks was a mere truism, an acknowledgement that apartheid had inflicted massive social, economic, cultural, and psychological damage on South African blacks. He notes nonetheless that the dissenters, far from being only white racists, included many staunch anti-apartheid whites, such as Breyten Breytenbach” (Diala 1).

4. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee self-consciously performs a subversion of the “black peril” narrative—by simultaneously scripting what Sol T. Plaatje referred to as “the white peril,” the hidden sexual exploitation of black women by white men that has existed for centuries (Graham 437).

5. Scholarly views differ widely as to the significance of rape in Coetzee's *Disgrace*. See for example, Cornwall 2002; Graham 2003; Spivak 2005; Anker 2008; Mardorossian 2011; Ogden 2012; and Roy 2012.

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