

EMPOWERING SILENCE:
THE OTHER'S AGENCY AS A SITE OF RESISTANCE IN
J. M. COETZEE'S EARLY FICTION

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Abstract. This paper examines the problem of *the Other's agency* as a space of tension and contention between, on the one hand, a dominant discourse that tends to subjugate the Other's voice through either modulation or obliteration and, on the other, silence as a strategy of resistance to the hegemonic discourse of apartheid in J. M. Coetzee's early novels. The authority's stratagem of using violence, whether it be corporeal or discursive, to coerce its (ex)colonial subjects to speak, confess, and even consent to the authorized versions of truth is impugned by the Other's provocative reticence to communicate with the Self. To achieve its autonomy in the face of such a totalizing authority, which relentlessly seeks to suppress any disrupt voice of alterity, the Other resorts to silence as an act of evasion and possibly liberation. The speechlessness of the Other in Coetzee's early novels, then, is not presented as a mere act of relinquishment the agency; it is rather eloquently staged as an aporetic state of incommensurability that disarticulates colonial and imperialist modes of representation tending to normalize and assimilate the colonized within its cognitive framework.

Keywords: (post)-colonial discourse, silence, resistance, otherness, agency, hegemony, incommensurability

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are [...]. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. In like manner, silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance.

(Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 100-101)

INTRODUCTION

In most of his early fiction, Coetzee advocates silence as an act of resistance to the “epistemic violence”²¹ of colonial language. The Other’s silence, in this regard, could be seen not so much a prone or lethargic response to persecution as it is an unspoken but audacious articulation of dissension. Instead of creating a counterforce by investing the Other with a voice to challenge the Self, Coetzee deliberately imposes silence on some of his characters to contravene the hegemonic mechanisms of representation underpinning the discourse of apartheid. Presented as victims of persecution in his fiction, Friday in *Foe*, the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron*, inhabit marginal and ambiguous spaces where the employment of language with its intricate ideological affiliations is actually an unavailing and unproductive contestation of power over agency. Those characters voluntarily, or sometimes involuntarily, refuse to be dragged into any communicative grid that would only accentuate and aggravate their position as an oppressed Other against whom the Self attempts to inscribe its narrative of power and dominion.

Drawing on Foucauldian poststructuralist conception of silence as a counterpart to coercive discourse(s), as the above epigraph suggests, this paper argues that since the Other’s agency is framed by power structures encapsulated in dominant discourse(s), most of the figures of alterity in J. M. Coetzee’s early fiction recourse to speechlessness as a strategy of resistance to and subversion of the representational language of the Self. This resonates with the postcolonial conceptualization of the colonized agency, which contains a fundamental critique of colonial rhetoric. The Other’s silence, accordingly, stands as a deliberate absence of meaning or a disjunction that not only interrupts and suspends the teleological course of colonial history working towards significant and meaningful self-fulfilment, but it also disrupts the dominant position of the Self as enunciator of discourse by rendering it apocryphal.

I. AGENCY IN THE MARGIN: MAPPING THE OTHER'S VOICE IN THE POSTCOLONIAL DISCOURSE

Along with its encounter with the Other, the Self risks the disruption of its authority in the enunciation of discourse as a result of the emergence of heterogeneous voices of alterity, which bear at their core the threat of subverting the presumable homogeneity of that discourse. In his examination of the forms of resistance undertaken by colonized peoples along the process of decolonization, Edward Said contends that, while facing “an active Western intruder against a supine or non-Western native; there was always some form of active resistance” (Said 1994, xii). For Said, the colonized resistance comes as a contrapuntal reaction to power and hegemony. It comprises a twofold process: a political resistance that aims at decolonizing the land and thus achieving territorial independence; a cultural resistance that strives to develop a “revitalized independent culture to resist the West” (Said 1994, 252). Said’s theorization of resistance aims to foreground the potential of the colonized to produce a counter-narrative to colonial discourse. He attempts to present the colonized as an active agent that has a deliberate political and cultural decolonizing project capable of recuperating the agency of self-representation by deconstructing and reconstructing the history of colonialism from the colonized perspective.

While Said attempts to extricate from the colonizer/colonized encounter an authentic and independent agency of the colonized, Homi Bhabha’s study of agency is disposed to represent the colonial encounter as an intersubjective implication rather than an antagonistic confrontation. In his postulation of the notion of mimicry, Bhabha reinscribes the colonized agency as a form of subversion of the colonizer’s monopoly on discourse articulation. While operating within the boundaries of the epistemological and linguistic structures of colonial discourse, Bhabha maintains, mimicry bears the potential of disruption and division of that discourse: “The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in

disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (Bhabha 1994, 88). Mimicry presupposes that the colonial subject’s position within discourse deviates from an “authorized versions of the otherness” that implies the familiarization and inclusion of a whole category of native interpreters and civil servants within the boundaries of colonial discourse,² to unruly or “inappropriate” (Bhabha 1994, 88) colonial subjects that impinge on the colonizer’s presence. In colonial contexts, mimicry adopted by the colonial subject engenders a shift in agency appropriation. Besides potentially establishing a space of political and cultural uncertainty and ambivalence in the structure of colonial power, which is concealed through the anxious repetitions of stereotypes, mimicry also daunts the colonizer’s contingent discursive unity and resolution. The acquisition of the colonizer’s language, which is originally intended to domesticate the natives, is paradoxically used to debilitate the assumptions, clichés, and images misrepresenting them. The colonized resistance, therefore, conduces to the relocation of colonial discourse, which is predicated on an either/or logic, into an interactive and dynamic cultural space of hybridity where marginal and repressed voices are enabled to articulate their own statements.

Notwithstanding Bhabha’s development of the notions of mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity to question the integrity and coherence of colonial discourse, Gayatri Shakravorty Spivak interrogates the possibility of engendering a counter-discourse in order to subvert the colonial and imperialist representations encapsulated in colonial discourse. The logocentric discursive hegemony exerted upon the colonized native, she holds, dispossesses the latter of any kind of agency in the enunciation of discourse. The ultimate aim of othering is to erase the very otherness of the ‘subaltern’ through shaping it “as the Self’s shadow [...]. The clearest example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated [...] project [which is] the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subjectivity” (Spivak 1988, 280-81). Spivak underlines the way marginalized groups, especially

in a colonial situation, are disappropriated by their own agency because they cannot escape the labyrinth of colonial forms of stereotyping that systematically construct them as a refracted and, thus, distorted image of the Self. In the same vein, the colonized agency, as Roberts Young puts it, is already contained by the dominant imperialist discourse. For him, any attempt to recuperate the lost subaltern agency is “a blind-spot,” where the subaltern can hardly articulate an authentic voice “once more out of the imposed silence of history,” because it is already “constituted as a subject through the positions that have been permitted” (Young 2004, 207). Since the Other’s self-representation is rendered more or less impossible due to the structural failure of such a voice emanating from the margin, silence, therefore, becomes an adroit evasion of the hegemonic framework of the colonial linguistic system. It could be regarded as a deliberate relinquishment— instead of appropriation— of agency that would permit the Other to acquire a provisional and fluid form of identity capable of thwarting the rigid and fixed frames of power imposed by colonial discourse.

II. SILENCE VS COERCION TO SPEAK IN *WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS*

Silence characterizes the untold story of agony and suffering of the speechless barbarians in Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Under the colonial rule of the Empire, the indigenous people, called ‘barbarians’ throughout the narrative, are not allowed to use their indigenous vernaculars. They are forced to either use the language of the colonizer, which is pervaded by the colonial racist and ethnocentric ideologies or just succumb to a state of speechlessness as their cultural identity can hardly be conveyed through the colonial language. Therefore, it becomes apprehensible to observe that most of the barbarians in Coetzee’s novel exist outside the linguistic performance of the novel as they are barely seen speak or perform full exchanges. Benita Parry argues that the so-called barbarians in Coetzee’s novel are indeed “muted by those who have the power to

name and depict them. [...] [T]he dominated are situated as objects of representations and meditations which offer them no place from which to resist the modes that have constituted them” (Parry 1998, 151). In a situation where the relationship is between the Empire and its marginalized colonial subjects, the breakdown in linguistic communication helps the latter to resist the Empire’s controlling and subjugating demeanours.

The silence of the Other in Coetzee’s text is far from being a mere muteness; rather, it can be regarded as a deliberate and self-imposed mode of resistance. In this respect, the reticence to speak and sometimes the utter silence which marks the barbarian girl, the main character representing the Other in the novel, should not be taken for its face validity as a sign of acquiescence or conformity to the dominant colonial discourse of the Empire. Rather, it could be read as a form elusiveness, or as Mike Marais puts it, “a potent political tool through which the other escapes” (Marais 1996, 75). Using the colonizer’s language as a medium to express the voice of the Other is an already lost game of power for the colonized, as his/her voice is either utterly eclipsed or, at its best, modulated by the colonial system of representation. The Barbarians’ silence, in this respect, is not so much an inert backlash as it is an assertive invalidation of the Empire’s linguistic coercion. Instead of empowering the Other with a counter-voice to challenge the Empire’s physical and verbal violence, Coetzee subtly encapsulates silence in the text as a contrapuntal interruption in the narrative that creates a gap or a total absence of meaning at the heart of the Empire’s authorial and authoritative statement. Such a linguistic void is rather filled with the signifying presence of the Other’s tortured body as a substitute to language.

The speechlessness of the barbarians could impart a human story from the Other’s perspective that cannot be articulated through words. Actually, the barbarian story is never explicitly told in the novel; it is left to the reader to lend an attentive ear to the unuttered story of pain and torture. Namely, the reader has to infer meaning from the tortured and mutilated bodies of the barbarians. After the

first military expedition undertaken by Col. Joll, who is sent by the 'Third Bureau' (an intelligence military division) to investigate and capture some alleged barbarian insurgents, the Magistrate pays a curious visit to the granary where the first barbarian captives, an old man and his son, are incarcerated for interrogation. The Magistrate is highly shocked at the sight of terrible traces of torture on the dead body of the old man, "[t]he grey beard was caked with blood. The lips are crushed and drawn back, the teeth are broken. One eye is rolled back, the other eye-socket is a bloody hole" (Coetzee 1980, 7). Like his father, the little boy is not spared torture either. The Magistrate observes "his belly and both groins are pocked with little scabs and bruises and cuts, some marked by trickles of blood" (Coetzee 1980, 10). These horrific scenes of torture seem to dash any hope to reach out or establish any truth. The Magistrate's growing scepticism towards the men of the Third bureau is reflected in his sarcastic undertone when he refers to them as, "specialists in the obscurer motions of sedition, devotees of truth, doctors of interrogation" (Coetzee 1980, 9). The assumption that "pain is truth" (Coetzee 1980, 5), which the Magistrate has mistakenly regarded as an efficient tool to reach the truth, loses ground when he discovers later that Colonel Joll, actually, uses horrible forms of torture so as not to get reliable information concerning the barbarians' assumed rebellion, but rather to suppress both the voice and ego of the Other.

The emphasis on the tortured body of the Other is so intense that it becomes the most distinguishing marker of the barbarians' silent presence in the narrative. The abominable act of torture reaches its climax at the scene in which Col. Joll "rubs a handful of dust into [each prisoner] naked back and writes a word with a stick of charcoal, [...] ENEMY" (Coetzee 1980, 115). The body of the Other is metaphorically transformed into a contentious space in which the separating lines between the barbarian identity and that of the Empire are violently set. Therefore, the torturing and the maiming of the barbarian body can be interpreted as an inscription that reflects the Empire's strong desire to impose and prolong its

position as a subject in the enunciation of discourse. In this respect, writing the word ‘enemy’ on the barbarians’ backs implies that the Empire as a colonial power presumably maintains the agency to inscribe its colonial text on the colonized. Nevertheless, marking the barbarians as the enemy of Empire exposes the ambivalence and contradiction of its colonial discourse. The Empire seems to create its own enemy only to destroy it. The acts of suppressing the barbarian voice and foregrounding their bodily presence make the Empire fall into a state of circularity and self-erasure. On the one hand, the Empire needs the exigent presence of the barbarians to validate its rule and maintain its dominion. On the other, it tries to undermine this presence by reducing the barbarians into voiceless bodies so as not to testify against the Empire’s dark history of colonialism, referred to in the novel as “black flower of civilization” (Coetzee 1980, 86).

One of the captured and tortured barbarians is a nameless girl, upon whom the Magistrate stumbles while dealing with the prisoners. Showing a great fascination with the marks of torture on her eye and ankle, the Magistrate takes it upon himself to read and interpret her as an encrypted text, "until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" (Coetzee 1980, 33). In defiance of such an obsessive glorification of extracting the truth from the Other, the barbarian girl systematically resorts to silence as a kind of a protective shield to resist the Magistrate’s process of interrogation. It has become a recurrent pattern that reflects a sort of causality in the relationship between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl. Whenever the girl is forced to tell the truth, she resorts to silence as an act of resistance to the violent process of interrogation in which she is coerced to speak. Therefore, what explains her silence is that whatever truth she might tell can hardly contradict or even disparage the official version of truth condoned by the Empire.

Instead of endeavouring to understand the totality of her being, as a whole human being entrusted with personal traits as well as an individual identity, the Magistrate deals with the girl in a fragmented

and detached way. He treats her alternately as an object of benevolence, a pet animal (he once compared her to a fox cub), and an encrypted text. For him, it is as if the girl's body is "only a surface across which [he] hunt[s] back and forth seeking entry" (Coetzee 1980, 46). The Magistrate's failure to approach her interior and bring out her story emanates from his blindness to the Other. He cannot see her anything more than a mutilated body, a corporeal chronicle of the terrific marks of torture to be explored and examined as a mere object of study.

For the Magistrate, the surface of the body hides the human interior, the intrinsic traits that constitute the true essence of the Other; here lies the failure of his approach. In fact, the presupposition of the existence of a pre-given essence, an origin, validates colonial modes of representation which seek to categorize and downgrade the colonized in its formation of knowledge. However, the barbarian girl's body is not presented as a transparent medium through which an interpreter, such as the Magistrate, or an interrogator, such as Colonel Joll, can successfully access the consciousness and inner feelings of the Other. Rather and regardless of the different procedures which the representatives of the Empire have deployed to unveil the girl's true story, she remains inaccessible, incommensurable, "like caressing an urn or a ball, something which is all surface" (Coetzee 1980, 52). Like Susan Barton in *Foe*, the Magistrate, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, also misses the opportunity to establish a meaningful exchange with the barbarian girl, who remains silent, a surface "without aperture, without entry" (Coetzee 1980, 45) unwilling to reciprocate communication. The Magistrate is disheartened by the absence of communication with the Other and fails to find any way to circumvent it. Contemplating his relationship with the barbarian girl, he confesses: "I must ask myself whether, when I lay head to foot with her, fondling and kissing those broken ankles, I was not in my heart of hearts regretting that I could not engrave myself on her so deeply" (Coetzee 1980, 148). Her otherness remains closed without an opening, refusing to cooperate or succumb to the

colonial process of subordination which incessantly seeks to engulf and confine the Other within the boundaries of its power grid.

III. THE FAILURE OF LANGUAGE IN *FOE*

Unlike other characters, such as Col. Joll and Mandel in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, whose solipsistic view of the world leads them to shut themselves off from any real communication with the Other, Susan Barton, the main protagonist in *Foe*, seeks out to build a mutual and constructive exchange with Friday, the racially and culturally different Other in the narrative. Nevertheless, despite her recurrent and ardent attempts at communicating with him, she falls short of retrieving a true and conclusive meaning from the ‘tongueless’ Friday. Such a failure of communication in the novel sheds doubt on the viability of language to move outside the single-minded and monolithic dialogue of colonialism. The presentation of a one-sided pattern of the colonial conversation imparts the idea that mutual communication between the colonizer and the colonized may be ultimately impossible. There is a clear sense of ambiguities and difficulties pertaining to Eurocentric discourse, especially, the difficulty of representing the Other.³ In this regard, Benita Parry describes the silence imposed on the Other as a narrative “where only the European possesses the word and the ability to enunciate” (Parry 1998, 150-51). Silence, accordingly, is deployed in the novel as a symbolic reproduction of a failed model of language exchange where the Self is liable to monopolize the enunciation of discourse through suppressing emerging voices of alterity.

Stranded on an unknown island, Susan Barton encounters Cruso, a white man, and Friday, a black slave. Among the things that have intrigued her attention on the island is Cruso’s attempts at teaching Friday some words and expressions, which take the form of commands and instructions about how things to be done on the island. Cruso as an archetype of white European colonists is presented teaching and civilizing Friday, the emblem of non-white

indigenes in the story. Such a mission is implicitly passed on to Susan after Cruso's death. This role of educating the Other, which is successively enacted by Cruso and then Susan Barton, evokes 'the white man's burden' paradigm embodied in the story. Friday with his tongue cut is voiceless. He is denied the ability to express himself or to articulate his identity. Therefore, since all that is linked to Friday is obliterated and rendered blank, it becomes the duty of Cruso and Susan to rewrite his history from a western standpoint.⁴

From the outset, the dynamic of the relationship between Susan Barton and Friday is played out in linguistic terms. At first, she does not know that Friday's tongue is cut. She thinks that he has only some sort of speech difficulties. After learning about the mutilation incident, Susan Barton becomes keen to know who cut his tongue and for what reason. What she learns from Cruso is that Friday is mute because his tongue was cut by his unknown enslavers or by the cannibals. Therefore, the past or the history of Friday is the missed episode in the novel that first intrigues Susan's interest in his mutilation, and then it grows into an obsession with his unfathomable story. It subsequently becomes the concern of Susan Barton to excavate the buried truth of Friday's muteness. However, Friday remains an enigma; nothing is unfolded about his past or even his feelings; nothing events from his mouth. Epitomizing the colonized in the novel, Friday's silence hinders any form of communication with the colonizer and, thus, it stands as an albatross that prevents colonial epistemological processes of knowing and understanding from converting the Other into an intelligible entity amenable to control and subjection.

Even after leaving the island, and throughout almost the rest of the story, Susan Barton keeps questioning Friday about those who cut his tongue. She could barely surpass the racial and cultural barriers because of his silence. She often wonders about the identity of Friday, his story, and his past; a myriad of questions left without answers or any possibility to reach the truth. She resorts to both semiotic and body language such as miming, painting, and even dancing to elicit a meaningful response from Friday, but all her

attempts have ended in vain. Still unabashed by his speechlessness, she even attempts to provide him with means of communication, “a slate.” Friday draws an image of “walking eyes” (147), and then he refuses to show her the picture. Friday refuses to join in the dialogue or to enter into an exchange; he resists disclosing or exposing his drawings to Susan’s gaze—the gaze of the colonizer—as an attempt to evade what Foucault designates as the panoptical surveillance imposed by authority.

On many occasions, Susan Barton is depicted trying to enact Friday’s mutilation through gestures, pictures, and sketches, but she ends up frustrated when she realizes that Friday is never going to give a real response, and that “[t]he story of Friday’s tongue is a story unable to be told” (118). This one-sided relationship urges her to admit that all her endeavours to probe into Friday’s past are actually “a time of being wasted by time” (70). Susan Barton becomes aware that she is the only voice that breaks the silence around her and, by that, she gives up on the idea that there would be any kind of reciprocation from Friday. For her, the fact that Friday’s tongue is cut out and that “the only tongue that can tell Friday’s secret is the tongue he has lost” (67) endorses the idea that the Other in Coetzee’s novel, and probably in most of his fiction, is presented as an incommensurable entity just like Friday’s story which stands as a blank page in the narrative of Susan Barton. In her scrutiny of the figure of otherness, she desperately determines that being “silent on Friday’s tongue is no better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly left empty” (67). Eventually, she abandons the idea of writing a book as she acknowledges that Friday’s muteness inhibits her capacity to write about her adventure with Crusoe and Friday on the island.

At the end of the narrative, there is an abrupt shift to the third person narrative point of view. Susan Barton’s narrative voice unexpectedly disappears. She eventually recognizes that her position as a story-teller—an enunciator of discourse—is, in fact, that of an oppressor. The only way for her to establish a plausible communication with the Other is through conceding her voice, her

subject position, and then metaphorically joining Friday at the bottom of the sea to occupy the position of the oppressed. The failure of representational language as a valid and tenable vehicle of communication is heightened at the last scene of the novel: “But this is not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused. This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday” (157). It is only at the last scene that Friday, the muted Other in the story, is disentangled from the colonizer’s linguistic strains as he becomes more capable of vocalizing certain unknown words by releasing a stream of air bubbles.

IV. BREAKING SILENCE: ETHICS OF DISSENSION IN *AGE OF IRON*

Having left her peaceful and safe place in the white suburbs of Cape Town, Mrs Curren, a white retired classics teacher, undertakes a perilous journey to eyewitness the nefarious crimes committed by apartheid regime during the mid-eighties’ state of emergency in South Africa. The climax in Mrs Curren’s trip to ‘Guguletu,’ a ghetto for black people in the west of Cape Town, is her encounter with Mr Thabane, a black intellectual counterpart. After a gunfire scene, Mrs Curren is overcome by fear and she asks Mr Thabane, who has so far been so courteous towards her, to take her home. His reply comes both unexpected and shocking for her: “‘You have seen enough?’ said Mr Thabane, sounding more distant than before. ‘Yes, I have seen enough. I didn’t come here to see sights.’” (Coetzee 1990, 90). Mr Thabane wants Mrs Curren to open her eyes to see the whole picture and witness the real situation of black people. He attempts to show the ugly truth so far censored and camouflaged by propaganda:

‘But what of the people who live here? When they want to go home, this is where they must go. What do you think of that?’ ‘I have no answer,’ I said. ‘It is terrible.’ ‘It is not just terrible,’ he said, ‘it is a crime. When you see a crime being committed in front of your eyes, what do you say? [...] What sort of

crime is it that you see? What is its name?' [...]. 'There are many things I am sure I could say, Mr Thabane,' I said. 'But then they must truly come from me. When one speaks under duress—you should know this—one rarely speaks the truth' [...]. 'To speak of this' [...] 'you would need the tongue of a god.' (Coetzee 1990, 90-91)

At the above scene, the pattern of the subject/object position is reversed. As a narrator, Mrs Curren has been occupying a subject position until her trip to Guguletu. Now that she is facing the awful side of the apartheid oppressive regime, she loses both her voice and her subject position and consequently becomes an object of public trial guided by Mr Thabane, who appears to be too inquisitive in the above scene. He makes use of the public presence of the angry and violent black mob to exert psychological pressure on the frail and physically exhausted Mrs Curren in order to make her recognize the crime committed by the white authorities against the black population. He wants to grasp the opportunity to have her as an eyewitness, probably not for the sake of law courts whether national or international, but rather for the sake of history. Mr. Thabane, as a teacher, seems to be pedagogical in his public interrogation of Mrs Curren. He attempts to elicit the 'name' of the crime from her. Being a member belonging to the white community, her naming of the crime can probably be taken as an acknowledgement and perhaps a trustworthy record of the apartheid oppressive criminal history against blacks.

Nevertheless, Mrs Curren is not ready yet to denounce the crime publicly; not because she is still sceptical of the justness of the blacks' cause in South Africa, but rather because after opening her eyes and repudiating the misinformation and propaganda maintained by mass media, she loses her voice and agency while confronting the unspeakable terrible crimes committed by the regime.

Despite her linguistic and academic prowess, Mrs Curren stands helpless in front of the unleashed racial violence perpetrated in the name of nationalism in South Africa. She appeals to metaphysical power, "the tongue of a god," to challenge the earthly power of

apartheid despotic regime. Her need for self-reformation necessitates real involvement in the events to reveal the truth she herself witnesses in order to subvert the officially propagated image of South Africa as the country “of smiling neighbours” (Coetzee 1990, 49). The truth unveiled to Mrs Curren is not simply limited to the absence of infrastructure and governmental facilities; it rather extends to include the high toll of violence she has so far been through. Mr Thabane informs Mrs Curren that the riots described earlier were not inter-racial, but rather intra-racial which reinforces the idea that the ghettos and cantons are closed and crowded spaces in which the black people are dehumanized. Forced to be relocated in such prison-like districts, away from white suburbs in Cape Town, blacks are aversively treated as captured animals that fight for survival because of limited resources. After being enlightened by the truth that has so long been concealed from her, or she has just been contented in believing the ‘truth’ presented by mass media, Mrs Curren decides to completely dissent from the mainstream racist ideology.

Like the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* who witnesses a torture scene in which the soldiers write with charcoal the word “ENEMY” on the naked backs of the native captives, Mrs Curren is appalled by the sight of “five dead bodies” (Coetzee 1980, 96) of young blacks shot down by pro-governmental paramilitary militia. She realizes the fact that dead bodies are more than mere flesh; they are rather turned into a parchment upon which apartheid inscribes its dominion. She understands that it is her ethical duty to decipher this corporeal space, to dig out for the truth not only through eye-witnessing but also through the process of writing. The impact of the presence of the dead bodies is so heavy, so blatant that Mrs Curren decides to take an active role in this conflict: “Now my eyes are open and I can never close them again” (Coetzee 1990, 95). Mrs Curren has to take a definite position within the polarity between the two races. There is no middle or neutral ground, no compromising or pacifying role for her. She expresses her hope that when she returns home she would openly denounce this crime

through recuperating her subject position, disrupted earlier during her journey to Guguletu.

Mrs Curren, as a ‘storyteller,’ shows a great tendency to articulate the painful experience that she has endured during her trip to the black ghetto. Yet, she recognizes the frustration of using language as an appropriate vehicle to convey the experience of what she is forced to witness. Instead, she is caught in a state of stupor as her efforts to tell the story of the five dead bodies are curtailed by their “massive, solid presence” (Coetzee 1990, 96) which blocks any possibility of retrieving any significance through language.

The journey to Guguletu can be regarded as a pivotal factor in accelerating Mrs Curren’s moral transformation initially triggered by her unexpected encounters with Vercueil, the main figure of otherness in the story, and then with Bheki and his comrades, the representatives of the young black resistance to the oppressive regime. After putting her own physical safety at risk by moving to the ghetto to eyewitness the violent events, Mrs Curren comes back home morally awakened and more resolute to re-examine her old self. As a sign of her moral transformation, Mrs Curren starts retrospectively questioning her identity as an Afrikaner belonging to the ruling oligarchy by designating her generation as “ugly” (Coetzee 1990, 121). She regards her backdrop as an iron-like and autochthonous mode of existence that leaves no room for dissenters like her. She eventually renounces her political affiliation as well as her ethnic filiation and its disgraceful colonial legacy when she lamentably expects the collapse of apartheid by likening it to a “sinking” (Coetzee 1990, 117) ship. Through resorting to writing, Mrs Curren seeks not to recuperate her lost agency belonging to her ‘doll’ identity. Rather, she wants to translate her experience in Guguletu into a written testimony as an alternative account that might dismantle the official version of history propagated by mass media. Although Mrs Curren recognizes her weakness and ‘confusion’ in the face of the invincible power of the prevailing system, she looks more determined to write her personal confession not only to save herself from the “madness” (Coetzee 1990, 107)

that invades the country but also to exonerate herself from the shame and disgrace of belonging to apartheid.

CONCLUSION

The Other's silence in the examined Coetzee's select novels is more than being just a mere renunciation of agency. Rather, it is adopted as a strategy of resistance to escape the authoritative and hegemonic process of subjectification that tends to thematize and interpret the Other's agency according to its epistemological framework. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Other's story is hardly told by speech as much as by silence. The barbarian girl's systematic recourse to silence occludes the Empire's representatives' attempts at deciphering her. In *Foe*, the possibility that only Friday's tongue can tell his story reveals that the Other in Coetzee's fiction remains impenetrable and incommensurable. However, it is only in *Age of Iron* that silence acquires ethical empowerment that leads Mrs Curren to question her belonging to the South African oligarchy and to disavow the colonial language of apartheid, which fails to establish an authentic and constructive dialogue between different cultures and races. In the above-studied texts, Coetzee orchestrates silence as a modality of subversion and resistance that potentially enables the oppressed figures of otherness to perpetuate and defend their autonomy and difference against the totalizing and homogenizing discourse of the Self.

NOTES

1. The Foucauldian term is used by Gayatri Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (283).
2. In order to support his theory of colonial mimicry, Bhabha uses as a sample excerpted from Thomas Babington Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education" (1835), in which the latter suggests creating "a class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern--a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in

- morals and intellect” (qtd. in *The Location of Culture* 87) so that they serve as a medium between the colonial authority and the colonized natives.
3. This idea of representing the other essentially predicated on Jean-François Lyotard’s postmodern view of alterity as “the unrepresentable in presentation” (*The Postmodern Condition* 81), For Lyotard, representational language, or what he refers to as “the principle of homology” (61), fails to establish a real dialogue between counterparts because its ultimate aim is to “legitimate the system-power” (61) through homogenizing and assimilating discourses of otherness for the sake achieving a purported consensus.
 4. In his book *On Postcolonial Futures*, Bill Ashcroft proposes that the image of the child and that of the primitive are inextricably intertwined in the Western philosophy especially that of the English philosopher, John Locke, whose notion of ‘Tabula Rasa’ invokes an innate blankness on which the imperial power can inscribe. The child, Ashcroft points out, signifies “a subject of exotic possibility and moral instruction, as well as a barbarous and unsettling primitive, [which] suggests [...] capacity for inscription and meaning” (41-42).

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