Coming to Terms

Ageing and Moral Regeneration in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* and *Elizabeth Costello*

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INTRODUCTION

Both literary gerontology and postcolonial studies are becoming firmly established in the academia and both forms of critiques continue to grow and intersect with other disciplines and sub-disciplines. However, in spite of their interdisciplinarity there is an unfortunate dearth in dialogue between them. Ageing is the missing theme in postcolonial studies and at the same time, the postcolonial dimension is the silent area of ageing studies. Ageing studies is still firmly located in the West and represents Western experiences. Julie Twigg and Wendy Martin have noted the flourishing of studies on ageing:

Books and articles on ageing and literature proliferated throughout the 1990s and into the twenty first century, and there is no sign of a slowing of the pace. Literary gerontology has spread its net widely, taking in drama and performance, fiction, auto/biography and poetry. It includes attention to non-Western writers – though it is true that at the moment the balance is still tipped in favour of the US, Canadian, European and (to a lesser extent) Australian writers – and pays some attention to both the popular and the literary. Content-based studies draw close attention to representations of ageing within literature. Others look at ageing and creativity, genre or readership. More and more, intersectionality is invigorating literary studies

of ageing, with a notable flood of work addressing age and gender and a more limited amount of research onto 'race' and age. (2015: 58)

This citation highlights the three main points with which I opened up this discussion: namely, the spreading of literary gerontology, its limitation to Western authors and its distance from the postcolonial question. What this means is that this vibrant area of studies runs the risk of representing a single perspective on the subject of ageing and there is the eventual danger of universalizing this perspective across cultures and experiences. Whereas as Margaret Morganoth Gullette (2004: 11) has noted " 'aging' even at the merely visual level cannot have a single, invariable, universal and ahistorical meaning." In this light, Twigg and Martin pursue their discussion by citing areas of weaknesses of cultural gerontology, one of which "concerns the character of cultural gerontology as a Western-dominated and arguably post-imperialist form of analysis. It is certainly the case that most of the work that has been done under this label focusses on the West" (2015: 7).

It is also important to note here that this accusation may as well be levied at postcolonial studies which continues to incorporate other fields such as feminism and environmentalism, but has made no significant attempt to address the subject of ageing in the postcolony. Yet through ageing studies, important insights might be had into the postcolonial condition as well as into the tensions between the colonizer and the colonized. Even though there have been some critical engagement (albeit few) with ageing in formerly colonized societies, these studies have in a general sense not adopted a postcolonial perspective whereby the interconnections particularly between questions of ageing and colonial agenda are addressed. Postcolonial studies have been understandably more interested in the colonial question that is the lasting effects of colonialism on colonized societies. What has seemingly gone unnoticed is the way a postcolonial approach to ageing might open up new ways of studying the effects of colonialism on the individual. Whereas one of the ways postcolonial studies has done this has been through genre studies and genre revision in the case of writers. The bildungsroman for example which in a way constitutes studies into the first stage of ageing has received much attention from postcolonial scholars who through this have revealed the ways in which colonialism deformed the development of the postcolonial

child and consequently reshaped the bildungsroman genre in the hands of postcolonial writers. From a similar viewpoint, postcolonial ageing studies could provide the adequate critical platform from which to ascertain the effects of colonialism on the psychological evolution of the individual as s/he ages in a colonized or formerly colonized society. Brian J. Worsfold has advised that: "approaches to gerontology must focus on the microcosm, that is, focus not on the society, the nation or even the community at large, but on the individual and the human and social context of the individual." (2011: xix) Following this advice creates room for the study of the ageing individual in postcolonial societies.

Similarly, ageing studies might enrich its perspective by integrating the postcolonial element. Therefore in a nutshell, adopting a postcolonial perspective to ageing studies will accomplish two major things amongst others: first of all, it will decolonize ageing studies and secondly it will enrich the field by bringing to it other experiences from across cultures. Similarly, introducing ageing to postcolonial studies will open up possibilities within the field to engage with the question and meaning of ageing in the postcolony. It will equally trace the evolution of consciousness in the ageing process, which evolution is important to postcolonial studies. Thus the intersection of these two disciplines will doubtlessly result in mutual enrichment.

It is even interesting to note some of the ways and areas in which postcolonial studies and ageing studies conflate and how this might open up possibilities for greater dialogue and mutual enrichment.

Both postcolonial studies and ageing studies are interested in the interrogation and deconstruction of cultural and social constructs. Put differently, much of the discussions of these two forms of critique are animated by the question of representation. Talking for ageing studies, Roberta Maierhofer in the "Preface" to *Acculturating Age* notes that "by placing cultural representations in a social, cultural and political context, existing disciplines and traditional paradigms can be reconstructed" (2011: xv), while speaking for postcolonial studies, Homi K. Bhabha underscores that postcolonial studies "bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order" (1994: 171). This underpins an interesting intersection between these two forms of critiques which have sadly remained aloof with each other. Whereas, given their shared interest

in cultural representation, some form of conversation would have opened up possibilities for collaboration.

Both forms of critique therefore play the political role of dispelling long-held myths about different groups of people: the aged and the colonized. Thus Twigg and Martin have stated that "much of the impetus behind cultural gerontology has come from a desire to get away from the dominant account of ageing in academic studies that has focused on problematic old age, emphasizing frailty and its consequent social burdens" (2015: 2). Similarly Bhabha whom I cited before further intimates that colonial discourse has as objective "to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and inclusion" (1994: 70). We therefore notice here that both studies are critically engaged in responding to the biases and distortions of master discourses.

These biases constitute both for the aged and the colonized a process of othering, whereby both groups find themselves on the wrong side of the binary divisions that serve to categorize human beings. These binarisms constitute an important concept in postcolonial studies and are of equal importance to ageing studies which seeks to uncover and therefore dismantle the ways old age is considered as the negative other of youthfulness. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin are of the opinion that:

> The binary logic of imperialism is a development of that tendency of Western thought in general to see the world in terms of binary oppositions that establish a relationship of dominance […]. Clearly, the binary is very important in constructing ideological meanings in general, and extremely useful in imperial ideology. (2000: 19)

Margaret Morganoth Gullette in reference to the Dalai Lama's (somewhat ageist) reaction to his own ageing faced with two older priests notes that "he used 'young' as everyone does – to mean a desirable state of being in opposition to the unwanted state of feeling 'old'." (2015: 21) These two aforementioned views underline the way postcolonial studies and ageing studies conflate. With these areas of convergence between these two forms of cultural studies, some shared sympathies would have been expected of them but this has unfortunately not been the case.

FROM PHYSICAL FRAILTY TO MORAL STRENGTH

Part of my aim in this paper is to attempt a formulation of postcolonial gerontology; and I think that for this project a good starting point would be the novels of eminent South African writer J.M. Coetzee. The role of literature in lending insights into human experience can neither be overstated nor underestimated. As concerns ageing studies, two of its prominent critics have said a word on this aspect. Hannah Zeilig argues that "Fictional stories can be invaluable for considering the various manifestations of age and ageing" (2011: 31), while Worsfold concurs by holding that:

> Using works of literature – fictionalisation – as a source of knowledge and experience allows students of ageing to research perceptions and attitudes across frontiers, in other countries, other societies and other parts of the world. It also enables a diachronic vision of the ageing process, crossing not just the barriers of space but also the barriers of time. (2011: xxv)

This idea is further buttressed by Diana Wallace who notes that "artistic representations of older people both shape and have the potential to counter our ideas about age and ageing" (2011: 389).

J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* is a good example of a novel that creatively paints such "manifestations of age and ageing" and this in the postcolonial context. The use of the epistolary device makes this more effective. The story focuses on the dying days of a retired university professor, who is battling cancer and the entire story is in the form of a letter she is writing to her grown-up daughter in the US. Through the letter-writing mode, the reader is granted access into her most intimate thoughts, fears, expectations as well as daily activities. Here the main question is how does Coetzee present ageing in the postcolonial context? Coetzee uses the technique of juxtaposition to portray the ageing process in this context. He juxtaposes two processes going on at the same time in the life of Mrs. Curren: On the one hand, she is physically degenerating into frailty, but at the same time there is a moral regeneration or reawakening. My use of the word "moral" here has to be understood in context and it actually refers to what I term "postcolonial morality" which I define as the recognition of the excesses of the dominant class, its dehumanization of the colonized and an informed

choice to resist this dehumanization of others which is based on imagined or perceived cultural, racial or ethnic differences. Based on this definition therefore, Mrs Curren, although in physical decline, is indeed in moral rejuvenation. She moves from passive opposition of the inhuman Apartheid system in South Africa to become more politically engaged. She stands up to policemen when they hound a black youth and expresses unconcealed sympathy for the victims of this system. It is important to note that Mrs. Curren is a white lady who under the Apartheid regime was exempted from its myriad abuses. She would rather have been a beneficiary of this system. Nevertheless, she rejects this privilege, identifies with the downtrodden and adopts a subversive stance against the system.

Through this juxtaposition of the physical degeneration and moral regeneration of Mrs Curren, I read Coetzee as interrogating assumptions about later life. Ageing is not a process of hardening of the heart, of becoming inured to the pains of those around us but rather a time of rethinking long held values. So, when Mrs. Curren offers shelter to a homeless man, considered by others as a "vagrant" and a "rubbish man", she makes the following important statement: "There are no rubbish people. We are all people together." (Coetzee 1990: 47) In this statement, she overthrows the leitmotiv of not only the Apartheid system but also of every other system that makes rubbish out of people. She insists on our shared humanity and on the recognition of everyone's personhood. This is one of the aims of postcolonial studies.

When she witnesses the consequence of police brutality in a black township which kills several youths including the son of her servant Florence, her moral consciousness becomes more acute. She writes to her daughter: "we kill these people as if they are waste, but in the end it is we whose lives are not worth living" (Coetzee 1990: 104). We witness a continuous moral renewal in Mrs Curren even as her body degenerates towards death. It is in her later years that she finally comes to terms with the failures of the colonial society. In the aftermath of the police brutality she states:

> Now that child is buried and we walk upon him. Let me tell you, when I walk upon this land, this South Africa, I have a gathering feeling of walking upon black faces. They are dead but their spirit has not left them. (Coetzee 1990: 126)

She acknowledges the wrong done to black South Africans and expresses the desire for things to be done differently in her society. This subversion is a form of resistance dear to the postcolonial project and so her activism deconstructs myths about the helplessness of the aged and punctures colonialist ideology. J.M. Coetzee creates a character who defies the untruths of colonialism as well as the untruths about ageing. Through Mrs Curren, Coetzee seems to suggest that the inevitability of physical degeneration in ageing does not necessarily imply a dimming of moral vision. That Coetzee successfully interrogate ageist and colonialist visions indicate a position beneficial to both ageing studies and postcolonial studies and opens up the possibility of postcolonial gerontology.

Coetzee adopts a similar posture in the novel *Elizabeth Costello* which chronicles the later years of the eponymous protagonist, a renowned Australian writer. Quite early in the novel Coetzee paints the picture of an old frail woman to indicate that his story is indeed about the intricacies of ageing. It is said of her that: "Elizabeth has become a little frail: without the help of her son she would not be undertaking this taxing trip across half the world" (Coetzee 2004: 21) and also "After the long flight, she is looking her age. She has never taken care of her appearance; she used to be able to get away with it; now it shows. Old and tired" (Coetzee 2004: 3). Once again, Coetzee acknowledges the physical degeneration that comes with ageing. However, Costello illustrates a sharpening of consciousness highlighted in the numerous talks she is invited to give. While Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron* fights for the rights and protection of blacks in South Africa, Elisabeth Costello is an activist for animal rights. She is adamant in her position against cruelty to animals and early in the novel, she expresses sympathy for the Penguins of Macquarie Island which were brutally killed for their oil by human beings.

In the chapter entitled "The Lives of Animals", Coetzee once again brings in his technique of juxtaposition but to this he adds the concept of the gaze. Through Michael, Elisabeth's son Coetzee is able to portray what society sees when looking at an older person: the degenerating exterior. So Michael notes of his mother as follows: "Two years have passed since he last saw his mother, despite himself, he is shocked at how she has aged. Her hair, which had streaks of grey in it, is now entirely white; her shoulders stoop; her flesh has grown flabby" (Coetzee 2004: 59). Even when she is about to deliver her lecture Michael sees only frailty "she looks old and

tired" he says. He representing the society here perceives human personality and ability only through the physical aspect reason why he tries to will strength into her. But Elisabeth Costello is not lacking in strength – at least not moral strength. In spite of the opposition to her thesis on human cruelty to animals, she persists and makes her points with convictions. She implores human beings to extend their sympathy to animals with the words: "There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination"(Coetzee 2004: 80). And she pursues her point with the statement:

I return one last time to the places of death all around us, the places of slaughter to which, in a huge communal effort, we close our hearts. Each day a fresh holocaust, yet, as far as I can see, our moral being is untouched. We do not feel tainted. We can do anything, it seems and come away clean. (Coetzee 2004: 80)

Her evocation on our moral being here is indicative of the fact that physical degeneration is in no way accompanied by moral decline. She resists the speciesism that has guided human/non-human relations and makes a call for more consideration to be granted to the non-human species. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin underscore the importance of the environmental question to postcolonial studies. They write:

One of the most persistent and controversial topics of contemporary politics is the issue of the environment. Global warming has demonstrated the devastating effects of the industrial revolution and the unfettered pursuit of capital expansion. The environment and attendant topics such as ecofeminism, ecological imperialism, environmentalism, and speciesism have all taken an increasingly prominent place in post-colonial thought because it has become clear that there is a direct connection between colonialist treatment of indigenous flora and fauna and the treatment of colonized and otherwise dominated subjects and societies. (2007: viii)

Costello's battles therefore conform to the expectations of both ageing studies and postcolonial studies. In refusing to occupy the state of helplessness and dependency attributed to the aged, she is making a statement against ageist doctrines. Even her son Michael is exasperated by her non-conformist attitude and complains "why can she not be an ordinary old woman living an ordinary old woman's life? If she wants to open her heart to animals, why can't she stay at home and open it to her cat?"

(Coetzee 2004: 83). In refusing to live this so-called old woman's life she displaces cultural misconceptions about ageing and the aged and in attending to the rights of animals, she aligns her moral struggle with one of the agendas of postcolonial studies.

Both postcolonial and ageing studies are interested in interrogating and deconstructing the process of cultural othering through stereotyping. They contest cultural representations and social constructs based on biased notions of what it means to be normal and acceptable. Ideologies are also born of humanity's cultural, ethnic, racial and national arrogance which considers all that is different or apart from self as inferior. Such thinking has resulted in many of the gross abuses of human rights such as the transatlantic slave trade, the holocaust, colonialism, environmental destruction and genocides. Within the context of colonialism, it was the constructed racial and cultural superiority of the West that led to the subjugation of the colonized. These colonized peoples were deprived of their humanity, culture and resources through the misguided and warped perceptions of the colonizer.

From a similar ideological standpoint, the physical and sometimes mental degradation that accompanies ageing has resulted in the popular construction of the process of ageing as well as the aged in negative terms. Ageing is represented in many cultures as the dulling of the emotions and hardening of perspectives. It is seen as the moment when the individual becomes unreceptive to new ideas and when change is consequently impossible. Thus both the aged and the colonized constitute categories of cultural constructs. As a consequence, just as postcolonial studies critiques Eurocentrism, so too is ageing studies a critique of ageism, the stereotyping of the ageing process and the aged. Both approaches question such popular consciousness by resisting such stereotypes. They are both engaged with the unthinking and displacing of the untruths inherent in cultural and social representations.

John Marx has noted of postcolonial writing as follows: "First, postcolonial writing is held to repudiate the canon. […]. Second, postcolonial literature has been shown to revise canonical texts and concepts" (2004: 83). Marx's proposition here underlines two important aspects that I evoked in the formulation of postcolonial gerontology and these are 'repudiation' and 'revision'. I do not limit the idea of repudiation here to just the Western conception of the colonized but extend it to cover

the process of rejecting as well the Western approach to ageing studies. Therefore, the repudiation and revision here call to mind a reworking or indeed the decolonization of ageing studies. It is no doubt that before now ageing studies have focused on the Western experience and so the postcolonial perspective comes in to serve as a check towards the universalizing or generalizing of this experience. The postcolonial approach infuses into ageing studies the vexed questions of racism, Eurocentrism, anthropocentrism, speciesism and sexism; while, concomitantly, ageing studies brings to postcolonial studies the question of ageing in a colonized land or ageing as a colonized individual or as a colonizer. This is the essence of postcolonial gerontology.

Coetzee's texts underline the idea that ageing in the postcolony far from being a process of moral degeneration is rather a time of awakening to moral consciousness. The transition from passivity to active resistance is a highly politically charged move that dislodges the belief that all there is to ageing is frailty. These novels underline the notion that physical frailty does not serve as an impediment to political engagement for the right reasons. This political commitment emphasizes the postcolonial dimension to ageing in Coetzee's texts. Both protagonists, Mrs Curren and Elizabeth Costello, reach out to and stand up for the downtrodden of their societies. Mrs Curren defends the outcasts and blacks who are the victims of the Apartheid system and Costello defends the rights of animals which are victims of human cruelty. They both rise up to the injustices and brutality of their societies even as they are faced with the spectra of ageing, frailty, sickness and death. Their activism debunks the consideration of old age as a period of helplessness and dependence. Thus in coming to terms with the untruths of the society and adopting a subversive stance, they legitimate Diana Wallace's view that "even in frail old age, there is the possibility of an opening up to life" (2011: 394). No doubt, even though she is faced with approaching death, Mrs Curren still expresses her love for life when she declares "Yet this first life, this life on earth, on the body of the 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" (Coetzee 1990: 13). Given the inevitability and imminence of her death, Mrs Curren still expresses this love for life which she manifests through the love she shows for the lives of others. She writes thus to her daughter:

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. (Coetzee 1990: 6)

Even in her sickness, she refuses to burden anyone but is ready to face death unaccompanied, yet she shares her love not only with her daughter but with the outcasts and downtrodden of her society.

CONCLUSION

Coetzee indicates that the ageing process can actually constitute a time of moral ripening where the ageing character has a rich stock of experiences from which to draw and come to terms with certain realities in the society. The later years of life have the benefit of these experiences which make greater room for informed positions on many issues. Within post-colonialism, recognizing the crimes of the oppressor and resisting them constitute important moral positions. Therefore, both gerontology and post-colonialism are critically involved in interrogating processes that hierarchize the world. The conflation of the concerns of ageing studies and postcolonial studies may be a good beginning of discussions on post-colonial gerontology.

In postcolonial societies, the question at stake is not only the othering of the aged but more importantly the relationship between this ageing process and the larger questions of colonialism. In this study, I have focused especially on the ageing of privileged individuals who nevertheless are discontented with the injustices of their respective societies whether these affect them or not. It has serious implications for perceptions of the aged as unbending, and unaccepting of new ideas, cultures or peoples. What we find in our texts are individuals who refuse the general flow and adopt "risky" postures faced with the excesses and abuses of systems of domination. The postcolonial gerontology which I propose here therefore is one which critically studies the nexus between colonialism and ageing. Such a perspective is beneficial in deconstructing some of the long held myths about old age and ageing. Through this approach, the ageing process is addressed not only in terms of frailty, sickness and death but also in terms of moral renewal and the maturing of what Coetzee terms the

"sympathetic imagination". This confirms Wallace's view that "work on representations of age and ageing can continue to draw strength from its interdisciplinarity" (2011: 410), and this same assertion holds true for postcolonial studies. Thus, in thinking about ageing in the postcolonial context, certain questions seek answers such as: what has one learned and unlearned?, what versions of truth has one imbibed and accepted and which others has one rejected and fought against? It is in answering these questions that I have read Coetzee's two novels as portraying the different possibilities of old age and ageing.

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