

**Problematizing Gender Normalities:  
The Bodily Counter Discourse in J.M. Coetzee's Fiction**

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J. M. Coetzee

Courtesy: <https://www.thenation.com/article/j-m-coetzees-facts-of-life/>

**Fluid and Transgressive Postmodern Body**

The postmodern body, whose materiality is mediated in culture and discourses, is a political one. The postmodern body is also fluid and transgressive, one that exists between the textual and the material, the organic and the virtual. It loses its fixed boundaries and unified meaning and becomes a site for conflicting meanings and positions. It is thus textualized or culturally constructed and is seen as a carrier of cultural and political inscription and attributes. The material body is often entangled with discourses rooted in social, cultural, and political codes.

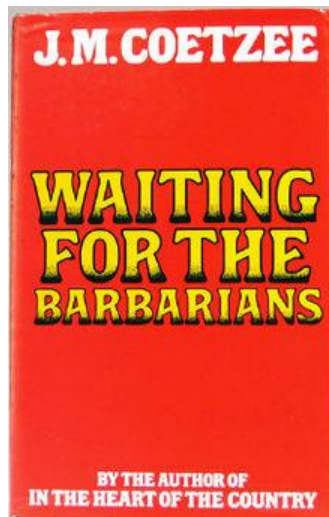
For an artist/writer in the postmodern era, there is the difficulty of representing the reality of material suffering taking place in the world. He/She is aware that bodily suffering happens around us and constitutes material history. But she is also aware that such events are estranged and complicated when one represents them in fiction and translates historical materiality into the discourse of the novel. Thus a pre-discursive reality to the suffering body has to be granted. At the same time a writer/artist has to interrogate its discursive exploitation or production.

Thus, the body is directly involved in a political field and power relations have an immediate hold upon it. It can be analyzed as a historically and culturally specific entity, one which is viewed, treated and experienced differently depending on the social context and historical period. The materiality of the body is inseparable from the power relations and historical forces and it complicates the relationship between the body and its discursive formations. It is inscribed by political power structures and its discursive practices. It is always subject to change and is always experienced as mediated through its different social constructions. In the present postmodern context, the history of suffering is displaced onto the body and this corporeal suffering is mediated in language and discourse.

### **J M Coetzee – Language and Identity**

The Nobel Laureate South African novelist J M Coetzee’s writing consistently focuses on the relationship of language, ‘identity’, and history: in all his works, he sets out to investigate the role of language in the constitution of ‘identity’. For him, the beginning of the subject is in the body. The very existence of the subject is in fact first and foremost corporeal, since we are all subject to living in a body, which makes great demands on us: it desires, it hurts, and it dies. It is thus an absolute limit. The body is omnipresent, the body breathes, and the body speaks. The body is central to subjectivity/selfhood.

### **Focus of This Paper**



Courtesy: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waiting\\_for\\_the\\_Barbarians](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waiting_for_the_Barbarians)

In this paper, the central women characters in J.M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* and *Waiting for*

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Ajeesh. S

13

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*the Barbarians* are analyzed. Both suffers from the alliance of colonization with patriarchy, and become doubly oppressed. In both these novels, the hierarchical logic of colonialism is maintained to the disadvantage of the marginalized. In the essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Spivak asserts that: “If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (287). In these novels, the body is closely aligned with the body politic and the material and historical conditions in which it exists. Coetzee strikes a balance between bodily pain and the ultimate construction of such experience in language. The novels conflate postmodern, feminist, and postcolonial themes by relating material body to language and history. The body exists, but it is aligned with language and textuality.

### **Mrs. Curren**

The author allows his female narrator to write about material suffering through the narration of cancer in *Age of Iron*. In the novel, the real is transformed into and mediated through narrated language. The protagonist of this novel, Mrs. Curren, speaks from the unprivileged position of sickness and seeks to unsettle power relations through the excessive bodily content of their narrations.

Mrs. Curren attempts to restore the filial bond with her exiled daughter through her writing/storytelling, her cancer pain, her politically-oriented and metaphorical understanding of her plight, and her encounters with the products of an unjust racial system. Mrs. Curren's body in *Age of Iron* is constructed through her reading and recounting of her illness. The diseased body is allegorized, written as a story about the relationship between the domestic space of the body and the public one. Cancer makes the body a rich site for sociopolitical and historical meanings. She makes her body a letter and political discourse, one in which the body is the site of an ethical position. The body testifies to political injustices and acts as their living witness. Cancer, metaphorically, marks the body and opens it to several readings. It marks her body as a text that tells a symbolic story of suffering beyond the limits of the personal. Mrs. Curren writes her diseased body into her letter and makes it the driving force of the ongoing narrative, thus making it a signifying text. Her narrative stems from and is occasioned by her diseased body. She renders the body a linguistic construct in the form of a carefully/painfully written letter to an absent daughter who left South Africa dissatisfied with its politics and estranged herself from her mother. The novel is her anguished mediation of her experiences in the form of this confessional letter. She sends her body in words for her daughter to read and taste, as she writes:

So day by day I render myself into words and pack the words into the page like sweets: like sweets for my daughter, for her birthday, for the day of her birth. Words out of my body, drops of myself, for her to unpack in her own time, to take in, to suck, to absorb... (9)

Words in this image are used by Mrs. Curren to textualize the body and to be, in turn, ingested by the recipient. It echoes a form of nurturing in which a mother nurses her daughter. The absent daughter is to receive a textual offering in which the mother is made text.

## **Cancerous Body**

Mrs. Curren's cancerous body is transgressive and rich in meanings. Cancer, metaphorically, marks the body and opens it to our readings. It marks her body as a text that tells a symbolic story of suffering beyond the limits of the personal. Drew Leder contends: "When in pain, the body becomes the object of an ongoing interpretive quest. We obsessively probe and palpate even when this increases discomfort" (78).

## **Intimate Relationship Between the Body and Writing**

Mrs. Curren dwells on the intimate relationship between the body and writing. As a storyteller, she sees her words as a legacy bequeathed to her daughter, when she writes:

This is my life, these words, these tracings of the movements of crabbed digits over the page. These words, as you read them, if you read them, enter you and draw breath again. They are, if you like, my way of living on (131).

Thus, the old, diseased mother overcomes barrenness and the surrounding death by transmitting her emotional words that gain a new life once embraced and read by the absent daughter. The letter allows her to speak to her daughter, and also to the reader in a meta-literary language, from a position beyond mortality and evoke material conditions and corporeal bodies in language. She writes: "It is through my eyes that you see; the voice that speaks in your head is mine. Through me alone do you find yourself here on these desolate flats, smell the smoke in the air, see the bodies of the dead, hear the weeping, shiver in the rain" (103).

## **Words and Words**

Words get embodied and fleshed by issuing from her sick body and being transcribed on paper. The diseased body lives through language as its materiality is temporarily erased in writing and then evoked in reading. As Susan Sontag argues, "Illnesses have always been used as metaphors to enliven charges that a society was corrupt or unjust" (72). Mrs. Curren makes the metaphorical relationship between her cancerous body and a politically diseased South Africa. Pain manipulates her conscious life and appropriates her being, which explicates the corporeality of cancer that gets represented in her narrative. Pain makes her more attentive to the pain of others. It makes her write out her pain and the pain of others in a letter that takes the form of a cancer narrative. It makes her think about her material body in metaphorical terms and cultural association.

## **Political Metaphor**

The diseased body is used as a political metaphor for the disease of the body politic as Mrs. Curren herself makes this connection. The body transgresses as a constructed text, and the text similarly passes as a corporeal presence full of pain and suffering. Mrs. Curren writes from a subordinate position as an oppressed body, and they transform this material body into a resistant discourse.

### *Waiting for the Barbarians*

In his novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, J.M. Coetzee carefully charts out the physical and mental typography of an unnamed, unidentified border town with walled enclosure and uncrossable desert. It is inhabited by primitive fisher folk and nomadic people, town Magistrate and official representative of armed force fight. Coetzee invites his readers to examine the essential nature of both history and the self in history. The two leading characters in the novel, Colonel Joll and the Magistrate, are representatives of the imperial law in this frontier town. . The Colonel, blinded, is the emblem of estrangement of knowledge and law, and of justice. The Magistrate, whose eyes are open to the sun, sees the humanistic values of knowledge and justice, but is powerless. Both of them are waiting for the barbarians. But one wonders who really are those barbarian people for whom that they are waiting for.

### **Barbarian Girl and the Empire**

The barbarian girl, who is one of the prisoners in the novel, is a material body tortured by the Empire. The girl is a body in pain, a body that is viscerally material and real, before she is a discursive trope for the disabled colonized. She is a tortured disabled body and simultaneously more than that material body. The barbarian girl's body is also more than that for the magistrate who textualizes it. He cannot comprehend the girl's body. He treats it as an enigmatic text to be decoded. He views it, in a postmodern fashion, as a compilation of single, disintegrating parts and inscribed surfaces. Yet, her body resists his nets of signification, and he fails in reading the signs of torture on her body. He cannot live her experience of pain, the event of torture, and thus he attempts to decode her silent body that is inscribed with torture. Her story remains alien to him, and her body signifies nothing much beyond its embodiment. If anything, her scarred body signifies that torture already took place somewhere and that she is marked for life as a victim of the Empire, but he cannot construct a coherent story from her regarding her experience. She is 'a stocky little body' he has no desire to enter (30). Even sex does not bring her closer to him as she remains silent about the details of her torture.

The girl could not resist the Empire's torture tactics and attempts to construct her as the Empire's enemy. She is even a docile body for the aging magistrate in that she 'yields to everything' (30). She yields to his rubbing and washing as well as other intimacies. The magistrate's frustration is apparent when he says, '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' (31).

The Empire has marked her body in torture, and he treats her body as an inscriptive surface. Her body, as an object of his interpretations and reading, is a text. The body remains entangled with attempts at construction and textualization. Her body confounds the magistrate through its apparent proximity and accessibility yet refusal to yield its story of torture. He wants to textualize her body, know her experience and story of torture, but since the magistrate cannot experience her bodily pain, the materiality of her body remains hers alone and he fails to read her tortured body. In her silence, her body has to be constructed and mediated in the story he wants to put together about the event of torture and her own status as a colonized subject and a trope

for the violated body of the other. The only visible history the magistrate can read on her body are the traces of a history burned into her flesh by the scars of her torture.

### **Reproducing Bodily Suffering**

Coetzee takes us back to the problematic of representation since bodily suffering cannot be reproduced easily. He enacts the postmodern dilemma of representation by articulating the materiality of bodily suffering but the difficulty of capturing this pure materiality beyond constructive attempts and despite the limitations involved. The magistrate fails to read the girl's story of torture as he fails to find the signs he looks for in the torture chamber. As he fails to render the girl's story of torture, he returns the body to discursive construction and makes her an allegorical figure for the tortured body.

In her silence, the barbarian girl enhances her status as a tortured body that cannot but be represented in the magistrate's account as a tortured body. She does not grant him the assurance of a reciprocal relation, and he reflects, 'with a shift of horror I behold the answer that has been waiting all the time offer itself to me in the image of a face masked by two black glassy insect eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast back at me' (43). The magistrate realizes that torture does not erase the materiality of the other body. On the contrary, it affirms its otherness and even denies the magistrate a reciprocal recognition. And because he does not speak her language, he finds himself far removed from this alien body on cultural terms.

### **To Conclude**

Thus, the female body of central characters in Coetzee's two novels transcend dichotomies and sometimes stand outside representational discourses. They refuse themselves to be defined or delimited. They constantly are in a state of flux, one of movement or of excessive materiality, or even mute, going beyond the logic of patriarchy and colonialism. This bodily resistance acts as a psychological challenge for the power structures since the creation of the 'Other body' and its domination is a prerequisite condition for them to normalize their discourses. The 'Performative' potentials of the female body in these novels dismantle the established norms of the society. Through excessive bodily content of their sayings and by remaining in a constant state of flux, the representation of these female bodies acts as a discourse of resistance to the accepted gender discourses and power structures.

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17

Problematizing Gender Normalities: The Bodily Counter Discourse in J.M. Coetzee's Fiction

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