

A JOURNEY FROM EXISTENCE TO
DESTRUCTION: EXISTENTIAL CRISIS
AND ISOLATION OF THE DISSENTERS
IN ANDRÉ BRINK'S
A DRY WHITE SEASON
AND
J.M. COETZEE'S *AGE OF IRON*

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*To my parents,
my elder brother, my younger sister,
and
myself*

APPROVAL PAGE

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AUTHOR DECLARATIONS

1. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

2. The advanced study in the English Language and Literature master program of which this thesis is part has consisted of:

- i) The analysis of existentialism in postcolonial literature
- ii) Application of this analysis to the works *A Dry White Season* by André Brink and *Age of Iron* by J.M. Coetzee

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ABSTRACT

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**A JOURNEY FROM EXISTENCE TO DESTRUCTION:
EXISTENTIAL CRISIS AND ISOLATION OF THE
DISSENTERS IN A *DRY WHITE SEASON* BY ANDRÉ BRINK
AND J.M. COETZEE'S *AGE OF IRON***

Based on postcolonial theory and Sartrean understanding of existentialism, this study explores the existential problem embedded with the socio-political circumstances in *André Brink's A Dry White Season* and J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*. Both of these novels illustrate how the white dissident protagonists undergo a transformation from passivity to consciousness of the reality of death for all, and how they fail to bring freedom to oppressed black people. In *A Dry White Season*, Ben du Toit, a white Afrikaner school teacher, gradually realizes the injustice perpetrated against the black 'Others', and he begins to question the meaning of life as well as the law and reliability of the white security forces in which he has trusted for so long. He becomes a dissenting voice among his own people because he decides to take the side of oppressed black people. However, he pays a great price for his awareness and activism: he loses his family, and finally his life. Similarly, in *Age of Iron*, the protagonist Elizabeth Curren is an educated white woman condemning the racist violence of the oppressive white power in Cape Town during the apartheid era. Jane Poyner suggests that she "achieves a critical edge through her relentless self-questioning and through her challenge to the political ideologies by daring to speak out" ("Writing in the Face of Death" 119). Mrs. Curren attempts to criticize

the injustice through the long letter she writes to her daughter living in America. She searches for a glimpse of understanding and love to hold on to life in corrupt South Africa. However, just like Ben du Toit, she dies in hopelessness. Both of the protagonists exist in their white communities, but they want to share the suffering of the black 'Others' and help them in their struggle for existence as individual subjects. However, both protagonists finally recognize that racial discrimination is at the heart of the country and cannot be transcended on an individual basis.

KeyWords

Sartrean Existentialism, Existentialism and Oppression, Existentialism and Racism, South African Literature and Postcolonialism, *André Brink*, J.M. Coetzee, Passivity and Activism, Individuality, Facticity and Death, Consciousness, Dissident, Hopelessness, Race Relations

KISA ÖZET

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Temmuz 2013

**MEVCUDİYETTEN YIKILMA BİR YOLCULUK:
ANDRE BRINK'İN KURU BEYAZ BİR MEVSİM VE J.M.
COETZEE'NİN DEMİR ÇAĞI ADLI ESERLERİNDE
MUHALİFLERİN VAROLUŞSAL BUHRANI VE
YALNIZLAŞMASI**

Sömürge sonrası teorisi ve Sartre'ın varoluşçuluk anlayışını temel alan bu çalışma, *André Brink*'in *Kuru Beyaz Bir Mevsim* ve *J. M. Coetzee*'nin *Demir Çağı* adlı romanlarında sosyopolitik şartlarla iç içe geçmiş varoluş problemini incelemektedir. Her iki roman da, beyaz ırktan karşı görüşlü iki ana karakterin, ölümün herkes için var olduğu gerçeğini görerek edilgenlikten bilinçlilik haline geçişlerini ve baskı altındaki siyahi ırka karşı yapılan adaletsizliğin önüne geçmeye güçleri yetmediği için çektikleri acıyı göstermektedir. *Kuru Beyaz Bir Mevsim*'de, Afrikaner kökenli beyaz bir ilkokul öğretmeni olan Ben du Toit, zamanla toplumun 'diğeri'leştirdiği siyahî ırka karşı yapılan haksızlığı fark edip hem hayatın anlamını, hem de uzun zamandır güvendiği beyaz polis güçlerinin güvenilirliğini ve yasaları sorgulamaya başlar. Baskı altındaki siyahî insanların tarafını tutmaya karar verdiği için, kendi ırkı içinde muhalif biri olur. Fakat ailesini ve sonunda hayatını kaybederek bunun bedelini ağır öder. Aynı şekilde, *Demir Çağı* adlı romanda ana karakter Elizabeth Curren, Güney Afrika'da ırkçılığın hâkim olduğu dönemde, Cape Town'daki baskıcı beyaz gücün ırkçı şiddet anlayışını kınayan eğitilmiş beyaz bir

kadıdır. Jane Poyner'a göre o, sürekli kendini sorgulayarak ve düşündüğünü açıkça söyleme cesaretini gösterip politik ideolojilere meydan okuyarak hassas bir hududa ulaşır ("Writing in the Face of Death" 119). Bayan Curren, Amerika'da yaşayan kızına yazdığı uzunca bir mektup aracılığıyla, adaletsizliği eleştirmeye çalışır. Güney Afrika gibi yozlaşmış bir ülkede, bir miktar anlayış ve hayata tutunmasını sağlayacak bir sevgi arar. Fakat tıpkı Ben du Toit gibi o da, umutsuzluk içinde ölür. Her iki ana karakter de ait oldukları beyaz toplumda varlıklarını bireysel özneler olarak sürdürürler. Öte yandan, bireysel özne olarak var olma savaşı veren, siyah ırktan olan 'diğer'lerinin acısını paylaşmayı ve onlara yardım etmeyi isterler. Fakat sonunda ikisi de, ırk ayrımcılığının ülkenin kalbine yerleşmiş olduğunu ve bu durumun bireysel olarak aşılamayacağını kabullenirler.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Sartre'in Varoluşçuluğu, Varoluşçuluk ve Baskı, Varoluşçuluk ve Irkçılık, Güney Afrika Edebiyatı ve Postkolonyalizm, *André Brink*, J.M. Coetzee, Edilgenlik ve Etkincilik, Bireysellik, Gerçeklik ve Ölüm, Bilinçlilik, Muhalif, Umutsuzluk, Irk İlişkileri

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

To say “No” to injustice is not merely the responsibility of those who suffer from it. To remain a silent witness to injustice also is to contribute to its existence. André Brink and J.M. Coetzee as white South African writers, through their writing, stood against racial injustice toward black people in South Africa. Explicitly or allusively, both of them wrote about apartheid to show how South Africa suffered from violence because of racial segregation and the violation of individual freedom.

Brink, who was born in an Afrikaner family, used Afrikaans language to speak against the apartheid politics of the white Afrikaner government. Many of his books were banned because of this. Coetzee also was born to parents of Afrikaner descent. Unlike Brink, none of his books were censored since he was not as overtly political as Brink. He used an allegorical language in most of his novels while portraying the human condition under the control of a white oppressive regime. Both Brink and Coetzee can be considered as white dissident writers writing against their own people – against white oppressive authority – during the apartheid and post-apartheid era in South Africa.

This study focuses on two novels: *A Dry White Season* by Brink and *Age of Iron* by Coetzee. Both of the novels explore society in apartheid South Africa from the perspective of white people witnessing the suffering of black people. The writers reflect the dilemma of white dissenters in the country by voicing their protagonists, who are rivals against their white rulers for the sake of justice for all. Both of the

white protagonists experience a change from indifference to consciousness, but their individual struggle cannot bring reconciliation to white and black communities. This struggle gives rise to an existential crisis, a quest for meaning in life. Neither of the protagonists can recover from this existential crisis. As the novel progresses, they become more and more isolated from the white community and from their own existence. My thesis argues that the socio-political conditions surrounding the white dissenting protagonists' lives cause them to experience the existential crisis resulting in their isolation and destruction.

The first chapter of this study concentrates on the theory of postcolonialism and the theory of existentialism. In the first part of this chapter, I focus on the definition of the term 'postcolonial' and its reference to colonialism. While doing this, I make use of John McLeod's *Beginning Postcolonialism* and Robert J.C. Young's *Postcolonialism: A Historical Introduction* as the primary sources for understanding the theoretical background of postcolonial writing. This part mainly deals with the issues such as "self" and "Other" as racial identities in apartheid South Africa, search for freedom through postcolonial writing and writing as a form of activism. It also explains the position of Brink and Coetzee in postcolonial writing.

In the second part of Chapter I, the postcolonial background to the ideology of apartheid in South Africa is introduced to the reader briefly in order to make clear the socio-political conditions in which both novels were written. The third section focuses on the theory of existentialism taking its roots from the existential philosophy dating back to the 1850s. In this section, I have used Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943) to explain the basic principles of existential philosophy such as being and existence, individual freedom, responsibility for acts,

and death as ‘facticity’. Mainly from the perspective of Sartre as an existentialist philosopher, writer and a postcolonial critic, I also point out the relation between postcolonialism and existentialism. In this section, I also explain how some existentialist authors such as Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett influenced Brink and Coetzee. In the last part of Chapter I, I clarify how Brink and Coetzee were influenced by existentialism as a literary trend and how it is reflected in their writings.

In Chapter II and Chapter III, *A Dry White Season* and *Age of Iron*, respectively are analyzed in terms of three facets of existentialism: the issue of ‘self’ and ‘Other’, freedom of individual choice, and responsibility for one’s acts as a conscious ‘Being-for-itself’. While doing this, I intend to illustrate how the protagonists of both novels struggle for making of their authentic being by attempting to transcend the power over them, which restrains them from choosing and acting freely. In addition, both novels emphasize the power of writing as a way of transcending one’s existence in the world and surviving even after death in the memory of the Other is emphasized. Since writing is an action against indifference or inaction, it is regarded as a sign of authenticity in this study. Finally, the last chapter summarizes the main points of this thesis.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are some reasons why I make use of postcolonial theory together with existentialism in this study, instead of other theories such as post-structuralism, psychoanalysis or Marxism. First, the two novels that this thesis explores were written in and are about the postcolonial period, beginning with the colonial demise and decolonization of many countries under the colonial rule of Europeans in the middle of the twentieth century. It is also a period when imposed identities began to be deconstructed, redefined, and replaced by multiple identities, and I address the issue of interchangeability of racial identities in my thesis, which is the most apparent characteristic of postcolonial theory.

Second, some of these theories deal with the connection between language and meaning. For example, post-structuralism focuses on the relationship between language and the subjectivity of reality. As John McLeod suggests in *Beginning Postcolonialism*, antifoundationalists, in other words, post-structuralists, regard language “as a medium which reflects reality”, and “reality is actually an ‘effect’ of language and the world is first and foremost a *textual* product” (251). They reject the idea that economical and social conditions are the determinants of reality and of our lives, and in this way, they question “oppositional discourses such as nationalism and Marxism” (252). On the other hand, while post-structuralism emphasizes discourse and deconstruction, postcolonial theory is interested in both linguistic and social

spheres of the human condition, especially after colonization. In this sense, it embodies poststructuralist thinking.

The third reason is that postcolonialism and existentialism together reflect both the social and individual human condition, which is my initial concern in this study. When it comes to Marxist theory, it is not sufficient for explaining the main subjects of my thesis such as individual freedom and existence. This is because Marxists explain literature and the individual in relation to society (Jefferson and Robey 135). Although socio-political conditions are a great concern in this study, and although material forces, including capitalism and class conflicts that are the substructures of Marxist thinking, are closely related to apartheid in the South African context on which my study focuses, Marxism puts emphasis on collectivity rather than individualism. However, my thesis aims to illustrate individual responses to apartheid and colonialism, and the ontological problems caused by them. Since Marxists believe that society and history are inseparable parts of literature, ideology as a representation of reality and collective ideas and experience becomes literature itself (137-38). For this reason, the individuality of the colonized is disregarded in Marxist theory for the sake of collectivity. This is what separates Marxist dialectic of ruling versus working classes from Sartre's existential Marxism that dwells on the existential duality for the colonizer and the colonized (Young 282). By devoting a great part of his *Being and Nothingness* to the conflict between "Being-for-itself" and the "Other" (in capital), he situates man in a private space considering his social being as well.

Similar to Marxist theory, psychoanalytic criticism also evaluates man as a member of society rather than as an individual. Freudian psychoanalysis indicates

that human consciousness is not the one who controls the individual psyche (Harland 130). Man is someone inherently constituted by childhood events, and his consciousness is shaped by society. The unconscious is a sort of thinking that necessarily is given meaning by the conscious mind, which is socially constructed (131). In addition, Lacanian psychoanalysis that is an extension of Freud's theory indicates the connection between language and the unconscious. He also deals with "signifier" and "signified", the unconscious structured as a language and language as a subjective perception. However, in my thesis, the emphasis is on the existential questioning of the individual because of his social and racial identity. Since psychoanalysis is more concerned with one's past and the unconscious, it would be inapplicable in my analysis of the main characters that are defined by their essence they choose in the present rather than by their past.

All in all, the ontological problem and identity issue are two aspects of the human condition, which are the main subjects in existentialism and postcolonial theory. Existentialism puts the individual and his existence at the centre, and postcolonialism deals with his social and racial identities. Since my initial aim is to observe existential responses to the socio-political dilemma in the South African context, I have found these theories more appropriate for this study.

2. 1. Postcolonialism

The term "postcolonial" is not easy to define because of its multifaceted nature in the sense that it reflects diverse inceptions and influences in different countries and cultures. A very general definition of postcolonialism as a literary theory can be found in *Key Concepts in Literary Theory*: "Postcolonialism refers in literary studies

to literary texts produced in countries and cultures that have come under the control of European powers at some point in their history” (Wolfreys, Robbins, and Kenneth Womack 22). In this definition, it is important to emphasize the word “history” because postcolonial theory cannot be separated from its history, which is colonialism. Robert J. C. Young in his book *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* explains the theory of postcolonialism with reference to colonialism:

Postcolonial history involves a political analysis of the cultural history of colonialism, and investigates its contemporary effects in Western and tricontinental [postcolonial] cultures, making connections between the past and the politics of the present. (6)

Postcolonialism, in this sense, cannot be evaluated independently from colonialism since it is “writing back” or the “rewriting of” or “resistance” to the colonial or imperial history. With regard to its relation to resistance, postcolonial writing is “a form of activist writing” of “those who were formerly the objects of history” and newly the subjects of it (10).

Postcolonialism embodies resistant, anti-colonial writings the main purpose of which is to liberate the colonized from the domination of the colonizer. However, postcolonialism differs temporally from one country to another. As McLeod points out, it is hard to find a proper starting point through which one critical procedure might be identified as typically “postcolonial” since a “variety of activities [are] often called ‘postcolonial’” (*Beginning Postcolonialism* 2-3). To acknowledge this variety enables us to evaluate the term “postcolonial” in a broader sense, which covers a range of issues in diverse specific literatures, and to recognize that “there is

no one singular postcolonialism” (3). The writers and critics from different cultural backgrounds or from different colonial experiences reflect diverse postcolonialisms.

To express postcolonial theory, I prefer to use hyphenless term because, as McLeod remarks, “the hyphenated term ‘postcolonial’ seems more appropriate to denote a particular *historical period* or *epoch*, like those suggested by phrases such as ‘after colonialism’, ‘after independence’ or ‘after the end of Empire’” (5). However, the ambiguity of ‘after’ in the South African experience of colonialism, for instance, is a particular historical case in which postcolonial studies disallow the use of the term ‘postcolonial’ in the meaning of ‘after colonialism’. Vilashini Cooppan in his essay “W(h)ither Post-Colonial Studies? Towards the Transnational Study of Race and Nation” points to this issue:

South Africa by some accounts has become post-colonial several times already, each time for a distinctly different population, with the creation of Union in 1910, with the victory of the Afrikaner-based Nationalist Party and the birth of the apartheid State in 1948, with the declaration of Republic rather than Commonwealth status in 1960, and of course most famously with the 1994 transition. (31)

Since I will examine postcolonial theory in the South African context, and since the postcoloniality of South Africa does not come ‘after’ colonialism, when using the term “postcolonialism”, I intend to stress the ongoing effects of colonialism rather than the temporal “after” indicating a specific past time as in post-colonialism or post-independence.

The political independence of a country from a colonial or imperial power does not mean the end of colonialism in that country. Since colonialists or imperial powers in the colonized country produce various modes and codes of representations, truths, and values through discourse, the colonized subjects have to choose one of those: to assimilate, to appropriate, to engage with, or to react to this colonial discourse. This is because the colonial values remain even after liberation of the colonized: “Colonialism’s *representations, reading practices and values* are not so easily dislodged. Is it possible to speak about a ‘postcolonial’ era if colonialism’s various assumptions, opinions and knowledges remain unchallenged?” (Cooppan 32). In this sense, defiance against and deconstruction of discourse as a system of values and truths conducted by the colonizer is a constituent of postcolonial writings.

What is “discourse” then? For the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault, “a discourse is a strongly bounded area of social knowledge, a system of statements within which the world can be known” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin 62). Discourse defines what the rules are which allow certain statements to be used instead of others. In this sense, discourse is wider than either ideology or language. Meaning and its practice is constructed within discourse; i.e., knowledge and meaning through which reality is constructed are produced not through language but through discourse. Therefore, discourse as the product of knowledge and meaning is the medium through which power is expressed, and historical practices are governed. As Foucault explains in *Power and Knowledge*, each society has its own regime of truth, the types of discourse that define mechanisms that decide what counts are true (131). In this sense, discourse constructed in a particular period for

particular subjects is power and those who have control over it have a say about ruling.

Edward Said borrows the idea of discourse from Foucault to explain the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized on the basis of “colonial discourse”, and he shows how the colonizer constructs representations by way of it. In his *Orientalism* (1978), he introduces the Orientalists’ general ideology of “the Orient” as “the Other”. The Publication of *Orientalism*, depicting Western-constructed myths and stereotypes of the East (the Other or the non-European), which are used as hegemonic instruments with the aim of justifying Western power over the Orient – the inferior, founded a basis for analysis of colonialism as a conveyor of colonial ideology through its discourse. As Young points out, by the help of Said it was understood that “colonialism operated not only as a form of military rule but also simultaneously as a discourse of domination” (383).

One of the imposed codes of colonial discourse is representation of the colonized as the “Other”. The colonial powers (mostly Europeans) throughout the centuries, constructed a “self” for themselves and a “non-self” for the others. This definition of “the self” intermingled with power and hegemony was far from recognizing the powerless, silenced “Other” as a subject; instead, the “Other” was treated as an object, an instrument of power, a ready-made slave submitting to be ruled. As Albert Memmi suggests in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, the colonized scarcely is a human being; he is heading toward becoming a property. He is constructed as evil, lazy, brute, beast-like and as a non-person; and “this mythical and degrading portrait ends up by being accepted and lived with to a certain extent by the colonized” (130-131). In this way, the colonizer structures a speechless

“Other” versus an almighty “self”, and this created myth of the “Other” transforms into a commonly accepted, unquestionable reality for the colonizer who constructs it, and the colonized who is the objective of it.

Discourses as “regulatory mechanisms by way of which material conditions come to be” reinforce the concept of foreignness imposed on one (Saunders 216). This foreignness, as a principle, is defined negatively due to the fear of the unknown: to be foreign is to be “*unfamiliar, uncanny, unnatural, unauthorized, incomprehensible, inappropriate, improper*” (218). Under the notions of “nation” and “race” lies this concept of “the foreign”. “Otherness” constructed by the colonizer operates in identity politics; defining nations and races depend upon divisions rather than collectivity. As McLeod indicates, nations are also constructions of discourse just as colonial representations of “the Other”: “Nations are not like trees or plants: They are not a naturally occurring phenomenon” (*Beginning Postcolonialism* 68). The idea of the nation is apparently not *apriori* but fabricated; it is “man-made”, “primarily an idea”, and a myth like the myth of the Other (68).

At the backdrop of the notion of “nation”, there is the idea of “collectivity and belonging” – to belong to a group of individuals that has common origins and a shared history (McLeod 69). After all, being a member of a particular group means to ostracize other groups that one has nothing in common with. Moreover, nations encourage people to own a specific land with borders and to govern it as the rightful owner of it (74). However, this ideology mainly ends with, in terms of nations, politics of differentiation regardless of the kinship of humanity, and within the nations having different ethnic groups the usurpation of power by a specific group of individuals and discrimination based on ethnical differences.

Race is an invention, and racial differences are “political constructions which serve the interests of certain groups of people” (110). Nation and race are both constructions of man. The constructed racial identities or national discourses in due course are perceived as normal and unquestionable. While the purpose of nationalist discourses is to create a “community out of difference to convert the ‘many’ into ‘one’”, irrespective of the diversity of the individuals in a nation (117), postcolonialism questions these unilateral definitions of identities that comprise various dimensions such as race, gender, nation, and culture. In this regard, postcolonial theories enable colonized communities (the Others) to define themselves rather than being defined by the colonizers. In this sense, it can be uttered that postcolonialism is a way of deconstructing, destabilizing, and reevaluating the constructed definitions of identities, and ultimately, it provides the oppressed and objectified “self” of the Other with the opportunity of authenticity and individuality.

Postcolonialism also deals with the issue of freedom. Soon after the independence movements of the 1950s and 1960s, the notion of liberation as well as nationalism began to occupy a substantial place in postcolonial critique, and especially in black experience: “As a struggle and as an event, freedom has been understood, within the history of black thought, as a significant moment for reconstitution of the former slave, the “native” and colonized, as a moral subject” (Mbembe 13). Yet, in the absence of postcolonial theory, the critique of modernity failed to define “freedom for all”, and this definition of freedom was always formulated against the un-freedom of some other groups. Freedom as such was based on domination and exclusion (14). The identification of freedom against the freedom of the Other was a product of colonial discourse, of those who held the power to

speak and to rule, to name and to judge. Because of this, with the emancipation from the colonial masters, new nations embodied a pivotal responsibility for themselves and for others – since to be free meant to be responsible for the future (15).

Frantz Fanon, who became a spokesman for the enslaved and the oppressed during the decolonization period, explained in ‘On National Culture’ (*The Wretched of the Earth*) how colonialism destroyed the culture – the past, the present and the future – of the colonized. He encouraged the writers and intellectuals to produce with a national consciousness in order to create a national culture free from the dominance of the colonizers. His concern for liberating “race” and “nation” from colonial discourse made him a prominent figure in postcolonial theory and criticism. For him, legal liberation from the colonial powers did not give the colonized freedom without any cost. Colonialism could not come to an end in any real sense until the imposed identities were deconstructed in the minds of both the colonizer (the self) and the colonized (the Other).

In terms of decolonization and freedom, postcolonial theory provides an intellectual foundation for resistance and a response to colonialism through literature. As Young suggests,

interest in oppression of the past will always be guided by the relation of that history [colonial history] to the present. In that sense, postcolonial theory’s intellectual commitment will always be to seek to develop new forms of engaged theoretical work that contributes to the creation of dynamic ideological and social transformation. (11)

Postcolonial literature as resistance or response to the colonial past is a means of decolonization of the mind, of besieged cultures and values, through dismantling,

decoding and deconstructing colonial discourse. It starts out by interrogating the inequity, absence of human freedom, and violation of human rights, and comes to a point where “transformation” begins. In this respect, writing is an action – an action against inaction, silence, and acquiescence, and postcolonialism is the most convenient stage for such an action through writing.

2. 2. Background to the Ideology of Apartheid

Having governed for almost 50 years, the white Nationalist Party legitimated racism under the name of “apartheid”. South Africa was under a ruling system based on national and racial segregations. The white Afrikaners from Dutch origin, the Boers, for 300 years – almost a hundred of which was under the British colonialism – segregated the land with their homeland policies for the benefit of the white minority by forcing the indigenous people into the rural interior of the country. The exclusivist politics of white Afrikaner Nationalists operated with divisions of races as ‘whites’, ‘coloreds’ (heterogeneous ethnic groups and tribes, and immigrants), and blacks (natives such as Hottentots and Bushmen). The Other in South Africa took its root from these ideologies of nation and race. South Africa’s Others, symbolizing the inferiority, non-humanity, and inborn slavery were primarily blacks, and to some extent coloreds.

In the South African context, freedom that was supposed to come after independence from the colonial British rule (following 1961) was not freedom for all. For blacks and for coloreds, freedom was beside the point because they were experiencing colonialism of a different kind in which unequal political and economic power relations were in function for the good of the oppressor. Considered from this

perspective, decolonization did not begin, so as Fanon observed when colonized South Africa became independent politically and economically. Under both Dutch and British rules, the indigenous South Africans, the majority of whom were black, suffered from racial discrimination and slavery. Even following 1961 when South Africa became a republic by gaining its independence from the Commonwealth, it was not possible to speak of freedom in real terms since white supremacy in the country had already replaced the British colonialism in a different form: oppression and violence. Until 1994 transition to a free, democratic state, even when racism was still operative, not legally, but socially and culturally, subjugation was a more valid concept than liberation in the country.

In South Africa, a country that suffered so long from colonial or racist dominance, postcolonial writing was mainly based upon two issues: colonialism and apartheid. *André* Brink in his essay “Post-Apartheid Literature: A Personal View” emphasizes the fact that during the apartheid years, writers either black or white felt the urgency of writing with social and political concerns since apartheid “was a force that determined the most immediate and urgent choices of” their everyday life (12). Apartheid was a distinctive factor not only in political but also in social spheres. During the apartheid period, as Brink states in *Reinventing a Continent: Writing and Politics in South Africa*, “‘The Struggle’ has been an acceptable symbol of South African fiction” (148). It was unavoidable for writers to take a resistant position since everything had a political interference because of apartheid policies (186). Under the rule of the Nationalist Party until 1976, literary tradition as a resistance to nationalist and racist policies came into existence from which many black and white writers protested against oppression and injustice. While black writers paid attention

to “black consciousness” and freedom, white writers mirrored the feelings of “guilt” or “shame” deriving from their complicity in colonial oppression. Regardless of color, most South African writers had the same drive for writing: to respond to colonialism and oppression. When the white South African writer J.M. Coetzee uses the phrase “white writing”, he focuses on the inclusiveness of it by specifying that the phrase does not point to a difference from black writing. He remarks that “white writing is white only insofar as it is generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African (*White Writing* 12).

A shared history of colonialism and apartheid gathered South African writers around a bounding reality. Coetzee points out this coercive reality laconically in *Doubling the Point*: “South African literature is a literature in bondage” (98), because in South Africa there is deformity, suffering, and homelessness; because “in South Africa there is now too much truth for art, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of imagination” (99). The reality prevails over imagination so much that some writers cannot avoid being agents of social and political reality by their writings. For this reason, even in the post-apartheid era, although fiction has drawn fact or history ahead, the implications of apartheid such as justice, complicity and reparation resided in South African contexts (Diala 51).

As a white South African writer, André Brink is one of those who believes that writing is a social responsibility. In his book *Mapmakers: Writing in a State of Siege*, he presents two tasks of the writer: One is to portray the human condition, and the other is to inform people, the task which he regards as “social responsibility” (152). For him, writing is “writing against”, “a struggle against lies and denial of injustice” (37); therefore, he writes for resistance. He prefers to be an agent charged with

responsibility in “The Struggle” for the liberation of the oppressed – particularly in his works written during the apartheid years. Sue Kossew in *Pen and Power* points out that Brink “writ[es] back to Afrikanerdom” as an Afrikaans writer who is against imperialist, nationalist policies and politics of the Afrikaner Nationalist government (6). Kossew compares Brink with Coetzee by underlining their different inclinations of writing. She emphasizes that although Brink confirms his political and authorial aims, Coetzee refuses to be positioned as a political writer (7). For Brink, writing is an action, a social responsibility, so he adopts the didactic role of literature. Accordingly, many postcolonial critics find his writing political, historical, and realist, while they regard Coetzee’s works as evasive, a-historical or quite literary. Brink, too, states that Coetzee did not write “Struggle literature” (*Reinventing a Continent* 197).

Because Coetzee’s contextual awareness and his stubborn evasiveness restrain his engagement with history or politics explicitly, and due to the dominance of realism in South African fiction, Coetzee has been frequently criticized for shrinking away from South African issues in his fiction. However, Dominic Head in *The Cambridge Introduction to J.M. Coetzee* stresses Coetzee’s ethical concerns as a postmodern writer. He writes that Coetzee is “intellectually independent, ethically sensitive, yet acutely conscious of the complicities and ambivalences that surround him, as an academic and as a novelist” (21). Moreover, Coetzee accepts his position as ‘ethical’ in his interview with David Attwell, and he remarks that one’s duty is “not to submit to powers of discourse without question” (*Doubling the Point* 200). It is clear that Coetzee’s priority as a writer is to have ethical concerns and to question discourse, rather than writing with political or historical urges. For that reason, as

Attwell indicates in *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and The Politics of Writing*, Coetzee's early fiction was an attack on colonialism and imperialism as well as historical discourses, and in later fiction, he deals with South African authorship (5).

In short, while Brink is overtly political and openly identifies himself as a dissident writer, Coetzee refuses both novelistic and political closure (Kosew 27). Although both writers have different tenets of writing and different narrative techniques, each has been influenced by European literary trends and philosophies, especially by France. One of the influences is existential philosophy, which I will now consider.

2. 3. Existentialism

Existentialism, in general terms, can be defined as a “philosophical [and cultural] movement that involves the study of individual existence in an infinite, unfathomable universe” (Wolfreys, Robbins, and Kenneth Womack 40). It is important to recognize that there is not a single existentialism. Existentialist philosophers have developed their own existential ideas. Each has a different perspective in order to question ontological problem.

Sören Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche are considered the heralds of the existentialist movement. Kierkegaard, in the 1850s, opposed the rationality of Hegelianism and Kantianism and put emphasis on the individual's “subjectivity”. Having been influenced by Schelling, he defended the idea that authentic existence is *subjectivity* and that it can be grasped better with self-reflection and inwardness than objective observation (Beck 285). While Kierkegaard developed his philosophy with a radical approach to Christian faith, emphasizing that God's existence is approved by

human's infinite interest in it, Nietzsche, also being in the war against rationalism and empiricism, attempted to disprove faith in God as a life-necessity and claimed that "God and immortality are nothing but an invention of wishful thinking", a product of the imagination (291).

Edmund Husserl was a German philosopher who dealt with the question of ontology. He underscored that consciousness is the place where objects become things. To Husserl, "consciousness is not just a passive registration of the world, but actively constitutes or 'intends' it" (48). The philosophical method he founded is called "phenomenology", in which objects become meaningful in the perception of an individual's consciousness. A world in which subjects and objects (phenomenon) are separate from each other is an unknowable world; phenomenology brings mind and the world together again, so that the world is to be perceived in relation to the subject.

Another German philosopher who contributed to existential philosophy was Martin Heidegger. He was highly influenced by Husserl's "phenomenological existence", and by Kierkegaard's philosophy of "subjectivity". Heidegger's philosophy is grounded on an existential and phenomenological world. A human as being-in-the-world is a subject only because he shares the world with others. Moreover, a phenomenon is a phenomenon only if there is some being (Dufrenne 57). The world is not an object "out there"; human existence is a dialogue with the world (Eagleton 54). In this sense, Heidegger emphasizes that subject and object are interdependent. Man both determines the world and is determined by it. Therefore, being-in-the-world (*Dasein*) requires activism, a continual "project" of existence.

One can live humanly as long as he constantly projects himself forward by choosing from the possibilities of being (54).

Although Heidegger did not accept being called an “existentialist”, his ideas about the question of “being” inspired many existential philosophers such as Karl Jaspers and Jean-Paul Sartre. Jaspers focuses on the freedom of man. According to his philosophy, man is both a man among man and a free being. On the one hand, man finds in himself what he can find “nowhere else in the world. He finds freedom” (Koenig 43); on the other hand, the authentic freedom of man is related to his involvement in the world (45). According to Jaspers, man can gain his authentic freedom in “communication” with the world.

Before coming to Sartre as an existentialist thinker, I would like to touch briefly on the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel, who coined the term “existentialism” in the mid-1940s. The fundamental structure of his philosophy was based upon man’s being-together-with-the-Other, i.e., “intersubjectivity” in Marcel’s terms (Koenig 79). The relationship of the “self” and the “Other” is regarded as interdependent since man’s freedom is rooted in both man’s being and his being-with-others. Freedom and communication (or intersubjectivity) is considered one and the same.

Existentialism is commonly associated with Sartre because of the fact that he adopted the term “existentialism” and systematized existential thought in his lectures and books. During the post-war years, existentialism flourished as a cultural movement among writers and artists, especially in France, with the help of Sartre’s literary texts such as his novel, *Nausea* (1938), and his play, *No Exit* (1944). Sartre and his associates – particularly Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir, and

Albert Camus, – and many others such as André Gide, Samuel Beckett, André Malraux, and Jean Genet – became important names in existentialism. Like some others, Camus and Beckett rejected the label “existentialist” and preferred to be called “absurdist” since they claimed that their works were about the absurdity of man’s situation in an indifferent universe, and about the futility of existence. However, the absurdity on which their texts are built is an inseparable principle for existentialist philosophy, especially of Sartrean existentialism, which he elucidates in detail in his philosophical book *Being and Nothingness* (1943). I will use this work to explain the theory of existentialism because it is a systematic elaboration of existential philosophy.

The cornerstone of Sartrean existentialism is “existence precedes essence”, meaning that man is born in the world, and then he defines his essence. In a world where there is no given morality, or God, or system of values, man is without foundation. He is the sole basis on which he can rely, and he is the one who determines meaning in life. Through his voluntary acts, he designates his essence.

Sartre defines two kinds of existence: Being-in-themselves and Being-for-themselves (*Being and Nothingness*, ix). The former refers to non-conscious things in the world, and the latter to conscious beings. Man as a conscious being looks toward himself from the world in which he exists with his body. This body is a necessary condition of his actions. His body, his place, his birth, his race, his class, his nationality, and his past are all the properties, conditions or “facticity” contingently and absurdly given to him. They all constitute the existence he possesses. However, this “facticity” is not a hindrance to design his essence freely because his essence is defined by his attitude toward himself, which is called “transcendence” (327-28).

Man constitutes himself as a project always in progress in a world where his “facticity” is revealed to him by the Other.

The existence of other people indicates being-with-the-Other in the world. The Other is the agent through which man comes to the consciousness of his being. Sartre explains the Other with reference to “the gaze”: With the Look of the Other I realize that there is someone out there who sees me, who can judge or blame me (221). However, when I see the Other seeing me, I cannot comprehend his relation to me, and he becomes an *object* of my thoughts although I posit him as *subject* (229). The problem of the existence of others, Sartre denotes, is the presupposition that “others are the *Other* that is the self which is *not* myself” (230). It is a separation between the Other and myself, it is an internal negation. I separate myself from him because he is an interest to me “only to the extent that he is another me, a Me-object for Me” (236). However, since he is also a Being-for-itself with his conscious being, I, too become an object in *his* consciousness: I am only an Other like him (237). At this point, I conceive of my being-with-the-Other who is a conscious subject rather than an object of my thoughts.

The Other, just like me, experiences the world outside and he interprets it. Since the Other is an existence with his own “facticity” and consciousness, when I see his Look I realize my being in the mode of for-itself. It reveals an intersubjectivity in the sense that “the Other is not [only] the one whom I see but the one who sees me” as well (228). This fundamental relation between me and the Other, therefore, is based on a connection: I’m not only a Being-for-itself but also a Being-for-others (253).

The consciousness of being looked at, which is explained by Sartre with the exemplification of “looking through a keyhole”, generates such feelings as shame, pride, and fear, “which makes me [Being-for-itself] live, not know the situation of being looked at” (261). When the Other with his Look sees the self in me, I find myself in the middle of a world beyond myself, a world that I share with the Other. In this world, the Other’s Look is at the centre of my *act*, and I feel alienated from the world that I myself organized. I comprehend that my possibilities are challenged by the existence of the Other and “*I am no longer master of the situation*” (256). I am captivated by freedom of the Other because it is the reason of the limitations of my possibilities, and so I feel “angst”. However, it is also true that he is in the Look of me and my being apprehends his possibilities. For this reason, each Look demonstrates that “we exist for all living men; that is, that there are (some) consciousness for whom I exist” (281). Thus, Being-for-others engages me with the Other who has an advantage over me as the only one who limits my being. This causes both me and the Other to attempt to free ourselves from enslavement of one another. To Sartre, this conflict cannot be solved since each tries to assimilate the Other’s freedom (364). As a result, the attitudes toward others take different forms such as “masochism”, “indifference”, and “sadism”.

All of these modes of attitudes are problematic: *masochism* is renunciation of freedom and subservience because of feeling guilty toward the Other and oneself – “it is a failure”; *indifference* is a sort of “blindness” with respect to others – “others are those forms which pass by in the street, ... I scarcely notice them; I act as if I were alone in the world” (380); and *sadism* is to refuse all “facticity”, to capture the Other’s facticity and to treat him as an object of exploitation – in most cases, a sadist

uses violence (399). These attitudes toward the Other arise from the fact that we are thrown into the world in front of the Other and we must actualize our acts in a world which others have already acted upon (410). Therefore, being-with-others is a conflict, a dilemma that one cannot get out of, and accordingly he has to choose one: either to transcend the Other or to allow the Other to transcend him (429).

Being thrown into a meaningless and groundless world in which the only foundation is himself, man is free in his acts. He has an existence that makes him acquainted with his freedom through his acts (439). As Being-for-itself, a conscious self, man cannot reject his freedom because “to be is to *choose* oneself” (440). By making choices, man chooses himself among possibilities, and in this way he projects his total possible. In his acts, he is the only one who decides, but this does not mean that his acts “can be anything *whatsoever* or ... *unforeseeable*” (453). It is a conscious choice that accompanies with responsibility. Man is responsible toward both himself and humanity in his project. Since life is a project of choices and acts, through his project he makes of himself as an authentic being in the world. In contrast with this, inauthenticity is the situation in which man rejects himself as his own foundation and disapproves his consciousness of freedom and responsibility, which is described by Sartre as a paradigm of “bad faith” (47). While authenticity is self-making, inauthenticity is the refusal of it.

Not to have any foundation to rely on in one’s acts causes “anguish” for Being-for-itself. While through his choices and acts he is projecting his future, he feels threatened by unconditioned freedom. To choose without a base of support is “absurd” because there is no choice of not choosing oneself (479). The absurdity of freedom is the “facticity” of man (481). Man is thrown into freedom, which is his

fate, i.e., facticity like his place, his past, his body, and so on. In this sense, “he is not free not to exist or not to be free” (485-86).

This facticity of freedom on the one hand limits for-itself, but on the other hand it becomes a condition for responsibility for choosing, for action, and for living. Being born, man takes a place in in-itself, so he is responsible for the place he takes (495). This feeling of indefeasible responsibility also leads to anxiety, as Sartre explains: “...everything takes place as if I were compelled to be responsible. I am *abandoned* in the world... in the sense that I find myself suddenly alone and without help...” (555). However, anguish felt by for-itself as a result of this helplessness should not cause resignation, rather it can act as an impulse for action. By assuming responsibility, man approves his place in the world and freely projects his being toward future.

Another absurdity of life is to arise in a finite world given to him as *already looked-at* (520). It is in this world that his body exists with existence of others. Death as ‘ceasing to be’ is the whole life of for-itself – “the final boundary of human life” (532). It is what he cannot determine (facticity). As Heidegger suggests, *Dasein* is toward death and he makes of himself toward death with a full consciousness of it. When he conceives of the finiteness of his existence, he is caught by “angst”, because although for-itself is the one who gives meaning to his life after he ceases to be, he will only exist through the consciousness of the Other. Thus, death alienates him from all the meaning he has, which is his life. This is alienation both from his consciousness and from the physical world. Albert Camus expresses this absurdity as an experience of mortality and temporality in which one’s passivity in the face of

time is relayed by his recognition of active being. He adds, in this recognition the individual sees his death (Koenig 15).

While Camus and some others rejected some aspects of existentialism and preferred to focus on the absurd condition of being, Sartre, especially after World War II, concentrated on the relationship between self and Other, freedom, and responsibility, i.e., acting, by associating his existential thinking with the social arena. Affected by the war, Sartre reasoned that man's isolation had disappeared after the war, and he became a social being, being-with-others rather than being-for-itself (Watson 407). Thus, Sartre decided to reconcile the individual with the social by highlighting "action" and "choice" as a solution to man's impasse (410). With his revision of Marx's dialectical materialism emphasizing that history is the product of class struggle in which the material conditions determine the existential project of the individual, he underlined the active role of the individual in the making of history. He defended the idea that the historical situation is not an obstacle for authentic existence, i.e., for self-definition. The individual as a social being is an active responsible man who should struggle for freedom and against inequities such as colonialism, imperialism, oppression, and violence – against any dehumanizing instruments that preclude his being. Thus, existential being and postcolonial struggle is blended in Sartre's humanism.

Sartre's concern about colonialism and racism unites him with Fanon. In his preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, he criticizes in general the European colonizer but in particular the French. He emphasizes how the colonizer (for-itself) sees the colonized (the Other) as an object of his thoughts: "...he [the Other] has, whether he's black, yellow, or white, always the same traits of character: he's a sly-boots, a

lazybones, and a thief, who lives on nothing, and who understands only violence” (16). The colonizer experiments with “sadism” through violence, and the collaborator experiments with “indifference” through the silence. According to Sartre, the former must stop violence and the latter must leave indifference which “serves only to place [them] in the ranks of the oppressors” (25).

With the analysis of the colonial situation, Sartre is also acquainted with racism. Owing to his political sensibility in the independence of the Third World, V.Y. Mudimbe in *The Invention of Africa* describes Sartre as an “African philosopher” (96). Sartre defended the rights of Blacks, especially in the Negritude Movement, because he believed that the revolt of blacks and decolonization were essential for the black souls to reestablish their essence. Since they were the oppressed ones whose “essence” and “existence” were determined and defined by others, they had no free choice to accomplish their authenticity under oppression and violence. The postcolonial situation would lay a ground for establishing an integral humanity (Williams 211). Therefore, Sartre believes that the achievement of existential engagement between self and Other as “we” – the social and political subject – lies in reciprocal recognition. The ideal society could be established by the supportive efforts of both parties. Moreover, Sartre was not alone in his attempts to encourage people toward a more humanistic existence and being. Besides some European philosophies, the postcolonial point of view of Sartre embedded in existential consciousness began to be effective outside Europe from the late 1960s on, particularly in African countries.

2. 4. André Brink, J.M. Coetzee, and “Existentialism”

In South Africa, following the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, repression and insecurity were rampant, and in the early to mid-1970s, a series of events changed the atmosphere in the country to a great extent. The most significant of them was the agonistic independent labor movement in the Durban area in 1973; the militant revolts of black students and the rise of Black Consciousness, which also contributed to the Soweto Revolt in 1976; and finally from 1977, the restrictive reforms of the State in order to manage the crisis. Following this period, the political situation in South Africa was seemingly set in two opposing categories: “revolution” or “reform” (Attwell 27). An academic revisionism in the field of historiography that began in the 1960s has to be given priority in this changing climate. South African fiction began to interrogate and revisit history by embracing radicalized European philosophies of the 1960s such as existentialism, structuralism, and Marxism (27).

During that period, a group of young writers who travelled or lived in Europe, especially in France, were influenced by literary traditions of Surrealism, existentialism, the absurd, and post-modernism. These so called “Sestigers” (a new generation of Afrikaans writers of the 1960s) the most productive of whom were Chris Barnard, Breyten Breytenbach, André Brink, Ingrid Jonker, Etienne Leroux and Adam Small, began to criticize the Afrikaner establishment and the literary traditions of Afrikaans through their works. While European literature was already experimenting new writing techniques, so André Brink claims, Afrikaans fiction was still dealing with nineteenth century romanticism (*A Fork in the Road* 208). For this reason, the Sestigers protested against the hackneyed themes and literary techniques in Afrikaans literature by overthrowing them with modernist and post-modernist

techniques, and they introduced new subjects such as atheism, miscegenation, and sex, against the Calvinistic austerity of the Afrikaners. Moreover, they brought a radical change to the Afrikaans literature with their exploration of a literary existentialism, motivated by such writers as Samuel Beckett, Jean-Paul Sartre and Eugene Ionesco (Rich 55).

André Brink was one of those Sestigers influenced by European intellectual traditions, and particularly by existentialist writers. During the years he spent in Paris, from 1959 to 1961, as he writes in his memoir *A Fork in the Road* (2009), the author W.A. de Klerk, one of the first Afrikaners who had experimented with existentialism, guided Brink toward foreign literature and philosophy, including such intellectuals as Mark Twain, Goethe, Ibsen, Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard and Colin Wilson (74). He also had an opportunity to see Beckett's plays like *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot* (a play that he watched with admiration several times), but his idol is definitely Albert Camus: "I do not merely admire Camus, I love him... Camus: indefatigable persistence of Sisypus [the Greek mythological character of Camus's *The Myth of Sisypus*], the revolt-without-end, the struggle, literally to death, against injustice, against the lie, against unfreedom" (133). He also adds that Camus was not only a guide for his exploration of France, but was also a lifetime project for him (133).

Camus had been his source of inspiration for almost a decade when he returned to South Africa in 1961. He expressed the source of his existential thinking in his 1965 interview: "For almost ten years, Albert Camus and the literary and philosophical ideas I'd encountered in Paris were the main influence on my writing... So during that time, my writing was existentialist in style and mood"

(Behgat and Adel 2). Even after this period, Brink's existential humanism was a substantial component in his writings. Particularly since 1968, he combined his existential consciousness of the human condition with the political roles of the writer. He had a tendency to transform political insights into humanist insights (Diala 110). Because of this, in his fiction he often integrated the existential situation of the individual with his political and social state. For instance, in the first story of his trilogy of novellas *Other Lives* (2008), in "The Blue Door", the South African protagonist David finds himself completely changed from a white man to a black man when he wakes up one morning. It sounds like an allegory implying that it is an existential change rather than a change in appearance. As the narrator remarks, it is like the transformation of Kafka's Gregor Samsa; however, "it is not fiction, it is real" (Brink 2). It is real in the sense that in South Africa the issue of racial identity is a matter of life and death – a matter of existence –, "an albatross around one's neck" in Coetzee's terms. In South Africa, existence and identity politics are intertwined.

Coetzee, like Brink, was considerably influenced by the European intellectual world. In the early 1960s he left South Africa for England, where he was employed as computer programmer, and later for the United States, where he studied linguistics and stylistics and became a lecturer at the State University of New York at Buffalo. If his memoir *Youth* (2002) can be taken as a reliable account of his literary tendencies, by considering his utterance that "all autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography" (*Doubling the Point* 391), it can be claimed that as a young man he appreciated Anglo-French literature as well as Roman and German literature (25).

Upon return to South Africa in 1971 after his acquaintance with metropolitan culture, he began publishing fiction. His attraction to writers like Kafka, Beckett, Dostoevsky, and Nabakov, his interest in modern linguistics, Russian formalism, Western structuralism, and postmodern and poststructuralist theories of Lacan, Foucault and Derrida all influenced his literary personality (*Doubling the Point* 4). Having completed his PhD on Samuel Beckett, Coetzee was extensively under the effect of Beckett's modernist technique. By following "the steps of Anglo-American modernism at its most hermetic", he wrote a formalistic analysis of Beckett's works written when "Beckett too was obsessed with form, with language as self-enclosed genre" (393). In addition to his stylistic influence on Coetzee, Beckett's ethical concerns and absurdist revelations in his plays such as *Watt*, *The Unnamable*, and *Waiting for Godot* were absorbed by Coetzee. By taking into consideration Coetzee's fascination with Beckett and his familiarization with writers like Kafka whose existential inclinations are universally known, it is not surprising that such subjects as death, silence, nothingness, ethics, and politics embedded in Coetzee's writings (qtd. in Attridge 82). In Coetzee's dehumanized protagonist of *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), Michael K is likened to a parasite, and an insect living in the bushes, "a creature left over from an earlier age" (207). Michael K's alienation and isolation is the result of his desire for life in its naïvest way, a marginalized life like Don Quixote's. His body as facticity attaches him to the human race, but he is not in the place where he wants to live. Likewise, the mad spinster in *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), Magda, lives on an isolated farm in South Africa, "totally outside human society, almost outside humanity" (118). She believes that she lives in a hole as "a castaway" thrown into the world (132). The reason for her alienation is largely

because of her identity as a white colonial female who sympathizes with the oppressed black slaves (Wright 114).

For both Brink and Coetzee, South Africa is a locale where the human condition, or in other words existence, is challenged by various parameters such as identity, race, gender, ethnicity, and class. Brink's *A Dry White Season* (1979) and Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990) both reflect the white dissenter's situation in South Africa, and their existential and ethical responses to injustice. In my thesis, I will investigate how in both of these novels the protagonists – the white dissenting voices – experience an existential quest triggered by the socio-political conditions surrounding their lives, which finally leads to their isolation. While doing this, I will focus on three subjects of existential thought: the notion of self and Other (as racial identities), freedom and unfreedom, and the dilemma between activism and inertia. Further, I will reveal to what extent the protagonists achieve their authenticity as existential beings-with-others.

CHAPTER III

A DRY WHITE SEASON BY ANDRÉ BRINK

“[...]”

it is a dry white season brother, only the trees know the
pain as they still stand erect
dry like steel, their branches dry like wire,
indeed, it is a dry white season but seasons come to pass”

Mongane Wally Serote, “A Dry White Season”

By taking its imagery of drought and dryness from the political climate of South Africa, Brink’s novel *A Dry White Season* (1979) indicates that it was a ‘dry’ ‘white’ season in the 1970s and 1980s, the period when apartheid was at peak. It was symbolically dry and lifeless because of the oppression and violence in the country, and there seemed to be no hope for a drop of water that could give life to the land – no hope for reconciliation between black and white people. The whiteness of the season, on the other hand, symbolizes white supremacy over the black community. It is clear from the very title that Brink’s novel focuses on the dilemma between “white” and “black” – the “self” and the “Other” – in South Africa.

Brink illustrates the restless atmosphere in which his book was written in his memoir *A Fork in the Road* : “...more and more people became perturbed about detainees dying after slipping on bars of soap, falling down stairwells, tumbling from tenth-floor windows, or hanging themselves on shoestrings or makeshift ropes from window bars” (244). The Security Police was whitewashing its violence and torture on the detainees and imprisoned people by inventing evidence in trials. Brink, having

seen the hypocrisy of the Security Police was also shaken by the murder of Steve Biko in detention, and he stopped writing his book for several months following Biko's death since he felt a sort of paralysis detaining him from writing in such a dry season. However, he soon realized that the sole "voice that could still be heard" (246) was the echo of writing – writing against the silence in the face of oppression. As suggested previously, having accepted the responsibility of reporting the truth to people, he decided to finish this novel.

To Brink, writing is a response to indifference toward the silent Other. The separateness in South Africa because of apartheid, which overreaches political dimensions, he explains, is the payoff of *A Dry White Season*. His novel, in this sense, aims to question if it is possible to "put out a hand and touch a fellow man" in apartheid South Africa (*Mapmakers* 206). In his *Reinventing a Continent*, he argues that his novel is about a white man's inquiry into the death of a black cleaner and his desire to know about this Other by crossing the border between their worlds (17). Ben du Toit, the white dissident protagonist, an Afrikaner who struggles against the injustice of the system, delivers his notebooks, diaries, press cuttings, letters, and papers to the narrator of the novel. Ben wants the narrator, a university friend, to store his notes and documents that reflect the concealed truths he gets to know but could not explain to anyone for fear of the Security Police. At first, the narrator is unwilling to get involved in politics into which Ben draws him unintentionally since he is a popular romantic writer: "My novels deal with love and adventure...; politics isn't my "line" (*A Dry White Season* 15). However, after Ben's mysterious death in a car accident and his last letter he receives, he decides to make a story of him: "I am left with the jumbled papers he dumped on me... What was unfinished to him is

complete to me; what was life to him is a story to me; first-hand becomes second-hand” (33). In this way, the narrator takes the responsibility for reporting the truth just like Brink the author.

The narrator’s perspective is highly important in understanding the inner journey of Ben, including his change in attitude and behavior. Ben’s gradual change from an ordinary history teacher to a political man is portrayed through the framed narrative of the narrator who compiles Ben’s diary and documents and who makes a story of them. In the Epilogue, he depicts the Ben he’d known at university as “reserved without being secretive; rather quiet, at peace with the world and himself” and not a “ringleader” at all (16). However, later in the novel, the reader witnesses how Ben is transformed from a man of routine to an activist with an existential awareness for freedom and justice.

3. 1. The Notions of Self and Other

Ben’s change begins with his questioning of the notions of self and Other. At the beginning, his concern for the Other is merely about care and charity. As a white Afrikaner, Ben helps Gordon Ngubene, the black cleaner in the school. Unlike many of his colleagues, he does not have a racist attitude toward Gordon as the black Other. Moreover, due to his sympathy for the Other as a human being, once some money is lost in the school and Gordon is accused of stealing, Ben takes “the cleaner under his wing” and makes inquiries that finally reveal the innocence of Gordon (37). He also contributes to the schooling of Gordon’s adolescent son, Jonathan. When Gordon comes to Ben for help in order to find out the truth about the death of his son in the youth revolts in Soweto, Ben finds a lawyer for him and pays the costs.

At this stage, Ben's relationship with the Other is a passive, one-way relationship, which does not give the parties an opportunity to know about each other in the real sense. The initial change in Ben's perception of the Other is when he sees how Gordon refuses to be blind to reality:

“How did Jonathan die, Baas?”

“That's what we don't know.”

“That's what I get to know, Baas. How can I have peace again if I do not know how he died and where they buried him?”

“What can it do, Gordon?”

“It can do nothing, Baas. But a man must know about his children”

[...] “A man must know, for if he does not know he stays blind.” (48)

Questioning starts with the urge “to know” and for Ben, it is triggered when Gordon is taken by the Special Branch because of his enquiries about the mysterious death of his son, since he has some clues showing that his son has been killed in custody. Ben's first reaction to the internment of Gordon is highly naïve. He believes that it is a “mistake”, a misunderstanding. Therefore, he goes to the Special Branch to discuss the issue and tells the police officers that he knows Gordon very well, and that he is “an honest, decent man” (59). Although Ben claims that he knows Gordon, the Other, his knowledge about him is highly limited as well as about the doings of the Security Police.

The urge “to know” and his uneasiness are increased when he gets some news about the mistreatment of Gordon. He “want[s] to find out what happened and why it was allowed to happen” (71). He sees “the dirty bundle in the newspaper they'd brought him”, “the stained trousers” and “the broken teeth”, which make him

nauseous (75). About two weeks later, when he hears the news on the radio that Gordon has committed suicide in his cell, his world is shaken by the fact of “death”, the limitation of life. At his home, he begins to feel “like a visitor from a distant land arriving in a city where all the inhabitants ha[ve] been overcome by plague” (81). He feels all alone “in an incomprehensible expanse”, like “a stranger”, “an intruder” in his own study room (81-82). This restlessness becomes the starting point of his internal journey from his self to the Other, as well as of his journeys to the black towns of Soweto that he describes as “another dimension, a wholly different world” (89), which enables him to see the real Other that he does not know.

The roles of self and Other are tested through his first journey to Soweto with the black Zulu taxi driver Stanley Makhaya, a close friend of Gordon’s, in order to see the corpse of Gordon. In this journey, Ben represents the self, the white man having privilege, and Stanley the Other, the oppressed and silenced black. The separateness between the two Being-for-themselves is emphasized by Stanley’s way of addressing Ben as “*lanie*”, meaning a Boer, a white Afrikaner. However, when Ben crosses the border between the white and black territories and sees the corpse of Gordon in Soweto with his own eyes, this separateness turns out to be vague for him. Forgetting about his white self he desperately wants to share with the black Other: “Ben’s ears were ringing. It was a curious experience: his senses were taking in acutely what was happening, yet he didn’t seem to be there. Disoriented, a total foreigner to the scene, an intruder in their grief which, nevertheless, he wanted so desperately to share” (94). It can be suggested that this journey initiates his existential restlessness since for the first time he realizes the existence of the Other as a human being, and he begins to know him in the real sense. His previous blindness

to and lack of knowledge of the Other changes into a light, the consciousness of the Other as another self before the fact of death. From this moment on, Ben's being-in-the-world never has a rest because "the memory of Gordon, small and maimed in his coffin in the cool bare room" does not leave him at all (99).

Upon his encounter with the death of the Other, he begins to question the truths that he has believed in for so long. His first initiative for this is the court inquest into Gordon's death. However, when the court condones the hypocrisy of the Special Branch, negating their violence on the detainees like Jonathan and Gordon as well as many other black prisoners, Ben begins to lose faith in the possibility of justice for the Other and in his own people, i.e., the white selves.

His existential crisis initiated by his realization of his being with Other (black) selves in the world is heightened because he is a member of the white, race-conscious, community. His colleagues, his friends, and his wife Susan are white Afrikaners who prefer to be indifferent to the injustice against the black Others. They refuse to be involved in matters of the Other selves for whom they have bad connotations in their minds. Mr. Cloethe, the principal of the school, for instance, often criticizes Ben's relationship with Gordon and says, "You can't trust one of them these days... The less we have to do with such people the better" (54). Similarly, a family friend, the young minister Dominee Bester evaluates Ben's going to law with the aim of enlightening Gordon's mysterious death as "dramatizing things a bit too much" (71). Ben's wife especially cannot stand any conversation about Gordon's case and gets hysterical. Even more, when Ben is photographed with Gordon's black wife Emily at Gordon's funeral, Susan and his daughter Suzette regard the situation as a "shame" (138).

Unlike the white community to which Ben inherently belongs, he does not have prejudices about the Other. For him, the Other is an unknown self, just like white individuals, having the right to live – the right to exist in the world. While the white community refuses to know about the Others and ignores both their existence and non-existence (death), Ben is conscious of the humanness of these Others separated from the white selves by the current racist system. Upon the question of Stanley, “What is it [Gordon’s death] to you, *lanie* ?” Ben shows his sincerity and concern for the Other: “Because I know him. And because – [...] I don’t think I ever really *knew* him before. Or if I did, it didn’t seem to directly concern me. It was – well, like the dark side of the moon. Even if one acknowledged its existence it wasn’t really necessary to live with it... Now people have landed there” (96).

Unlike the indifferent white people around him, Ben perceives the existence of the Other and the fact of death for both the self and the Other regardless of the color of the body. His rejection of ignorance to the reality of death as a shared “must” for all humans beginning with his contact with the Other in Soweto, as Sue Kossew suggests in *Pen and Power*, causes him to question his Afrikaner identity: “Ben’s contact with the Other increasingly isolates him from the familiar world to which he has belonged – the protected, privileged world of white colonial authority” (101).

After meeting his soul mate, a young journalist Melanie Bruwer, outside the court building, he gradually awakens to the backcloth of white supremacy and feels alienated from his own people. Melanie warns him, with her realistic attitude toward the truth, not to expect the court to bring justice. The court’s “first duty is to apply the laws”, she remarks (121). She also reminds him of his real identity that he cannot change: “Remember, you’re an Afrikaner, you are one of them. In their eyes that’s

just about the worst kind of treason imaginable” (195). As a white dissident, “the colonizer who refuses” in Albert Memmi’s terms, Ben is considered a traitor, a collaborator with the enemy of the state – with the black Others. Even though he is labeled as a liberal “with lofty ideals” (149) by one of the collaborators of the Security Police in the concealment of their guilt, Ben refuses to be called a “Liberal” and claims that he is “a very ordinary man” (150), searching for truth and justice for his black “friend”, Gordon.

Ben’s questioning his Afrikaner origin is reflected by him explicitly in the diary he begins to keep after his house and study room is searched by Captain Stolz and some other police officers from the Special Branch. Upon the domiciliary visit, the aim of which is intimidation, he understands that “it was no longer a case of ‘them’, a vague assortment of people, or something as abstract as a ‘system’: it was this man [Captain Stolz]” (156). He observes that injustice is brought by real men with flesh and blood – men just like him as Being-for-themselves. They represent the white power maintaining the apartheid notions of self and Other. From then on, Ben knows his enemy and decides to keep a diary because he will not let them to wipe out his existence as if he has never been in the world (13).

In his diary, he divides his life into two: “Before” and “After” since he believes that he has crossed a frontier (158). In his new world, as a dissident white Afrikaner who acknowledges the Other as another self, he feels alienated from his self:

Everything wholly strange... Your own words seem unfamiliar to you... Inside you is a manner of knowing which you cannot share with anyone else... Something essentially different. As if you now exist in another time and another dimension. You can still see the

other people, you exchange sounds, but it is all coincidence, and deception. You're *on the other side*. And how can I explain it in the words of "this side"? (158)

Ben feels completely displaced. He can neither get out of his self nor can he experiment to be the Other. His existential crisis, his hopeless situation in between the self and the Other is strengthened by the disillusionment that he can no longer trust what he has believed to be true: "Everything one used to take for granted, with so much certainty that one never bothered to enquire about it, now turns out to be illusion. Your certainties are proven lies" (161). Now he must learn a new language to express what humanity means and to learn the "bare-arsed history"(86), in Stanley's words. The history he has ignored for a long time, which is about his own people who regard the self and the Other as incompatible beings: "'My people'. And then there were the 'others'... And the blacks... We lived in a house... They laid our table, brought up our children, emptied our chamber pots, called us *Baas* and *Miesies*. We looked after them... But it remained a matter of 'us' and 'them'... That was the way it has always been" (162).

When he begins to question his identity after seeing the suffering of Gordon's family caused by his own people, he loses his sense of belonging to his origins. Although this Afrikaner heritage is his facticity, the given condition of his body, through questioning he discovers his being and his existence in the world for the second time:

...that summer when pa and I were left with the sheep. The drought that took everything from us... that was where I first discovered myself and the world. And it seems to me I'm finding myself on the

edge of yet another dry white season, perhaps worse than the one I knew as a child. (163)

In this second dry white season, his position as a white dissident looking for a place among the Others increasingly drags him into existential restlessness. The more he makes progress in his search about Gordon's death, the more isolated he feels. He wishes to know more about Gordon – the man existed in the world as the Other; nevertheless, his desire to touch the life of the Other does not seem to be possible: "...as far as Gordon is concerned, here I'm actually working on him day and night... But when all is said and done, what have I really got? Facts, facts, details. What does it tell me about *him*? This man, this Gordon Ngubene who must exist somewhere beyond all the facts?" (220). This existence of the Other is unreachable in the sense that he has his own subjectivity as Being-for-itself. Each individual being in the world has a desperate loneliness in himself, which makes him a stranger to the different worlds of Being-for-themselves. Melanie's father, the retired Philosophy Professor Phil Bruwer, indicates this loneliness of the individual: "what can one man really know about another? [...] each one desperately alone in the world" (220). In this sense, Ben's attempts to be involved in the privacy of the Other cannot succeed. This issue of loneliness will be discussed in detail later on.

Ben expects to be accepted by the black community, but there are still insurmountable borders for him as a foreign self on the Other's side. In his last visit to Soweto without Stanley, a few black youngsters attack him. Although he shouts at them hysterically, "Don't you understand? I'm on your side!" (302), they throw stones at his car. He is torn between the two separate worlds he is indisputably conscious of: the one in which he is a privileged white Afrikaner, a member of the

oppressive white community using torture and violence on the 'Others' with sadistic urges, and the other in which he is a stranger to the Other and a traitor to his own people – an unwelcome white self among the black Others. This desperate situation drags him into accepting the immutability of his existence as a white man:

I wanted to help. Right. I meant it very sincerely... And I am white, they are black. I thought it was still possible to reach beyond our whiteness and blackness... In an ordinary world, in a natural one, I might have succeeded. But not in this deranged, divided age... I can imagine myself in their shoes, I can project myself into their suffering. But I cannot, ever, live their lives for them... Whether I like it or not, whether I feel like cursing my own condition or not – [...] – *I am white*. This is the small, final, terrifying truth of my broken world.

(304)

This separateness between the self and the Other, the constructed foreignness of beings toward each other, is a situation that Ben cannot change despite his ambitious struggle. For that reason, from his first encounter with the real Other in the black towns of Soweto to the end of the novel, he wrestles with an existential predicament. However, this predicament becomes an impulsion for his search for justice throughout the novel. For the sake of this purpose, Brink's decisive protagonist experiences some limitations of freedom in his resistance to acquiescence and passivity. I will examine this in the next chapter.

3. 2. Freedom and Unfreedom

“Fate is not in Man [in his essence] but around him.”

Albert Camus, *A Happy Death* (1971)

The kernel of Sartrean existentialism postulates “the absolute freedom of the individual” (Cobb 369). Man is free in his choices and actions through which he makes of himself as an authentic being-in-the-world. However, this idea of freedom is problematic in the South African context because of racial identities: The existence of individuals as free Beings-for-themselves is challenged by the separation of self and the Other.

A Dry White Season portrays how white selves experience the privileges of freedom and contentment while black Others are deprived even of the right to live or to exist. Before he has chosen “the other side”, Ben enjoys the freedom of white selves as a member of white Afrikaner community. Gordon says, he can reach the places where blacks cannot (180), and he reminds him of how “hope” is the privilege of white people:

“It is a terrible thing that happened,” said Ben awkwardly.

“Well, we knew it was going to happen, didn’t we?”

Ben was shocked by Stanley’s nonchalance. “How can you say that? I was hoping all the time – ”

“You are white.” [...] “Hope comes easy to you. You’re used to it.”

“Surely that’s got nothing to do with black or white!”

“Don’t be so sure.” (83)

Freedom has been a matter of skin color as white supremacy feels threatened by the existence of black Others. One of the strategies of the regime in order to keep them

under control has been the use of torture and violence, which are the basic instruments of sadism toward the Other. The Special Branch is an agent of coercion that controls the lives of black Others for the benefit of white Being-for-themselves. The detainees who, like Jonathan, have been ringleaders in the riots like Jonathan are “forced on their knees, whereupon bicycle tubes had been wrapped around their hands and inflated slowly, causing them to lose their consciousness” (50-51). This degradation of the humanity of the Other is claimed by the Security Police to be “a duty, an obligation to all our [white] people” (59). It is intended for the good of the whites, of a group of selves.

Freedom of the self against unfreedom of the Other has been embedded with the feeling of fear: “The Government is handling the electorate as if it were a bloody donkey. Carrot in the front and kick in the backside. The carrot is Apartheid, [...] .The kick is quite simply, fear... Fear can be a wonderful ally” (188). Because of fear, many people who know about the death of Gordon from torture while in the custody refuse to sign an affidavit and to serve as witnesses in court. The unfreedom of black Others under the supremacy of white rulers is also expressed by Gordon’s words: “I’m only as free as the white bosses allow me to be” (98). These black others whose right to choose and to define their authentic beings – their essence as free individuals – is taken from their hands by the oppressive regime are described as “corpses” by Ben: “All those Tsabalalas... They have nothing left to lose. Only their lives. And what remains of life when it’s been stripped bare like that? [...] .How can a government win a war against an army of corpses?” (119).

As Sartre points out in his Introduction to *The Colonizer and the Colonized* by Memmi, a people who have no choice but the gift of despair taken from its

oppressors has nothing to lose (25). On the other hand, the white beings holding the whip hand and having the concession of freedom and the right to choose have a lot to lose. Ben, too, as a white Afrikaner, has “everything to lose” (*A Dry White Season* 120), but especially his freedom.

Having resolved to recognize the Other as an individual, a self in the Look of the white Being-for-themselves, Ben begins to experiment with freedom from his white self. Although his identity is a given fact, he tries to transcend it by identifying himself with the Other. In this sense, he refuses to be defined by his facticity; instead, his own attitude towards himself as a man feeling responsible towards the now and then ignored and suppressed Other gives him freedom of self-definition: “I’m an Afrikaner”, he says (181). However, he is fully aware that he is an “undesirable influence” (184) as a dissident against his Afrikaner heritage.

Brink describes the situation of a dissident in *Mapmakers*: “This is an experience of being *in situation*, which is something radically different from ‘being within the system’!” (35). Ben’s dissidence lays in his opposition to being a collaborator in a corrupt system that dehumanizes the black Others. Therefore, he starts questioning his middle-class values and his job as a history teacher. History as “neat and solid facts” (197) is about white Afrikaners’ struggle for their freedom against the Empire. They see themselves as the “first freedom fighters of Africa” (160). However, to Ben, the new white South Africa demolishes the basic components of humanity such as “compassion; charity; decency; integrity” and it composes “an entirely different set of synonyms: cruelty; exploitation; unscrupulousness” (161) that violate freedom of black individuals.

When he crosses the border between self and Other with his visits to Soweto, Ben gradually faces the limitations of freedom because the more he gets involved with the enquiries about Gordon's death, the more captured he feels. His wife Susan criticizes him for his involvement with the matters of the black Others, and she wishes him to be the man of her imagination. While Ben changes from an ordinary Afrikaner history teacher to a fighter for freedom and justice, Susan expects him to be his "old self again" (137). However, Susan speaks "a different language" which is foreign to Ben. In Isidore Diala's words, with his "recognition of a suffering 'Other' as a fellow sufferer" (908), Ben finds himself in the line of fire, under the restrictions of his Afrikaner society: "Tension at home, with Susan. Quarrels on the telephone, with Suzette [his daughter]. Tiffs with colleagues... It was impossible to get used to those episodes of petty intimidation which recurred regularly, to learn to live with them, even to get bored by them" (223).

His family and his colleagues disapprove of him; therefore, he is restrained from acting according to his free will. Many of them believed that their own people holding the power today are the owners of South Africa as a consequence of their struggle against unfreedom in their history. Susan's father is one of those who defend the free white Afrikaner government possessing the land:

"You, a man who teaches history at school. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, man. Now that we have at long last come to power in our own land."

[...]

"Now we're free to do to others what they used to do to us" [...]

.“What would you do if you were a black man in this country today, Father?” (212).

While the white community means to build freedom of its white selves against the freedom of the black Others, Ben’s desire to recognize freedom for all puts him against his own people, which causes him to experience unfreedom of the Other sustained by the white Afrikaner power. His house is searched, his colleagues are questioned because of him, his telephone and his mail are checked by the Security Police. Moreover, an unknown car follows him to town, the phone rings in the middle of the night (215). At school he finds insults on his blackboard and slogans on the wall of his house. Being conscious of the hypocrisy of the Security Police who claim that South Africa “is a free country and every man is entitled to his own views” (225) but on the other hand, regard any dissenting act as a threat to freedom and security for the white people, Ben feels “like living in an aquarium” in which one’s every move is watched by eyes – by the Look – “through glass and water, surveying even the motion of [one’s] gills as [one] breath[es]” (222).

From the day when Captain Stolz comes to Ben to warn him to give up his struggle for finding the truth about Gordon’s death, he is aware “of being watched, of acting against invisible obstacles opposing him every inch of the way” (215). His privacy and freedom is violated by some power that he cannot transcend:

What is set up against me is not a man, not even a group of people, but a thing, a something, [...] an invisible ubiquitous power [...], a power that follows me wherever I go, day and night, [...] frustrating me, intimidating me, playing with me according to the rules devised and whimsically changed by itself [...]

So there is nothing I can really do, no effective countermove to execute [...] (237)

Against this invisible enemy, Ben finds himself in despair. He is tired and all he needs is some peace (237). This feeling of frustration results from his being inhibited by the Special Branch, which is the representative of that invisible power enjoying the privilege of freedom. It becomes a hindrance to Ben's acts for freeing himself from his ignorant and privileged old self in order to share the suffering of the black Other. To some extent, he achieves to contact with the Other, for example, with Stanley. They shake hands like friends, they travel in the same car, and they talk about their past. However, all occurs in privacy. No matter how hard they struggle to share freely in public, it seems unlikely:

“Are you also abandoning me now?”

“I won't drop you lanie [...] .We'll be together again, sure's tomorrow... We'll walk out here in broad daylight together, man. Down the streets, left-right, all the way. Arm in arm, I tell you... No one to stop us... You and me, man...” (288)

Despite Stanley's hope for solidarity and freedom, this is the last time they see each other, the narrator tells us. Ben's individual struggle for the black Others to be recognized as free beings just like white selves falls short because the white supremacy that has power to restrict freedoms prefers to reject the black Others right of liberation. Nevertheless, Ben achieves his existential authenticity by taking the responsibility of freedom – freedom to choose among possibilities. He is reminded by Melanie's father that what he lives is the result of his own choice:

“Not an easy road you’ve chosen,” he commented.

“I have no choice.”

“Of course you have a choice, damn it. One always has a choice. Don’t fool yourself. Only be thankful you made the choice you did. Not an original thought, I admit. Camus.” (190)

“Matter of choice”, he said. “You can also stop asking questions if you want to, can’t you? All you need to do is accept that ‘such things happen.’” (221)

Ben as an individual projects his self by choosing to be in quest of truth and justice for all instead of disregarding the suffering of Other beings. In this way, he assumes the responsibility of acting and carries out the condition of his existence as an authentic being in spite of the fact that unfreedom is a reality, a man-made facticity in the country where he lives. However, he gets exhausted between this facticity limiting his freedom and the desire to make of himself through his own choices and acts. Thus, his activism under restricted freedom for the sake of gaining insight to the truth gradually raises his existential crisis. In the following section, I will discuss how Ben strives to overcome this crisis and how it leads to his isolation.

3. 3. Responsibility and the Conflict between Action and Inertia

According to Sartrean existential thought, which supports Heidegger’s view that man is thrown into the world without any foundation of what is right and what is wrong, man determines his own essence and meaning of life through his acts. In these acts, which take roots from personal choices, he is responsible toward both himself and humanity since he is in the world with Others. This liability comes to be

an impulse for action. Those who have the consciousness of responsibility become authentic beings in the world through their actions.

In Brink's novel, Ben changes from a passive and obedient family man to an active, questioning individual who assumes responsibility for acting. The conversation between the narrator and Ben before his death indicates the inertia of the 'old' Ben who "lack[s] [...] ambition", and is "very much his own man" (10) and, in Susan's words, "a loser" (24):

"Don't you want to become a school principal one day, or an inspector?"

"No, I don't like administrative work."

[...]

"When we were at varsity you had such definite dreams about a 'happy society', a 'new age'. What's become of all that?"

[...] "One soon finds out there's no point in trying to reform the world." (28)

Instead of "trying to take the world by storm", this old Ben believes that he can achieve more with silent acts (28). To him, every individual has something he is meant to do, a unique duty in the world, which cannot be performed by someone else. He prefers to wait to discover this something "like an actor waiting for his cue" to "trying to find it" (29). This "waiting" can be seen as a sign of inaction like in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, where it symbolizes the existential absurdity of life.

Ben's passivity before he witnesses the victimization of the Other by the white dominance for the sake of preserving the existence of their selves is also associated

with his naïveté. He hopes that Gordon will be home after the interrogation of the Special Branch and he wants to rely on the information they have given him about the health of Gordon in prison. However, after seeing the tortured corpse of Gordon, Ben is no longer blind to the injustice done to the Other by the Special Branch.

He changes from a man of thought to a man of action by assuming the responsibility for helping the dehumanized Other under the oppression of the white community. He actively begins to fight for bringing Gordon's death to light by presenting a case. At that point, he still has trust in justice: "They won't get away with it in court, Stanley" he insisted. "Our courts have always had a reputation for impartiality" (96). Although Stanley tells him that it will be no use and he "still believe[s] in miracles", he is naïvely hopeful for justice (103-4). On the last day of the inquest when the verdict is handed down, he loses his last hope for justice from a court of law, and he begins to question the existence of justice in the current system. From that moment on, the reader can observe that he individually embarks on a quest for truth and justice. However, in this quest he is not completely alone. Melanie as well as Stanley helps him in his search for clues for the trial. She who is also white but not an Afrikaner in origin seems to be Ben's other self. She is a "light in the bloom" (161) for Ben because, unlike Susan who does not understand his cause, she gives him confidence to act and encourages him to go on with his struggle (183). Similar to him, she has the consciousness of responsibility for being in the world:

"There aren't many ordinary people around nowadays."

"What do you mean?" He looked at her with a suggestion of suspicion, yet disarmed by her smile.

“Just that very few people seem prepared to be simply human – and to take responsibility for it.” (116)

She considers responsibility as a condition for human acts in accordance with existential philosophy. As a responsible individual, Melanie, like Ben, intends to overcome her inertia, her feeling of laziness, since inaction is a threat to existence:

“...Deep down, I suppose, I’m just lazy... Nothing would be easier than to indulge myself, to allow myself to sink back to it, like in one of these old easy chairs. But it’s dangerous... I mean, one can lead such a delightfully cushioned existence that you actually stop living, stop feeling, stop caring [...]

Then, one day, you discover that life itself is slipping and past and you’re just a bloody parasite, something white and maggot-like, not really a human being, just a thing, a sweet and ineffective thing.” (128-29)

The idea of futility can be associated with one’s indifference or blindness to one’s humanness. By forgetting the responsibility toward oneself and the Other beings, one forgets his existence in the world. Like Ben, Melanie’s blindness disappears when she allows herself to recognize the existence of the Other. Her housemaid Dorothy’s life in poverty, the life of the black Other, opens her eyes to the reality:

“It was not the poverty as such: one knows about poverty, one reads the newspapers, one isn’t blind, one even has a ‘social conscience’. But Dorothy was someone I thought I *knew*; she lived with me in the same house every day of my life. As if, for the first time, I made the

discovery that other lives *existed*. And worst of all was the feeling that I knew just as little about my own life as about theirs.” (130)

When Melanie contacts the Other in a real sense, she begins to question both the Other’s and her own existence. What steers Ben and his soul mate Melanie into acting is this existential questioning – questioning of being-in-the-world with others.

Being committed to his responsibility to act, Ben refuses to yield to injustice and take it for granted. His refusal to obey passively can be seen in his talk with Dominée Bester:

“There is no evil that cannot be cured by prayer, Oom Ben. Don’t you think you and I should [...] pray for our Government and for every man in a position of authority?”

“I find it too easy, Dominée, to shrug off our responsibility by referring them to God.” [...] “It’s not a question of whether I trust Him or not, Dominee. He can manage without me. The question is whether there may be something He expects *me* to do. With my own hands.” (144)

Ben is against the Christian orthodoxy that holds the belief that authority takes its power from God so that one must accept its decisions without question and that all one can do is to pray for justice. He rejects passive acceptance of the Divine Providence if it means disregarding the duty of the individual. His attitude toward the personal responsibility for choices and acts reflects the existential philosophy that posits that one should assume responsibility for acting as long as one’s body exists in the world. Ben, having an existence in the world, feels helpless in his struggle against

the injustice of the system and the lack of freedom of individual thought and action; nevertheless, he does not retreat:

“...I simply don’t know anything anymore [...] .All I know,” he said, “is that it won’t be worthwhile having a soul left if I allow this injustice to stand.”

“What are you planning to do, Oom Ben?” asked the Rev Bester... “I wish I could give you an answer. I wish I knew myself. All I know is that I must do something.” (145-46)

His ambition to do something, to act, to perform his responsibility, is significant for not losing his conscience and his soul. Although his wife Susan compares him to Don Quixote, “the man with whom the whole world seems to be out of step” (139), and he knows that his acts may not be successful, he is very decisive in pulling his weight:

“Surely, if I were to consider what I might ‘achieve’ in a practical sense I couldn’t even hope to begin. So it must be something else... Perhaps simply to do what one has to do, because you’re *you*, because you’re *there*.

I am Ben du Toit. I’m here. There’s no one else but myself right here, today. So, there must be something no one but me can do: not because it is ‘important’ or ‘effective’, but because only I can do it [...] because no one else in the world in Ben du Toit.” (161-62)

Ben takes responsibility for his existence, for his being-in-the-world as an individual who is expected to determine his own self by acting. In this sense, he escapes bad faith – ignorance of one’s freedom to define the self and the meaning of life –

marking the inauthenticity of being. However, since he is restricted in his every act from finding out the truth about the oppressive regime, which is a disincentive for individuals to be controller of their lives, his authenticity is impeded. As a result, he is confronted with a dilemma between action and inaction. From time to time, he feels overwhelmed by the feeling of responsibility as more and more black people are coming to him to ask for help (214). This drags him into questioning if he should give up struggling for justice. Moreover, the suffering of the Others because of his acts makes him feel hopeless by increasing his existential crisis: “I wanted to “clean up” Gordon’s name, as Emily had put it. But all I’ve done so far is to plunge other people into the abyss. Including Gordon? It’s like a nightmare,... Am I the leper spreading disease to whomever comes close enough?” (236). This feeling of being a contagious disease ruining the other lives is related to his incapacity against his “invisible enemy” (237). The more he struggles to defeat this invisible “naked power” (244), the more helpless he feels. Thus, he begins to believe that it is “madness to hope for even the most paltry form of change” (244).

His hopeless struggle to change things for the better is made more difficult by his solitude and isolation, but he still tries to hold onto his cause:

“My thoughts wandered back, all the way. Childhood. University. ...Susan. Our children. Responsibilities. The empty predictable rhythms of my existence. ...Jonathan. Gordon. Emily. Stanley. Melanie. ...I felt myself groping on the edge of a strange abyss. Utterly alone....

But I dare not give way to a new depression... I must go on. Stanley was right, after all. We must endure. We must survive.” (248-49)

Although he seems to give way to a melancholic state of mind, he does not resign himself to his fate. He tries to motivate himself for acting in order to survive. After Stanley brings him the news that Jonathan’s younger brother Robert has been shot and died, and that Emily has committed suicide in the Orlando train station, he resolves that he cannot give up anymore: “All I know is that it is impossible to stop now. If I can’t go on believing in what I’m doing I’ll go mad” (260). However, Susan accuses him of being selfish, and she leaves home after their quarrel about this issue. Later, after his intimate photographs with Melanie have been mailed to his house, his whole family opposes him for his “shameful” deeds except his son Johan. Ben also has to resign from his job at school. Feeling “the rock-bottom of loneliness” (267), he tries to face his solitude that drives him to question his psyche: “Am I mad – or is it the world? Where does the madness of the world begin? And if it is madness, why is it permitted? Who allows it?” (266).

Completely helpless and alone, he wishes for everything he lived to “become part of one vast mirage”, and he feels like a paranoiac, like a man having “an illness in his brain, a tumour, a cancerous growth, a malignant accumulation of cells causing him to lose touch with what was really happening” (285). This feeling of madness reaches a point where his existential crisis leads him to excessive anguish. He cannot foresee his end or reconcile himself to God or the world; on the contrary, he feels helpless in the presence of a “blind uncontrollable motion [...] as imperceptible as the motion of the earth under his feet” (285). After Stanley abandons him too, he

feels completely isolated from human community. He cannot eat or sleep and feels “claustrophobic” like “a bumblebee in a bottle” (299).

Despite his isolation and helpless situation, Ben never accepts defeat. As Isidore Diala points out, “he rises beyond mortal fear, liberated in fact by his consciousness of the inevitability of defeat and death, resolute in his election of a path which might achieve at least some modest meaning for society” (“André Brink and the Implications” 911). Even though his acts may end in failure, Ben is “prepared to pay the full price” (*A Dry White Season* 297) by assuming his responsibility toward humanity:

“If I act, I cannot but lose. But if I do not act, it is a different kind of defeat,... Because then I will not have a conscience left.

The end seems ineluctable: failure, defeat, loss. The only choice I have left is whether I am prepared to salvage a little honour, a little decency, a little humanity – or nothing.” (305)

Inaction is also a defeat in the sense that one refuses one’s humanity by remaining silent to the suffering of the Other beings-in-the-world. Inertia for Ben, in this sense, is a sort of complicity, the confirmation of guilt committed to the Other.

Being fully conscious of the value of being human, Ben refuses to connive at injustice although it costs him his life. He is killed in a car accident on the day when he sends his documents to the narrator. His existential quest beginning with his desire to know the Other, to choose and act freely, and to resist inaction, finally results in his isolation and death. The narrator describes the situation in which both he and Ben find themselves as a “vicious circle” (315). Ben, as a man “capable of being” – Being-for-itself – who is aware of his existential individuality – wants to

transcend this vicious circle throughout the novel; however, he is prevented from achieving this by the oppressive white regime that sustains the vicious circle.

The narrator tells the story of Ben because he believes in reporting what one knows (316). Brink, in a 2010 interview, also refers to the responsibility of writing: "...one of the functions of a writer: to try and bear witness,... being there and reporting on being there, especially in a time of terror, in a time of atrocities, in a time of trauma. I have always felt that *being there* is so tremendously important" (6).

Being conscious of "being there", being in a country where the individuality of the black Other is disregarded and suppressed by the white self, Ben writes what he knows in his diary, and by the act of writing he proves his existence in the world. Although he has been constantly prevented from achieving his authentic self, he survives through the narrator's writing, through the consciousness of the Other. In this way, even after he "ceases to be", he exists in the consciousness of the Other.

CHAPTER IV

AGE OF IRON BY J. M. COETZEE

Children of iron, I thought. Florence herself, too, not unlike iron. The age of iron. After which the age of bronze. How long before the softer ages return in their cycle, the age of clay, the age of earth? A Spartan matron, iron-hearted, bearing warrior-sons for the nation. (46)

J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (1990)

The title of Coetzee's novel, *Age of Iron*, is a mythical expression borrowed from Hesiod, referring to a period when injustice, violence, and shame surrounded people's lives (qtd. in Brittan 480), because of a lack of grace or charity. In such a period, human values such as mercy and understanding are replaced by degradation and ignorance. By using this title, Coetzee reflects "the spiritual deformation of South Africans by the social and political structures of apartheid" (Marais 230) during the State of Emergency between 1986 and 1989. Elizabeth Curren, the white protagonist of the novel, an old retired professor of classics suffering from terminal cancer, describes this period by saying that black child-revolutionaries are the "children of iron" who inherited the hatred or stone-like heartedness from their parents' generation. However, it was not only the black youngsters in the townships who caused restlessness; there was also political unrest and chaos in every place where the State of Emergency was officially declared by the South African government in 1986.

During that period, André Brink states, the media were silenced: none of the media organs was allowed to report openly about what was happening in the country (*Reinventing a Continent* 136). For this reason, while most of the black people knew what was happening since they were experiencing it first-hand, white people hardly heard about it. South African whites believed or wanted to believe that unrest in the country was declining day by day under their white Afrikaner comrade Botha's regime (42-53).

Coetzee sets his novel in this restless period, which Jane Poyner describes as "the waning but most virulent years of apartheid" (*Writing in the Face of Death* 111). He fictionalizes the unrest in Cape Town during that period. Militant young people were demanding liberation in education and promoting school boycotts, and the security forces were using any power – including violence, torture and killing – against the black rebels. Besides, "non-white solidarity" and "black opposition" were dramatically increasing because of the lack of authority during the interregnum (Head 67).

Although Coetzee sets his novel on a historical context, his oeuvre generally focuses on textuality and fiction rather than historicizing – unlike the traditional social realist writing in South Africa. David Attwell notes that Coetzee has "a form of political and ethical" evasiveness, while in South Africa under apartheid the demand in writing is a realistic report of oppression (*J.M. Coetzee* 11). Coetzee's implications of race and colonialism, he claims, cannot be seen as a desire for historical representation, and he is one of the "less obviously affiliated political" writers among other South African writers (25-26). Since his "narratives are inclined to be less straightforward, more ambiguous, [...] at least on the surface" (Post 67), he

is considered to be a marginal author writing about marginal characters. This marginality and evasiveness enables critics to interpret his texts from various perspectives. For instance, while Attwell focuses on the relationship between history and fiction in Coetzee's novels, Sue Kossew pays attention to their political and fictional aspects in comparison with Brink's novels. On the other hand, Dominic Head positions him as an ethical postmodernist.

Yet Coetzee himself avoids positioning himself as an author who "embrace[s] the ethical as against the political", and he believes that "one has a duty (an ethical duty? Perhaps) not to submit to powers of discourse without question" (*Doubling the Point* 200). In this sense, it can be argued that rather than reporting history or politics, he puts emphasis on language and discourse, in one sense on 'history' produced by them. He states that history is created by way of language, and without language it would be impossible to record history publicly (Gitzen 3).

Without ignoring history or reality in South Africa, Coetzee "refracts direct social representation with self-conscious fictionality" (Atwell 520). While South African fiction demands an overtly political writing because of the tragic dilemma of the country (Barnett 290), Coetzee brilliantly combines ethics, fiction, history and the politics of apartheid in his novel *Age of Iron*. In Peter D. McDonald's words, he "emerges as a hero of the margins" ("The Writer, the Critic, and the Censor" 297). However, when compared to other novels of Coetzee, *Age of Iron* points more to "realism" (Poyner 8) and to the politics of apartheid, which also can be clearly observed in *A Dry White Season*.

In *Age of Iron*, the narration is embedded with the political restlessness in Cape Town and the psychological and physical unease of the narrator living there. Mrs.

Curren, the confessor narrator of the novel who is dying of cancer, represents how the private space of the individual is eradicated by publicity because of the tragic collapse of the country under the State of Emergency. The chaos in the country leave no space for personal suffering since life begins to lose its meaning due to the everyday violence and death instigated by the white police forces. Mrs. Curren's body decays because of carcinomatosis, just as the country suffers from another kind of disease – oppression and violence. However, this biological crisis in her body is not the only crisis with which she struggles. She also wrestles with an existential crisis taking root from the burden of shame of complicity-in-ignorance toward the bloody racial dilemma in the land. As a member of the white population that cruelly tortures and kills the black Others in the country, she is ashamed of its conduct. While her cancer-ridden body is one reason of her questioning her own existence in the world, another and more important reason is her encounter with the death of the black Other in a battlefield black town, similar to Brink's protagonist Ben du Toit's encounter with Gordon's corpse.

Upon *seeing* the black Other in the face of death, she begins to change completely from an old woman, whose motherly care has been reserved just for the one with whom she has a blood-relation, for a self inherited from her self – that is her daughter –, to a woman who recognizes the Other as a subject. In other words, she gradually turns into a person who transcends her self in order to be able to love the Other. Mrs. Curren narrates this existential questioning and the accompanying change to the reader in the epistolary form. She depicts her experiences and her isolation in the corrupt South Africa. In her long letter intended to be sent to her daughter in America with the help of Vercueil, a derelict she meets on the day when

she gets the news that she is about to die, the reader witnesses the sincere avowals of a dying old white dissenting woman and her belated activism for freedom for all.

4. 1. The Notions of Self and Other

Like Brink's *A Dry White Season*, in Coetzee's novel there are diverse 'Others'. Vercueil, for example, having "a smell of urine" (*Age of Iron* 4), is described not as "an angel" but "an insect" by Mrs. Curren (12). There is no implication whether his racial identity is colored, white, or black. Mrs. Curren's domestic help Florence and her two little daughters Hope and Beauty, her son Bheki and Bheki's militant friend John (later called Johannes), and Mr. Thabane, who is Florence's cousin, are the identified black Others in the novel.

Mrs. Curren's relationship with Vercueil, with the Other whose race or color is unvoiced, begins as a sort of charity – like the charity of Ben du Toit to Gordon. She invites him to her house and offers him some food just as she feeds an animal. She gives because she is "full enough to give", "to nourish" from her fullness (7). This motherly care is one reason for her helping him and offering him a job, which is to cut the lawn. On the other hand, she illustrates her lack of affection for him by describing him as "a derelict, an alcoholic, a lost soul" (13) because Vercueil does not feel indebted to her in return for her care of him. He spits a gob of spit before her where she can 'see' it (7). However, he is the one who helps her to *see* the ugliness she has avoided for so long. As a person who "revolts at the lassitude", Mrs. Curren for the first time confronts a different "language", a different kind of "word", which Latin – the language she knows very well as a retired classics professor – or any language she knows, is inadequate to describe.

At the beginning, Mrs. Curren intends to establish a give-and-take relationship with Vercueil, with the Other. She believes that they cannot “proceed on a basis of charity” because one must “deserve” charity (19). Although she tells him that the word “charity” is related to heart in Latin etymology, she knows that “the true root of charity” is care (20), – the sense of care, which can be seen as the opposite of ignorance toward Other beings. Her care and charity change into a voluntary love during the course of the novel.

Upon hearing the news that she is about to die of an incurable disease and upon meeting the uninvited stranger Vercueil, she begins to write a letter to her daughter. She decides to write because in “the Look” of this Other, she sees her self. While she writes about him, or his dog, or the house she and he share together, she actually writes about herself because she finds the reality of her life, her existence in the world with the Other Being-for-themselves (8). By writing, she wants to survive, not to cease to live at least in the memory of the Others. For this reason, she asks Vercueil to send her papers to her daughter: “They are my daughter’s inheritance. They are all I can give her, all she will accept, coming from this country” (28). It is clear that although they seem to be a personal account of one’s life, these papers are about the corrupt South Africa in which white rulers are “sitting in a circle, debating ponderously, issuing decrees like hammer-blows: death, death, death” (26) and where “the spirit of charity has perished” (19).

From the very beginning of the novel, it is explicit that as a white ‘self’ she has sympathy for the Other – black or white – unlike her daughter and other whites lacking the feeling of care. When one of her neighbors describes Vercueil as a vagrant, although Mrs. Curren does not know him enough yet, she defensively says

that he is “not a vagrant”, he is a man working for her (22). Moreover, she protects him from the black Others such as Florence who calls him one of the “rubbish people” for “he is good for nothing” (44). Since Mrs. Curren does not have racial consciousness, her humanity and motherly affection are for all those who are in need. Although she does not trust Vercueil, she nominates him as her messenger and toward the end of the novel, they gradually get closer to each other as Vercueil shares her house, her bed, and her loneliness.

Although she is not disturbed by the existence of Vercueil, her restlessness increases with the newcomers to her old house, “built solidly but without love, cold, inert now, ready to die” like her cancerous body (13). Florence brings her fifteen-year-old son Bheki with her as well as her two daughters to Mrs. Curren’s house. Because of the violence at schools in Guguletu, where Florence’s people live, she cannot leave Bheki behind. A friend of Bheki, John, a young boy like him, also comes to stay in the house. Therefore, her house is inhabited by people who are foreign to her ‘self’, just like her body invaded by an incurable illness. She feels like an “old woman who lived in shoe” with “five people, a dog and two cats” in the backyard (33) – like being “trapped in a crowd” (47). She has to cope with these Others who occupy her privacy, her house, and with the pain in her body at the same time.

Although the country is under the State of Emergency and therefore “smoulders”, her “true attention is all inward” (36). She “can only half-attend” the struggle of the country because she is so much focused on her suffering body “burning” like the country itself, and she is so much interested in her self and being-in-the-world that she cannot ‘see’ the suffering of the Others. When she thinks of

what is happening in Guguletu where “the police come in and shoot” brutally (49), she is happy that her only child is far away from that violence in the country. Apart from this, she is “tired of being used” by those Others in her house: “...it was my car they were sleeping in. My car, my house: mine: I was not yet gone” (54). Therefore, she wants “to get them out of the house” (52). However, in time, her illness becomes a catalyst for her understanding the Others’ existence in front of death, which is a stark fact that no one without any exception of race or color can escape. Her passive liberal values are challenged when she begins to negate her suffering body and her *self-centeredness*. With self-negation she gets closer to the Other Being-for-themselves and their suffering. As a result, she gradually dispossesses her self for the sake of identifying with the Otherness of those beings around her. This self-negation becomes the starting point for her existential crisis.

The first moment when she faces the suffering of the Other is where the black Other Bheki and his black John are pushed by a police van while they are riding bicycles. She sees the blood on the bodies of two black boys lying on the pavement after the accident, and she begins to question the color of blood in terms of race:

Blood flowed in a sheet into the boy’s [John’s] eyes and made his hair glisten; it dripped on the pavement; it was everywhere. I did not know blood could be so dark, so thick, so heavy...

...What did our [whites’] timid thimbleful count for beside this torrent of black blood? Child Snowdrop lost in the cavern of blood, and her mother lost too. (57)

She explains the racial difference between the black and white people and how much black people have suffered when compared to the whites. At this moment, she also

sees the reality uniting all beings regardless of color – i.e. the reality of blood as the source of life and existence. By recognizing the equality of self and Other before the facticity of death as lack of blood and body, she moves from white liberal conscience to human consciousness, which allows her to see beyond racial identities of self and the Other: “Blood is one: a pool of life dispersed among us in separate existences, but belonging by nature together. ...The blood of all, [...] .The blood of mankind...” (58). Her understanding of the Other begins to change with this bloody incident although she still cannot love Bheki’s “self-important” black friend, John (42). She is still on the way toward discovering the pain of the black Others under the oppression of white Afrikaner ruling system.

This internal journey intensifies her existential crisis driven by her helpless body suffering from cancer. In addition, an external journey enables her to see the real ‘Other’ in Guguletu, a black neighborhood where killing and violence are the basic instruments of white police to suppress the black militant young children. When she, Florence, and Florence’s cousin Mr. Thabane travel to Guguletu in order to find Bheki who disappears, she sees “a scene of devastation: shanties burnt and smouldering, shanties still burning, pouring forth black smoke” (87). She hears gunfire and shots, and she watches gangs of men and some incendiaries setting fires and attacking the houses violently (87-88). When she is asked what she thinks about these scenes, she cannot find the right words to describe the violence she has seen. She only says “it’s a crime” (90). When Mr. Thabane insists that she describes what kind of crime it is, she wants to express it in her own words:” There are terrible things going on here. But what I think of them I must say in my own way...” (91). Since she is ashamed of the crime committed in her name by the white Afrikaner

regime (149), she rejects being labeled as one of those racist white Afrikaners. While Florence and Mr. Thabane look for Bheki around, she waits in embarrassment as an Afrikaner white self among the black Others. She is like “bad luck” in the black territory (93), because she does not belong to this place as a white self. However, like Ben du Toit, she desperately wants to help these suffering Others, at least Florence as a mother looking for her innocent child.

Upon seeing Bheki’s corpse among the five bodies laid out under the rain, she becomes conscious of the violence used towards the black Others by her own race. She is shaken before that scene, and her white blindness or indifference toward Other selves is staggered by the death of this black Other Bheki: “Now my eyes are open and I can never close them again” (95). From that moment on, her blindness changes into an illumination, to a newborn consciousness. To see his death helps her to face the reality of all selves or Others: *we* and *they* issues are neutralized in front of death. However, this event increases her existential restlessness. Her house feels “cold and alien” (99), and she no longer cares if she lives or what might happen to her: “If someone had dug a grave for me, [...] I would without a word have climbed in and lain down” (96). She prefers to die instead of living in shame, shame of being a white Afrikaner who passively watches while black Others are being killed by her own people.

As a matter of fact, she is aware that killing has surrounded the country because of the rule of the Boers even before she sees the corpse of Bheki: “...life in this country is so much like life aboard a sinking ship, one of those old-time liners with lugubrious, drunken captain and a surly crew and leaky lifeboats,...” (20). South Africa is a sinking ship with its merciless rulers and ignorant crew. She is

conscious that the country is corrupt because of the oppression and violence in every corner of it. Moreover, the media sustain the intentions of the white government:

Television. Why do I watch it? The parade of politicians every evening... They [...], a locust horde, a plague of black locusts infesting the country, munching without cease, devouring lives [...] the reign of the locust family is the truth of South Africa... (25)

We watch as birds watch snakes,... Between the hours of eight and nine we assemble and they show themselves to us... A thanatophany: showing us our death... Death to the young. Death to life. Boars that devour their offspring. The Boar War. (26)

Mrs. Curren criticizes the white rulers for the ease with which they kill, and as Attwell suggests, she condemns their new forms of puritanism and militarism (*J.M. Coetzee* 122). She knows that what happens in black towns is hidden from the white community with the aim of making these white selves as ignorant as possible toward the existence of black Others: “Of trouble in the schools the radio says nothing, the television says nothing, the newspapers say nothing. What I know about events in Guguletu depends solely on what Florence tells me, [...] namely, that Guguletu is not burning today, it is burning, is burning with a low flame” (37). She feels repentance and shame because of her lifelong indifference toward the Others’ existence and their suffering under the rule of her own people. Although the country is presented like “a land of smiling neighbors” (49), she knows it is not the reality. The white community, to her, is a “doll-folk” living “a doll’s life” (100). She is also a white self, but her antagonism to the brutality of the white régime separates her from her white community: “I, a white. When I think of the whites, what do I see? I see a herd

of sheep (not a flock: a herd) milling around on a dusty plain under the baking sun. I hear a drumming of hooves, [...] ‘I!’ ‘I!’ ‘I!’ And, cruising among them, [...] the savage, unreconstructed old boars grunting ‘Death!’ ‘Death!’” (73). The self-centered lives of the white make them blind to the reality of South Africa, the country which is “an albatross from the old world” around one’s neck (117). They cannot see that in this burning country where blood and death is everywhere, the day-old “land-explorers, the colonists, prepare to return to the deep” (116). South Africa is now a place where one cannot live peacefully because of embarrassing blindness and complicity in the crime committed against the country: “The whites of South Africa participated, in various degrees, actively or passively, in an audacious and well-planned crime against Africa” (*Doubling the Point* 342). Mrs. Curren feels the shame as a white woman in South Africa.

However, her questioning of her identity is not because of the feeling of guilt but because of “the burden of consciousness”, “which is a form of pain” (116). She struggles with both the firm consciousness of shame and the pain in her cancer-ridden body, which causes her to experience a double existential crisis: questioning her own life and the lives of those Other Being-for-themselves. She is weakened by this burden of shame, and she is in haste to leave “this worthless life” she leads (*Age of Iron* 107). Although she knows that it is not her doing that her times had been so disgracing and that she is incapable of lifting this shame on her own with her old sick body (107), she still does not want to lose the “sense of shame” (109). The reason is that, only in this way, she may know that she is a good person:

...in his soul the honorable man can suffer no harm [...] .As long as I was ashamed I knew I had not wandered into dishonour. That was the

use of shame as a touchstone [...] .For the rest I kept a decent distance from my shame. I did not wallow in it. Shame never became a shameful pleasure; it never ceased to gnaw me. I was not proud of it. My shame, my own. (150)

Not to fall into dishonor, she wants to keep this disgrace. On the other hand, she is ashamed of it since it implies the objectification of the Other by the white selves. In this sense, her recognition of shame as the price she pays for the crime committed in her name indicates that she acknowledges the existence of the Other as a subject, as Being-for-itself rather than Being-in-itself, unlike those naïve white selves who tend to accept the subject-object relationship between the self and Other beings.

Especially after her white Afrikaner identity is challenged by the feeling of shame, which has been accelerated by seeing the death of the Other, she gradually feels the unimportance of her bodily suffering and of her self. In her talk to Bheki's friend whom she wants to convince that war is not for children, she confesses that what makes her sick and hopeless is not her cancerous body but a different kind of cancer: "I have cancer. 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" (132). What she suffers is a non-biological cancer that eats one's soul because of consciousness and hopelessness. This is very similar to Ben du Toit's "illness in his brain, a tumour, a cancerous growth, a malignant accumulation of cells causing him to lose touch with what was really happening" (*A Dry White Season* 285).

She explains this non-biological disease to one of the white police officers who tries to keep her from interfering in their job when the police go to Mrs. Curren's

house to take John since he is suspected of being involved in militant acts. She remarks that she had “cancer of the heart” and that she had “caught it by drinking from the cup of bitterness” (*Age of Iron* 142). She also warns them not to be blind to the cruelty that they cause by saying naively: “You will probably catch it too one day. It is hard to escape” (142). However, it is definite that as an old sick woman who has already given up her self and given in to her impending death; she has no voice and no power to wake the blindness of these white Being-for-themselves. She is alienated from her white self drawing her to live the life of a doll, “living not life but an idea of life, immortal, undying, like all ideas” (101) – a life far from reality, a life without conscience and consciousness. Because of this, with her eyes open to the reality of South Africa, she intends to transcend her self to be able to love the Other, especially “the unlovable” one, which is Bheki’s friend:

I do not love this child,...

...I do not want to die in the state I am in, in a state of ugliness. I want to be saved. How shall I be saved? By doing what I do not want to do [...] I must love, first of all, the unlovable. I must love, for instance, this child. He is here for a reason. He is part of my salvation. I must love him. (124-25)

She knows that she must love the Other despite her self but she does not want to. The reason is the violence in this child. She believes that “the instinct for battle” in him is “too strong” (131), and it is as if he carries a “bomb on his chest like a talisman” (137). For this reason, by loving the unlovable black boy she wants to transcend her judgmental self for the sake of an unconditional love. Although she fails to love him, even after the police kills him in her house where she lets him stay for protection

from the violence in Guguletu, she cannot forget this child because the facticity of death unites both Mrs. Curren and John. The boy has died, and she is about to die as well. In her own words, she will face “the great white glare” – death – after him (160).

She also cannot forget Florence, another black Other. She has a dream of her or a kind of hallucination because of her illness. When she is in her bed, she is in Florence’s room, too (159). Although neither John nor Florence is around her physically, her consciousness is occupied with them. Her mind is busy with thinking of the Others and their pain instead of her own bodily suffering: “I remember, when the boy was hurt, how abundantly he bled, how rudely. How thin, by comparison, my bleeding on to the paper here. The issue of a shrunken heart” (125). Compared to the suffering of those black Others, her shame and suffering seem to be insignificant. In this sense, at the end of the novel, she is completely moved away from her self-centeredness.

She helplessly waits for her death under the care of Vercueil. At the beginning, Vercueil is under her protection; toward the end of the novel she falls under his care (179). It can be counted as a reversal of roles, a kind of reciprocity in understanding. Vercueil as the Other shares her solitude in the absence of her daughter. They share the same room like “old mates”, and Mrs. Curren renames him as her “shadow husband” (173-74). It can be considered a kind of agreement with the Other, and in the sense of their relationship, selfhood and otherness can be redefined. However, the last “embrace” from which Mrs. Curren has had no warmth indicates that love is not a possibility between the self and the Other. Moreover, in the due course of the novel, it is observed that the black Others do not accept her as one of them. Although

she is ashamed of what her people are doing to the black Others, and she claims that she “stands on the other side” (140) – i.e., on the side of the Other like Ben du Toit – her criticizing “the comradeship” is not welcomed by Mr. Thabane:

‘Mr. Thabane, [...] as for this killing, this bloodletting in the name of *comradeship*, I detest it with all my heart and soul. I think it is barbarous. That is what I want to say.’

‘...Then let me say, Mrs. Curren, I don’t think you understand very much about comradeship [...] When you are body and soul in the struggle as these young people are, [...] then a bond grows up that is stronger than any bond you will know again. That is comradeship... We stand back but we stand behind them. That is what you cannot understand, because you are too far away.’ (136-37)

She is an outsider, a foreigner to the black Others. She wants to share their suffering but she also knows that she has no right to do this as a white self whose existence is associated with violence and death: “‘I saw the body [...] I was shaken’ I said [to Vercueil]. ‘I won’t say *grieved* because I have no right to the word, it belongs to his own people’” (113). In this sense, it is clear that Mrs. Curren as a white voice cannot talk for these black Others because she does not belong to their world.

Although she recognizes the individuality of the Others and the equality in the face of life and death – of existence and non-existence – she is voiceless as an old woman dying of cancer, and she is incapable of changing the cruel power which has invaded the Other selves in South Africa. As a result, the helplessness she cannot escape increases her existential crisis in the absence of her freedom to choose to live

or die in this place. This lack of freedom will be discussed in detail in the next part.

4. 2. Freedom and Unfreedom

According to existential philosophy, man chooses a self by choosing from possibilities – freely, with conscious aims. He is free in his actions and inaction. However, when there is a force, a power over an individual, which limits his freedom, his authority of choosing and defining himself freely is demolished. Outside his facticity such as body, blood, birth, class, and race upon which he is expected to build his essence, when he is limited by the existence of an authority making his own authority impossible, man as Being-for-itself cannot achieve his authenticity since his choices are made under given conditions –in an unfree existence.

In the South African context, such a restricting power always exists because of the fact that the State decides who is to be free in both private and social spheres. This power violates individual freedom – either of whites or of blacks – by using body as a political instrument. Coetzee indicates this plight in the country in *Doubling the Point*: “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 [...] but for political reasons, for reasons of power” (248). He emphasizes that power is an undeniable authority in South Africa. He also expresses, through his writer protagonist Señor C in *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) the lack of individual freedom: “It is hardly in our power to change the form of the state and impossible to abolish it because vis-à-vis the state, we are, precisely, powerless” (3).

Even though one wants to transcend this power, one is incapable of doing so because it exists beyond individual power.

By looking at Coetzee's main characters, it seems that most of them are unfree because this kind of power restricts their individual freedom. Magda, for instance, is a white woman who helplessly wants to have a voice under the male dominant, oppressive regime. She cannot have one because she is born in slavery – i.e., born as unfree by conditions and “every man born in slavery is born for slavery” (*In the Heart of the Country* 134). The Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* also suffers from the cruelty of the Empire and cannot prevent its killing the Others and plundering their land. Another character, Michael K, the protagonist of *Life and Times of Michael K* prefers to live on earth, to lead an isolated life far from civilization and publicity and not to be a part of the system, but military forces do not allow him to lead a life that he personally yearns for. In *Age of Iron*, which is set in corrupt South Africa where “nothing is private anymore” under the State of Emergency (157), it is apparent that man is not free because of the oppressive system:

Reason they [the white politicians] have shrugged off what absorbs them is power and the stupor of power. Eating and talking, munching lives, belching... Dingane in white skins. Pressing downward: their power in their weight... Sluggish hearts, heavy as blood pudding.

And their message stupidly unchanging, stupidly forever the same... To stupefy: to deprive of feeling; to numb, deaden; to stun with amazement...

A message that turns people to stone. (24-25)

The individuality, the existence and the consciousness of man are destroyed by the power in the country – the power that makes one’s world “a closed universe, curved like an egg” by encaging him (20). In such a stone or iron age when some people’s blood is shed because of its color and some others’ whiteness gives them privilege to choose freely, violence and corruption inevitably surround people’s lives. There is violence in the schools of Guguletu, Langa, and Nganga, and there is an angry young generation full of hatred and revenge, fighting for freedom and the so-called comradeship of black people. This new “rising generation” is out of control (74), and there are many thieves, destitute and homeless people in the streets. When Mrs. Curren leaves home upon witnessing the murder of John by the police officers, some foundlings in a corner of Buitenkart Street attack her while she is trying to sleep under her quilt. After this attack, she asks if these violent, stonyhearted children have any mercy. However, she is aware that the country is already corrupt: “Why should there be mercy in the world?” (144). She thinks that South Africa is a country where a company of “bullies, thugs, torturers, killers” has a hold on power (117). The oppressive regime is turning the country into a “hell” that one cannot bear to live in: “Hundreds of thousands of men, faceless, voiceless, dry as bones, trapped on a field of slaughter, repeating night after night their back-and-forth march across that scorched plain in the stench of sulphur and blood: a hell into which I plummet when I close my eyes” (126).

Restlessness and oppression is everywhere in South Africa, which makes even the dream of freedom irrelevant. Military forces are “shooting in Guguletu” (83) and armored police vans are on the roads to the black towns (83-84). A police car deliberately pushes Bheki and John very close to a truck without leaving them any

place to ride and causes them to get seriously injured. Police also raid Mrs. Curren's house and examine it. The police officers touch everything in the house: under such an oppressive regime, there remains no space for privacy. It is "like a rape" of individual freedom (154) – not only of black Others but of white dissident selves as well.

The lack of freedom for the black Others is already an unwavering reality in the country. Since the white Afrikaners have a Calvinistic ideology of being the chosen people to rule the so-called promised land, South Africa, they possess the power and abuse it by plundering individual liberty of Being-for-themselves; Mrs. Curren calls them the "new puritans, holding to the rule, holding up the rule" (75). They kill black children and take their *freedom to live* from their hands. Mrs. Curren expresses her grief about the death of Bheki whose right to live has been taken from him:

I sat down at the table and gave myself up to tears. I cried not for the confusion in my head, not for the mess in the house, but for the boy, for Bheki. Whenever I turned he was before me, his eyes open in the look of childish puzzlement with which he had met his death. Head on arms I sobbed, grieving for him, for what had been taken from him, for what had been taken from me. Such a good thing, life! (100)

His life is taken from him by white power, which takes its roots from a sadistic approach to the Other. This power ignores his subjectivity and his freedom to exist in the world as a black Other. It uses violence on the Other or kills him like a non-self, an object, or in Sartrean terms, like Being-in-itself. Because of this, for Bheki and for

Other black children, the only choice seems to be to fight for their freedom – even at the price of death.

However, Mrs. Curren believes that although the bodies of those black Others cease to exist, their spirits will stay with them (115). The black souls are free when they die, but they are not free while they are alive. In Mrs. Curren's words, "they are safe" since they are dead (157). In this sense, death is freedom for the black Others while life is "death in life" for them (78). For black Others, "life is drowning. Falling through water, to the floor" (179), because of the white regime holding the power to decide on freedom and unfreedom of individuals. With this regard, unfreedom turns out to be a man-made facticity for the black Being-for-themselves.

Mrs. Curren shares the unfreedom of these black Others. Her conscience, besieged by her approaching death, enables her to understand the inevitability of death: "...children inside me eating more every day, not growing but bloating, toothed, clawed, forever cold and ravenous... I have lived too long. Death by fire the only decent death left" (59). Death as facticity of existence for every Being-for-itself is something inescapable. Mrs. Curren knows that her sick body is the only possession that makes her a part of this world. In the absence of 'body' – the physical existence –, there is no life. Now that her body is suffering from cancer, she begins to understand that man is not free to choose to exist or not to exist and as a result, she feels alienated from her body: "What do I care for this body that has betrayed me? I look at my hand and see only a tool, a hook, a thing for gripping other things [...], why should I have to carry them with me everywhere?" (11). Since she is incapable of changing the sickness in her body, she feels like "an exile" (69), a "prisoner" in her own body (75). In this way, she understands how it feels to be unfree because she

awaits her death, which is a power over her existence. Likewise, she shares the unfreedom of the black Others, and she believes that there is no freedom in the world:

I have no idea, what freedom is, Mr. Vercueil. I am sure Bheki and his friend had no idea either. Perhaps freedom is always and only what is unimaginable. Nevertheless, we know unfreedom when we see it – don't we? Bheki was not free, and knew it. You are not free, at least not on this earth, nor am I. I was born a slave and I will most certainly die a slave. A life in fetters, a death in fetters,... (150).

Coetzee borrows the idea that freedom is unimaginable from Kant (*Doubling the Point* 341). Believing that freedom is unreachable, he draws Mrs. Curren as a character lacking freedom. This deprivation of freedom is because of the existence of power. Mrs. Curren believes that as long as this power exists, freedom is beside the point because “it invades. That is its nature. It invades one's life” (107). Under the existence of power, one cannot transcend unfreedom. Therefore, one may think that man is everywhere in chains as Rousseau suggests in his *Social Contract*. Nevertheless, in existential philosophy, even the desire to transcend unfreedom in order to achieve authenticity as an individual by choosing among possibilities is considered to be a manifestation of freedom, of a conscious choice. In this sense, it is evident in Mrs. Curren's confession to her daughter that she works on her authentic being by struggling with her unfreedom. She is utterly aware of her confinement by power, and she intends to free herself from this power helplessly: “I want to sell myself, redeem myself, but I am full of confusion about how to do it” (107). She wants to transcend this unfreedom, but she confronts the non-existence of foundation

and therefore, she feels angst. Moreover, with her sick body, she is powerless to change the reality of violence, unfreedom and death, so she begins to find her life “worthless” (107), and she realizes that “desire” and “love” are gone from her (111). She is completely drawn into hopelessness: “Could I survive without the pills? No. But did I want to survive? 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 contact to the slow thudding of a heart” (144). As a result, she gradually yields herself to death.

The facticity of death as an ineluctable reality of existence drives her into such a desperation that she feels the existential nothingness after death. Since to exist is to live, in the absence of body one ceases to exist. Therefore, she is afraid that she will be all alone after her death: “...I have no firm idea of what is possible after death. Perhaps there will be no watching over allowed, or very little... There may not even be secrets allowed, secret watching. There may be no way of keeping a space in the heart private for you or anyone else. All may be erased. All. It is a terrible thought” (172). Due to her fear of agnosticism and being forgotten after death, Mrs. Curren writes what she has lived in a confessional mode. She chooses to write as a way of acting. Through words, she intends to survive in the memory of the Others, like Ben du Toit who has kept a diary to make some truths public and to prove that he has existed in the world. This is her way of taking the responsibility of her being-in-the-world, as she tells John:

‘There is not only death inside me. There is life too. The death is strong, the life is weak. But my duty is to the life. I must keep it alive. I must. [...] You do not believe in words. You think only blows are

real, blows and bullets. But listen to me: can't you hear that the words I speak are real? Listen! They may only be air but they come from my heart, from my womb. They are not Yes, they are not No. What is living inside me is something else, another word. And I am fighting for it, in my manner, fighting for it not to be stifled.' (133)

She believes in the power of words rather than violent resistance against oppression and injustice, and therefore she chooses writing as a form of activism. Hers can be called a non-violent resistance because her writing is a form of rejection of indifference or inertia. Even though she has not an authoritative voice as an old sick woman, she speaks for the “unheard” through her writing (134). In this way, she projects her authentic being by taking the responsibility of acting despite her unfreedom. In addition, she struggles to overcome her existential dilemma deepened by the reality of death – both for her self and for the Other. However, the more she tries, the more desolate she feels. In the next part, I will explore how her existential crisis is strengthened by her solitude and how much she resigns herself to inaction.

4. 3. Responsibility and the Conflict between Action and Inertia

According to existentialism, man is in absolute freedom whether he chooses to act or not to act: “Man everywhere has the initiative, even when he makes himself inert in order to act upon inert nature, even when he produces inert totalities where he alienates himself. There is an alienation, but *for* a freedom. And *from* a freedom” (Dufrenne 61). To this understanding, as long as action is a personal choice of man, he is regarded to be creating his authentic self by taking the responsibility of conscious choice. Unlike Brink's characters, who are active participants in resistance

to injustice, Sam Durrant is of the view that Coetzee's characters are mainly protesting witnesses who cannot decide between action and inertia:

His novels would seem to be manifestations of a melancholic or even masochistic repetition compulsion. At the same time, however, they are a mode of protesting this forced affiliation. They are thus minimal, highly qualified forms of action; as a mode of waiting for the end of apartheid, they too hover undecidably between activity and passivity.

(Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning 19)

In this sense, Coetzee's fiction generates a mode of waiting as in Beckettian *absurdism* (20). In *Age of Iron*, Mrs. Curren waits for her death in hopelessness like "a dodo quaking in her nest, sleeping with one eye open, greeting the dawn haggard" (25). Since she cannot defeat the cancer that has surrounded her body or pull through the shame brought upon her by her white identity, she chooses to wait for her death: "I am waiting for someone to show me the way across. Every minute of every day I am here, waiting" (164). Although she waits for her impending death in hopelessness, she encourages Bheki to non-violent activism by telling him that he has to lay a complaint against the two police who injured him and his friend John. In addition, she tries to do it herself, but she is not allowed since it is only permitted to those who are directly affected by the injury (77). Apart from this, when the police come to his house to take John and ask her to leave the house, she rejects by saying "I am not going" repeatedly and resists them when they try to carry her to the front door (142). She screams and wants to call out to their conscience through her words that express the shame in her heart caused by the white power which they serve. The implications of her acting this way are the rejection of silence against oppression.

At one point, in order to protest against the violence of white power, she plans to commit suicide by burning herself before the Houses of Parliament, which she renames “the house of shame” (104) and “the House of Lies” (128). Since she believes her life is worthless, by making her death public she expects to make her life more meaningful and less shameful. This is resistance or activism. However, she abandons this idea because she finds it inefficacious: “If dying in bed over weeks and months, in a purgatory of pain and shame, will not save my soul, why should I be saved by dying in two minutes in a pillar of flames? Will the lies stop because a sick old woman kills herself? Whose life will be changed and how?” (129) It is clear that unlike Ben du Toit whose active resistance against injustice proves his heroism, Mrs. Curren cannot be a heroic character because she is captured by the idea of death, which strengthens her inertia. Besides, she confesses to Vercueil that heroism does not suit her:

‘...I am a good person still. What times these are when to be a good person is not enough!

‘...What the times call for is quite different from goodness. The times call for heroism. A word that, as I speak it, sounds foreign to my lips. I doubt that I have ever used it before, even in a lecture. Why not? Perhaps out of respect. Perhaps out of shame.’ (150-51)

Heroism as a sign of active existence in the world cannot find a place in Mrs. Curren’s Gogo-and-Didi-like life. Her life “may not be perfectly good, but it is still a life, not a half-life” (152). She is living to be good and honorable. In this sense, her heroism can be moral rather than physical, unlike Ben du Toit’s.

As David Atwell suggests, in the third shift of Coetzee's novelistic oeuvre including *Age of Iron*, he emphasizes the necessity of reconstructed ethical values instead of liberal humanism (*J.M. Coetzee* 119). In the novel, Mrs. Curren reflects the lack of ethical concerns in human life: "Decency: the explicable: the ground of all ethics. Things we do not do. We do not stare when the soul leaves the body, but veil our eyes with tears or cover them with our hands" (*Age of Iron* 180). What Mrs. Curren pays attention to is the ethical responsibility of one toward the Others, which is similar to the doctrine of responsibility in existential philosophy: man is responsible toward Other beings in his choices and acts. By abandoning her self-centered values, Mrs. Curren assumes that everybody is personally responsible for his acts. In her talk to her domestic Florence, she tries to explain that parents are also responsible for the violent deeds of their children, and they cannot just put the blame on white power (49). She is aware that in South Africa it is the choices of white rulers that make an age "the age of iron", instead of "the age of granite" (47). However, she also knows that what makes the world are the choices of man. By assuming her personal responsibility as being-in-the-world, she chooses writing as a form of action because she believes that writing is "the foe of death" (106). For this reason, she writes to her daughter in America:

...It is the soul of you that I address, as it is the soul of me that will be left with you when this letter is over. (118)

...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. (120)

Through writing, she can survive in the memory of her daughter, of an Other self, even after death, and writing is the only act that she is capable of to make her authentic self.

Her long letter is not a “baring” of her heart, but “a baring of something” (13). It is “a message in a bottle with the stamps of the Republic of South Africa on it” (28). In this sense, it is a confession about both her life and the reality of South Africa. The first confession is her inability to love Bheki’s friend John, just like those who cannot love South Africa enough. She also confesses that she does not want to die in “a state of ugliness” (124). As Forrest G. Robinson reveals, Mrs. Curren as a white South African feels an urge to write her way to ethical responsibility and condemns the racial consciousness of white power (5-6) through her confessions.

It can be argued that she is sincere in her confession. In the first instance, she insists on finding her own words to express her ideas or feelings about the incident in the bush: “‘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...’” (*Age of Iron* 91). She also warns her daughter not to take everything she writes for granted: “I am the one writing: I, I. So I ask you: attend to the writing, not to me. If lies and pleas and excuses weave among the words, listen for them. Do not pass them over, do not forgive them easily. Read all, even this adjuration, with a cold eye” (95-96). Besides this, in Mrs. Curren’s confessional writing, as Coetzee points out, “sincerity is guaranteed” because of the death of the confessant (*Doubling the Point* 284). Since they are her last words to her daughter, she is far from deceiving.

By choosing, consciously and freely, this act of writing to speak out, Mrs. Curren makes her authentic being, and she is saved from bad faith. However, her long letter is a “rope of words” (*Age of Iron* 181), coming out of her sick body (8). Therefore, they are doomed to be unheard as the person who talks them is from a “bygone age” (85). Coetzee has noted that “Elizabeth Curren brings to bear against the voices of history and historical judgment that resound around her two kinds of authority: the authority of the dying and the authority of the classics. Both these authorities are denied and even derided in her world: the first because hers is a private death, the second because it speaks from long ago and far away” (*Doubling the Point* 250).

Since her language is a “dead language”, “a language spoken by the dead” (*Age of Iron* 176), her voice cannot be heard by the new generation. When she attempts to tell the white police officers in Caledon Square that they have made her ashamed, she notices that she has made fool of herself (78). She desperately wants to “bare” something to those ignorant white police officers, “to bring out a scar, a hurt, to force it upon them, to make them see it with their own eyes” (98). However, she knows that she has no voice. As a result, in the course of the novel her existential lassitude embodied in the consciousness of her impending death is deepened by her hopelessness and solitude.

She is afflicted with the passivity that accompanies melancholy. She cries more easily and sometimes without reason (64-65). As “an old woman, sick and ugly, clawing on to what she left”, she misses her mother who has given her life by giving birth to her (50). She feels like “a man who has been castrated” in his maturity, because of which he feels the pain of separation (111). Further, she, who will be

separated soon from her existence and conscious being-in-the-world by death, knows that she cannot take her chance with God for survival: “This letter has become a maze, and I a dog in the maze,... Why do I not call for help, call to God? Because God cannot help me. God is looking for me but he cannot reach me. God is another dog in another maze [...] he is lost as I am lost” (126). Since she is all alone in the world without any foundation, she gives in to melancholy, which increases her existential crisis.

Without any ground to cling to, she is also wrapped with the feeling of madness. She tells that madness is already in the air in South Africa (107), and she calls herself “a mad old do-gooder caught in the rain” (97). This feeling of madness, unlike the psychological restlessness of Ben du Toit, is also a result of her biological disease that causes her even to hallucinate. It heightens her existential predicament: She feels “hollow”, like “a shell” within which there is only non-existence. Her existence is challenged by “the black hole” she is falling into (66). In this way, she experiences an internalized absence of meaning, the emptiness and nothingness of a hole, a world outside the consciousness.

In this existential nothingness, she feels inadequate for being human: “Man, I thought: the only creature with a part of his existence in the unknown, in the future, like a shadow cast before him. Trying continually to catch up with that moving shadow, to inhabit the image of his hope. But I, I cannot afford to be a man. Must be something smaller, blinder, closer to the ground” (155). Toward the end of the novel she is fully alienated from herself. She leaves herself to her fate and resigns from her being-in-the-world as a human being.

Her existential crisis is also cultivated by the feeling of solitude, which strengthens her inertia. She misses the old days and longs for her daughter's embrace. However, her daughter has told her that she will not come back. Because of this, in time, she is alienated from her daughter, the only person close to her, and the letters she has sent become "the letters of someone grown strange, estranged" (127). Vercueil is the only person who stays with her and shares her loneliness. Nevertheless, his existence is not enough to ease her existential crisis and solitude; in contrast, his silence and idleness also contribute to Mrs. Curren's inertia. He is "dry" and he "does not know how to love" (179-80). For this reason, there is "no warmth to be had" from his embrace (180). She dies in hopelessness and cold, deprived of the warmth of any embrace or love.

Already knowing that she would "never be warm again" after seeing the corpse of Bheki, the death of the Other (99), the only way to share her agony because of shame was writing. By choosing writing, or an ethical action, instead of rejecting the responsibility of her existence in an existential sense, she chooses her self authentically. Unlike Brink, who typically calls for activism in his fiction, Coetzee writes for raising the issue of responsibility, and more specifically ethical responsibility. For this reason, even though Mrs. Curren is an old, sick, and voiceless white woman in a chaotic country, she is given a chance of "having a say" in the novel by its writer. Coetzee has pointed out in *Doubling the Point*: "What matters is that the contest is staged, that the dead have their say, even those who speak from a totally untenable historical position. So even in an age of iron, pity is not silenced" (230). In this sense, it is clear that as a white dissident in South Africa where the white self and the black Other urgently require a mutual recognition and

understanding, Mrs. Curren touches the Other with her ethical humanity through the act of writing.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The idea on which this essay built is that the white protagonists of *A Dry White Season* and *Age of Iron* experience an existential crisis because of oppression and violence surrounding their lives, which finally ends in their isolation and death. Both protagonists as white selves living with suppressed black Others in South Africa question the social paradigms of the country and their own existence in the world.

In my thesis, I focus on three major doctrines of existential philosophy: the subjectivity of Being-for-themselves; freedom of choice and its deprivation; and activism as a sign of consciousness of existence in the world. Moreover, I have attempted to indicate how potent the dissenting voices are in making themselves “a project of choices and acts” in terms of existential philosophy. Both Ben du Toit and Mrs. Curren are in pursuit of humanity in an inhumane white regime that neither can transcend. For that reason, they search for freedom as a necessity for their beings by means of writing. Through writing, they perform their duty as responsible beings toward the Other Being-for-themselves. In this way, they refuse to remain silent while the Other beings around them are being objectified by the white regime because of their racial identity. Since protesting against ignorance or indifference is to recognise the existence of Other beings and therefore of their subjectivity, neither of the white dissenting protagonists, Ben du Toit or Mrs. Curren, who recognizes the subjectivity of the Other Being-for-themselves, in existential terms, are guilty of

“bad faith”, which is the rejection of one’s conscious choice of making one’s self freely.

Even though the socio-political conditions in the country under apartheid prevent individuals to choose and act freely, both Ben du Toit and Mrs. Curren assume responsibility for their consciousness despite the surveillance of oppressive white regime. They witness the violence committed on the black dissenting voices and the destruction of their individuality. Because of this, each in his way criticizes the injustice of the system within which they live and sets off their personal resistance against it.

The difference between Brink and Coetzee in terms of their literary personality can be seen in their concern for different consciousness: Brink mostly focuses on transformation from ignorance to political consciousness while Coetzee from indifference to ethical consciousness. Since Brink believes in the social responsibility of a writer in South Africa, “in which the socio-political realities are so overwhelming that no escape is possible” (*Mapmakers* 150), he is more overtly political when compared to Coetzee. Therefore, Brink puts public events under the light by affiliating them with private experiences; on the other hand, Coetzee puts emphasis far more on the private dimension of human condition. He defends that political commitment should not overlap the fictionality of a novel and the individuality of characters. In this sense, his works are more vested with artistic and ethical concerns than political ones.

As I have discussed before, existentialist philosophy and existentialist writers such as Camus and Beckett have influenced both writers. For this reason, both Brink and Coetzee in their novels explore the human condition in a private sphere i.e., the

inner world of individuals, and death as an indispensable reality in existence. Private experiences of the protagonists draw them into a quest of immortality through the consciousness of the Other, by which they can survive nothingness. Both Ben du Toit and Mrs. Curren as narrator/writers of their own experiences intend to survive by way of writing. For both of them, writing becomes a means of expressing their personal experience of seeing the Other from the perspective of their own selves.

Brink remarks, in *Reinventing a Continent*, that “it is the intensity of private experience that drives a person to take up the pen” (19). In this sense, the protagonists through their texts illustrate their existential experience and the impossibility of handling with it, because of both the restlessness in the country they live and the uneasiness in their inner world. Their writings also indicate the lack of freedom and choice in one’s acts in South Africa.

Despite their different literary perspectives, what unites Brink and Coetzee is the reality of South Africa, the country about which both have first-hand knowledge, and the country where love is conditional and not for all. Coetzee states, “South Africa, mother of pain, can have meaning only to people who can find it meaningful to ascribe their “pain” (“alienation” is here a better word) to the failure of Africa to love them enough” (*Doubling the Point* 117). From this respect, South Africa have had different connotations for different people: For some people, it is associated with “shame”; for some others, it is “a testing ground” where different people and cultures need to coexist (Elnadi and Rifaat 8); and for some others (the Boers), it has been the promised land.

After all, there is one common incontestable idea about South Africa, which is apartheid is more than a word in this country. A country affects the emotions of

individuals inevitably. As the narrator of Lettie Viljoen's short novel *Lament for Koos* (1984) puts into words, "the country [South Africa] forms a basis for identity and analogy with emotional states" (Brink and Coetzee 177). For this reason, the restlessness in the country because of identity politics traumatizes the individual beings such as Ben du Toit and Mrs. Curren, and therefore it causes them to experience an existential dilemma. The purpose of Brink in *A Dry White Season* and of Coetzee in *Age of Iron* is to set light to the inner worlds of those individual beings questioning their existence and meaning of life under the control of an oppressive regime. Both writers illustrate one's inner journey from indifference toward the existence of Other beings to consciousness and recognition of them as subjects, in other words, as Being-for-themselves.

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