

## White Woman under Colonialism: Existential Crisis in Coetzee's *In The Heart of the Country*

Dr. Shakira Khatoon<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

---

White skin is generally been associated with power, particularly in countries with deep racial prejudices such as South Africa. Under colonialism, the relations between whites and blacks had been that of master and slave. The word 'slave' here brings to mind the images of hundreds and thousands of black men, women and children, toiling for their masters under the apartheid regime, whereas the word 'master' conjures up the figure of a white 'male' only. Never does the image of a white woman comes to mind while speaking of master-slave relations in a racially charged society. White woman remained mostly invisible during the centuries' long colonialism, and the reason that can be assumed for this absence of her is that she, like blacks, has also been a victim of the white patriarchal regimes. Thus, her existence has remained in dark – ignored or avoidable. Her white skin did not accrue as much benefit to her as that of a white male, her whiteness having been overshadowed by her woman-ness such that she is neither slave, nor master. She belongs to nowhere in a white-black master-slave dialectic. She is assigned no role and hence has no way to assert herself and get her existence acknowledged, leading her to an existential crisis. This paper analyses Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*, a farm novel, in the same vein, focusing on the character of the Protagonist Magda, a white spinster living on a lonely farm with her colonial father and some black servants. The whole novel is a monologue by her, written in the form of a journal, different entries narrating different incidents in her life (real or imagined?) in an incoherent manner.

---

**Keywords:** white woman, colonialism, master-servant, identity, existential, feminism

White woman under the patriarchal colonial regime has been thought to have an ambivalent position in between the colonial master and the colonized subjects, her gender posing an obstacle in attaining the status of 'master', and her white color being a block in the way of winning the good will of the colonized blacks; the superiority and the power and authority associated with the white skin often being overcome by the vulnerability of her 'gender'. This ambivalence put her into a situation of belonging clearly to nowhere, resulting in the lack of a clear identity as she can identify completely with neither side, ultimately leading to an existential crisis. Identity is a very complex phenomenon. It depends on a number of factors, some of which being out of our control, and thus it cannot be wholly constructed or reconstructed according to how one wishes to be seen and projected. Our identity is often affected by and judged in relation with the larger community to which we belong, irrespective of what we as an individual stand for. Sometimes, different factors impose different identities upon a person with the result of him/her having nowhere to go.

Magda in Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* is such a character caught between the dual identity of a colonizer (because she is the daughter of a white colonizer) and of colonized (because she is a woman). Lost in this confusing duality, she feels extremely marginalized and is pushed to face an existential crisis as her invisible existence on the lonely farm appears completely meaningless to her. Dominic Head, in *The Cambridge Introduction to J. M. Coetzee*, emphasizes this duality by regarding her as "both victim and perpetrator of colonialism" (Head, 1998, p. 43). However, she is more a victim as she is the target of violent impositions from both sides in the colonial power struggle. The fact of her being white is shadowed by the fact of her being woman, the situation of temporal colonization of blacks by whites being overwhelmed by the eternal colonization of women by men.

Magda's story is a series of attempts to be seen, to be noticed, to have a place, to have some definite role in the scheme of things, because "... one needed to be seen by others to be sure of one's own existence." (Byatt, 1991, p. 508). Being deprived of any clear and stable identity, she continuously enacts and re-enacts different events, mostly in her mind, to find or create some place for her in the lives of the people around her.

---

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Women's College, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh (UP), India 202002,  
Email: [shakirarais446@gmail.com](mailto:shakirarais446@gmail.com), Phone no.: +919997942084

As a white woman within the patriarchal regime of settler-colonialism, she finds herself in a position of marginality, both from her white colonizer father as well as from the black servants on the farm. She stands as white colonizer only to receive their hatred, indifference, and resentment, but in holding power over them or commanding their obedience, her racial superiority is subdued by her gender. She is not the 'masterly-self' like her father. When old Anna and Jakob leave the farm, they seek permission only from the 'master', and do not bother even to tell her simply because they are not under any such obligation. They go "without even speaking" (Coetzee, 2004, p. 49) to her which is felt deeply by Magda as it makes her realize the meaninglessness of her existence on the farm, that she "... was born at the wrong time, in the wrong place, in the wrong body." (Coetzee, 2004, p. 56)

She is despised by the servants on account of her racial affinity with the whites though she has no role in their subjugation, herself being a tool in the hands of patriarchy: "All my life I have been left lying about, forgotten, dusty, like an old shoe, or when I have been used, used as a tool, to bring the house to order, to regiment the servants." (Coetzee, 2004, p. 44). She herself is as colonized under the patriarchy as the blacks under the colonialism: "she is obliged to support a hierarchical system not of her devising, to which her own identity must be subordinate." (Head, 1998, p. 55). Her marginalization from all possible sources of identification pushes her into extreme loneliness, and it is this loneliness that leads to her disorientation towards the end of the novel, just like Bertha in the Brontë's famous classic work *Jane Eyre*. Just as Bertha set fire to the Thornfield Hall in order to get noticed, Magda also thought of putting her house and everything there on fire so that "... the neighbors, whoever they may be, see the towers of flames on the horizon and came galloping through the darkness" to rescue "a cackling, gibbering old woman who wanted notice taken of her." (Coetzee, 2004, p. 49). Both Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*, and Bertha in *Jane Eyre* suffer the torments of being lonely and neglected, being unable to identify with the people around them; not having a stable social identity; they suffer the loss of belongingness, and crave for love and care, and finally succumb to madness.

In the face of utter loneliness and neglect, Magda's craving to be seen, to be spoken to, to be touched, is so intense that she does not even mind her father's beating. She rather feels happy that at least something is 'happening' in her life and "it is better than solitude." (Coetzee, 2004, p. 60). Her having "spoken and been spoken to, touched and been touched" is an assurance for her that "I am more than just the trace of these words passing through my mind..." (Coetzee, 2004, p. 61). Her desire to feel some human presence in her life is such that in spite of being raped and humiliated by Hendrik after her father's death and her failure to pay him his wages, she craves for humanly touch with him during his subsequent visits at night. In the absence of any love and warmth from his side in their relation afterwards, even the act of sex could not provide her any solace or pleasure, but she continues to have relation with him to retain her, because he and his wife Anna being the only human presence on the farm beside her, she doesn't want to lose them.

Magda lacks a cultural background to be supported and recognized by it. "In the absence of a cultural mechanism that throws back the reflections of the self by others", as said by Aroma Kharshiing, "Magda is bereft of a crucial factor in constituting a stable identity." (Kharshiing, 2008, p. 30). She lacks the language to communicate with her servants on an equal level. What she learns from her father is "a language of hierarchy, of distance and perspective" (Kharshiing, 2008, p. 106), her "father-tongue". There is a certain irony in this word. She does not regard her language as her 'mother-tongue', because mother-tongue is something that a person feels comfortable with, that facilitates a better communication. But her father-tongue, instead of facilitating communication, rather hinders it and makes her 'alienated' from others. She knows only the language of giving and taking orders, and it is not the language that her "heart wants to speak", the language of "free beings", because, as per Magda, "The language that should pass between myself and these people was subverted by my father and cannot be recovered." (Coetzee, 2004, p. 106). She feels too much "the pathos of its distances".

Coetzee's fiction deals with the inevitability of falling into identities assigned by one's social caste such as race or gender. White 'masters' form such a caste in South Africa as commented by Coetzee himself in *Doubling the Point*: "The masters, in South Africa, form a closed hereditary caste. Everyone born with a white skin is born into the caste. Since there is no way of escaping the skin you are born with (can the leopard change its spots?), you cannot resign from the caste.

You can imagine resigning, you can perform a symbolic resignation, but short of actually shaking the dust of the country off your feet, there is no way of actually doing it" (Coetzee, 1992, p. 96). Feminising his own position in relation to these masters is Coetzee's way of resigning from his social caste, though only symbolically. This appropriation of feminine figure by Coetzee in order to show his own disempowered position due to the sense of complicity highlights the fact that despite having been born into the master caste, white women's role as masters has been rendered ineffective and ambiguous because of the universally implemented gendered hierarchies.

Magda's insistence all through the novel to assert her individuality beyond her racial affinities, in order to have an equal and reciprocal relationship with Hendrik and Anna, is a futile attempt on her part to get rid of her social caste. "I am I" is her constant cry. She wants to be seen not as a white, but simply as a human being, not to be treated as a race, but as an individual, as she says to Hendrik while trying to persuade him to stay with her at farm "I am not simply one of the whites, I am I! I am I, not a people." (Coetzee, 2004,p. 128). But she is not trusted by him because of belonging to the white colonizer's race. She, thus becomes a victim of both racism and sexism, both gender and race being factors beyond her control. She is very much right in saying that "Anatomy is destiny."(Coetzee, 2004,p. 124), as it is her anatomy that puts her into such a position of marginality, it is her anatomy that decides her destiny to be a destitute all through her life. Her white color costs her much more than paying anything and her woman-ness renders her powerless on all fronts.

She feels and treats herself all through the novel as a black person in the garb of white skin, because she knows her real social position. Her dressing in black all through is symbolic of her real identity, that her white color holds no significance in the face of her having belonged to a suppressed gender. "From wearing black too long", she has "grown into a black person", 'black' in the sense of being marginalized, oppressed, neglected, and powerless. Being an "absence" to her father all her life, she wants her existence to be felt and acknowledged. But she is too powerless to do anything except thinking and imagining. That's why whatever she wants to do, she does it in her imagination. The whole novel is a series of fictional episodes told by her, where she creates the stories of her father's remarriage with a black girl, her father having murdered by her, and her own suicide by drowning. All these fictional events show her mental derangement.

Magda can be seen as a parody of the diver in Adrienne Rich's poem "Diving into the Wreck," which has often been read by critics as an allegory of the retrieval of women's histories or women's voices submerged beneath a dominant patriarchal discourse represented in the poem as a "book of myths/ in which/ our names do not appear."The feminist discourses have been preoccupied with the theme of submergence due to its allegorical connotations of representing women's plight in a phallogocentric world, as they believe that the lost histories and the language of women displaced by the phallic discourses can be found in the 'underground kingdom'. In one of the imaginary incidents narrated by Magda, she dives 'into the wreck', but she cannot hold for long under water as she suffers the "blind panic of an organism that wants to live" (Coetzee, 2004,p. 13) implying the inevitability to accept the phallic discourse as no women's language can survive outside of it.

Magda's name itself reflects her existential crisis as it "is suggestive of Mag, which means 'to chatter, to talk rapidly and to little purpose,' to speak 'nonsense,' often forming "onomatopoeic sounds" as Michael du Plessis has pointed out" (Probyn 2002). Her speech has been described at different places in the novel as "'prattle', 'gabble', 'chatter', 'babble', etc. she herself call it 'cackling' and 'gibbering' of an old woman. Erasmus in his *The Praise of Folly* uses a female figure to highlight the wisdom of man and its folly. Coetzee also uses female figure to direct the attention of his readers towards the folly of 'perceived wisdom'. Magda's lonely meaningless existence on the farm as the daughter of a white colonial patriarch reinforces the futility and inherent disruptive tendency of colonial regimes.

Towards the end of the novel, when Magda is left all alone on the farm, she even imagines her dead father coming back to life, living with her on the farm, just to create a sense of company. In the absence of any human being to communicate with, she even tries to communicate with the sky-gods, but is not understood even by them. That's what makes her realize and say: "We are the castaways of God as we are the castaways of history. That is the origin of our feeling of solitude." (Coetzee, 2004,p. 147). It is to fight against this solitude, to "fight against becoming one of the forgotten ones of history." (Coetzee, 2004,p. 4), that she weaves in her imagination different situations, and by putting herself in there, tries to search for a place of her own, to have herself made up through them:"I make it all up in order that it shall make me up." (Coetzee 2004,79).

Magda is in fact "a parody of the feminist quest for identity beyond the phallic discourse."(Probyn, 2002). And it is not only the story of Magda, "The colonies are full of girls like that." (Coetzee, 2004,p. 1) She also represents Coetzee's own ambivalent position as a white writer in south Africa. White women narrators provide Coetzee to have a middle voice. That's what Magda wants to be "The medium, the median", she wants to be "Neither master nor slave, neither parent nor child, but the bridge between" so that in her "the contraries can be reconciled!" (Coetzee, 2004,p. 145). The female figure or feminine is exceptionally appropriate to be used as a model for the postmodern decentred and fragmented subject. For Caroline Rody, Coetzee has appropriated Magda's "feminist voice" as a tool to enable the masterly reading of "the horror and absurdity of his own postcolonial condition" (Rody, 1994, p. 179).

According to critics, Coetzee's predominant use of white woman narrators enables Coetzee to depict his own position as a "dissenting coloniser" or marginalised white liberal in South Africa. "Coetzee's white women narrators are situated between complicity in the totalising schemes of logo centrism ... and a search for an impossible position outside the discourse that binds them" (Probyn, 2002).

## References

- Bronte, Charlotte. (2010). *Jane Eyre*. London: Harper Press.
- Byatt, A. S. (1991). *Possession*. New York: Vintage.
- Coetzee, J.M. (2010). *Foe*. London: Penguin Books.
- (2004). *In the Heart of the Country*. London: Vintage Books.
- (1992). *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*. David Attwell (Ed.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Erasmus, Desiderius. (1965). *The Praise of Folie*. 1549. Trans. Sir Thomas Chaloner. Ed. Clarence H. Miller. London: Oxford UP.
- Head, Dominic. (1998). *J. M. Coetzee*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Karshing, Aroma. (2008). *Writing the "self": Coetzee's In the Heart of the Country*. In Kailash C. Baral (Ed.), *J. M. Coetzee: Critical perspectives*. New Delhi: Pencraft International.
- Plessis, Michael du. (1988). *Bodies and Signs: Inscriptions of Femininity in John Coetzee and Wilma Stockenström*. *Journal of Literary Studies*, 4.1, 118-129.
- Probyn, Fiona. (2002). *J. M. Coetzee: Writing with/out authority*. *Jouvert: A Journal of Postcolonial studies*. 7.1. Available at: <https://legacy.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v7is1/probyn.htm>
- Rich, Adrienne. (1994). *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972*. New York: Norton.
- Rody, Caroline. (1994). *The Mad Colonial Daughter's Revolt: J.M. Coetzee's In the Heart of the Country*. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 93.1, 157-80.