

“She needs to be needed:” Isolation and Desire in J. M. Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country*

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Humans are “social animals.” Despite the outstretched lands open to habitation, people still tend to build their homes closer to each others. Whatever their language, culture, origins or backgrounds, human beings have an innate desire to be together. This desire to be together is a desire to survive because the human race can only survive if its individual members survive, and the individual needs the group to enhance its own odds of surviving. Further, at the most basic level, human beings are drawn together for reproduction. Built into every human being is the need to reproduce other humans. This need and the means to do it are inborn instincts. When these two instincts are disturbed, the outcome is the destruction of the individual and by extension the whole society. This paper argues that the frustration and the final collapse of the central character in J. M. Coetzee’s novel *In the Heart of the Country* are caused by the unfulfillment of these two desires. It argues that Magda’s mental conflict is the outcome of her desire to be a human being, to be recognized as a human being particularly a woman. Throughout the novel Magda struggles to fulfill this desire. As all the events narrated in the novel take place only in her mind /imagination, the question that really matters is what happened to her mind. This paper attempts to tackle this question in double-forked way: first, Magda is a female whose basic need is a male counterpart, and second, she is a human being whose life and property depends on his communication and interaction with other human beings in the society.

In the Heart of the Country is J. M. Coetzee’s second novel. This novel is set in one of South Africa’s remote and isolated farms. Written in the first person’s narrative style and in the form of journal entries with numbered paragraphs, the novel tells the story of Magda, an old and psychotic spinster, living in her father’s isolated farm. Magda is a white European woman living in South Africa. She is an intelligent, bitter, unattractive, spinster daughter of a European sheep farmer. Magda, in other words, is not an original Boer colonizer. Rather, she is the daughter of a colonizer. Her ancestors are the conquerors of South African people. But those ancestors have left her with the responsibility of continuing their oppression. So, she represents a people who have replaced the native culture with their own. Having grown up as a member of the ruling elites, Magda should feel comfortable with this role. She should feel powerful and proud of her ancestry. But this is not what happens. She appears unsatisfied with her role. Being the daughter of the colonizer, a white European woman in an alien land, Magda feels separated from the larger society in which she lives. There is clearly a wall between her and other humans living in the farm. Magda is also a human being in need of other humans around her. The isolated life in the farm has made life so boring. It seems that she spends all her time in her room with her dairies and imagined heroes and heroines in which she attempts to create and populate her own world.

Magda's bitterness comes from the fact that she feels that she has been an absence all her life to her father who pays no attention to her existence. Though they live in the same house, they never speak to each other. "I was absent. I was not missed. My father pays no attention to my absence. To my father I have been an absence all of my life" (2). What she experiences here is a poor self-worth, and an inability to feel deserving/worthy of receiving what she needs and wants. Her desperate, unrelenting quest to gain acceptance and approval from her father is central to and a determinant of her later behaviour. Magda needs to feel valued by her father. She needs to see welcome on her father's face when she enters his room, and feels like she really matters, and is loved. Instead, she experiences expressions of indifference or annoyance and this shaped her view of herself. It is this feeling of being uncared for, unnoticed that drives Magda to imagine the death of her father because for her his death and life are the same.

Psychologically, care-damaged children grow into needful adults. Their sense of need feels gigantic, and often painful. But they never express their need openly because they feel that the person on the receiving end will not be able to provide for their need. This always triggers shame for being so needy. This shame makes one want to shut-down their needs or control them. It also has them choose emotionally unavailable partners who reactivate painful sensations that usually reinforce their childhood abandonment trauma. This is what happens for Magda. The death of her mother and callousness of her father have left her emotionally lacking. But she never feels shame to express her need. On the contrary she openly expresses her feeling and it is this daring expression of herself that has kept her alive. She neither suppresses what she feels neither controls her emotions. However, she has chosen a wrong partner. Her fantasies of her father having sex with the servant show her desire to replace the servant, to be her father partner. As this relationship is not available, her fantasies only reactivate her desires and pain. For this reason she imagines killing him.

Magda is a victim of the world around her. Rejected and ignored by her father, abandoned by her mother, her dark imaginings become her chief resource to which she resorts in her solitary. She is a passive sufferer whose actions to change her world and circumstances are only imaginative. Hence, imaginative murders and revenge becomes a central experience of power for her. However, beneath her unspoken violence and strongly creative awareness of things is a longing for affirmation of her feminine self, an affirmation of her existence as a human being first and as a female second. The pain of the novel lies in the terrible condition and ultimate absence that this human suffers.

Magda's failure to find recognition from her father compels her to look outward, toward the outer society. Her second attempt to be recognized comes through her relationship with Hendrik and Anna. She attempts grasping her identity and completeness through this relationship with the servants. To establish this relation she invites them to live with her. But again those relationships prove a failure because the colonialist instinct inside her still identifies them as inferior. The relation grows as master-slave one based on inequality and distance. In other words, the colonizer-colonized gap is so wide that she feels unable to bridge it because the language she uses is one that comes from what her, and by implication, society has taught her. In spite of her rebellion against the oppressive social structures that hinder the establishment of a loving relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, it remains questionable whether she is able to liberate herself from the same social structures.

After the failure of her attempt with Hendrik and Anna, Magda makes one more attempt at gaining recognition, this time from the men in the flying machines, but it also fails. They represent her final chance at becoming something fully human. She says, “It is my commerce with the voices that has kept me from becoming a beast” (125). At first she simply listens to voices. This listening turns into attempted communication when she begins to shout. Finally, she writes messages to them with rocks. Each level of communication represents a move toward a more permanent existence but also a higher level of desperation as she tries to gain recognition and completion in any way she can. What Magda attempts to do is to create a new being for herself but because the men in the flying machines—like the servants—never recognize her, she does not fully exist. The result is that she is unable to accomplish her goals of self-definition, purposefulness and reconciliation. The text seems to say that Magda is not complete because she needs recognition from others and because the other refuses to provide her with her need she does not exist.

Magda’s dilemma is the natural outcome of her need to be needed, to be seen, to be recognized and to be identified. Her father’s absence—though he is physically present— and the carelessness of the outer society only intensify her isolation. Put another way, her dilemma and suffering will not be so severe if an adequate dose of attention, affection and care is provided by people around her. Such a distance between her and others makes her resorts to her imagination to fulfill the void. This can be clearly seen through her constant feelings of emptiness and in her inability to identify herself with her own people. From the first page of the novel the reader can recognize this feeling of emptiness and incompleteness. Magda’s lonely life—evidenced by her solitary walks, her talking to herself – is clear throughout the book.

The second factor behind Magda’s abnormality is her unfulfilled sexual desire. Magda is also a woman, a feminine creature and one of her basic needs is to fill her sexual desire. The reader recognizes her need very early in the novel. In the opening pages of the novel, she declares her emptiness and her desire to fill it. She needs to love and be loved. And this is her second predicament. She herself acknowledges this:

I am incomplete, I am a being with a hole inside me, I signify something, I do not know what, I am dumb, I stare out through a sheet of glass into a darkness that is complete, that lives in itself, bats, bushes, predators and all, that does not regard me, that is blind, that does not signify but merely is. If I press harder the glass will break, blood will drip, the cricket-song will stop for a moment and then resume. I live inside a skin inside a house. There is no act I know of that will liberate me into the world. There is no act I know of that will bring the world into me. I am a torrent of sound streaming into the universe, thousands upon thousands of corpuscles weeping, groaning, gnashing their teeth. (9-10)

Magda becomes a double prisoner: first she is a prisoner in her feminine skin and second she is a prisoner inside the house. Elsewhere in the novel, she declares, “I am...a farm girl...not unaware that there is a hole between my legs that has never been filled” (41). In another place she laments her condition saying, “I move through the world...as a hole, a hole with a body draped around it, the two spindly legs hanging loose as the bottom and the two bony arms flapping at the sides and the big head lolling on top. I am a hole,

crying to be whole” (41). She presents herself as a thing without substance and wishes to fill her void by discovering her own story, a “story that will wash over [her] tranquilly as it does for other women” (8). Magda is an unmarried woman who almost feels useless and lonely, hopeless and desolate. At one point, she tells of her “unused body now dusty, dry, unsavoury” (44). She feels to be “a zero, null, a vacuum” (2). All these statements show her desperate need for sex. These statements show her unhappiness with her present identity, the daughter of a colonizer, and her urge to alter it. By killing her father and expressing herself as a woman, she attempts to destroy her colonialist identity, an identity imparted on her by her ancestors, and identifies herself as a woman: “I am not simply one of the whites, I am *I!* I am I, not a people. Why have *I* to pay for other people’s sins? (118). In this declaration she asserts the separation from her father’s legacy. She represents herself and not her colonizing people.

Magda’s need to be a woman is further expressed when she imagines herself to be an “O.” “I am a hole crying to be whole...I am...not unaware that there is a hole between my legs that has never been filled, leading to another hole never filled either. If I am an O, I am sometimes persuaded, it must be because I am a woman” (41). The “O” connotes femininity. The “O” or lack with which Magda identifies herself, her vagina, parodies Sigmund Freud’s supposition in “Lecture XIII: Femininity” that female genitalia are the “atrophied” version of the male’s, and that the girl-child is always initially homosexual, erotically desiring the body of the mother before bestowing her affection upon the father—Magda’s daughter seduction fantasy. Not only does “O” signify the atrophied condition of femininity in Coetzee’s novel, it also represents a double signification of unfulfilled desire since Magda is a virgin. With a perverse sense of logic, she even wonders if her fantasy of rape will have made her a woman. However, Magda’s lack is not only gendered, as spinster, on a textual level, it represents the repressed female voice more generally. Magda’s social alienation is specifically that of the Afrikaner spinster on the farm because she has failed to take her place at that hallowed table of women and mothers.

What Magda needs is a man. She expresses her desire for a man in a way that leaves no doubt. “I need a man...I need to be covered, to be turned into a woman. I am a child... despite my years, I am an old child, a sinister old child full of stale juices. Someone should make a woman of me...someone should make a hole in me to let the old juices run out” (86). Magda here is attempting to assert her feminine identity.

Magda’s libido makes the workings of her mental faculty interprets everything sexually. In the beginning of the novel she imagines her father remarried to his servant’s wife Klein-Anna. She imagines killing her father and his black mistress for having sex not because she is racist but because of her jealousy and envy. This daughter–“mother” conflict or competition reveals her Electra complex as understood by Freud which usually derives from penis envy. Upon re-aligning her sexual attraction to father (heterosexuality), the girl represses the hostile female competition, for fear of losing the love of her mother. Magda does not suppress her sexual desires as the usurper is not her mother. So she kills them both. Freud thus considered the feminine Oedipus attitude (“Electra complex”) to be more emotionally intense than the Oedipal conflict of a boy, resulting, potentially, in a woman of submissive, less confident personality. This is what Magda is.

Many critics interpret the sexual intercourses between Magda and Hendrik as rape. But this is not real for two reasons: first she rehearses the scene five times in the novel without expressing her annoyance with what has happened; second, her descriptions of the sexual intercourse that takes place between her and Hendrik do not suggest anger and rage which always accompany rape. Further, Hendrik's words during the act—"Don't be afraid;" "Everyone likes it;" "Hold tight;" and "It won't hurt" (107) do not bear the menace of the rapist. Hence, her fantasy with Hendrik is the outcome of her suppressed emotions that find an outlet in her imagination. Hendrik's encouragements are thus suggestive of Magda's inexperience in and therefore of her wild imaginings of sex. On each occasion Magda wonders whether she is hallucinating these utterances, lending weight to the idea that they are the product of an unstable mind *and* constitute a text that self-reflexively reconstructs the colonial fantasy. Further, Magda, romanticizing and lusting after Hendrik, always thinks of how Hendrik is going to have sex with her forcefully. Her begging for more, to be satisfied, demonstrates that she accepted the relation with consent.

Magda is a spinster, an old woman without husband. It is her feeling of being a spinster that destroys her mind. Her reference to being a spinster is seen throughout the novel. In one place she says "The land is full of melancholy spinsters like me, lost to history" (3). Elsewhere she adds, "What it means to be an angry spinster in the heart of nowhere" (4). Magda constantly regrets her inability to love and be loved. She rues her ugliness, her frustration of having not had sex and not knowing how it feels like to have it and therefore having not become a "complete" woman like Klein-Anna. However, this is not Magda's dilemma alone. Many daughters of the colonizers are the same. The experience of alienation, Clingman suggests—Magda is the personification of alienation *par excellence*—"from the foreign land, the continent, and its peoples...is the reality of the colonial enterprise" (236). Magda feels alienated by the sexual relationships that she imagines have been built between her father and his new bride, between the black servants Hendrik and Klein-Anna, and between her father and Klein-Anna: "lines have been drawn, I am excluded from communion" (). She experiences both Electral fantasies—the daughter, here infantilized desiring the father and usurped by the "mother"—and colonialist fantasies of the fear of and desire for the black other. Magda conceives of Hendrik as a father-figure and the women with whom her father and Hendrik have relationships as mother-figures.

Magda's desire for sex reaches its peak when she expresses her desire to inhabit Klein-Anna's body, a most resonant motif in the book:

I would like to climb into Klein-Anna's body, I would like to climb down her throat while she sleeps and spread myself gently inside her, my hands in her hands, my feet in her feet, my skull in the benign quiet of her skull where images of soap and flour and milk revolve, the holes of my body sliding into place over the holes of hers, there to wait mindlessly for whatever enters them, the songs of birds, the smell of dung, the parts of a man, not angry now but gentle. (108-9)

She even imagines law as a man. At one point, Magda, in a reflection on her place in the power relations that surround her, imagines "the law" standing "fullgrown inside my shell," with "its sex drooping through my hole" (84). She imagines the law gnawing through her, leaving her "sloughed, crumpled, abandoned on the floor" (84). The

personification of the law as male, and as a parasite devouring her body, emphasizes the partly colonized position of the white woman in colonial structures, obliged to support a model of power to which her own identity is subordinated. The desire to inhabit Anna's body enables her to imagine herself as Hendrik's sexual partner, thus confounding the psychological wrong of Hendrik's sexual violence.

The perception of Magda is her reality; she exists in a constant state of suffering and seems to have very little power over her world. The world in which she lives is cold to her, and she seems to snap a little when she sees that she cannot make the landscape and its people yield to her will. Her (apparent) act of killing her father, hiding his body, and then, ultimately, staying on at the farm alone seems to be her wild and desperate attempt to enforce her meager power on the world.

Magda's aggressive behaviour, killing her father and the mistress, even if imaginative, are the natural outcome of her unfulfilled sexual desire. Freud's psychoanalytical theory that almost all of humankind's actions can be traced to sexual instinct is formulated around the idea that unfulfilled sexual desire leads to frustration, which is expressed by aggression. In *Frustration and Aggression* by John Dollard, et al. (1939), Freud's theory is further developed with the frustration-aggression hypothesis, which proposes that whenever something prevents a person from achieving a goal, it's perceived as an obstruction, whether animate or inanimate, and needs to be injured. Magda's inability to be recognized by others and her unfulfilled sexual drive lead to her aggression. So, Magda is not mad as some critics suggest. Rather she is frustrated and it is frustration that motivates her destructive behaviour.

Anxiety and panic disorders that Magda experiences are triggered by her long-held resentment and repressed rage. This deficit in feelings/emotions results in a partial personality, instead of a whole one. She, therefore, feels an empty, robotic shell of an adult. Her genuine feeling self is submerged or killed off. Further, the neglect that she receives from people around her starts working inward. Her image of herself is distorted. She starts viewing herself as ugly and unlovable. This is the normal outcome that results for anyone in her situation because the subconscious mind presumes that if one were truly lovable, one would get far more affection/attention, and be happy and content. Magda lacks a sense of belonging, or feeling like she actually matters to anyone.

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