

ISSN: 0976-8165

IMPACT FACTOR 7.86

THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN
ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

VOL.14 ISSUE 5 OCTOBER 2023

14 Years of Open Access

Editor-in-Chief
Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor
Dr. Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Magda as a Patriarchal Rebel in J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*

Dr. Swapnila

Former Research Scholar,
Department of English & MEL,
University of Lucknow,
Lucknow, India.

Article History: Submitted-29/09/2023, Revised-14/10/2023, Accepted-15/10/2023, Published-31/10/2023.

Abstract:

In J. M. Coetzee's novel *In the Heart of the Country*, Magda is a complex character who is seen as a patriarchal rebel in several ways. In this novel, Magda's attempts at rebellion are central to the story's themes and character development. The novel has set in colonial South Africa, and Magda challenges the traditional gender roles and power dynamics of the time. In the novel, Magda's psychological conflict results from her eagerness is identified as a human being, explicitly a woman. She defies societal expectations and refuses to conform to the submissive role typically assigned to women in her society. She rejects the authority of her father and, later her female servant's husband and asserts her independence. Her relationship with her father has been strained, and she resists his attempts to control her life. Magda's sexual relationships with various men in the novel is a form of rebellion against the patriarchal norms of her society. She engages in relationships that challenge the conventional expectations of female chastity and modesty. Magda's rebellion has been marked by her isolation and descent into madness, which raises questions about the effectiveness and consequences of her resistance. This research paper focuses on Coetzee's portrayal of Magda as an intricate exploration of gender, power, and rebellion in a patriarchal society. It also explores her pursuit of gaining her identity in a society where she herself as a colonizer trapped in between the colonizer and the colonized. The novel, through Magda, offers a critical exploration of racial prejudices and the view of the postcolonial society of South Africa.

Keywords: Patriarchal rebel, Identity crisis, Sexual liberation, Colonizer-colonized bond, Postcolonial psyche.

Introduction

The novel *In the Heart of the Country*, written by J. M. Coetzee, has been set in one of South Africa's distant and remote farms. The novel is composed in the first person's account

and in the pattern of diary records with numerical order sections. All the incidents recounted in the novel occurred only in her inner mind. The novel narrates the story of Magda, an elderly and insane spinster residing in her father's deserted farmland. She is a white European lady who is the clever, pungent, repulsive virgin daughter of a European sheep grazier residing in South Africa. Magda is a daughter of a colonizer but not an actual African colonist. She feels desolated and segregated in that isolated farm from the massive community. There remains a huge barrier between Magda and other people residing on the farmstead. She feels bored in the farm, spending all the time in her chamber with her memoirs and chronicles. Magda hates her father because he never gives her attention. Instead, he brings home a Black African mistress, whom she thinks of as a co-wife of her mother, "*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*" (IHC 2). Magda is a victim of marginalization, as she is detached both from her father and the black retainers and also a sufferer of racial prejudices. She also felt herself as a tool in the hands of patriarchy as is reflected in these lines in the novel, "*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*" (IHC 44). She is not only an object but also a victim of father-daughter schism. Her father believes in domination, so he uses to beat her, and even impels her more towards isolation. Her father's behaviour has a significant impact on her psyche. Though living among the people around her she is never capable of creating any kind of bond with anyone on the farm. Her loneliness is visible here in such lines:

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 me. I am a torrent of sound streaming into the universe, thousands upon thousands of corpuscles weeping, groaning, gnashing their teeth. (IHC 9-10)

Her mental condition is also because of the gender bias which she bears almost all her life. She faces both physical and mental trauma. However, meanwhile, she derived the language of a colonizer from her father, which she feels challenging to communicate with the servants on the farm.

In the novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, written by J. M. Coetzee. Magda, who is the chief protagonist in the novel, resists the authority of her father throughout the novel. She

refuses to conform to his expectations and desires for her, asserting her independence and autonomy. Magda flouts traditional gender roles and expectations for women in her society. She refuses to adhere to the submissive and passive role often assigned to women, which was prevalent in the colonial context of the novel. Magda, engages in sexual relationships with various men, including the servants Hendric and Klein-Anna. These relationships have been seen as rebellion against societal norms and taboos surrounding female sexuality and chastity. She asserts that she is a prisoner in her own feminine body and declares, “*I am...a farm girl...not unaware that there is a hole between my legs that has never been filled*” (IHC 41). Magda’s descent into madness is being interpreted as a form of rebellion against the oppressive and stifling environment in which she lives. Her madness represents a rejection of the rational and ordered world of her father and the colonial society. Magda’s narrative voice in the novel can be seen as a form of resistance. She tells her own story, offering her perspective on events and characters, which challenges the dominant narrative and allows her to assert her agency.

Magda’s rebellion allows her to express her desires and sexuality freely. She challenges societal norms and taboos, exploring her sexual desires outside the constraints of her patriarchal and colonial environment. Her acts of rebellion, especially her sexual relationships with the farm’s servants, demonstrate her autonomy and independence. She refuses to be subjugated by the patriarchal authority of her father and asserts her agency. Magda killed her father after accepting the fact that her father is the reason behind the destruction of her only way of her life. Feminist critic Dodd (1987) claims “*rather than interpret[ing] Magda’s killing of her father as originating in her inability to take place of Anna in her father’s bed, I would suggest that Magda’s actions can be read as an attempt to overthrow the rule of the patriarch*” (p. 159). Therefore, as a rebel, Magda not only faces its consequences but also pays costs. Her rebellion leads to her isolation from her family and the local community. She becomes increasingly alienated, which intensifies her loneliness and sense of detachment from the world around her. Her rebellion ultimately leads to mental instability in her, which has been seen as a consequence of her inability to reconcile her desires with the repressive society in which she lives. Her madness further disconnects her from her true identity. Engaging in sexual relationships with her servants exposes Magda to danger and vulnerability. In the context of apartheid South Africa, such relationships are not only taboo but can also lead to severe consequences for both her and those involved. Her rebellion does not give her with clear answers about her identity or liberation. Instead, it plunges her into a state of ambiguity and confusion. Her actions raise questions about whether her rebellion is a genuine search for liberation or a reaction to her isolation and desperation.

The colonial context in which Magda lives in *In the Heart of the Country* has a profound impact on her life and sexuality. The colonial setting influences her life in various ways. Magda's life on a remote farm in colonial South Africa has been marked by isolation and alienation. Clingman suggests that *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). She has been separated from the broader society and cultural influences, which can intensify her inner struggles and desires. Her isolation contributes to her loneliness and longing for human connection that dismantles her mind. In the novel, she says, “*The land is full of melancholy spinsters like me, lost to history*” (IHC 3). Colonialism brings significant power imbalances, with white settlers like Magda's family exerting control over indigenous populations. This power dynamic plays out in Magda's relationships, including her sexual encounters with servants Hendrik and Klein-Anna. These relationships are influenced by the inherent power imbalances between colonizers and the colonized. Magda's sexual relationships with servants can be seen as rebellion against the racial and societal norms of the colonial period as her desires remain not only suppressed but also confined inside her. She also finds all the paths closed for her in the coming days as well. Here Magda rightly admits,

“My father creates absence. Wherever he goes he leaves absence behind him. The absence of himself above all – a presence so cold, so dark, so remote as to be itself an absence, a moving shadow casting a blight on the heart. And the absence of my mother. My father is the absence of my mother, her negative, her death.” (IHC 88)

Her intimate relationships with non-white individuals challenge the racial hierarchies and taboos of the time, highlighting her defiance of the established order. Her sexuality has also influenced by her desire to escape the confines of her colonial existence, and intensify her internal conflict and contribute to her identity crisis. Watson in an essay on Coetzee's novels:

If colonialism, at its very simplest, equals the conquest and subjugation of a territory by an alien people, then the human relationship that is basic to it is likewise one of the power and powerlessness: the relationship between master and servant, overlord and slave. It is this aspect of colonialism that receives the most extensive treatment in Coetzee's fiction. (Watson, 370)

Her sexual encounters represent a form of escapism from the dull and expressive life on the farm. They provide her with a temporary respite from the strictures of her society. The colonial context contributes to the internal conflicts within Magda. She grapples with her desires and the societal norms that repress her sexual expression. This inner turmoil reflects the broader conflict between colonialism and individual identity.

In the novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, the racism and patriarchal society of South Africa play significant roles in causing an identity crisis for Magda, the protagonist. The apartheid era of South Africa depicted in the novel is marked by a strict racial hierarchy, with white settlers like Magda's family exerting power and control over indigenous populations. Magda's awareness of this racial divide contributes to her sense of alienation and disconnection from the land and its people, causing her to question her identity within this racially divided society. Her family represents the colonial elite, and their isolated farm is a microcosm of the broader colonial legacy. This isolation reinforces her sense of being cut off from the outside world and intensifies her loneliness and detachment. Her inability to connect with the local people further compounds her isolation and identity crisis. Within the patriarchal society of her family and the broader colonial context, Magda is expected to conform to traditional gender roles. Her father exerts control over her life, and she struggles to assert her own agency and desires in the face of this patriarchal oppression. Her resistance to these gender norms contributes to her sense of conflict and identity crisis. Magda's dive into madness has been viewed as a coping mechanism in response to the oppressive environment in which she lives. Her madness becomes a way to escape the confines of her identity as a colonizer, and a woman, allowing her to detach from the reality that oppresses her. Coetzee tries to represent gender inequality in African society through the character Magda in the novel. Her condition puts her in a miserable circumstance and this has been easily obtained when she agonizingly yells, portraying Freudian theory of 'lack' by the employment of a big 'O' when she says,

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. (IHC 41)

Coetzee's novel *In the Heart of the Country* serves as the condemnatory study of racial intolerance and the postcolonial society of South Africa. Coetzee's novels vividly portray the deep-seated racial prejudices and hierarchies in South Africa during the apartheid era. Through the character of Magda, a part of the white colonial elite, Coetzee exposes the racism that underpinned everyday life. The novel delves into the enduring legacy of colonialism in South Africa. The isolated farm setting and the relationships between the white family and their black servants symbolize the power dynamics and inequalities inherited from the colonial past. Coetzee's writings underscore the dehumanizing effects of racial prejudices. The relationships between the white characters and their black servants are marked by exploitation and a lack of genuine human connection, highlighting the dehumanization in a racially divided society. When Hendrik rapes Magda, she becomes submissive. Despite, this, she comes to know later

that Hendrik raped her due to his desire of revenge for the numerous years of oppression and subjugation. Poyner in this regard condemns that, "*In Coetzee's In the Heart of the Country, rape portrays a historically patriarchal system of retribution, revenge and reparations*" (2016). Coetzee explores the complexities of identity in a racially divided society. Magda's character clashes with her identity within the context of a colonial and racist environment, leading to a profound identity crisis. The novel delves into the psychological impact of living in a racially prejudiced society. Magda's fall into insanity which can be interpreted as a response to the psychological trauma inflicted on her by the colonial and racial dynamics of her environment. Coetzee uses a first-person narrative to offer a subjective view of racial prejudices and postcolonial society. This narrative style allows readers to intimately experience the inner thoughts and conflicts of the characters, shedding light on their perspectives and prejudices. Sevry in an interview, Coetzee says: "*I think there is evidence of an interest in problems of language throughout my novels. I don't see any disruption between my professional interest in language and my activities as a writer*" (Sevry, 1986:1).

Magda, in the novel, is represented as an intricate character who finds herself in a unique and challenging position as a colonizer trapped between the colonizer and the colonized. Her character's predicament reflects the broader themes of identity, power dynamics, and isolation in the context of colonialism. Magda as a part of the white colonial elite in South Africa, which makes her a member of the colonizer group by her race and social status. Her isolation on the remote farm and her alienation causes her to question her own racial and cultural identity. Magda not only seeking her identity as a dismissed daughter but exploring her identity as a spinster. In this regard, she comments, "*an angry spinster in the heart of nowhere ... in the shadowy hallway ... we are bitter vestals ... a jagged virgin, I stand in the doorway ... in the cloister of my room, I am the mad hag*" (IHC 8). She struggles to find a sense of belonging within the colonizer group. Her isolation on the farm results in profound loneliness and a sense of detachment from the broader colonial society. She is being separated from the social circles and privileges of the colonizer class, and her only interactions are with the black servants. This isolation intensifies her sense of being trapped between worlds. Magda is both subject to and wielder of power dynamics. She has been subjected to the authority of her father, who represents the colonial establishment. Yet she also exerts her power and control over the black servants with whom she engages in sexual relationships. Her position highlights the complexities of power within the colonial context. Her sexual relationships with the black servants have been interpreted as acts of rebellion against both her own colonizer's identity and the norms of her society. Magda defies the racial and social boundaries set by colonialism,

which adds to her sense of being trapped between opposing forces. Her character struggles with an intense identity issue in the novel. She questions her role as a colonizer, her desires for independence and sexual liberation, and her place within the colonial power structure. This internal conflict is a central element of her character's development.

Conclusion

Magda's rebellious actions and internal struggles with identity and power dynamics are central to the novel's exploration of colonialism, gender, and the individual's quest for autonomy in a repressive society. Coetzee in this novel, uses the colonial setting to explore how external forces, such as colonialism, shape and constrain an individual's life and sexuality. Magda's experiences are emblematic of the tensions and conflicts inherent in such a context, making her a complex and compelling character. The racism and patriarchal society of South Africa depicted in the novel create a turbulent and oppressive environment that leads to Magda's profound identity crisis. She grapples with questions of race, gender, power, and her place within this complex and troubled society, making her a compelling character whose struggles mirror the broader issues faced by individuals in the colonial and apartheid era of South Africa. Magda's character and experiences in the novel be interpreted as a reflection of the complex psychological and emotional landscape that individuals and societies navigate in the postcolonial era. Her struggles, rebellion, and identity crisis mirror the broader themes and challenges of the postcolonial psyche. While Magda's rebellion allows her to express her desires and assert her autonomy to some extent, it also comes with significant costs and consequences, including isolation, madness, and uncertainty. Her journey in the novel reflects the complexity of seeking identity and sexual liberation within the confines of a repressive society. Coetzee's critical views on racial prejudices and postcolonial society are evident in the novel's themes, characters, and narrative style. It serves as a thought-provoking exploration of the complexities and injustices of South Africa's historical and social landscape. Magda's character embodies the tension and complexities of colonialism, where she is simultaneously a member of the colonizer group and someone who challenges the norms and expectations of that group. Her isolation, resistance, and identity crisis make her a compelling character through whom Coetzee explores the nuances of colonial dynamics in his novel, *In the Heart of the Country*.

Women in South Africa often face intersectional challenges related to gender and race. Women of colour may experience unique forms of discrimination, disadvantage and violence due to the intersecting factors of race and gender. However, the women belonging to the white

race also faces gender biases and identity crisis in the male-dominated patriarchal society. However, the historical legacy of apartheid, coupled with ongoing socio-economic disparities, which means that racism and racial segregation continue to have an impact on South African society.

Works Cited:

Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Priam Books, 2004.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Clingman, Stephen. "Beyond the Limit: The Social Relations of Madness in Southern African Fiction." *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance*. Ed. Dominic LaCapra. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1991.

Coetzee, J. M. *In the Heart of the Country*. New York: Penguin, 1982.

---. and J. Sevry. (1986) "An Interview with J. M. Coetzee." *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies*., Vol. 9, No. 1.

Dodd, J. (1987). Naming and Framing: Naturalization and colonization in J.M. Coetzee's in the heart of the country. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 27(2), 159.

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. Seventh edition. Pearson Education Limited, 2009, 1356.

Poyner, J. (2016). *J. M. Coetzee and the paradox of postcolonial authorship*: Routledge.

Watson, Steven. (1985) "Colonialism and the Novels of J. M. Coetzee." *Research in African Literatures* 17: 370.