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In the Heart of the Country: The Story of Subjugation of Women during Colonialism

Dr. Ranjeet Singh*

ABSTRACT

The novel, written with intention to design transitional-period psyche, seeks to investigate how the novelist represents contemporary societal conditions through the characters with regard to the notion of change in that transitional phase of South African society, though the phase continues with no major change, contrary to the expectation of the black population. South Africa was transformed into a democratic polity with new Constitution containing lofty ideals of Equality, Liberty and Fraternity. The very long period of slavery had oppressed the blacks to the extent of showing no reaction to any degrading and repressive regulation. The conditions that subjugate women such as colonialism, patriarchy and apartheid are highlighted in the novel. In Coetzee's literary exploration of the problem of racial conflict in South Africa, there is a general acknowledgement of the idea that gender inequality constitutes a debilitating problem in South Africa. There is a strong case to eliminate this gender inequality and the new democratic government should, by implication, accord top priority to this matter as a happy society is prosperous and strengthens democracy further through wide ranging participation.

KEY WORDS- Colonialism, Racial-segregation, Racial-discrimination, Apartheid, patriarchy etc.

In the Heart of the Country (1977) is an early novel of J. M. Coetzee. Coetzee offers in this text a realistic documentation of oppression of African women in all conceivable forms touching upon conditions of living. From womb to tomb, they are maltreated: as girls, they are not allowed to go to school, they are forced to help in household work, help their mother, obey all the elders and all males in the family; when adult, they have to work in fields, others' homes, father or in his absence, their brothers, will decide whom they should marry and what kind of life they should live. As women, they had to turn over as much work as their male counterparts did; else, they received severe punishments. Sometimes, the pregnant women lost their children during inflicting of savage punishment like beating with whip or sticks. They were treated just like animals. During apartheid rule, men also got such a

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treatment but women were under triple oppression - at home under patriarchy and as black in society where the writ of the whites runs freely, and also subjected to cruel treatment for the slightest mistake at the hands of the employer. Coetzee is one of the South African writers who bear witness to injustice happening around there.

In *The Heart of the Country* the agony of the central female character Magda stems from the fact that she is overshadowed by figures or structures of patriarchal power in her society. She is rendered almost a non-entity, even non-present. The hostile social climate created by the cruel apartheid regime that she lives in renders her mute and marginal. She does not have a genuine status of her own as individual, and she becomes, barely, a reflection of other, overpowering figures. Magda voices her plight and demands recognition reducing limitations of the margins. Magda is used as a symbol in the novel as quintessential African emancipated woman. She believes that, although patriarchal suppression is a global problem, her situation as an African woman is outrageous.

The complete ignorance of Magda's father fills her life with loneliness and emptiness. Magda is affected by paranoia. She suffers from extreme anxiety and fear. Certain circumstances like unhappy childhood, father's negligence, loss of her mother, sexual abuse in her childhood, abused by the native servant, unmarried life and her father's affair with the native servant resulted in Magda's paranoia.

Magda often thinks about her mother. Magda's mother died when she was a baby. She describes her mother as a fragile woman, who was very gentle and loving. She also died because of her husband's incessant sexual demands. And he also didn't forgive her mother because she didn't bear him a son. Magda states the reason for her mother's death as "*She was too frail and gentle to give birth to the rough rude boy-heir my father wanted, therefore she died*" (02). After all these years now he has married a woman, without considering his daughter who is aging. He took no interest in getting her daughter married. Magda's father is selfish and treats his own daughter as a slave. Magda describes her presence to her father as: "*To my father I have been an absence all my life. Therefore instead of being the womanly warmth at the heart of this house I have been a zero, null, a vacuum towards which all collapses inward, a turbulence, muffled, grey, like a chill drafted dying through the corridors, neglected, vengeful*" (02).

Magda feels totally ignored and neglected by her father and sometimes even by the society and her servants. She keeps thinking that her father and step-mother would be enjoying their marital union. Josephine Dodd asserts that Magda's behaviour refers to Oedipus complex in the novel.

The Freudian analysis of the Oedipus complex only partially applies. Magda is supposed to visit the (displaced) scene of her parents' lovemaking. Magda is supposed to desire her father as representative of the law and custodian of reason and language, but it is only male children who are supposed to fantasize the killing of the father, only male children can hope to accede to that position of power. (159)

Magda is dominated by her father and by Hendrik, the native servant. Her father treats her as a servant rather than his daughter. In this father-daughter discordance that emerges in the novel, the father is the symbol of the colonial order, a representative of a colonial system in which the colonizers have an overbearing presence. Daughter represents the women subjected to patriarchal oppression and torture of husband, neglect at the hands of the polity and physical and mental torture and maltreatment at the hands of the employers.

She is always faced with the fact that these narratives are coercive and face her into the role of either avenger or mad woman. The action or fantasy that proceeds from this construction of self is scripted by her dominant literary discourse to go mad, we are scripted by our dominant psychoanalytic discourse to identify her as wanting to be seduced by her father. (Dodd, 159)

Magda blames her father and stepmother for her unhappy state. She feels that without freedom there is no point in living a bonded life in the lonely farm. She curses her spinster fate. She has become a miserable victim of fate which made her as pitiable person in the society.

Magda wants a person to live with, to share her thoughts and her mind yearned for love. *"I am not a happy peasant. I am a miserable black virgin, and my story is my story, even if it is a dull black blind stupid miserable story, ignorant of its meaning and of all its many possible untapped happy variants"* (05). Magda is obsessed with death, which is a symptom of paranoia. She considers death as liberation from all her problems. Magda feels bitter for leading a lonely life. She feels that even becoming the wife of a peddler is a decent life rather than glooming over this spinster life. *"Is there something in me that loves the gloomy, the hideous, the doom-ridden that sniffs out its nest and struggles down in a dark corner among rats' droppings and chicken bones rather than resign itself to decency"* (25). Magda's father is unaware about his daughter's passion and longing. He visited Hendrik's cottage and offered Anna attractive gifts like candies, coins etc. Magda was able to understand the cunningness of her father. *"Where can she possibly spend the money? Where will she hide it from her husband? Where will she hide the sweets? Or will she eat them all herself in a*

single day? Is she so much of a child? If she has one secret from her husband she will soon have two. Cunning, cunning gift!" (36-37). Magda's father goes to the extreme of thinking that Hendrik as a hindrance to consummate his desire with Anna. Magda knows very well that if her father once wanted to have a woman surely he will trap her to satisfy his lust.

Magda's father started to bring Anna to the house for preparing his breakfast. Magda was ashamed of her father's act of sitting with a servant maid in the dining table. "*The State is a 'machine' of repression, which enables the ruling classes (in the nineteenth century the bourgeois class and the 'class' of big landowners) to ensure their domination over the working class, thus enabling the former to subject the latter to the process of surplus-value extortion*" (Althusser, 137). Magda's father who is a white man cunningly makes the young native girl Anna as his mistress. He assigns work to Hendrik on the remote area of the farm and used the opportunity to seduce his wife. Hence, the working class people were forced to live the life which the ruling class dictated. "*Portrayals of rape have ambivalent potential, and the stakes are high where rape stories have served the interests of colonialism and apartheid*" (Graham, 9). Magda ponders about the reason for Anna's betrayal of her husband. "*What does this new man mean to her? Does she merely part her things, stolid, dull nerved, because he is the master, or are there refinements of pleasure in subjection which wedded love can never give?*" (57).

Magda is psychologically possessed; couldn't decipher what was happening to her. She took the gun, went to her father's room and pulled the trigger through the window. Magda brutally kills her father and his mistress while they are in bed. When Magda went to her father's room he was heaving his last breath. Magda sought the help of Hendrik to dispose the body. Magda says, "*What purgatory to live in this insentient universe where everything but me is merely itself!*" (73). Hendrik and Magda dressed her father and covered his wound with a bandage. She says that crime has been done and she is responsible for that. She knows very well that he will not survive. She feels that she had done justice by murdering her father.

After shooting her father Magda made Hendrik to be completely dependent on her. The power has been shifted from the master to Magda. She thought that Hendrik is helpless and so she can bring him under control. "*Rather than interpret Magda's killing of her father as originating in her inability to take the place of Anna in her father's bed... Magda's actions can be read as an attempt to overthrow the rule of the patriarch*" (Dodd, 159). The food on the farm was running out and Magda didn't discover any money left by her father. Hendrik demanded his salary. This situation turns him to be the oppressor and he

tortures Magda. The lack of money changes the attitude of the master and the slave. Hendrik started to kick Magda and abused her with bad words. So from the position of the master Magda is relegated to the position of a slave; thus the oppressed is changed into oppressor. Hendrik rapes Magda and leaves her to her fate. Magda says *"This is my fate, this is a woman's fate. I cannot do more than I have done"* (116). When her father was alive Hendrik treated her decently. After his death he misused Magda and gave her no respect but ill-treated her. She asks herself *"Am I now a woman? Has this made me into a woman?"* (117). Finally her desire was fulfilled by Hendrik, but the way it was done was very cruel which made Magda to have bitter thoughts. She wants to make love with Hendrik which he did not allow. Hendrik, having been oppressed in his whole life, uses the opportunity of abusing Magda as a revenge against the dominant community. He physically abused her body by raping her and which in turn made her submissive to him. Thus, the power is shifted from master to the slave.

The black man cannot take pleasure in his insularity. For him there is only one way out, and it leads into the white world. Whence his constant preoccupation with attracting the attention of the white man, his concern with being powerful like the white man, his determined effort to acquire protective qualities—that is, the proportion of being or having that enters into the composition of an ego. (Fanon, *Black Skin* 36)

Hendrik left the farm after sometime. Magda felt disgusted about her relationship with Hendrik. Magda says, *"I am humiliated; sometimes I think it is my humiliation he wants"* (122). Magda thinks the world exists and everything happens because of desire. She says *"A man comes to Anna and comes to me: we embrace him, we hold him inside us, we are his, he is ours"* (124). Magda feels every desire is only for a short time like her relationship with Hendrik that ended quickly. *"I am not one of the heroes of desire, what I want is not infinite or unattainable, all I ask myself, faintly, dubiously, Querulously, is whether there is not something to do with desire other than striving to possess the desired in a project which must be vain, since its end can only be annihilation of the desired"* (124). Hendrik didn't value Magda as a woman, he just wanted to humiliate and hurt her. Hendrik uses Magda to take revenge on the superior race which oppressed him.

Patriarchy and gender hierarchy operates within the relationship between Hendrik and Magda. Magda expresses her longing for love thus: *"Like a great emptiness, an emptiness filled with a great absence, an absence which is a desire to be filled, to be fulfilled. Yet at the same time I know that nothing will fill me, because it is the first condition of life forever to desire, otherwise life would cease"* (124-125). Magda's desire

to lead a married life is thwarted and it becomes the root cause of all her problems.

Magda wanted to live her own life. She spent her life in her own way. At last she wanted to depart her life in the garden, near her father's bones rumbling the music which she wanted to write. At the end of the novel Magda grows crazy. *"At all events, whether excluded or secretly invested with reason, the madman's speech did not strictly exist. It was through his words that one recognized the madness of the madman"* (Foucault, 217). Magda wanted to be a part of the society, but the society did not provide any opportunity to use her full potential or to prove her intelligence. Magda tried to overcome the barriers between her and her father and also with the servants. But her efforts ended in a mere fiasco. She wanted a good rapport with her servants, but the result was that she was raped by the native servant Hendrik. Magda was unable to change the mental barriers between the masters and slaves created by colonialism.

The world created by the novel contains the nasty and miserable plight of women; in such a world, gender and inter-racial relations are in constant conflict; the individuals operate in a climate of ignorance, like molded cogs of machine and thus lead ritually guided mechanical life with no freedom to think and act, not permitted by the force of oppression even to dream freely. In this arena of conflict, the women suffer the most: all men and women are subjected to the apartheid system equally but, being also operating under the patriarchal system, the women are the worst sufferers. It is evident that at any time when there is war or conditions of hostility, in any African state, it is the women who suffer the most. Some are widowed too soon, some lose their children, and some are deprived of their parents, siblings or other relatives.

During times of conflict between races, tribes or castes or ethnic groups, it was common to rape the wives or other affiliated women of the opposing group's men (soldiers or civilians) to harm them in an indirect way, in order to damage the reproductive functions and social system of these women. As women are seen as the bearers of the morale of the family and society, it is exactly these institutions that are humiliated when a woman is raped during armed conflict. In these circumstances, rape can be seen as a political weapon. In South Africa, women's bodies were being used as battlefields, as a ground for shaping a new national identity. In short, women were the ones who suffered the most, and again, it was the black women who were more prone to rape as they were less protected due to apartheid, according no status to black women. The apartheid has made this survival difficult for the blacks and the patriarchal society has made the life of black women more difficult;

both these forces also generate inter-racial hatred and constant conflict. This is truly the socio-political mood of most African States scarred by frequent civil wars, violence, ethnic strife and other forms of conflict-affected relationships.

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