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History, Patriarchy and Women in J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*

Devender Kumar*

Abstract: The history of South Africa is deeply marked with racial relationships decided by colonial past and postcolonial present in that country. J. M. Coetzee's novel *In the Heart of the Country* reflects the maiming impact of such history on women in an essentially patriarchal society. Patriarchal taboos coupled with colonial violence create the problem of identity before woman. Magda the narrator protagonist in the novel appears to be one such hapless victim of colonial history and conventional patriarchy in her dealings with her father and Hendrik the black native. The narrative of the novel spells out drastic repercussions for the social and cultural set-up of the region with the advent of the white settlers. Referring to the colonial and postcolonial phases at micro-level the novel depicts graphically two women—Magda the white woman and Anna the black woman—as the worse victim of these changes and challenges. Presuming that the double frame of colonial history and patriarchy redoubles the miseries suffered by women, the paper analyses critically the interactions of women like Magda in this novel with their surroundings.

Keywords: *Colonialism, Patriarchy, Women, Violence, Identity*

J. M. Coetzee's novel *In the Heart of the Country* reflects colonial history of South Africa and the associated issues of violence and identity in its morbid account of a crazy, white, spinster Magda who lives on an isolated sheep farm in the Cape desert at the beginning of the twentieth century. Magda's story is set during a crucial period of South African history: the decades of drastic changes at economic, social and

cultural levels immediately before and after the advent of the twentieth century. The catalytic agent in these changes was the penetration of the white colonizers from Europe. Although *In the Heart of the Country* is not a historical realistic representation of an African stock farm as far as its structure is concerned, it is permeated with enough number of hints, clues and references to identify the novel's historical setting. One such hint is the transportation carried by horse, donkey, bicycle and train. Another one is the reference to lack of electricity or running water in the house Magda lives in. By the end of the novel, the reader senses the advent of twentieth century: Magda receives a letter printed in two languages "requesting the payment of taxes for road maintenance, vermin eradication, and other marvels" she has "never heard of" (Coetzee 124-25); she also receives messages from voices "out of machines that fly in the sky" (Coetzee 126)—an obvious reference to airplanes, a major invention of the twentieth century. On the basis of these mentioned above and many other clues spread across the text Gallagher concludes that the narrative in the novel spans from 1870 to 1960 approximately (Gallagher 83).

Basically, the colonial history of Africa is embedded deeply into developments in the fields of peasantry and sheep breeding carried out traditionally by the natives— the black Hottentots. The advent of the white settlers from Europe was bound to have drastic repercussions for the social and cultural history of the region. A moment of enormous significance in the colonial history of South Africa was the arrival of merino sheep on the plains of Africa from the other side of the Atlantic. It apparently provided the black natives with one more occupation in the form of rearing and hewing the merino wool. Nonetheless along with the merino came the white settlers who began to establish their colonies in that region. With this new settlement in Africa began an unprecedented phase of race relationships hierarchized in favour of the minor white settlers. Under this new arrangement the minor white settlers began consolidating their governing position over the major black natives. This arrangement was bound to change traditional social and cultural mores and result into an identity crisis for the clueless and naïve natives. As it happens always women emerged as the worse victim of these changes and challenges. In the novel the narrator protagonist Magda visualizes most of these changes on physical as well as psychological levels

succinctly: She notices the native Hottentots “crisscrossing the desert with their flocks and their cattle, heading from A to B or from X to Y, sniffing for water, abandoning stragglers, making forced march” (Coetzee 20). In the context of the advent of white settlers from Europe, she recalls again: “Then one day fences began to go up—I speculate of course—men on horse back, rode up and from shadowed faces issued invitations to stop and settle . . . and so one became herdsman, and one’s children after one” (Coetzee 20). How hierarchy is settled on the basis of the rule ‘Might is Right’ is illustrated conspicuously in the novel.

The colonial forces aimed at gaining the mastery over the native populace by getting hold of the land and animals as quickly as possible by hook or crook. As soon as they achieved this objective they began to impose a hegemonic system over the social, political and cultural life of the natives. In simple words the race relationship became the master-slave relationship for all practical purposes in South Africa. As masters the white Europeans gained access to the natives’ women also and began to develop illicit relations with them in front of their hapless men. The woman turned out to be the natural victim of these colonial conditions especially in the countryside the novels focuses on. Magda’s narrative in the novel depicts herself and Klein Anna as victims of patriarchy as well as colonialism in the heartland of South Africa. In their case, their racial identity has little role to play in their victimization. Both women—one white and the other black—suffer the repercussions of historical as well as ahistorical circumstances without any discrimination. In other words, women have no race as they do not have any caste or religion. Woman is essentially a woman the receiver of every onslaught arising out of any clash of interests.

The narrative in *In the Heart of Country* revolves around the colonial relations between Magda and her father as Dutch settlers on the one hand and the native Hottentot tribesmen represented by Hendrik and his young wife Klein Anna on the other in the countryside South Africa. The delineation of farming life in the novel peopled with agriculture labourers under the unrelenting gaze of the master is remarkable. The ambience created in the novel is suffused with an air of tension and suspicion arising out of the strenuous relation between the master and the slaves. Magda’s account is remarkable in this regard: “They sweat and strain, the farm house crack through the night. Already the seed must

have been planted, soon she will be sprawling about in her mindless heat swelling and ripening, waiting for her little pink pig to knock. . . . My father, scowling with a whip” (Coetzee 10-11). While presenting the account of Hendrik, a black Hottentot, Magda traces the fascinating colonial history with wondering speculation. Hendrik, a boy of sixteen at that time, joins the farm as a labourer and works for his white master from dawn to dusk. The master pays his dues in cash as well as kind: “two slaughter sheep and weekly rations of flour, mealie-meal, sugar and coffee with six shillings (Coetzee 26). Her account of Hendrik’s arrival and his appointment as one of the labourers on her father’s farm constitutes a turning point in the narrative of the novel.

With the passage of time, Hendrik marries Klein Anna a girl of his own tribe. The couple begins to live happily on the farm under the lusty sniffing nose of the master. The master gradually starts to make lustful advances towards Klein Anna. In the beginning, she remains indifferent towards the master; but gradually the insidiously scheming master gets the girl under his control. Magda vividly remembers the temptation and subjugation of Anna by her father: “While Hendrik is out on a godforsaken task in the heat of the afternoon my father visits his wife. . . . He speaks to her. She is bashful. She hides her face. He tries to soothe her” (Coetzee 36). She further recalls: “As Klein Anna makes her way homeward in the heat of afternoon my father comes upon her. . . . He reaches into his pocket and I catch a flash of silver. For an instant the coin lies open in her palm, a shilling or even a florin” (Coetzee 36).

The relationship between Klein Anna and the colonial master reveals amply how unqualified power dominates the body and the soul of the subjugated. Very soon the master’s lusty persuasions and alluring gifts culminate into forced sexual exploitation of the Anna at the hands of the master. Magda recalls: “My father tethers his horse outside the servant's house. He locks the door behind him. The girl tries to push his hands off, but she is awed by what is about to happen. He undresses her and lays her out on his servants’ coir mattress. She is limp in his arms. He lies with her and rocks with her in an act which I know enough about to know that it too breaks codes” (39).

This humiliating master-concubine relationship against the background of colonial occupation of the land and people compels Magda to go into deep speculation about her own place in history. She

realizes the presence of some danger to her own person lurking in near future as a knee-jerk response to the master-slave relationship. So long as one possesses power, one can keep at bay the dragons of desire; but once the scales of power get overturned, the counter-violence unleashes with full force making woman its easiest victim. She speculates that next woman to be victimized by masculine forces is none else but she herself: “I am no prophetess, but a chill in the wind tells me that disaster is coming. I hear dark footfalls in the empty passages of our house. I hunch my shoulders and wait. After decades of sleep something is going to befall us” (29). And the same happens in due course of the narrative. Once the spell of power and passion subdues, she gets exposed to violent responses from the erstwhile victims. The scale of power begins to shift in favour of the black natives as soon as Magda murders her own father out of her disgust with his illicit relation with Anna.

Magda, the embittered spinster daughter of the Master, is so much ashamed of her father’s relation with his black concubine that she does not think twice before murdering him. This act of patricide exposes her eventually to violent responses from Hendrik to her person as the easiest target of vengeance. The history of victimization this time gets enacted with earlier positions reversed. With the death of the master of the farm Hendrik, the man, automatically takes up the charges of farmhouse under the nominal control of Magda, the woman, even though the relationship between them still remains that of the white and the black. For instance while dealing with Hendrik in a condition of bankruptcy, Magda still talks to him in the language of the master. But now the situation goes upside down as Hendrik begins to defy her by ignoring her injunctions and orders. For instance he begins to slaughter a sheep a week to claim his due without Magda’s permission. This act of adamancy on his part is a first but firm step towards the destiny where he will become the victimizer and Magda the victim of his retributory violence. The slave who has never dared so far to climb the stairs of the master’s house now enters the master’s room and puts on his clothes. Magda asks him to take off those clothes at once, but he ignores her and walks away wearing the master’s clothes. This act symbolizes Hendrik’s determination to become the natural master of Magda the woman and her land.

This metaphorical act of possession on the part of Hendrik prepares the stage for history to repeat itself with same participating communities

in reversed roles this time. As the settlers from outside earlier possessed the natives' land and even women, the native Hendrik now begins to possess the land and woman of the colonizer. The act of possession culminates into violent episode when Hendrik possesses Magda physically and violates her sanctity: "He springs at me and grabs my arm. Let go I shout. He grips me tightly and pulls me back into the kitchen . . . He throws me against the wall, pinning my wrists, his whole weight upon me . . . his pelvis grind hard into me. No! I say. Yes! he says, Yes! He has forced his way into me. I toss from side to side and weep, but he is relentless, he bares my breasts too and presses down on me, he pants in my ear, rocking further and further in" (Coetzee 113-16).

The physical assault on Magda makes her ruminate over various aspects of human life such the nature of desire, coming of age and above all the patriarchal possession of land and its heir under the colonial and postcolonial condition. As she notes down: "I am heir to a space of natal earth which my ancestors found good and fenced about. To the spur of desire we have only one response: to capture, to enclose, to hold. But how real is our possession?" (Coetzee 119). In her hallucinatory account of the feudal dynasty of the Whites in South Africa, Magda muses over those hidden aspects of history which could unmask the ignominies committed in the name of power politics. The agony of being a woman in a patriarchal culture is visible in her disclosing her real status before Hendrik when he is ready to desert her all alone on the farm and she requests him not to leave her behind. She tells him how her own people usually think of her: "Look at me! You know who I am, I don't have to tell you! You know what they call me, the witch of Agterplass!" (Coetzee 128). Here Magda's conversation with Hendrik stands as an illustration of the fluid relationships between any two communities during a period of transition.

The narrative of the novel reveals tellingly something about the loneliness, the craving for love of a lonely woman especially during a period of transition. Lacan writes, "In the other, in the mirror's image, in his mother, the child sees nothing but a fellow with whom he merges, with whom he identifies" (*Lemaire* 78). Being motherless since childhood Magda needs her father to be the other parent through which her existence can be defined. Her whole attitude to herself is punctuated by the way she is perceived by her father. In the absence of the mother,

Magda attempts to make her father that other. However, as the other her father only sees her as an absence, the mirror image that is sent back to Magda in her case is a hollow one. The absence of the core of Magda is augmented by her being a female, and hence she feels doubly displaced: She remains throughout the novel incapable of seeking recognition from a non-existent mother and a father who is disappointed to have a daughter and not a son. As a product of a cruel culture that considers daughters inferior, Magda gets no recognition from her father as well.

Nonetheless, Magda—a miserable victim of colonial history and cruel patriarchy—refuses to become “one of the forgotten ones of history” (Coetzee 03). In her fight against her name itself (Magda was the long-suffering and heroic wife of the Great Trek leader Piet Retief and is revered as one of the “mothers” of South Africa) she turns out to be the feminine counterpart of Jacobus Coetzee of *Dusklands*, another novel by J. M. Coetzee. Any way *In the Heart of the Country* is usually seen as referring to the South African situation in the postcolonial times. In this context Magda’s isolation, paralysis, and madness read like allegorical references to the plight of the white in South Africa. In a review of the novel, Paulin claims: “We have to read her action symbolically as a prophetic account of the historical destiny of South Africa. . . . In less rigid societies change is possible without violence, but in this situation only the bloodiest murder will liberate it into the world and return it forcibly to history” (Paulin 88). Bound within the framework of colonial race relations and patriarchal father-daughter equations Magda and women like her stand relegated perpetually to the dismal background in the social, political and economic arenas through persuasion, coercion and even violence.

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*Department of English,
Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India
devsuman2@gmail.com