

The Question Of Women's Language In J.M. Coetzee's In The Heart Of The Country

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ABSTRACT

*Coetzee's women narrators have drawn considerable feminist interest as each of them is concerned with finding a "woman's voice" to situate against patriarchal authority. Nevertheless, interpreting these readings becomes intricate because of their complicity with the established authority and the language structures they employ for expression. This double bind weaved in their speaking position is to be found in all his narrators where their consciousness of the possibility of bad faith enables them to interrogate structures of power, language, authority and authorship. This article aims at studying one of these narrators, Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* to analyse how her ambivalent position of being both the colonizer and the colonized has an impact on her writing. All Magda's attempts to reconcile with the land and her lot are thwarted by an extreme degree of alienation in language. Her words have been depicted as unstable, unauthorized and outside literary canon in the novel, which renders her susceptible to self-consciousness of her writing and to write self-reflexively. This self-reflectivity, while highlighting the gaps and silences in the text, puts under suspicion the act of writing itself.*

Keywords: feminism, language, writing, authority, authorship

Abbreviations: HC – In the Heart of the Country. FOE- Foe

Introduction

One of the most intriguing elements of J. M. Coetzee's works that has sparked significant exploration is the choice of using female narrators. Three of his most acclaimed novels have women narrators: *In the Heart of the Country* (1979), *Foe* (1986) and *Age of Iron* (1990). In the conservative view, the male author's employment of female narrators raises the question of appropriation of authorship and of colonization. However, in Coetzee's case the employment of female narration suggests a more complex strategy. Sue Kossew in her essay "Women's Words: A Reading of J. M. Coetzee's women narrators" argues that Coetzee uses female narrations in complex way which situates the text in the intersection between feminist and postcolonial discourse (166-179)

Historical and Sociocultural Context

It is important to recognize that in the works of this author, all the female narrators are white and are portrayed as complex characters whose voices are influenced by their involvement in certain actions. This sense of involvement is a significant aspect of the author's own writing style. To gain a deeper understanding of these female narrators, it's helpful to refer to Robin Visel's article titled "A Half Colonization: The Problem of White Colonial Women Writers." In this article, Visel highlights that women who were part of the colonial establishment occupy a unique position compared to colonized women. While they

too face oppression from white men and patriarchal systems, they also share in the power and responsibility of the colonizers. This notion of being "half-colonized" is crucial for grasping the perspective from which these women express themselves. Failure to comprehend this concept has led many critics, particularly those with a feminist focus, to what Kirsten Holst Petersen calls "an elaborate dead end" (Holst Petersen 251).

Language and power dynamics in colonial/post-colonial contexts

Coetzee's women narrators have drawn considerable feminist interest as each of them is concerned to find a "women's voice" to situate in contradiction of masculine authority. However, these interpretations become intricate because they are entangled with the authority they address and the language they use to express themselves. This dual complexity in their narratives can be observed in all of Coetzee's narrators. Their awareness of the potential for insincerity allows them to scrutinize systems of power, language, authority, and authorship. This suggests that when Coetzee employs female narrators, it's a way of claiming the male-dominated realm of authorship. This perspective leads Kirsten Holst Petersen to the conclusion that, for those of us seeking a female perspective in literature and history, Coetzee might actually be seen as an adversary (Holst Petersen 251).

All the three women narrators are authors of their texts: Magda writes diary in *In the Heart of the Country*; Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron* composes a letter to her daughter, who is living in exile in America and Susan Barton in *Foe* writes a manuscript and a series of letters to Foe. Their words have been depicted as unstable, unauthorized and outside literary canon in each novel which renders these women susceptible to self-consciousness of their writings and to write self-reflectively. This self-awareness, which exposes the gaps and omissions in the text, casts doubt on the very act of writing itself. Elizabeth Curren characterizes her writing as a crafty discourse implying a degree of trickery or manipulation in her storytelling. Magda, uncertain about the legitimacy and substance of her words, asserts that her narrative is more than just a fleeting stream of thoughts passing through her mind, going from nowhere to nowhere (HC 56). Susan, plagued by self-doubt, admits that some people are natural storytellers and it seems that she is not (FOE 81). Therefore, all three female narrators demonstrate an understanding of the limitations of narration and their constrained ability to engage in it.

This self-awareness, which reveals gaps and silences in the text, casts doubt on the act of writing itself. Elizabeth Curren describes her writing as a crafty discourse. Magda, unsure about the authority and substance of her text, claims she's more than just a pale suggestion of the words passing through her mind (HC 56). Susan, filled with self-doubt, proclaims that some people are natural storytellers and she am not (FOE 81). In essence, all three women narrators are aware of the constraints of storytelling and their limited ability to engage in it.

One subject that has preoccupied postcolonial discourse in Africa is the failure of language and discourse to write or represent the landscape of Africa and to communicate with the natives in a meaningful way. Coetzee's fixation with the issues of language is evident in *In the Heart of the Country*. There is a shift between English in thoughts or Magda's monologue to herself and Afrikaans in dialogue. The use of different languages in the inner and outer world emphasizes the isolation or distance of a character with others. Further, it reflects the colonial state of affairs of South Africa and the traditional setting of *plaasroman*. Thus, the novel creates an impression that as a language, Afrikaans establishes and reflects master/slave dichotomy. As a consequence, all Magda's attempts to reconcile with the land and her lot are thwarted by what Rody explains as "an extreme degree of alienation in language" (Rody 160). Magda is acutely conscious of the breakdown in communication within her estranged society. She conveys that the language meant to connect her with the servants has been subverted by her father and is irretrievably lost. She grew up with a language that emphasized hierarchy, detachment, and a certain viewpoint,

which was essentially her father's language. This language doesn't align with the words her heart desires to utter, and it creates a sense of alienation from those around her (HC 971).

Feminist literary criticism and its relevance

In this context, Magda employs the term "father tongue" to describe the language she speaks, highlighting the pervasive influence of patriarchal systems in African society. What Magda articulates here is a significant issue that has been a central concern for women and feminist writers within the prevailing culture. There isn't a distinct "women's language" that isn't characterized by detachment and fails to convey the language of the heart. Magda, therefore, discovers that in a colonial system, masters suffer just as much as slaves. Magda finds herself entrapped by language while she attempts to press against it. For Magda, who is placed in the genre of *plaastroman*, the written words signify isolation and denial of sexual and social interaction. Language isolates in two ways: Firstly, the self as subject is formed by the masculine symbolic from which Magda attempts to break free and secondly, her story though strives to give representation to others is a monologue not a dialogue suggesting the struggle with words or language of the socially alienated (cf. Rody 161). Here, Coetzee emphasizes the role of language in establishment and continuation of colonial situation. Stephen Watson corroborates the idea that the novel appears to be built on the concept that our colonization occurs not only through physical conquest but also through language itself, specifically through the established conventions that are perceived as "natural" or "universal." (374)

- **Linguistic Strategies and mechanism:** Language and power have been linked up in postcolonial writings. The issue here is how language controls the nature of imperial mechanism and how it invariably exerts cultural and linguistic domination over colonized people and imposes a hierarchy of value. Therefore, language is the tool used to maintain a power structure with levels of authority, and it's also how ideas of "truth," "order," and "reality" are established. This power is challenged when a strong postcolonial voice emerges [Ashcroft et al. 7].
- **The issue of language in colonial discourse:** It is closely related to the process of "othering". The notions of "self" and "other" are underlying aspects of colonial discourse and emerge strongly in *In the Heart of the Country*. The author of the discourse asserts complete control over how others are represented and spoken for, often using negative or exclusionary language. Stephen Slemon describes this as a way to shape our understanding of different groups and the ideological methods used to control and monitor these subject populations (Slemon 183).
- **The issue concerning the power of language in colonization is twofold:** displacement and the quest for an authentic voice that isn't imposed by a central authority. This concern applies to both the colonizers and the colonized. Colonizers try to find a language to represent the foreign land and its people, while the colonized seek a genuine language that isn't dictated by the central power. This is also a concern for feminists searching for a true "women's voice," and it relates to the dual oppression experienced by women in colonies. When a woman is also a colonizer, as is the case with Magda, it further complicates the situation. Visel refers to this as "half colonization," a contradictory position. Josephine Dodd also highlights that, at the character level, Magda is subjected to the patriarchal dominance of her father and Hendrik, as well as the cultural influence of the first world (160).

Power Dynamics and Language: Towards the end of *In the Heart of the Country*, Magda refers to women and the colonized as "the castaways of history" (HC 135). The "we" here refers to both women and the colonized. The problem of language binds feminism and Colonialism as has been explained in *The Empire Writes Back*. Women, much like colonized communities, have a deep, personal understanding of the dynamics of subjugation and control. Just as colonized peoples have been

compelled to express their experiences using the language of those who oppress them, women have also faced the necessity of communicating their own experiences using the tools provided by their oppressors. Like postcolonial societies, women have had to create their own means of expression when the only tools at their disposal are those inherited from the colonizers. (Ashcroft et. Al.174-175).

However, Coetzee's portrayal of Magda can be distinguished from other examples like her in the fact that from the beginning Magda is projected as self-conscious and self-reflective who constantly reminds of her own fictionality, subject to the whims of her author. "Magda is not only controlled literally, under patriarchal authority, she is also controlled literarily as a character in the text, both by her author and by literary history" (Poyner 2009).

Silence as a form of communication

Josephine Dodd highlights that Magda embodies the fictional depictions of women she has come across in her reading. This positions her in a role akin to "the madwoman in the attic," a concept from feminist theory. Magda herself acknowledges this by saying, "I am the one who stays in her room, reading or writing or fighting migraines. The colonies are full of girls like that but none, I think so extreme as I" (HC1). This image is widely found in women's text of nineteenth century, like Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar attempt to explain the trope of "madwoman in the attic" as the one representing the resisting female writer where the madness actually construes autonomy. Magda indulges in the process of fictionalizing and attempts to search her identity. Kossew postulates that she seeks to read her own significance.

Therefore, Magda's deliberate crafting of her identity within the text and her resulting self-dramatization are closely connected to the act of turning her life into a fictional story, drawing inspiration from existing models. In this way, Magda's narrative serves as both her attempt to interpret her own importance and as an effort to reclaim a sense of belonging, which she has lost due to the way colonial daughters are typically depicted. The text, in this sense, becomes a tool to transport her from the ordinary aspects of existence into the realm of deeper meaning and interpretation. (Kossew 4). Magda's quest for an identity distinct from the one forced upon her by the central authority is intimately tied to her habit of turning her life into a story. This connection becomes evident when she gazes at her reflection in the mirror and suddenly understands that she will wither away and fade into obscurity in this remote, isolated place unless she has some noteworthy experiences to sustain her. She is determined not to lose her individuality and hopes to make a lasting impact (HC 23).

On the textual level Magda is double bound, in the sense that as she depends on her narrative to escalate her from marginality to the position of substance, she is also tied up to the law of father. On one hand, she can't escape the fact that she's turning her life into a story and asserts that she invented everything to define herself and cannot stop anymore. However, on the other hand, she's more like a symbolic author of her own narrative, fighting to have control over her own story. (HC 79). This places her in difficult situation as "she struggles to free herself from writing or being written as the art of writing makes her both complicit with yet subjected by phallogocentrism. It is from her phallogocentric self and from Coetzee as emblematic patriarch and author that she struggles to liberate herself from whilst at the same time needing to assert her autonomy" (Poyner 44).

Reader Response and Interpretations

Towards the end of the story, Magda now deserted by the servants, imagine communicating with "machines in the sky". She is mentally unstable by now and hears voices conveyed by these machines speaking "universal truths". She struggles to make sense out of them and

imagines “writing” messages to the “sky gods” with stones (HC 150)s, which can be read as a desperate attempt on the part of Magda to announce herself and her body on the farm. Since it appears her shouts go unheard, she turns to “writing” which is subject to the Law of Father. However, after all her attempts to resist dominant modes of writing, the narrative came to an end with the father reappearing, symbolic of supremacy of the law of Father. The voices Magda hears figure out the crisis that resides in the space Magda occupies. Nietzsche sees these voices as a result of a situation where people, lacking external challenges and living in a monotonous and confined environment, are compelled to make life more interesting for themselves. Magda supports this idea by stating that she is accused of making her life into a story because, in the absence of external enemies or exciting events, she has chosen to become her own source of adventure (HC 139-140).

Cultural and gendered biases in interpretation

Ian Glen proposes that we shouldn't see Magda as a conventional character in the pragmatist sense. Instead, she is more like a self-aware narrator who reflects on the circumstances of her own writing (123). Magda hints at this when she mentions that she isn't a flesh-and-blood woman with "red blood in her veins" (HC 62). She also shows signs of recognizing the textual nature of her monologue. Consequently, Glenn argues that Magda serves as a literary alter-ego for Coetzee, enabling him to explore his role as a writer in South Africa (131). Coetzee's strategy here is to distance himself from the colonialist discourse by portraying a character who lays bare the process by which she is written. Coetzee escapes any responsibility for what is written because Magda has been represented as insane therefore, unreliable and thus becomes only an insignificant representative of the colonial undertaking. Magda's self-consciousness of being a character in a book makes her call upon her author, Coetzee to acknowledge and understand the silences of women in literary histories. She also ponders whether, in the future, an as-yet-unborn scholar might delve into the core truth behind this idea of childhood rape. (HC34). Here, she refers to Coetzee as an unborn scholar who she feels will champion the cause of anti-pastoral, though she herself participates in the project as the nominal author of her own story. Magda is talking about the history of writing about women's experiences in the *plaasroman*, which is typically dominated by male perspectives. She sees the female story in a unique way compared to the tradition and views the silences of women in the *plaasroman* as an act of defiance rather than submission. Consequently, she breaks from tradition and invents her own genre. In the *Heart of the Country* portrays Magda's struggle with literary devices in search of an identity of her own. Ironically, Magda finally finds herself excluded from the tradition of both *plaasroman* and the South African tragedy. Magda recognises madness has potential of resistance and could become her means of remaining outside the dominant forms of writing, but she fails to achieve this and is finally forced to become the part of the dominant forms of discourses.

Coetzee mentions Erasmus's book *The Praise of Folly* from 1509, in which Erasmus uses the character of a woman named Moria to point out the foolishness of humans and their so-called "wisdom." By adopting the perspective of a fool, who happens to be a woman, Erasmus could criticize both sides of the argument and offer his critiques without facing consequences or retaliation. Coetzee recognizes that Moria, as a character, doesn't need to be treated seriously, as she herself states, because she's a woman. (Giving 97). Its parallel is found in *Age of Iron*, where Elizabeth Curren describes her words as “doubly negligible Magda resembles Moria from Erasmus's work. Just like Moria, Magda's identity as a white colonial woman living on an isolated farm in Karoo is so delicate that it challenges established colonial norms. Magda also acknowledges that her position is teetering on the edge of irrationality, much like Moria did when confronting the philosophers of her time. Magda herself engages in Freudian interpretations of her own character and playfully undermines the seriousness of her narrative. She states that she is not philosopher as women are not philosophers "(HC 119). She describes her own speech as "babble," "chatter," "cackling," and "gibbering," indicating that she talks rapidly without

a clear purpose (HC 48, 110, 45). This seemingly nonsensical language allows Magda to occupy a position that goes beyond the black-and-white boundaries of opposing politics. It provides Coetzee with a perspective from which he can explore both sides of the debate more effectively.

The domestic sphere vs. the outside world

Coetzee's use of women narrators to dramatize his own self positioning raises questions of post structuralist and postcolonial use of feminine as a figure of crisis. Caroline Rody affirms that Magda's female voice has enabled Coetzee to articulate "the horror and absurdity of his own postcolonial condition" (179). Coetzee's own difficulties with writing find expression in Magda's predicament. Ian Glenn suggests that Magda, as a writer in the story, reflects on the constraints of writing, offering insights into Coetzee's own approach to literature (127). In a similar vein, Glenn argues that Magda's narrative emphasizes the physical body and, in doing so, resists complete control or domination. He interprets Coetzee's use of Magda as a means of allowing her character to consciously choose a role resembling "the madwoman in the attic." This choice provides her with a certain level of bodily and expressive freedom and allows her to break away from further constraint. (131).

The use of a female hysteric's voice in *In the Heart of the Country* allows Coetzee to express his own relationship with dominant discourse in a unique way. Coetzee opposes powerful discourse and refuses to establish dominance to the extent that he doesn't want to control his own texts entirely. As a result, he employs historical discourse, which speaks about the hidden and suppressed truths of dominance, to challenge discourses of control and compete with established history. Even though Magda says, "I is I. Character is fate. History is God," her way of speaking challenges the conventional idea of character in literature. Instead, the reader encounters a fragmented and hysterical "I-figure." Her subjective and hysterical first-person narrative disrupts chronological time, therefore undermining history's claim to be the sole source of "objective" truth.

There is a reference to Adrienne Rich's poem "Diving into the Wreck" towards the end of the novel "Foe" when Susan Barton asks, "Who must dive into the wreck?" Rich's poem is often seen as a symbol for the recovery of women's history and voices that have been hidden beneath a dominant, male-dominated discourse. Rich implies that it's in the body and fluidity that we might discover a language that doesn't have a male-centric perspective. In line with this idea, the unnamed author in "Foe" realizes that underwater, it's "not a place of words." Each word, as it's spoken, is captured by water and dispersed (FOE 157). Similarly, it's not the place where a definitive and authoritative meaning can be assigned to Friday, the character in the novel. Just as Friday's words flow slowly, Magda's narrative is also submerged

Magda's attempted suicide is her endeavour to "diving into the wreck" and this in turn is a satire on the belief that women's language can be found beneath phallic discourse. While Magda's suicide might be seen as an effort to attain a sense of literary significance, she views it as a more "literary" adventure than even murder. She believes that as her story is reaching its conclusion, all her emotions and poetic expressions, both good and bad, are finding their release. She takes one last, peaceful look at the sky and stars before plunging into the abyss (HC 13). However, Magda doesn't succeed in her attempt to end her life. She resurfaces, seemingly mocking the feminist pursuit of finding a significant presence hidden beneath the surface of a male-dominated discourse (HC 13).

This implies that Magda fails in her feminine quest for "silent under water body" which in Friday's case seems to represent his voice: "though absent yet present at the margin". This also implies that Anglo-American Feminism is unaware of the extent to which it itself is complicit in the process of submergence of women's history. Magda's inability to survive underwater is indicative of the fact that women's language cannot survive outside of phallic which must be deconstructed from within.

In the water imagery, Coetzee utilizes the feminine symbol of lack. Coetzee refers to Monique Wittig's work *Les Guerilleres* which features "Os" as symbols of feminine excess or the position outside representability. He goes on to emphasize that symbols like the O, circle, or hole represent something that male authoritative language can't fully grasp or control. Magda, pondering her absence and surplus, suggests, "If I'm symbolized as an O, it's likely because I am a woman" (HC 41). In this way, Coetzee uses feminine symbols that shift from representing absence to abundance to question and illustrate the boundaries of language.

Conclusion

The issue of representation of both women and the colonized is crucial in the comprehension of Coetzee's novels. Tyson argues that the oppression of women by patriarchy is similar to the subjugation of indigenous people during colonialism (423). He also points out that feminist criticism looks at how literature, as part of a culture, can either support or challenge the economic, political, social, and psychological mistreatment of women (83). As a result, both women and colonized populations often face a form of "othering" or being treated as outsiders. Like the colonized who are treated as other by colonialist ideology, women find themselves treated as different by male dominant patriarchy. This enunciates the common grounds of feminism and postcolonialism and their conjunction in what can be termed as "postcolonial feminism". The key issue Coetzee raises in his novels is that of having a voice or getting heard. Both postcolonial and feminist theories suggest that those who are oppressed always strive to discover ways of thinking, speaking, and creating that are not controlled by the beliefs of those who oppress them. (Tyson 423). Coetzee's novels thus, deals with discursive resistance to representation of both women and the colonized through the colonial and patriarchal ideologies.

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