

The Psychotic Behaviour of Magda against her Father in J. M. Coetzee's In the Heart of the Country Mrs. Alamelu G ¹, Mrs. G. Janet ²

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Abstract. People who live in their own fantasies and imaginations react according to their own beliefs contrary to the real life situations. Thus, there is always an improper coordination of what they feel and expect and what actually happens to them. Magda, the book's central figure, is an elderly and psychotic spinster who lives on her father's remote farm. She is an intellectual, resentful, unattractive spinster and the daughter of a European sheep farmer. Magda, then, is the descendant of a coloniser who, during the height of colonisation in South Africa, is trying to establish who she is in the setting of a frontier house. She is not one of the original Boer colonizers. Her ancestors, rather, were the conquerors of the native people, but those ancestors have left her with the responsibility of continuing their representational oppression. So, she serves as a representative of the people who have replaced the native culture with their own. As a daughter she is hostile towards her father since her mother's death. When her father brings his new bride home, she behaves vehemently and gets into fantasies and starts imagining things and based on her imaginations behaves in a neurotic manner. This study throws light upon how loneliness, neglect, longing for love and patriarchy under the influence of colonialism affect the female character's mind and behaviour and how she becomes psychotic. This study will also look at how Coetzee has used the female protagonist in his novel to rebel against the dominant patriarchy.

Keywords: In the Heart of the Country; Magda; Psychotic behavior; Patriarchy; Colonialism

1 Introduction

J. M. Coetzee is a South African author and scholar who now resides in South Australia as an Australian citizen. He has received many prestigious awards including two Booker Prizes and a Nobel Prize. His main focus is on the apartheid system in South Africa, which is the hideous pinnacle of man's inhumanity to man. The white minority has tried to perpetuate its position of supremacy over black majority for which prison, police, rape, land acquisition, military harassment and racial humiliations are made use of in South Africa and these ideas form the constant themes of African novels. The base of them is violence which hangs thick in the air of South Africa. In addition to these themes, Coetzee's novels also record the loss and dissolution of family life and break-up of the traditional bond of love and protection between parents and children. Family relations are in his novels invariably strained, distorted and marked by violence. They are "deformed and stunted" (97) as Coetzee describes in *Doubling the Point* all relations between human beings under colonialism, bear the scar of a failure of love and the feeling unlikely to flourish in the South Africa of apartheid. Though Coetzee's novels cannot be termed as family novels, the theme of the parents' failure of love and commitment towards their children cannot be overlooked in his work. This results in behavioural changes in children, sometimes neurotic or even psychotic.

2 Residual Relationships

The family sub-text in Coetzee's novels is rather like a buried sub-plot which is rarely allowed to surface and develop on its own terms which something the author refuses to narrate, but hints at. Families are imperfect entities, amputated and diseased, and yet surprising and most of Coetzee's characters are not only primarily introduced in terms of their family status, but also the plots of the novels often revolve around family ties and obligations. In most cases what the researchers find are residual relationships, what is left after some members of the family have disappeared and there is apparently nothing to bind those who are left. The review of the novel, *In the Heart of the Country* appeared in *The Observer* goes thus: "Watched by his shrivelled, brooding daughter, a Boer widower commandeers his black foreman's child bride for his bed. Something cracks a rifle shot or the spinster's sanity, in this powerful, morbid study of lust, degradation and fantasy" (29).

Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* narrates the complex relationships that exist between the colonizer and the colonized. The story paints an image of Africa as a continent in crisis and as a world torn apart by racism, fascism, and other forms of bigotry. 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 and her childhood days and various other incidents that dramatically change the lives of the people living there. The narration is not always chronological and is sometimes even contradictory, making the summation of the plot difficult. The novel starts with Magda's father bringing home a voluptuous new bride to the farm. She is envious of the mistress of her late father, who also happens to be the spouse of their caretaker Henrik. Magda murders them with an axe. This turns out to be a delusion, and Hendrik, a farmhand, is actually the one who has brought home a new wife, the young and attractive Klein-Anna. Magda's father becomes infatuated with the new bride and initiates a courting that breaks the colonial rules. In the midst of this stream of consciousness, she informs the readers of how she actually kills her father by shooting him while he is sleeping with Klein-Anna. He takes a very long time to die, and Magda then struggles to bury him, ultimately succeeding. The farm crumbles without the patriarch to manage it, and Magda is unable to pay the servants. Hendrik rapes her in retribution, and this evolves into a voluntary sexual relationship.

She has gone insane by the end of the story, alone in her house in the middle of nowhere. Magda starts imagining that airplanes fly over the farm and communicate with her. Also towards the end of the novel it is insinuated that her father might be alive after all. This shows how affected Magda is psychologically. The novel at large portrays the coloniser-colonised relationship and how the family gets scattered and how the personality of an individual gets shattered due to the effect of colonialism. The New York Times Book Review gives a one-line synopsis of the plot including "loneliness, anger and eventual madness" (35). The novel portrays, according to Mary Jacobus, the female narrator as "a reserve of purity and silence in the materiality of its traffic with the world" (28). In most of Coetzee's novels the impact of colonialism is portrayed in the characters and in their lifestyle and also in their mental health. In an essay on Coetzee's fiction, Stephen Watson says:

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 power and powerless: 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 (370).

3 Embittered Spinster

Magda is a solitary and spiteful loner who resides on a sheep farm in South Africa's interior. As she has grown up as a member of the group which established their rule over the natives, she should feel comfortable, powerful and be proud of her ancestry. But she is not so. She appears unsatisfied with her role. Magda primarily wants to separate herself from her ancestors' legacy and create her own identity and also to work toward reconciliation with the colonized. Magda feels isolated from the greater community in which she lives since she is the daughter of the coloniser, a white European woman in a foreign continent. There is a barricade between her and other humans living in the farm as she is not able to identify herself to anyone in the farm. Magda perceives herself as a void that needs to be filled. Magda sees herself as "simply a ghost or a vapour floating at the intersection of certain latitude and a certain longitude, suspended here by an unimaginable tribunal until a certain act is committed" (17).

She observes the servants and they also remind her that she is an incomplete and inexact being belonging to no exact place and time. She tries to fill that hole through the attempted separation from her father and through her relationships with the servants but in vain. She desperately needs something to help her quiet her mental state, which is perpetually disturbed by despair: "I look upon any poor man as totally undone, whispers a voice (in my solitude I hear voices.)" (p.36) She is a prisoner of estrangement, and as a result of the confining elements of loneliness, she encounters psychological issues and develops a slew of various internal disorders. Coetzee depicts this African woman as plagued by discord and anguish. *In the Heart of the Country*, according to Wade (1993: 122), is a novel that describes South Africans and their natural environment as a tightly controlled framework dominated by neurotic structure, of conduct and understanding, from which no escape is feasible.

4 Her relationship with Her Father

Her mother died in childbirth, the cause of which Magda attributes to her father's "relentless sexual demands" (*In the Heart of the Country* 2). She has been excluded and ignored by her callous father and scorned and feared by her father's servants. Though Magda and her father 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). Magda is an intelligent woman whose outward meekness disguises a desperate resolve not to become "one of the forgotten ones of the history" (4). She proclaims, "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 draft eddying through the corridors, neglected, vengeful" (Coetzee, 1997, p. 2). Living alone with the widowed father, in the desert, Magda asks,

But will he ever know the desolation of the hour of the siesta chiming in cool green high-ceilinged houses where the daughters of the colonies lie counting with their eyes shut? The land is full of melancholy spinsters like me, lost to history, blue as roaches in our ancestral homes [...] wooed when we were little by our masterful fathers, we are bitter vestals, spoiled for life (3).

Her yearning for her father's love is explicit in the above passages.

5 Psychoanalysis of Magda

Psychoanalysis demonstrates that certain kinds of mental processes and specific instincts make the individual who (s)he is. Magda is dissatisfied with the dominance of patriarchy in her family and community. Her manner is a product of defective primary socialization. The absence of a warm, loving relationship between Magda and her father ensues in her abnormal acts. She loses her mother when she was a very little girl and so she depends only on her father for attention and affection. But she does not receive any from her father. Here she experiences poor self-worth, and an inability to feel worthy of receiving what she needs and wants. Her desperate, unrelenting quest to gain acceptance and approval from her father is central to her later behaviour. Magda needs to feel valued by her father. She expects her father to be concerned about her and to show his love and affection towards her. She herself confesses that she loves her father and that she is sexually attracted to him.

6 Unrequited Love

The father, however, does not acknowledge her existence, let alone love her in return. She believes that her father has treated her as an unwelcome kid since she was a child. Her father has never expected a daughter in such a male-dominated enterprise where a son will supposedly survive and perform better. Magda's father is a demanding, repressive, possessive, and presumptuous figure, a true male chauvinist who wields an iron fist over his household. He does not spare the rod in maintaining discipline over his daughter and servants. Magda is predominantly restricted within the domestic walls. Magda misses the paternal affection and this has a deep psychological effect on Magda. It is believed that children from broken homes always engage in deviant acts because they act out the feelings of guilt and frustration that they suffered in adolescence. It is understandable why Magda, a representation of African women, experiences so much pain and feels insecure in her own household.

7 Gender Discrimination

When a woman gives birth to only female children, she is blamed. Magda's problems result from her mother's inability to bear her husband a son. The institution of marriage in Africa is primarily a union between two families, rather than between two individuals. Male children are preferred and this predisposes the girl-child to danger

both physically and psychologically, from birth to adulthood. She is considered a liability, not an asset, to the paterfamilias. Therefore, gender inequality in African societies is strengthened by early childhood experiences, which lead men to see themselves as highly valued, and women to see themselves as being of less social value. Women are expected to give birth to male child and so she is pressurised in this regard. She may be forced to have more children until a son is born, or until, as in the case of Magda's mother, she dies in childbirth.

8 Magda's Psychotic Behaviour

Magda suffers from a phobia of total displacement in her father's household. Magda becomes envious like a lover would when her father treats the housekeeper's wife as a mistress. She even spies her father's sexual behaviour on his mistress. She witnesses from outside how he indulges in sex with her. And she weeps "drunken weeping" (p. 39). "Tears roll down my cheeks, my nose is stuffed, it is not good, I wait for the man on the other side of the door to decide for me what form tonight's misery is to take" (p. 56). It is obvious that her happiness or misery depends largely upon her father and his behaviour. Yet, her father consciously and unconsciously never troubles himself to soothe her feeling or to comfort her. She strongly hopes that the sexual attraction and the bond between the two lovers are broken so that her father would love her and take care of her but all her hopes are shattered. Moreover, he even hurts her physically. One night when she feels helpless and her insomnia attacks her she knocks at her father's door just to ask for a comfort. "Daddy.... Can you hear me? ...Daddy, I can't sleep... . Daddy, I'm feeling strange. What shall I do?" (p. 59). She gets an unexpected reaction from her father as he becomes so furious and hurts her arms and elbow.

9 Physical Abuse

Magda's father abuses her and uses physical violence to keep her in her place. He beats her when she makes a ruckus: "I am hit. That is what happened. I am hit a heavy blow on the head. I smell blood, my ears ring. [...] I have been dealt with. I was a nuisance and now I am dealt with" (112). In other words, she is physically forced to stay in her position. Whenever she gets into her father's way she is locked up in her room. Even after this kind of treatment, she imagines having sex with her father. She imagines exploring the sensation of having her body slip out of her and an entirely new one creep in, with limbs inside her limbs and a mouth inside her mouth (p. 58). She lists every act her father has performed on her while she is on the verge of passing out: He puts me down and takes my shoes off. He smooths my dress. What more can he do? What more dare he do?" (p. 61). She is frustrated because of not being sexually touched and so gets all the more confused and becomes even crazier. She says: "His hand is on my forehead, the horny hand of a man who bends wire. How tender, how comforting! But what he wants to know is whether I am feverish, whether at the root of my desolation lies a microbe. Should I tell him there are no microbes in me, my flesh is too sour to harbour them?" (p. 61).

10 Electra complex and her Dark Imaginings

However, it appears that Magda and her father engage in husband-and-wife behaviours that resemble an Electra. For instance, she prepares the warm water for her father to bath and makes sure that the hot water has been poured into the bathtub the moment her father comes through the front door. She appears to be relishing this ac-

tivity particularly when she can inhale the heavy malodour of soap and sweat. This description in itself seems more erotic than filial. Magda is a victim of the world around her - rejected and ignored by her father and feeling abandoned by her mother. To escape from the feeling of loneliness, she lives in dark imaginings which become her chief resource. She is a passive sufferer whose actions to alter her world and circumstances are only imaginative. Hence, imaginative murders and revenge become a central experience of power for her and she imagines the death of her father. "Oh father, father, if I could [...] creep through the honeycomb of your bones, listen to the turmoil of your marrow, the singing of your nerves, float on the tide of your blood" (p. 136).

Magda asks whether or not "there [is] something in me that loves the gloomy, the hideous, the doom ridden" (p. 44), from this it is evident that many of her descriptions are dark and foul. After she has avenged herself, and her father is dying in his bed, covered in blood and crusty feces, Magda says that "[b]ehind every door there is a new horror" (p. 145) making the house sound like a house of horrors, which is emphasized when she lies awake "listening to the cries [...] of sorrow and disgust and anguish [...] that swoop and glide and tremble through this house" (p. 49). She relishes the details of the descriptions of her father's misery: "I open the sickroom door and am hit by the sweet stench. [...] He is lying in a sea of blood and shit that has already begun to cake" (145). She also struggles to bury her father and his concubine after the first murder. She is concerned about the corpses reemerging:

What of the bodies? [...] if buried in the riverbed they will be washed out in the next spate, [...] and return to the world [...]. If weighted and sunk in the dam, they will contaminate the water and reappear as chained skeletons grinning to the sky in the next drought [...] lolling in each other's rotting arms (34).

She feels isolated and unloved. Even at the outset of the novel, she declares her emptiness and her desire to fill it. She wants to love and be loved. She herself acknowledges this:

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).

11 Lonely Maid

She does not receive love and warmth from her father and being a spinster, she never has any chance of being loved and cared for. She feels greatly frustrated at the thought of being single with no one to love and take care of her. She refers to herself as a spinster throughout the novel. Once she says "The land is full of melancholy spinsters like me, lost to history" (3). 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 she feels that she has not become a "complete" woman like Klein-Anna. However, this is not Magda's dilemma alone. Many daughters of the colonizers have the same feeling. She also experiences the feeling 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 is distressed and estranged by the imagined sexual ties that have developed between her father and his new wife, the black housekeeper Klein-Anna and Hendrik, as well as between her father and Klein-Anna. She is always obsessed with her condition and she laments 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 considers herself as a thing that is hollow and wishes to fill her void by discovering her own story, a "story that will wash over [her] tranquility as it does for other women" (8). 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 love and sex.

Every animal on the farm has its part to play and she remains the sole exception. Like the farm which is at the mercy of someone to be irrigated, she feels that her life which is like a desert should be irrigated. It is implicit that she feels lonely and yearns for company. Her father's character, an embodiment of the patriarchal dominance and the isolation of farm life in South Africa have a decided effect on Magda's psychology. The novel is set as a description given by Magda in her diary. She records her thoughts and observations and utilises them to vent her rage. Magda always maintains a low sense of self-worth because she simply vents her fury on writing rather than actually fighting a worthy fight. She portrays herself as being abandoned, filthy and feels all the more dejected for being used as a tool to organise the household or discipline the servants. She also sees herself as "simply a lonely, ugly old maid" (45). This kind of self-image has led to her withdrawal from life. She calls herself a spinster, several times and this reveals her suffering from being lonely, with no companion. She also yearns for male company and wishes, "If only I had a good man to sleep at my side and give me babies, all would be well, I would perk up and learn to smile" (45).

12 Physical Symptoms of Neurosis

When her father takes a black mistress, Magda's reactions are extreme. She despises the possibility of her becoming a servant in her own father's house. In her fantasy, she thinks that in a couple of months, she will be serving her father and his mistress breakfast in bed. She will have to wash out the mistress's "soiled underwear" (54). Magda exhibits various physical indicators of neurosis in addition to her psychiatric features. In several notes, she complains repeatedly about migranes, insomnia and other diseases. She says, "I said once that I slept, but that was a lie [...] How can I afford to sleep?" (79). She also says, "hour after hour concentrating on the sounds inside my head [...] I listen to the molecular world inside me with the same attention I bring to the prehistoric world outside" (38). Thus it is clear that she is gradually getting into a sort of disturbance in her psychological state.

Once Magda stands naked in the doorway of her father's bedroom and says, "Daddy, I can't sleep [...] Daddy, I am feeling strange. What shall I do?" (59). Receiving no answer, she visits them again with an axe in her hand to kill them. Her body develops the ability to resist the heterosexual supremacy that her father is imposing. After completing her kitchen work Magda proceeds to her father's bedroom. Magda acts like a specific warrior figure of female singleness in order to carry out this first parricide. Magda weighs the tool she has picked for the task at hand as she stands in the faint light of her father's bedroom, "I bring not the meat –cleaver as I thought it would be but the hatchet, weapon of the Valkyries" (11).

She believes that she has prevented her father from having a further successor who might have continued in his legacy or possibly usurped her own precarious place in his life. The violence that her kitchen conjuring have produced must be hidden away, erased from her body, "I have a face to compose, a story to invent" (12) before the servant arrives to witness her transgression. Magda does not want the black male servant, Hendrik, to see the results of her rebellious servitude. Magda's first parricidal chore is hampered by her concurrent urge to hide her violent behaviour behind a flaw-

less guise of normalcy. The fantastical deaths begin to lose their finality when Magda longs for a "strong-thewed accomplice" (17) to help her clean up and dispose of the bodies. Magda faces a dilemma between her desire to be rid of the dictates of her culture which tells her that only married, fertile woman is whole and desire to be one of those very women.

13 Psychotic Behaviour

When Hendrik, the African foreman brings in his bride, Magda's father abuses her by given candies and coins. She rages against her father and says: "my rage at my father is simply rage at the violation of the old language, the correct language, that take place when he exchanges kisses and the pronouns of intimacy with a girl who yesterday scrubbed the floors and today ought to be cleaning the windows (p. 47). When Magda watches her father making love with Hendrik's wife, she imagines herself in her place, finding someone at last, at the end of her empty childhood, to play with. However, this is just delusions, accompanied by resentment. It doesn't require much time for neurosis to progress to insanity. Magda's complete lunacy is revealed when she becomes delusional. Although she does not consider herself a "destroyer" (47), she has put herself as a killer by fantasizing to execute her father. She imagines: "I have broken a commandment, and guilty cannot be bored. I have two full grown bodies to get rid of besides many other traces of my violence" (12).

Magda also imagines the coming of some insects. She is greatly terrified and tells Hendrik, her servant and his wife: "We must be aware in general [...] of the revival of insect life [...] I mention plagues of caterpillars [...] the wasps, for wasps are predators too" (91). So she sees things and hears voices in her imagination. Such delusion and paranoia are severe symptoms of a psychotic person. Magda yearns to have sex with Hendrik and in her frustration she says, "I am ... a farm girl... not unaware that there is a hole between my legs that has never been filled" (45). But Hendrik abuses her and even makes fun of her behaviour in bed. Magda is finally driven totally insane which is demonstrated by her interactions with the sky gods and conversation with her dead father. After Hendrik and Klein-Anna leave, the father returns once again – "perhaps my father is not dead after all" (133). Magda throughout the novel faces with lots of troubles and tribulations under the patriarchy of her father who considers her as a tool for doing some chores for him at home and Hendrik who abuses her sexually and in various other ways. However he struggles hard to overcome all the barriers between her and her father and the servants but in vain. Her failure is not because of her weakness but because of the tradition which has existed for thousands of years, that of the master and slave relationship. In reality an individual's effort can never bring about such a big change in the society, that too in a very short span of time. As Magda is not able to cope up with her idealistic world and the bitter reality she becomes neurotic.

14 Conclusion

Thus the isolation, neglect, and sexual desire faced by the female narrator, Magda of the novel *In the Heart of the Country* leads to her mental depression and neurosis and the successive events in the novel lead her into psychosis. She is an angry jealous lady with very low self-esteem and also suffers from a terrible headache, which does not have a valid medical cause. When she begins to have delusions like imagining her father and his mistress being killed and the arrival of insects, her neurosis transforms into psychosis. This paper therefore to a certain extent tries to analyse how coloniali-

sation and patriarchy influence the character in the novel, especially how the female narrator of the story gets affected by it.

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