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Author(s)	KEHINDE, Ayo
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## PATRIARCHAL SUPPRESSION AND NEUROSIS: AFRICAN WOMEN'S PLIGHT IN J. M. COETZEE'S *IN THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY*

Ayo KEHINDE

*Department of English, University of Ibadan*

**ABSTRACT** This paper analyzes the socio-political status of African women with regard to notions of femininity, masculinity, and sexism. The discursive strategy involves a concept of feminism that deploys psychoanalytic theory. It also relies on sociological and anthropological analytical tools. The paper critically examines a J. M. Coetzee novel - *In the Heart of the Country*. Among the issues discussed are the following: What kind of femininity is suggested in the novel? In what way do the implied female qualities mirror a society structured by a racial and gender schism? What are the techniques employed by Coetzee to foreground women's plight in the novel? Generally, Coetzee's depiction of African women subverts and disrupts patriarchal modes of representation and containment. It also suggests that African women's full enjoyment of their human rights is a prerequisite for their empowerment, and constitutes the trademark of democracy in their continent. Magda, the protagonist of the novel, is simply one voice in a chorus that is calling for an end to patriarchal suppression in Africa, as well as for order, unity, security, and gender equality. Coetzee's text mediates the idea that African women should be empowered to decide freely on matters relating to all aspects of their lives.

**Key Words:** Feminism; Patriarchy; Empowerment; Suppression; Neurosis; Coetzee.

### INTRODUCTION

That the African continent is a chaotic and violent place to live is an observation that has often been made, especially when the racist, ethnic, and sexist tendencies that have been allowed to develop in African societies are considered. To a great extent, African women are being relegated to the background in the social, political, and economic arenas of their societies. This has had a negative effect on the development of the continent. Corroborating the claim that violence and discrimination against women is a developmental problem in Africa, Olayinka (2006: iv) states:

If women, who often constitute at least 50% of the total population, should bear any burden, it can only be reasonably expected that the rest of the society will have to either directly or indirectly bear part of the burden.

However, African women, conscious that they have been relegated to a position from which they function as mere appendages to men, have always strug-

gled to achieve recognition as human beings in their own right. Literary works serve as a means by which the predicaments of women in this continent can be represented and condemned. Rushdie (2003: 338) comments on the relevance of literature in the depiction of social issues and aspirations thus:

“...a work of literature offers its readers a clearer, deeper understanding of the opaque events being reported in the press and on TV, whose shadowed truths the half-light of journalism fails to illumine.”

In this context, Coetzee’s novel is understood in this study to be both strongly humanistic and feminist. However, his representation of African women in general has been under-examined in previous collections of criticism of his work – a critical imbalance that this essay seeks to redress. This study examines Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country* (1976) as a story that dwells on the travails, aspirations, upheavals, and achievements of African women. It also focuses on the feminist aesthetics of the novel.

The theoretical framework of the paper derives from the assumption that, in his fiction, Coetzee uses feminism as a social theory and as a philosophy (Madoo & Niebrugge, 1996). Feminism, as a theory, proposes that a just society must be inclusive and seek equality for all, across gender, race, and class. As a philosophy, feminism sets out principles and ideals that people should uphold and live by. Feminism, as depicted in Coetzee’s text, offers a critique of social relations with respect to gender that highlights inequality, and it promotes women’s rights, interests, issues, *etc.* Through the diary of Magda, issues such as gender discrimination, stereotyping, objectification (especially sexual objectification), oppression, patriarchy, *etc.* are examined. The philosophical orientation of Coetzee’s fiction is that African people should fight against the desires that emerge from the patriarchal cultures that inform their societies. Our basic hypothesis is that Coetzee uses the life, psychology, and mental dissonance of the protagonist of his story (Magda) to chronicle the extreme sexism that is rampant in African societies, and to advocate the empowerment of African women. Magda’s dilemma is also used to depict the alienation of African women generally. Patriarchal suppression and alienation have a negative impact on Magda’s psyche. She sees herself as unfit and, as a consequence of her experiences, develops emotional problems and becomes psychologically unstable. The text foregrounds symptoms of madness that emerge as a result of excessive patriarchal suppression. These include memory lapses and forgetfulness. This is why Magda keeps on repeating the phrase “or perhaps,” a semi-otic signifier of mental atrophy. She also suffers from migraines as a result of the oppression that she experiences in a phallogocentric society.

## ANNOTATING MAGDA'S 'TALES' OF PATRIARCHAL OPPRESSION OF AFRICAN WOMEN

As a testimony to the fact that Coetzee offers in this text a realistic documentation of oppression of African women by African men, Bartnik (2006: 43) has noted that Coetzee is one of the South African writers who bear "witness to injustice happening around them, and their role is to ascertain the truth by describing life as adequately as possible." The agony of Magda stems from the fact that she is overshadowed by figures or structures of patriarchal power in her society. She is rendered almost transparent, even non-present. The hostile social climate that she lives in renders her mute and marginal. She does not have a genuine status of her own, and she becomes, barely, a reflection of other, overpowering figures. However, as a radical feminist who cannot be perennially suppressed, Magda voices her plight and demands recognition from the margins. She expresses her desire to participate in social discourse and condemns a society that is rigidly controlled by men. She knows that if she fails to empower herself socially, she will become totally invisible and silenced by the figures of power.

Magda is used in the novel as a symbol of Coetzee's quintessential African emancipated woman. This claim is in consonance with a similar one made in the press promotion of the novel:

"Magda's response to an Africa that will not respond to her is violence and madness."

She believes that, although patriarchal suppression is a global problem, her situation, as an African woman, is particularly outrageous. In her words:

"The colonies are full of girls like that, but none, I think, so extreme as I." (pp.1-2)

Magda is passionate, obsessed, and absurd. These and many other qualities contribute to her ability to survive in a hostile environment. The text examines what it means to be a woman in contemporary African society, in which patriarchal oppression is particularly onerous and evident; it also envisions a new African community in which men and women are liberated from the societal structures that have led to oppressive male roles and to battered women's syndrome, as well as to the ills of domestic violence and rape. Her father represents the African patriarchal order of appropriation and epitomizes the oppressive symbolic law of that culture. In fact, she functions, as Foucault's paternal 'No'. This is because the father represents not only himself but also the colonial and patriarchal milieu. Magda is a fictional character who is universal with respect to her struggle for self-expression and desire to tell her own (hi)story using language that does not alienate her. She struggles to become an agent of her own (hi)story, thereby rejecting cultural and historical definitions of her sub-

jectivity. Magda and her father live in a secluded place, on an isolated farm. In the father-daughter dissonance that emerges in the novel, the father is a symbol of the colonial order, a representative of a colonial system in which the colonizers have an overbearing presence. Magda, the archetype of Coetzee's radical women, questions cultural stereotypes and reverses a jaundiced portrayal of women. She gives a Freudian explanation for her predicament, thereby highlighting her private experience and public dilemma (Ashcroft, 1998).

The situation of women in the society portrayed in the novel is harsh. From the beginning of the story, Coetzee prepares the mind of the reader for an African woman's descent into neurosis by selecting and paralleling a series of incidents that, on the surface, appear insignificant and unconnected, but which, taken together, are ultimately instrumental, not only to shaping the course of her life but also in transforming the narrative into an artistic whole. Magda can be said to be a literary sister to Adela Quested in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, who suffers following her relationship with Dr. Aziz. Similar to Adela's situation, Magda's emotional tumult is revealed in her bouts of hallucinations. In addition, Magda is as garrulous as the two tramps in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (Estragon and Vladimir). However, unlike the two tramps, Magda matches her words with actions. She challenges the oppressive character of her society:

“by changing the very language of identity, by allowing the feminine to speak.” (Gallagher, 1991: 92)

In this way, Coetzee is able to objectively present the crisis of domestic violence in African societies. That is, the problem is not the exclusive preserve of African men; there are also women who beat their husbands regularly.

The patterning of the actions in the novel is part of the novelist's technique and helps to define the novel's theme and purpose. This design is presaged in Magda's meditation at the beginning of the novel. She is in dire need of something with which to calm her mind, which is constantly plagued by depression and neurosis:

“I look upon any poor man as totally undone, whispers a voice (in my solitude I hear voices.)” (p.36)

She is a victim of alienation, and she suffers from emotional anguish and a host of other internal mental crises, as a result of the constraining forces of isolation. Coetzee portrays this African woman as encumbered by dissonance and pain. Wade (1993: 122) describes *In the Heart of the Country* as a novel that:

“presents South Africans and their landscape as a closed system dominated by neurotic structure, of behavior and perception, from which no escape is possible.”

In line with Wade, Cantor (1994) sees the text as exploring the manifold problems arising from decolonization, gender dissonance, national liberation, and ethnic identity. Indeed, the novel raises important questions relating to race, gender, and class. Nobody in the text understands anyone else. Magda does not understand her father, and he does not understand her motives and plight. She does not understand Hendrik and his wife. She does not even comprehend herself. This is the plight of women in the world of the novel, where gender and interracial relations are conflicted, and individuals operate in a climate of ignorance. However, in this arena of conflict, it is the woman who suffers most. It is glaringly evident that any time that there is a war or crisis in any African state, it is women who suffer the most. Some are widowed too soon; some lose their children, and some are deprived of their parents, siblings, or other relations.

African women, as portrayed in the novel, are bedeviled with skewed interpersonal relationships. Therefore, the images of women that pervade the novel are characterized by powerlessness, social isolation, and abnegation. Magda is used by Coetzee as a confluence of all the agonies that beset African women. Coetzee is not a writer who reflects the socio-political problems of his people uncritically; rather, he refracts the troubles of Africa and Africans by suggesting alternatives. To him, men and women should live together peacefully because gender war in any society portends danger for both sexes. Hence, through Magda, Coetzee calls for the liberation of all women from oppression. Magda can therefore be called a tool in the hand of the novelist, one that can raise the consciousness of African women, so that they can rise up and fight for their freedom and empowerment. To existentialists, alienation is a permanent condition; human beings are essentially self-alienated. Therefore, it is futile to expect that human beings will, one day, disalienate themselves. However, in Marxism, disalienation is possible for a willing mind. To the Marxist, human beings were not originally self-alienated, but became so, through the course of history. Hence, human beings can return to themselves in future (Eagleton, 1990). Disalienation is therefore possible through a radical transformation of society that permits (wo)men to lead a more fulfilled human existence. This is the philosophy that Coetzee seems to be artistically propagating in this novel. Some African societies have suffered and are still suffering untold social, political, economic, and physical agonies. One reason that has been given for the pandemic nature of such woes in Africa is gender warfare. Coetzee, through his portrayal of Magda, believes that this is not an insurmountable problem; people could participate in changing the socio-political and economic climate of their continent through a reordering of their society along lines of mutual understanding among its various strata and groups of people.

Magda has a domineering, rigid, possessive, and assuming father, a true male sexist who rules over his household with an iron hand. He does not spare the rod in maintaining discipline over his daughter and servants. In fact, Magda is confined to the domestic sphere. She both fears and hates her father for refusing to give her paternal affection. This father-daughter schism has a deep psy-

chological effect on Magda. The reader knows and hears nothing about her mother (her gold), and the father who is supposed to be her consolation is a bully. Throughout her monologue, hints of his Spartan discipline emerge. The dissonance between Magda and her father leads to her accidentally killing him while discharging a shotgun through the bedroom window because he has coerced Klein-Anna, the wife of Hendrik, the farm laborer, into his bed. As the world in the novel does not readily grant the satisfaction of (wo)man's desires, Magda murders her father. Thus, Coetzee captures the chaos, confusion, and disorder that characterize the postcolonial African world, reminding the reader of the problem of gender dissonance that is inherent in contemporary African societies. The picture of Africa that emerges in the novel is one of a crisis-ridden continent, a world destroyed by fascism, hate, and racism; in this context a tragic conception of history, as an eternal cycle of human stupidity, is formulated. Pitiably enough, Magda's rebellion violates the peace of the family and introduces chaos, division, and strife.

Capitalism has eroded the sense of unity and egalitarianism that characterized a number of pre-colonial African societies. Even the unit of the family, assumed to be a conflict-free setting, is now marred by cut-throat hatred. Recourse to violence becomes a pattern in the family of Magda's father. She has witnessed violence meted out to her peers and neighbors by her father. This has a negative effect on her psyche, and it is reflected in her aggressive behavior (bullying and fighting), emotional disturbance (depression, continual fear, anxiety), criminal activities (vandalism and murder) and general emotional trauma. Through Magda's capacity to kill her father, Coetzee seems to be upholding a basic tenet of Amazon Feminism, which focuses on physical equality between males and females. It opposes gender stereotypes and discrimination against women based on assumptions that women are supposed to be, look, or behave, as if they are passive, weak, and physically helpless. Magda's ability to murder her father is Coetzee's rejection of the idea that certain characteristics or interests are inherently masculine or feminine. By this act, Coetzee, the male Amazon feminist, envisions, upholds, and explores a vision of heroic womanhood.

The daily experiences of Magda, and by extension African women generally, as witnessed in her monologue, reveal that women, in the world of the novel, are inundated with all kinds of intractable ecological, economic, social, and psychological problems. These are shown in a number of horrifying apocalyptic images that appear in the novel. These images include experiences of madness, isolation, rape, murder, alienation, and paranoia. We can conclude, through the imagined ordeals and experiences of Magda, that human beings are both savage and civilized and governed by contradictory impulses. Ward (1989) sees Magda as a literary symbol of white South African society, most especially after the trauma of Soweto. However, in this paper, Magda is conceived of as being more than simply a symbol of an African nation. This is because, in her deeds and revelations, it is possible to observe some of the pain and trauma of African women in general. The society depicted in the novel is one character-



ized by struggle, where survival of the fittest is the order of the day:

“We have to destroy other things and people... in order not to destroy ourselves, in order to protect ourselves from the tendencies to self-destruction.” (Osborn, 1965: 25)

This is, in fact, the socio-political mood of most African states, scarred by civil wars, violence, ethnic strife, and other forms of conflicted relationships.

Pacifist measures in the world of the novel, and by extension, the African continent, tend to be ambivalent because, under conditions of stress, they reveal themselves as aggressive impulses. Psychoanalysis has demonstrated that certain kinds of mental process and specific instincts make the individual who (s)he is. Magda is frustrated because of patriarchal hegemony in her home and society. Psychological explanations abound for Magda's deviant behavior. Her manner is a product of defective primary socialization. The absence of a warm, loving relationship between Magda and her father ensues in her deviant acts. Some believe that children from broken homes or polygamous homes always engage in deviant acts because they are acting out the feelings of guilt and frustration that they suffered in adolescence. This confirms a popular Yoruba adage:

“Bi odede o dun, bi igbe ni ilu ri.” (“if all is not well with the family, the town will look like a dung pit.”)

The problem that African women face is that they encounter hostile social and cultural elements that are embedded in the social structure of their societies. These elements continue to undermine the welfare of women in Africa. Among the multiple problems faced by African women that are revealed or tangentially observed in the monologue of Magda are child marriage, female genital mutilation, widowhood rites, nutritional taboos, body scarification, tribal marks, and tattooing, among others. These practices have effects on the physical, social, and psychological well being of African women. Many constitute acts of violence against women.

Given the tortuous experience of Magda, a symbol for African women, it is no surprise that she becomes paranoid. One cannot excuse Magda's brutality in relation to her father and her stepmother on any grounds. However, it is important to see beyond that act, which constitutes a symptom, and to seek out the circumstances that could turn a sane person into a beast-like and crazed being. This, we think, is one of the important messages mediated by Coetzee's text. He wants the reader to understand the fate of the majority of African women, who are gradually destroyed physically, mentally, psychologically, and even spiritually by societal dissonance and sexist attitudes, and who are looking to retaliate. However, this cannot (nor does Coetzee intend it to) excuse the brutality and parricide committed by Magda. The real enemy, in this case, is sexism, which perpetuates prevailing notions of race and class.

Despite the rational explanation of chromosomal influence on the sex of



a fetus, 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. Preference for male children predisposes the girl-child to danger (physically and psychologically), from birth to adulthood. She is seen as a burden, not an asset, to the paterfamilias. A boy child is seen as a person who can enlarge the family. On the other hand, a girl child is seen as one who will reduce the household, because she can be 'acquired' by another family as a wife. 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. These perceptions of gender lead to a social system that is dominated by men. Pressure is put on a woman who does not 'produce' a male child. She may resort to having more children until a son is born, or until, as in the case of Magda's mother, she dies in childbirth. In this situation, the husband, as represented by Magda's father, will either marry another woman who, hopefully, will bear him sons or, if he is married according to Ordinance Law or Christian marriage, he tries to have a son outside his marriage. Contrary to the glowing portrait of marriage set out in magazines and other media, African women see marriage as a bad bargain (Yusuf, 1999). This is because they are disadvantaged in many spheres of marital life, due to the patriarchal structures upon which their societies are built. Thus, in *In the Heart of the Country*, Coetzee dwells on the predicament of women living in states of crisis and displacement, and in an agonistic relation to oppressive sexual and political circumstances. This representation includes the idea of the general challenge inherent in the condition of postcolonial African women, the problem of their relation to the Other, gender wise (Stone, 2003). 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 Africa.

In such a context, it is not surprising to note that polygamy is allowed in African culture. An African man may marry another woman as a reprieve when his first wife is unable to have male children. In fact, as is seen in the plight of Magda's mother, a woman's place is not consolidated until she bears a male-child. A woman who cannot have a male-child has defaulted, and can even be divorced for that reason. A woman who does not reproduce figures of authority, power, and supremacy in the form of sons is not regarded highly by her husband (the chief figure of power), or by her in-laws or society at large (Akanke, 1999). The fact is that a woman who 'produces' only girl children is as 'useless' as a barren woman.

We can offer some sociogenic explanations for Magda's seemingly anti-social behavior, which is socially induced in that it arises from the conflict and pain experienced in her home and social environment. We can support this claim with the Anomie Theory of Deviance propounded by Robert Merton. The behavior of Magda reveals that there is a breakdown of order in the normative structure of her society, a society that fails to provide individuals with

opportunities to achieve the goals that are considered desirable. People react differently to situations of anomie. For instance, in this text, Magda reacts to societal pressures rebelliously. She not only rejects conventional cultural goals and the means of attaining them but also endeavors to establish a new and radically altered society, devoid of class schism, racism, and sexism. She is against authority, patriarchy, racial dogmatism, and any kind of impediment to the rendering of her story by herself. This revolutionary temper makes things very difficult for her. The problems that women face in Africa, as a result of various forms of prejudice, are of such dimensions that, even religion, the traditional haven of battered souls, cannot give Magda the required peace or psychological relief. The church is presented in Magda's soliloquy as one big theatre of hypocrisy. She cannot reconcile herself to the morality of a world that disseminates the attractive values that are the foundation of Christianity but at the same time treats women, half the human race, as inferior beings.

Magda suffers from a phobia of total displacement in her father's household. She thinks that if Anna graduates to the status of mistress then, automatically, she will retrogress to the status of servant. To prevent this, Magda murders her father, the perceived source of her impending servitude. We should, however, look beyond the death of Magda's father and see it as the end of a value that has been held sacred by an entire race. This may be seen in Machiavellian terms. An individual has to protect his or her status and role with whatever means to hand, even if that entails using means that are socially unacceptable. This said, dissonance and pain are key characteristics of any human society; they are ubiquitous and perennial. Magda seems to have jumped from the frying pan into the fire; she is unable to escape the weight of her father. Her attempts to wipe away her life-pain appear fruitless. In pain, Magda asks:

“What are pain, jealousy, loneliness doing in the African night?” (p.9)

The imagined death of Magda's father brings more problems to her: the arrival of locusts, insects, plagues of caterpillars, predators, and wasps, among other pests. This is a replica of the plight of African women who have experienced, successively, slavery, colonialism, perverted independence, military dictatorship, castrated democracy, neo-colonialism, *etc.*

Magda's reaction to loneliness, helplessness, and frustration is similar to that of Firdaus in El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, who has to murder the pimp, Marzouk, who is considered her oppressor. This is a course that is inviting to any neurotic. Magda also finds an equivalent in Raskolnikov, the hero of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, who commits murder for no clear reason and goes into penance for the rest of his life. Magda's isolation, therefore, becomes a metaphor, not only for the fate of women in the hostile gender and class structure of African society but also for humankind's isolation in general. She claims: ‘The land is full of melancholy spinsters like me’ (p.3). She is, in large measure, starved for attention and affection. Her story has a tragic core: pathos ensues from the hostile social and sexist circumstances that she has to

face. Her trajectory is one of despair, sterility, loneliness, madness, and vengeance. She sees herself as a void, a hole, a ghost, and a vapor, frequently on the verge of dissolving into complete insubstantiality. She is left miserable and shut off from the whole world at the end of the story.

Magda's existence is also bedeviled by disease, including migraines, ennui, and speculative languor. Pain has become part of her life:

“Many things I fear but pain does not seem to be one of them.” (p.22)

Implying that pain is an eternal problem of humanity, Magda traces it to the fall of man in the biblical Garden of Eden (p.23). She is hardly master of her own fate; rather, she is buffeted by broad changes in socio-political life that render her, from time to time, more or less powerless and dependent. Women's condition in the referent society of the novel, and by allegorical extension, the postcolonial African world in general, is analogous to that depicted in T. S. Eliot's 'The Hollow Men' and 'The Wasteland.' Magda herself declares:

“If I am an emblem then I am an emblem. I am incomplete. I am a being with a hole inside me, I signify nothing....” (p.9)

The absence of her father on the farm portends the ruin of the farm. This is aggravated by the subsequent departure of Hendrik and Klein-Anna, leaving Magda virtually isolated. Since people are not naturally monologic, but dialogic, Magda attempts a linguistic metamorphosis by setting up a dialogue with assumed celestial and subterranean beings. Her communion with the sky-god is a substitute for human communication and an attempt to find a language that is not mediated by social division (Attwell, 1993). She struggles against aphasia, and her speech is disrupted by the hostile societal pressures, harsh social structures, and a painful emotional climate. Her speech disorder is a consequence of severe emotional and psychological stress, caused by her social context and family (Mwihaki, 2003). She is mentally tortured and experiences a series of oppositions or opposed needs. She suffers from schizophrenia (*dementia praecox*), a severe mental dissonance characterized by emotional desensitization, intellectual deterioration, social isolation, disorganized speech and behavior, delusions, and hallucinations. She sees things that are not there, hears voices and experiences various kinds of mental delusion.

In fact, sexism has scarred the psychology of Magda, as it has that of other women in Africa. Some African myths portray Africa as a fertile ground, pleasant and temperate, a land of many heroines and heroes. However, the monologue of Magda opposes this notion by foregrounding some of the painful realities of existence in Africa. Magda is thus an oppositional figure in African feminist-humanist historiography. She gives the reader a subversive counter-discourse and deconstructs an existing notion of African consciousness by foregrounding certain painful realities of existence in Africa, which is depicted as a godless place of brutes and sexists, lacking language, government, humanity, and apparel.

Child sexual abuse is pandemic in African neocolonies. This is a result of a number of economic and social factors, which include overcrowded housing units, poverty, alcoholism, and child labor. The problem of rape in Africa is seemingly perennial. Cases are under-represented in electronic and print media, and those that do come to the attention of the law enforcement authorities are not always pursued to a logical end. The dissonant relationship between Magda and Hendrik offers a good example of the climate of rape and assault in which African women live. After the death of his boss, Magda's father, Hendrik takes the baton of male patriarchy. Suddenly, he becomes lionized and rules over his wife, Klein-Anna, and his new boss (Magda) with an iron fist:

“Magda now washes the dishes. Hendrik now starts to vanish into the night.” (p.110)

He suddenly metamorphoses into a brute, physically abusing and raping Magda. He also refuses to see Magda as a lover. Instead, he treats her like a whore, refusing to engage in any phatic communion with her. What ensues between them is only painful sexual intercourse, without mutual acceptance. Magda speaks her mind about this ‘sex without love’:

“You do nothing, but shout at me, you never talk to me, you hate me.” (p.106)

Thus, Magda is humiliated by yet another man (Hendrik). There is little or no chance to talk to each other. All Magda wants is companionship, a little peace between them (male and female), which seems unattainable:

“He only creeps into her bed and takes her in the small hours of the night. He comes in the night like a ghost.” (p.110)

The experience of physical and sexual abuse has a negative impact on Magda's health. She sustains many injuries and experiences chronic pain, gastrointestinal disorders, anxiety, and clinical depression. Coetzee underscores the racial implication of the act by subsuming it under a gendered orientation:

“This is my fate, this is a woman's fate” (p.106) says Magda.

This reflects how some men treat women in many African societies. In African neocolonies, women are vulnerable to sexual exploitation because of high poverty levels; many have no option but to engage in dangerous activities like prostitution. The belief of Coetzee, as reflected in his portrayal of Magda, is that women should strive to lift themselves out of despair. They should strive to improve their economic, social, political, legal, and cultural status with a view to guaranteeing both sustainable development and economic growth. This is reflected in Magda's defiant rebellion against her father and male-constructed destiny.

Magda attempts to escape the master/slave dichotomy by learning to live in reciprocity, equality, intimacy, and true freedom. She believes this will engender global peace. However, Magda's vision may be a Herculean task, because the perversion of human relationships in Africa has become so entrenched. The process of reconciliation is a very difficult one. Magda herself tries to mend fences by attempting to create an androgynous and raceless society on her farm; however, the black couple (Hendrik and Klein-Anna) are still wary of her, and she doubts their love. There is a fear of reciprocity in the society. The yearning of Magda for racial, social, and gender consonance is also unfulfilled, as it is dependent on individuals, a scenario that often ends in futility or violence. For cultural and societal change, the efforts of individuals are not enough. Such revolutionaries or iconoclasts always end up being perceived as insane, or as social pariahs. This is the fate of Baako in Armah's *Fragments*, and Ezeulu in Achebe's *Arrow of God*. Therefore, individual will, with respect to the extermination of societal conflict, is a necessary but insufficient means for the redemption of societal life. This is one of the reasons why the story is gripping, especially when it comes to the dissonant and painful scenes. Although Coetzee employs the stream of consciousness technique in the novel, the events seem to be linked to produce a general effect of frustration, mental dissonance, and self-abnegation. It is powerful because it provides an imaginative catalogue of the sexist practices found in postcolonial Africa while revealing the basic similarities between human beings, color, gender, and class notwithstanding.

#### AN ANALYSIS OF COETZEE'S TECHNIQUES IN THE REPRESENTATION OF GENDER-INDUCED WOES

The power of Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* lies in the combination of thematic focus with superb techniques. For instance, one of the formal features of the story is a demonstrable desire to explain the dilemma of African women in the neo-colonial period allegorically. Coetzee's ideological stance is that human societies are much the same the world over. Thus, the allegorical mode of his fiction allows him to conceive of racism and sexism from a ubiquitous and transcendental perspective, instead of the more usual synchronic and localized perspective found in many contemporary African novels. Coetzee is a writer who recognizes the evils of gender inequality in African societies and imagines a number of alternatives to this situation in his text. Stotesbury (1991: 147) opines:

"Novel after novel contains, structurally and thematically, an awareness of alternative to the real world of South Africa."

One innovation in Coetzee's narration of the woes emanating from sexism in African societies is the postmodernist style that characterizes his text. This seemingly anti-realist style is akin to storing old wine in a new bottle. It

may be said that Coetzee's fiction, with its apparent anti-realist posture, is still based in actuality. To decipher Coetzee's fiction, the reader should be familiar with the relevant semiotic codes in African societies – linguistic, historical, and social. Boehmer's (1995: 8) assertion is relevant here:

“any piece of writing is a product of its time.”

The allegorical style in Coetzee's fiction, in the final analysis, does not obscure contemporary social, political, economic and cultural realities of Africa. This is because behind the allegory lies an indictment of sexism as well as its concomitant effects.

It is apparent that Coetzee has a penchant for transforming the picture of African gender relations into a surrealist nightmare, by means of the allegorical method. The characters seem intended to function as symbols of the oppression that women have experienced in neo-colonial African states; the effects of sexism on men, and their inhumanity to women, are also shown. The text shows the effects of sexism on the psychological composition of both the oppressors and the oppressed. This is similar to the allegorical style employed by Brink in his *The Wall of the Plague*.

Coetzee also uses symbols in depicting the burdens carried by women in African societies. This gives the work an aesthetic richness, given that symbols lend themselves to various interpretations. Recurring symbols in the text revolve around solitude, madness, hunger, rape, impotence, and muteness – all signifying the various unfulfilled yearnings and frustrations of African women and girls. Characters and episodes are at once symbolic and yet quite distinct, owing to the allusive nature of Coetzee's allegory of 'illness' and 'madness'. To be specific, *In the Heart of the Country* is an allegorical story about the generalized unease that characterizes the contemporary condition of African women; this said, it is more existential than social in its preoccupations. Thus, the novel is an exploration, using fable and allegory, of a sexist reality that emerges through the monologue of Magda. In fact, the text offers an Aesopian visual metaphor for Africa itself, through the metaphor of Magda's father's farm, i.e., the farm that apparently looks beautiful and fertile is actually a place of woe and stagnation.

Closely related to the foregoing is the fact that the novel is densely populated with images of despair. The pervading mood of the novel is one of brutality. This atmosphere has a negative impact on women's psyche, inducing paranoia. It is a situation in which women are hemmed in by racism, sexism, dejection, segregation and fear. Coetzee employs an extensive and striking use of physical settings as a backdrop for the actions in the novel. He shows how the environment mirrors the moral decay inherent in most African neo-colonies. His text suggests that the disintegrating condition of the physical environment is indicative of the larger political world of gender schism that brings with it the physical and psychological degeneration of the people. He gives the reader a picture of a society that drains its female citizens of life and hope, a society



where little or no love is demonstrated. The characters seem to experience only neuroticism, conflict, and pain.

There are two additional marks of postmodernism in Coetzee's fiction. On the one hand, there is the liveliness that comes from topicality and, on the other, there is the difficulty that comes from intellectual abstruseness. Emerging from the intricate roadmaps of Coetzee's fiction is a non-conservative ideology in the form of a cynicism in relation to all popularly held beliefs. Magda calls into question the social mores of her time. She critiques her society and brooks no gender or racial compromise. She completely rejects a society that imposes limitations on human aspirations by interrogating the patriarchal society and hostile social structures that she lives in. This posture may be seen as representing the efforts of African women generally in their attempt to move from the margin to the center. Given that literature is always a reflection and refraction of the realities of its enabling society, it constitutes a tool with which Coetzee can depict African women's plight in a patriarchal world. It is a fact that African women of today are beginning to make their mark and assert themselves; they are seeking self-respect, dignity, self-assertion, and a new moral code as part of their new quest for redefinition and self-esteem.

Coetzee's fiction also offers metafictional commentaries on particular sub-genres of white writing in South Africa, especially the pastoral novel, colonial travel writing, and historiography, as well as various canonical works. By this, the novelist is able to refract the agonies of African women generally from the painful experiences of South African women, especially during the period of apartheid. The metafictional quality of Coetzee's novel can best be discerned in its sense of drift. For instance, Magda is never sure of the time at which events took place, since she is herself a fiction. She asks at one point, "How shall I be saved?" (p.16). Her public outcry against patriarchal brutality manifests the desire of Coetzee that he and other androgynists register their opposition to sexism. The statement, like many others in the text, foregrounds the inability of African and black women generally to transcend the constant violence and injustice that beset their lives (Dovey, 1997). Thus, the ubiquitous nature of women's pain and mental dissonance that is created in any sexist and racist society is manifested.

Another technique used by Coetzee as a thematic vehicle in this work is that of stream of consciousness. This is commonly used to characterize the unbroken flow of thought and awareness in the waking mind (Abrams, 1981). In Coetzee's novel, we find an introspective incursion into the minds of the characters. For instance, throughout the narrative, there are long passages of introspection that provide a picture of Magda's mind. This can be seen in a series of numbered paragraphs that reflect the consciousness of the lonely and passionate Magda, the archetypal deprived and subordinated African woman. This is a strategy for highlighting the predicaments of various sets of people in that society; it also allows for vivid narration. Additionally, the stream of consciousness technique is used to illustrate internal disruption of a hitherto smooth flow of thought, action, and events. Since events do not unfold smoothly in the con-



temporary African world, a world wracked by war and conflict, it is reasonable to represent this incoherence in the inner consciousness or minds of the characters. Using this technique, Coetzee is able to foreground the mental dissonance and neurosis of Magda and of African women in general.

Rhetorical questions are another stylistic device that is used by Coetzee in the novel to foreground the plight of African women and to offer a redefinition of what it means to be an African woman. This is in consonance with the 'new' African women's thirst for knowledge and growth, and a more fulfilling existence. The strategy of piling up rhetorical questions is seen most often in confrontations, rushes of emotion, or when sudden changes of outlook occur. A few examples will suffice:

"What are pains, jealousy, loneliness doing in the African night?" (p.9)  
and

"How should I be saved?" (p.16)

The use of rhetorical questions in the text is a means of mediating the seriousness of the novelist's message, and a way to wring meaning out of the suffering of African and black women generally. The rhetorical questions found in the novel constitute a symptom of the psychological disturbance in Magda's psyche. Thus, the rhetorical questions in Coetzee's text are a means of confronting life's pain and a way of seeking a way out of human solitude. They are used as a vocabulary for the horrors found in postcolonial African societies and to mediate the fragmentation of a mind into a shocked subjectivity as a result of gender and social dissonance.

## CONCLUSION

The above analysis of Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* reveals that it is a strongly feminist text. Coetzee's artistry appears unique, in that his text manifests a mode and cast of literary expression that bears little resemblance to that of other contemporary African prose writers. In Coetzee's fiction, Africa's gender and social problems emerge as a synecdoche for the universal problems of women in any society. African women are depicted as a point of convergence for all manner of oppression. Even when men are also victims, women suffer more. It is on her back, like the footstool of the human race, that the burden of society lies and, like a mule, she has been exploited and dehumanized by all and sundry. However, it should be noted that African women's reaction to patriarchal repression has not been simply one of acceptance. On the contrary, these women have struggled and are still struggling to re-define themselves. Magda is an example of these determined women and, in the process of her re-definition, like a prophetess, she envisions a better future for the children of tomorrow, male and female. Through the portrayal of Magda, Coetzee contributes immensely to the imaginative unsettling of the patriarchal foundation on

which the traditional ideas associated with African women are set. The novel reveals that African women are a force to be reckoned with. Magda can be understood as a symbol of African womanhood insofar as she is an individual who is searching for self-actualization in a dignified way (Chukwuma, 1994). In fact, Magda, the radical African woman, has rejected the definition of womanhood imposed upon her by a patriarchal society. Despite the maltreatment, persecution and marginalization of the women in her milieu, she sticks to a hope that change can occur (Gallagher, 1991). In line with the idea of Probyn (2002), Magda steps out, beyond the limitations imposed by (phal)logocentric thinking, in order to interrogate structures of power, authority, and language. Concerning the issue of who will bring about positive change to the plight of women in her milieu, Magda comments, "It is up to me" (p.23). Thus, in Coetzee's text, the idea emerges that African women should personally fight for their own, individual empowerment, and reclaim their true identity. This is an urgent task, as the development of the continent depends on tapping and harnessing the potentialities of women. The artistic credo of Coetzee in *In the Heart of the Country* is that of women's empowerment. Through the predicaments and actions of Magda, he canvasses for compulsory education for all girl children, an end to violence against women, and the granting of socio-cultural, economic, and political rights to women. Through Magda, Coetzee seems to be saying that African women need a level playing field, not domination by African men. African women should have a voice of their own; the situation in which men are the sole voices should be discouraged. African women's destinies should no longer be in the hands of men. This is why many African women are now shedding their cocoon of silence, speaking for themselves, and seeking solutions to their problems through their own actions and initiatives.

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Author's Name and Address: Ayo Kehinde, *Department of English, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, NIGERIA.*  
*E-mail: ayobamikehinde2000@yahoo.com or ma.kehinde@mail.ui.edu.ng*

