

WOMEN, COLONIZATION AND BODY POLITICS: AN ANALYSIS OF J.M. COETZEE'S *IN THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY* AND *DISGRACE*

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Abstract

In Coetzee's fiction, the relationship between men and women appears to exist in the binary of the dominant and the subordinate, the colonizer and the colonized, the 'self' and the 'other'. The male members assume the role of colonizer and women's plight becomes analogous to that of colonized. In this dichotomy, man occupies the top position and is the possessor of all superior traits; woman, on the other hand, is subordinate to man and is the embodiment of all that is negative and inferior. While the collapse of Apartheid in South Africa brings power and autonomy to the previously oppressed black male, the plight of black female remains unchanged. It does not give them power and authority like their male counterpart. They continue to occupy the lowest position in the power hierarchy. Likewise, the status of the white female also emerges as that of a subordinate one both in colonial and post-colonial South Africa. During the colonial period, they are subservient to their male counterpart in every matter. In the post-colonial society, when the power is shifted, they suffer even more as now they fall below black males in power hierarchy and hence are subjugated by both whites as well as blacks. They fail to exert any authority over the black male. Instead, their white skin tone/racial privilege become the prime reason for their oppression in post-colonial South Africa. The present paper aims at discussing the colonized status of white women in colonial and post-colonial South Africa. It is observed in both the novels that it is women who are traumatized by the men of the opposite race both, during the time of apartheid as well as after the collapse of apartheid. The paper examines how their body becomes a site where colonial and patriarchal power is asserted and demonstrated.

Key Words: Colonized, Apartheid, Power, Oppression, Trauma, Body.

In Coetzee's fiction, the relationship between men and women is that of the dominant and the subordinate, the colonizer and the colonized, the 'self' and the 'other'. The male members assume the role of colonizer and women's plight becomes analogous to that of colonized. In this dichotomy, man occupies the top position and is the possessor of all superior traits; woman, on the other hand, is subordinate to man and is the embodiment of all that is negative

and inferior. While the collapse of apartheid in South Africa brings power and autonomy to the previously oppressed black male, the plight of black female remains unchanged. It does not give them power and authority like their male counterpart. They continue to occupy the lowest position in the power hierarchy. For them, the colonizers are replaced by the men of their own race who oppress and exploit them. Likewise, the status of the white female also emerges as that of a subordinate one both in colonial and post-colonial South Africa. During the colonial period, they are subservient to their male counterpart in every matter. In the post-colonial society, when the power is shifted, they suffer even more as now they fall below black males in power hierarchy and hence are subjugated by both whites as well as blacks. They fail to exert any authority over the black male. Instead, their white skin tone/racial privilege become the prime reason for their oppression in post-colonial South Africa. The present paper aims at discussing the colonized status of white women in colonial and post-colonial South Africa. In the novels taken for the study of the present paper, white women, despite their lack of direct participation in colonization, stay guilt-ridden and are seen by the blacks as one among the oppressors. Hence, black men try to subjugate and oppress them in revenge. Further, the paper also aims to explore the vulnerability of female existence/body to violence and atrocities in times of any political turmoil besides examining their subordinate status in society. It is observed in both the novels that it is women who are traumatized by the men of the opposite race both, during the time of apartheid as well as after the collapse of apartheid and their body becomes a site where colonial and patriarchal power is asserted and demonstrated.

In *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), Magda, a white woman, does not have an independent position in the house. She lives a degraded life under the domination of her father, the authoritarian white male. Later on, she is seen as one of the oppressors by Hendrik, the brown-skinned manservant, who, in the absence of Magda's father (his master), exploits her sexually as a way to reclaim his power. She recounts her deprived childhood in these words: "I grew up with the servants' children. I spoke like one of them . . ." (7). These words by Magda reveal her marginalized status in the household wherein like the servant's kids, she did not enjoy many privileges, and this subjection continues throughout her life. The trauma that Magda undergoes is not exclusive to her only. She represents the majority of white women who inhabit the farm and are the victim of this hegemony. She states, "The land is full of melancholy spinsters like me, lost to history, blue as roaches in our ancestral homes, keeping a high shine on the copperware and laying in jam. Wooed when we little by our masterful fathers, we are bitter vestals, spoiled for life. The childhood rape: someone should study the kernel of truth in this fancy" (3-4). Magda's remark suggests the sexual exploitation of daughters by their fathers as a common practice of power assertion in colonial South Africa. She desires to acquire the same authority her father has over the farmhouse and its inhabitants owing to her similar skin tone but fails to have that. Her existence is of no

significance to her father. To her father, she is an 'absence.' She says, "I was absent. I was not missed. My father pays no attention to my absence. To my father I have been an absence all my life" (2). Her insignificance in the eyes of her only parent i.e., her father has a deteriorating effect on Magda's sense of self and being. She yearns to have her presence felt by her father. However, all her attempts to prove her worth and significance are met with failure as "...he[father] has never needed anything" and is "enthralled by my need to be needed." It is always she who "circle(s) him like a moon" (5-6). The father figure stands for power, authority and the patriarchal forces to which everyone on the farm must submit, including Magda, the daughter.

Helpless as she is, Magda thinks that it is only the death of her father that can grant her due power position. Therefore, Magda's killing of her father can be seen as an attempt at acquiring authority by taking her father's position. She says, "The day I compose my father's hands on his breast and pull the sheet over his face, the day I take over the keys, I will unlock the rolltop desk and uncover all the secrets he has kept from me, the ledgers and banknotes and deeds and wills..." (42).

Hence, Magda, who always longed to have authority on the farm, enjoys a sense of power when she sees her father injured and descending into a state of complete dependency. Her father pleads help from Magda for fulfilling even the basic needs like water or getting into bed. She describes the helpless plight of her father in these words: "There are flies in my father's room . . . They crawl on his face and he does not brush them away, he who has always been a fastidious man. They cluster on his hands, which are red with blood" (71). His situation becomes analogous to that of a baby: "He is crying like a baby," "He is sitting in a pool of blood like a baby that has wet itself" (74). Babyhood is regarded as the most dependent stage in human growth. Magda's father, the autocrat, the authorial figure, becomes as helpless as that of a baby. Magda is able to reverse the role wherein earlier it was she who used to revolve around her father, and now she is the dominant one to whom her father is subservient. However, Magda's joy turns out to be ephemeral. Her attempt at assuming authority over the farm in the absence of the white male is thwarted by the presence of Hendrik, the manservant, who is according to Magda is " nothing but a tall, straight-shouldered brown man . . . , a man who slaughters the sheep . . . and milks the cow. . . and lifts his hat and goes about his duties" (27). He assumes power over Magda and the farm. He no more remains the same obedient servant. The former subservience of Hendrik is lost. He threatens and beats her mercilessly: "Yes! ... Yes! ... Yes! ..." says Hendrik, beating me, I raise myself on hands and knees and begin to crawl to the door. He kicks me in the buttocks, heavily, twice, a man's kicks, catching bone. I flinch and weep with shame. Please, please!' I roll over on my back and lift my knees . . . He goes on kicking at my thighs" (114). For Hendrik, Magda is weaker sex upon whom he unleashes violence as a way of taking revenge of the centuries of colonial oppression. Magda helplessly pleads him, "What more do you

want? Must I weep? Must I kneel? Are you waiting for the white woman to kneel to you? Are you waiting for me to become your white slave? Tell me! Speak! Why do you never say anything? . . . How can I humiliate myself any further? Must the white woman lick your backside before you will give her a single smile?" (128). However, her pleas and cries fail to move Hendrik.

Further, it is seen that Hendrik's assertion of absolute power comes in the form of Magda's sexual exploitation. The patriarchal structure of society use rape to assert men's superiority over women. The sexual violation of women gives them a sense of power and dominance. Kate Millett writes, "Patriarchal force also relies on a form of violence particularly sexual in character and realized most completely in the act of rape" (44). Hendrik is racially subservient to Magda, but he enjoys male privilege in the patriarchal society. Magda's rape seems an assertion on the part of Hendrik of his masculine power as well as the subversion of the racial hierarchy. He seems to be able to take revenge for the years of suppression and oppression he and his people have faced at the hands of the whites. He does not care about Magda's pain. In fact, the more pain and humiliation she undergoes, the more it adds to Hendrik's strength and power both as a man and as an oppressor. Magda writes, "He throws me against the wall, pinning my wrists, his whole weight upon me.... 'No!' I say. 'Yes!' he says, ' Yes!...Yes!...'"(115). She continues, "'Open up,' he says, those are his first words to me; but I am cold, I shake my head and clench myself, I clench everything together . . . He parts my knees by force and I clamp them to again, time after time after time" (116). Magda fails to understand as to why she, who never oppressed Hendrik or Anna has to become the victim of Hendrik's rage. She helplessly pleads him: "You are so bitter that you are completely blinded. I am not simply one of the whites, I am I! I am I, not people. Why have I to pay for other people's sins?" (128) A little later she says, "Must I weep? Must I kneel? Are you waiting for the white woman to kneel to you? Are you waiting for me to become your white slave? . . . How can I humiliate myself any further? Must the white woman lick your backside before you will give her a single smile?" (128). Magda's plight reveals the way white women are sexually violated by black men in their attempt at taking revenge against the years of colonial oppression which they certainly cannot take from the white male. Hendrik, though aware of his wife's sexual abuse by Magda's father could not take revenge against him. Now in the absence of her father, he sexually exploits her: "You are my wife's half-sister, where your father lay I lie too, I know that man, his mark is in my bed" (106).

The novel *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) also perpetuates the idea that a woman is incomplete in the absence of a man. Magda is a virgin spinster. She is conditioned to believe that her social worth lies in her association with a man. Therefore, she yearns to be needed, loved and belonged to a man. In the absence of a man (not getting married), she describes herself as "a hole crying to be whole" (44). Her loneliness leads her towards

insanity. She feels a void and hollowness in her being. After being raped by Hendrik, she is less concerned about the pain and humiliation caused but is more anxious about her entry into womanhood. She thinks, “Am I now a woman? Has this made me into a woman? . . . I can say I am finally a woman, or, Am I finally a woman?”(117). Despite Hendrik’s abuse, she beseeches him to stay in her life and is willing to take care of his every need merely to have the protective male presence of Hendrik. Her position is not that of an authoritative white woman but of a helpless woman trying to survive in a hostile patriarchal environment. She pleads: “I will cook your meals, I will even, if you like, try again to be your second woman, it is surely not beyond me if I put my mind to it, all things must be possible on this island out of space, out of time” (134). She is prepared to be the ‘second woman’ in Hendrik’s life. She knows that she can have a man only by slaving for him. A man needs a woman in the same way a master needs the servant. The master is more in need of the servant, but the colonial politics works in such a manner that it appears that it is the slave that needs a master. Likewise, a man needs a woman, but the patriarchal politics manipulates the situation in favour of man empowering him vis-a-vis woman; he is needed: she is the needy as is evidenced in case of Magda.

There are occasions wherein Magda addresses herself as black “a miserable black virgin” (5), “black fish swimming among all those white fish” (77), “black flower that grows in the corner, dazzled, dizzy...” (117), “ From wearing black too long I have grown into a black person” and so on give insight into her miserable life wherein she is subjected to all kind of torture and suppression and does not enjoy any privilege of being white (105). Thus, Magda while she holds the apartheid system and her country, South Africa, in which she is born and lives responsible for her misery, she holds her female body as the primary reason behind her oppression. Her disgust for her gender and race can be seen in statements like, “...I was born at the wrong time, in the wrong place, in the wrong body” (56), “What can I do against the two of them? I am so alone, and a woman! . . . This is my fate, I must go through with it” (107) and “This is, my fate, this is a woman’s fate” (116).

Seeing the white as well as the black men around her enjoying power and authority, she wishes to be one: “I should have been a man, I would not have grown up so sour, I would have spent my days in the sun doing whatever it is that men do, digging holes, building fences, counting sheeps. What is there for me in the kitchen? The patter of maids, gossip, ailments, babies, steam, food smells, catfur at ankles- what kind of life can I make of these?”(22). Her traumatic experiences force her to conclude that happiness, power and authority is something exclusive to men only. A little later she even decides to disguise herself as a man. She says, “I can still run away to the city disguised as a man, a wizened beardless little man, to practice greed and make my fortune and find happiness . . .” (73).

Disgrace (1999) similarly shows the exploitation of women’s bodies by men as a means of power assertion. Melanie and Lucy, they both are the victim of sexual abuse by the

men of the opposite race. Melanie, the black student who studies at the University of Cape Town, is abused by her teacher, David Lurie, a white professor of Communication. Melanie's race, gender and her subordinate status as a student put her at a disadvantageous position and make her body available to be abused by the white male. David Lurie takes advantage of his superiority and is guilt-free about it as if he had not committed any crime. When a case of harassment and victimization is filed against him, he cannot believe that Melanie has taken such a step. For he always thinks of her as "too innocent" and "too ignorant of her power" (39). In his opinion, there is nothing scandalous about having an affair with a woman as it is the right of man to enjoy as many women as he wishes, "because a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it" (16). Hence, he shows no qualm in bringing Melanie to his place or going to her house to satisfy his lust. He neither seems worried about his nor Melanie's reputation as he casually says, "People will find out, they always do; there will be whispering, there might even be scandal. But what will that matter?" (27). Likewise, when he is brought before an enquiring committee and asked by the members of the hearing committee to confess his sin publicly in a spirit of repentance, he declines, and all he says is "I was not myself. I was no longer a fifty-year-old divorcee at a loose end. I became a servant of Eros" (52) and "I am guilty of the charges brought against me" (54). Lurie accepts that he has done what he is accused of, but persists in his belief that following one's instinct is not objectionable and therefore he has not committed anything wrong. There is a complete absence of remorse and sensitivity in his words towards the pain he has caused to the girl. The patriarch Lurie cannot believe that giving into one's natural desire is a sin. FrodiaRassool, a female member of the hearing committee is able to empathize with Melanie and wants David not only to admit his sin but also confess the abuse he has done to the girl and the pain he has caused to her. She tries to draw the attention of the other members of the committee to understand the difference: "We are going round in circles, Mr. Chair. Yes, he says, he is guilty; but when we try to get specificity, all of a sudden it is not abuse of a young woman he is confessing to just an impulse he could not resist, with no mention of the pain he has caused, no mention of the long history of exploitation of which this is part" (53). However, the reaction of the male members of the committee towards Lurie exposes the deep entrenched patriarchal notion that perceives women as an object of the male pleasure. They do not find Lurie as a wrongdoer. Hence, instead of trying to mete justice to the girl, they try to justify Lurie's act as something most natural and human. Desmond Swarts, one of the members of the hearing committee consoles Lurie by saying: "We have our weak moments, all of us, we are only human. Your case is not unique. We would like to find a way for you to continue with your career." Similarly, Aram Hakim says, "We would like to help you, David, to find a way out of what must be a nightmare" (52). The male members of the committee have their sympathies more

with Lurie than with Melanie and try to find out an easy solution to his grave act of sexual violence.

In case of Melanie, who suffers on account of her race and gender, as the power changes, it is once again the female body that pays the price of years of colonial exploitation and oppression committed by the white male. Lucy bears the brunt of belonging to the race of oppressors. She feels, "They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors" (158). Lucy has lived alone on the farm and has remained safe in the apartheid period, but now in the post-apartheid South Africa, she realizes her altered position and the vulnerability of her body: "In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business; mine alone . . . This place being South Africa" (112). Living alone on the farm with no male relatives makes her situation even more vulnerable. She says to Lurie: "Objectively I am a woman alone. I have no brothers. I have a father, but he is far away and anyhow powerless in the terms that matter here. To whom I can turn for protection, for patronage?" (204). Hence, to protect her body from any violation in the future, she accepts to be the third wife of Petrus, her servant, as the only way to survive in a post-apartheid patriarchal society. Lucy can see that her rape is not just out of personal enmity but rather "It was history speaking through them . . . A history of wrong . . . It may have seemed personal, but it wasn't. It came down from the ancestors" (156). Therefore, when Lurie asks her to take a stand for it, she refuses. She comprehends that the time has changed wherein Lurie being a male can still get away with things, she being a female would not be forgiven for any act of audacity. She says: "Don't shout at me, David. This is my life. I am the one who has to live here. What happened to me is my business, mine alone, not yours, and if there is one right I have it is the right not to be put on trail like this, not to have to justify myself-not to you, not to anyone else" (133). Thus, we see that Magda and Lucy's superior position as a white female is subverted in the presence of a black male and these "daughter of the colonies" are left with no option but to be the mistresses of their black servants to survive in hostile patriarchal setup (In the Heart of the Country³).

Thus, in both the novels, racial hierarchy is undermined when it comes to gender and sexuality. It has been seen that the subjugation of the female body becomes a means of asserting colonial and masculine power. The novels included in the study are set in different time periods. While, *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) is set in apartheid South Africa, *Disgrace* (1999) has its setting in the post-apartheid South Africa. The novels highlight the continued oppressed status of women. Women become more vulnerable in the wake of any socio-political upheaval. Male members are not as affected as their female counterpart. They are able to escape the trauma to a certain extent because of their privileged sex. Lurie, a white man in the post-apartheid era, rapes a girl for which he does get punishment. He has to resign from his job that leads to "an inglorious end" of his academic career (44). However, when

pitted against what happens to Lucy despite her committing no wrong, his misery seems of less magnitude. Lucy's fault is that she is a white woman in post-apartheid South Africa. Unlike Lurie, her suffering is not just mental and emotional but physical and sexual. It is Lucy's body that pays the price of crimes committed by the men of her race. She becomes the site for venting out years of anger brewing within the black. While Lurie, he being a man fails to understand Lucy's resistance in not raising her voice. Lucy knows that by taking any such step, she would be making herself more vulnerable to the black's rage. Likewise, it is Melanie, a coloured girl in whose sexual violation Lurie finds the assertion of his superior male self.

Works Cited:

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