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Struggle Against Racist and Patriarchal Dominance: An Analysis of J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*

ABSTRACT: J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) is a critique of patriarchal Afrikaner society and focuses on the pathology of master-servant relationship, and on the theme of transgression. The novel touches upon how racial inequality parallels conventional gender disparity. It also focuses on the issue of Coetzee's stance in the novel and consequences of colonial encounter with the whites as well as the blacks. The protagonist is resentful of the patriarchal imperialist structure of her world, but at the same time, she realizes that her father and the imperial system that he symbolizes are the only accessible means of social identity for her. Trapped in such a situation, the protagonist is overwhelmed by ontological-existential angst that forces her to face the naked truth about her position as a white woman in South Africa. It is through the tensions generated by the confluence of gendered and raced oppression that the protagonist's insanity can be traced. The effect of the protagonist not only being oppressed by the structures of Afrikaner society, but also her attempts to institute oppression over her servants is one of displacement in the equation of injustices, that of gender/sexuality and race. The novel depicts the failure of the protagonist to subvert the racist and patriarchal patterns of dominance. The sexual oppression as a result of power shift leads to her alienation and subjugation. The two-fold failure of the protagonist, the failure to secure a subject position within history and her failure to establish an equal and reciprocal relation between the races leads to her disorientation when she completely loses her power over her servants.

KEYWORDS: Patriarchy, Race, Gender, Dominance, Power-reversal, Alienation, Subjugation, Colonialism, Gender Disparity, Racial Inequality, Rape.

J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) is a critique of patriarchal Afrikaner society and focuses on the pathology of master-servant relationship, and on the theme of transgression. The novel touches upon how racial inequality parallels conventional gender disparity. It also focuses on the issue of Coetzee's stance in the novel and consequences of colonial encounter with the whites as well as the blacks. The narrative tells the story of Magda and her father (whites) who live on an isolated farm in South Africa near Armeode. They live there with their servants Anna, Jacob, Hendrik and Klein-Anna (blacks). Magda's father has power over her and he is very strict. He does not really pay attention to her, but she tells that her father has several household expectations, "his bath should be ready for him" and adds that, "it was her childhood duty to light the fire an hour before sunset" (*In the Heart of the Country* 9). Magda's father only seems to use her as a household help and according to James Wohlpart, Magda was, "mastered by her father." He seems to treat her more as a servant than as a daughter. She also remarks, "All my life I have been left lying about, forgotten dusty, like an old shoe, or when I have been used, used as a tool, to bring the house to order, to regiment the servants" (*HC* 44).

According to Kossew, Magda, "is herself colonized by her father's authority and domination, which reflects those of the wider patriarchal Afrikaner society and its attitude towards women and their domestication as household slaves" (67). It seems that it is quite normal in Afrikaner society that women are treated like Magda. Canepari Labib adds that Magda, "could never achieve recognition from her father - neither as a daughter nor as a woman" (184). Magda also feels that she would have been a better person if she had been a man. She thinks that she "should have been a man," because then she "would not have grown up so sour" (*HC* 22). As Magda struggles with her gender, she seems to feel incomplete as a woman, which perhaps is caused by her father's behavior, "I more through the world not as a knife blade cutting the wind, or as a tower with eyes, like my father, but as a hole, a hole with a body draped around it ... I am a hole crying to be whole" (*HC* 44).

Magda kills her father when she comes to know about his illegitimate relationship with Hendrik's wife Klein-Anna and she feels left out. Hendrik refuses to help her in burying her father. After the death of her father she becomes the mistress of the house and the servants. Magda's father used to pay some money to Hendrik and Klein-Anna every month, but after his death they do not receive their money any more. Hendrik tries to force Magda to pay him, but she does not give them money. The servants no longer obey her after her father's death. Magda attempts to become friends with them, and as a result of this Hendrik

starts testing his power. According to Canepari Labib, “Magda’s attempts only lead to a reversal of roles and to a repetition of the relationship she already had with her father” (183). As Hendrik notices that he can acquire power, he starts to feel powerful and behave more dominantly. Instead of money, he now wants clothes of the master (Magda’s father) and of Magda’s mother. Hendrik and Klein-Anna are then dressed in the clothes of the master which somehow empowers them. As a result of this, Magda starts losing her power over the servants.

After Magda and Hendrik have sex, Magda loses almost all her power and Hendrik acquires it, which completes the power shift in the novel. Magda recounts the sex as rape in the novel. According to Lopez, “In *In the Heart of the Country*, Hendrik’s rape of Magda is symptomatic of the partial reversal of the mistress-servant relationship” (925). According to Canepari Labib, “Magda is unable to achieve an identity in her relationship with Hendrik. The servant no longer recognizes her as his mistress, and his attitude makes plain he does not recognize her as a woman” (184). Hendrik only wants physical contact and nothing more, but Magda thinks, “It is my humiliation he wants” (*HC* 122). Magda feels frustrated that their communication has deteriorated and that they only have physical contact. Later in the novel she notices that they, “have progresses in familiarity” (*HC* 127) because Hendrik no longer behaves like a servant. According to Canepari Labib, “Hendrik assumes the position of mastery, and Magda, instead of experiencing the communal life of her childhood, finds herself in the same submissive position she already had to suffer because of her father” (189). Because of Magda’s attempts to become friends with her servants, Hendrik is able to take over power from her and until he and Klein-Anna leave the farm, he takes over her role. According to Wohlpart, “the conclusion of the novel reinforces Magda’s failure to subvert the ideology of power. While Magda exists outside of history, outside of law of the father, as Magda describes it a place, with ‘no past or future,’ an ‘eternal present,’ the machine of South Africa churns on” (222). Hendrik’s sexual violation of Magda operates as a means of maintaining the pretense of a power that, through its brutality and degradation, converts the racial inequality into a more conventional gender disparity.

The analysis that follows draws most of its critical perspective from Aroma Kharshiing’s article “Writing the Self: Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country*” (2008) and Jane Poyner’s article “Refusing to Yield to the Spectre of Reason: The Madwoman in the Attic in *In the Heart of the Country*” (2009). Kharshiing states that the novel takes us into the heart of settler colonialism that is not only repressive of the black servants but also of their

own women. Magda cut up in the failure of reciprocity can only speak to the sky-gods as no one around her is listening. Kharshiing explores the concept of “self” in the novel and in that she underlines that Magda’s story not only brings into conflict authority and subversion but also problematizes colonial patriarchy and gender.

Magda in the novel is influential in demonstrating Coetzee’s stance both as a linguistic and critical cultural theorist in developing his concept of “self” as a decentered and displaced construct outside the western projects of Enlightenment and rationality. This position underlines Coetzee’s convincing post colonialism that brings its metropolitan leanings into a charged and complex relationship with the historical crisis in which it finds itself. Magda, in the novel, is a displaced subject, for she desperately attempts to seek and construct a life for herself as the only means to resist her fate. She realizes that in a colonial condition, all forms of relationship and communication - filial, societal, and marital as well as the colonial structures of relationship, lack legitimacy and reciprocity. In such a situation, she realizes the need to create a new order of authenticity that is possible only by subverting the old racist regime of colonialism. However, in the absence of a cultural mechanism that functions as a mirror that throws back the reflections of the self by others, Magda is bereft of a vital factor in constituting a stable identity. As a result, she is completely alienated. She is not a conventional mother-martyr and sustainer of the racial purity of the South African farm novel. She is a spinster, caught up in her neurotic fantasies where she continuously kills and buries her father, as well as the regime that he represents. She searches for a give-and-take relationship with her black servants, yet remains trapped within the very racist patterns of dominance and subservience that she tries to challenge.

She claims to be, “a spinster with a locked diary,” having an “uneasy consciousness,” frantically resisting the possibility of becoming, “one of the forgotten ones of history” (*HC* 11). Cut off from the world that she dwells in, Magda turns to a schizophrenic interior monologue, which displays a breakdown of the signifying chain that is responsible for bringing about cohesion and meaning in the language of social interaction. The numbered units of her fragmented discourse reflect Magda’s lack of a mutual exchange with others, as well as the fictiveness of her discourse, thereby leading to her being trapped in her internal monologue of neurotic and morbid fantasies, “This monologue of the self is a maze of words out of which I shall not find a way until someone else gives me a lead” (*HC* 17).

The fictiveness of Magda's monologue is a metafictional commentary on the literature of colonial pastoral realism in South Africa, as well as on the tradition of the liberal Romantic novel of isolation. Coetzee does not subscribe to the genre of realism and the belief that a realistic documentation of colonial and apartheid's oppression is the unquestioned means of telling the truth about South Africa. He is skeptical of the liberalism of the white realist writers, as they have failed to engender a literature of equal and reciprocal relationship between the races.

As the possibility of a language of equal exchange does not seem to be attainable in a society as divided as South Africa, Magda recognizes that the language that she speaks with her black servants has been contaminated by her Afrikaner father and the regime that he represents:

The language that should pass between myself and these people was subverted by my father and cannot be recovered. What passes between us is now a parody. I was born into a language of hierarchy, of distance and perspective. It was my father-tongue. (HC 195)

Magda's obsession with how language constitutes the self and her determination to get beyond the "names" that keep her bursting, "... through the screen of names into the goat's eye view of Armeode and the stone desert," (HC 19) leads her to reflect on the relationship between desire, language and social relations. Language is a social medium of exchange but, ironically, it cannot portray the passion that she feels for the land and the people, "Words are coin. Words alienate. Language is no medium for desire. Desire is rapture, not exchange. It is only by alienating desire the language masters it" (HC 4).

In such circumstances, Magda embarks on some of her most ontological introspections. She imagines herself as existing outside the boundaries of human society, in a primordial state of "unthinking animal integrity" (HC 44) and she thinks of herself alternately as a beetle, "who lays no eggs and blinks in the sun;" (HC 20) a snake, "licking the egg slime off herself" (HC 41) before crawling off to the farmhouse; and a black widow spider that hides in a corner to, "engulf whoever passes by in my venom" (HC 43). She also conceives of herself as inhabiting a world outside of consciousness altogether in a condition akin to the Sartrean "being-in-itself":

I am lost in the being of my being. This is what I was meant to be: a poetess of interiority, an explorer of the inwardness of stones, the emotions of ants, the consciousness of the thinking parts of the brain. It seems to be the only career, if we accept death, for which life in the desert has fitted me. (*HC* 38)

At the same time, Magda is also severely aware of an internalized absence of meaning. She describes herself as, “a hole with a body draped around it ... a hole crying to be whole” (*HC* 44).

In his Achterberg essay, Coetzee quotes from Wallace Stevens’ “Nanzia Nunzio” that approximates Magda’s condition, “I am the woman stripped more nakedly/than nakedness .../ Speak to me that, which spoken, will array me ... (395-6). In the absence an equal and reciprocal exchange between the races, Magda is forced to resort to fictions of the self. She devises a pastoral comedy in which she features as a wife to a farmer and the mother of, “a litter of rat like, runty girls, all the spit image of myself, scowling into the sun, tripping over their own feet, identically dressed in bottle green smocks and snub nosed black shoes” (*HC* 46). Alternatively, she imagines herself as the protector of the feudal codes that her father disregards in his illegitimate relationship with the wife of his black servant, Hendrik. Magda’s accomplishments to create a story as the only means of self-preservation whereby she can create a story with “a beginning, a middle and an end” (*HC* 46) is indicative of her self-preservation instincts. She has to resort to fiction as the only means of self-representation whereby she can construct a subject position for herself within history.

Having failed to bridge the gulf between herself and her father as well as the black servants and herself, Magda mulls over other kinds of fiction she could have constructed for herself. She considers the genre of the colonial-pastoral, but finally discards it. According to Coetzee, the colonial-pastoral construct is an isolated space, where things that normally seem improbable in the wide world and the cities can be achieved. This concept of a constructed space as a limited solution to intricate issues is, according to Coetzee, artificial and ineffective. He displays his rejection of the colonial pastoral novel through Magda, who is cynical of the South African pastoral genre, laden with the notion of humanism in South Africa. As Coetzee says, “humanism in South Africa is a part of British liberal culture that has not only failed to engender a literature of equal and reciprocal relations between the races, but also has failed to persuade both British and Dutch colonialists that such a relation is something worth sacrificing for” (62).

The outcome of such a failure is the establishment of a South African society that is burdened with the pathologies of the master-slave relationship. It is a society where neither the master nor the slave is free; the master is not free as he cannot do without his slave, while the slave is not free as he is not his own master. The colonial pastoral genre exemplifies these stunted and deformed human relations and demonstrates what Coetzee calls in his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance speech a “Literature in Bondage”:

South African literature is a literature in bondage, as it reveals in even its highest moments, shot through as they are with feelings of homelessness and yearnings for a nameless liberation. It is a less than fully human literature, unnaturally preoccupied with power and the torsions of power, unable to move from elementary relations of contestation, domination, and subjugation to the vast and complex human world that lies beyond them. It is exactly the kind of literature you would expect people to write from a prison. (98)

The novel also focuses on the facet of transgression. By means of transgression Coetzee exposes the structure of South Africa’s settler colonialism and legacy of apartheid. Magda’s transgressive consciousness in the novel reveals the pathological undertone of the structure of relationships in the settler-colonial context. In the novel, Magda’s transgressions are compiled through sequential episodes in the narrative. In the first sequence, her transgression exposes the deformed family relations in a colonial set up. From Magda’s point of view, the noticeable absence of the mother in the family throws her and her father into a relationship that is tinged with Oedipal implications. Pondering over her relationship with her father, Magda winds up that colonial daughters who are wooed by their “masterful fathers” are, “bitter vestals, spoiled for life” (*HC* 4). She calls this power of the white settler fathers over their daughters, “the childhood rape” (*HC* 4).

Detached from the nurturing figure of a mother, Magda’s world is a “lost world” that is illustrated by stark masculine sterility, “My lost world is a world of men, of cold nights, wood fire, gleaming eyes and a long tale of dead heroes in a language I have not unlearned” (*HC* 7). Magda’s family structure is an allegory of the consequence of colonialism on the continent. Colonialism in South Africa brought about the severance between the indigenes and their homogeneous culture, thereby stranding them in foreign territory separated among the white settlers.

Magda imagines herself as a spinster who is lost to history because unlike her father, she does not have any role to play in replicating history through marriage, for she cannot access a position from which she can epitomize herself within the feudal system that her father symbolizes. As a white woman within the patriarchal regime of settler colonialism, Magda finds herself in a position of marginality, “To my father I have been an absence all my life. Therefore instead of being the womanly warmth at the heart of the house I have been a zero, null, vacuum towards which all collapses inward” (*HC* 2). However, Magda’s cold acceptance of her non-position in the house of her father is cast a shadow on her fear of total displacement with the advent of her father’s bride. Though the courtship and marriage of her father is her own construction, Magda’s imaginary stepmother poses a menace to the merely close relationship and social identity that she gets pleasure from by virtue of belonging to her father’s household. Magda is resentful of the patriarchal imperialist structure of her world, but at the same time, she realizes that her father and the imperial system that he symbolizes are the only accessible means of social identity for her. Trapped in such a situation, Magda is overwhelmed by ontological-existential angst that forces her to face the naked truth about her position as a white woman in South Africa:

What are pain, jealousy, loneliness doing in the African night? Does a woman looking through a window into the dark mean anything? I stare out through a sheet of glass into a darkness that is complete, that lives in itself ... 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. (*HC* 10)

In the second sequence of the novel, Coetzee depicts the concealed pathologies underlying the master-servant relationship in the colonial family. As Attwell says, “a principle of equivalence” (62), is erected between the colonial family in the farmhouse and that of Hendrik, the black servant when he brings home his new bride Klein-Anna, in a move that is evocative of the commencement of the first sequence where Magda’s father brings his bride home. This uniformity creates a pressure that is manifested in two scenarios; in the first scenario, Magda’s father is substituted for Hendrik in the servant’s marriage; while in the second scenario, Hendrik is replaced with her father in a quasi-incestuous relationship with her. The first situation breaks the bar against miscegenation and unlocks the luminal apprehensions in Magda when she is confronted with her father’s illicit desires. Her father’s illegitimate relation with Hendrik’s wife forces her to face the harsh truth that the exogamous relations defined by her father’s colonial decree cannot ensure equal and reciprocal relations

between the races. However, this does not diminish the possibility of easy sexual gratification for the dominant white master, not governed by institutionalized forms of social exchange. Repelled by such hypocrisy, she murders her father in the second sequence of the novel. The act of parricide is symbolic of Magda's rebellion against the duplicity of her father as well as the conventions of her social structure. After the death of her father, she attempts to domesticate the illicit sexuality unleashed by her father by bringing Hendrik and Klein-Anna to live with her on the farm while attempting to enter into a liaison with Hendrik. Her effort to draw near to the black servant falls through and she is raped. With the failure of her attempts to establish an equal and reciprocal relation, Magda discovers that the racial conflict underlying the master-servant relationship is more pronounced and consequential than she has imagined it to be.

Magda's two-fold failure, the failure to secure a subject position within history by creating a fiction of the self; and her failure to establish an equal and reciprocal relation between the races, is dramatized in her disorientation towards the end of the novel, when she completely loses her power over her servants. Hendrik and Klein-Anna no longer obey her after her father's death. By sexually oppressing Magda, Hendrik takes over power from her. He along with Klein-Anna leaves the farm and Magda is left alone there.

Magda gives up on any possibility of human exchange after being abandoned by Hendrik and Klein-Anna. Cast aside by the humans, she is forced to resort to communion with the elusive sky-gods, in her effort to find a language that is unmediated by social division. However, the language of "pure meaning" (*HC* 137) uttered by the mystical sky-gods is a metaphysical discourse, to which Magda has no access. In her attempt to seek transfiguration through a reciprocal dialogue with the mythical sky-gods, Magda tries to communicate with them by shouting skywards, placing stones in the field to form letters, writing entreaties and cryptic poems; yet all her efforts fall through, leaving her in a state of thwarted passion and poignant despair:

Why will no one speak to me in the true language of the heart? The medium, the median – that is what I wanted to be. Neither master nor slave, neither parent nor child, but the bridge between, so that in me the contraries should be reconciled. (*HC* 145)

Transcendence, Magda eventually realizes, is something that proves to be unattainable, "we are the castaways of God as we are the castaways of history. That is the

origin of our feeling of solitude” (*HC* 147). Through Magda, Coetzee also demonstrates the complex ramifications of the settler postcoloniality and his own as a white male author in South Africa. For Coetzee, the voice of the white woman is the most effective vehicle, whereby he can dismantle the structure of power, authority and language. The feminine narrative voice combines the twin strategies of projecting the lack of an adequate vantage point as well as the lack of absolute authority. Drawing from the dominant patriarchal ideology that defines the white woman’s possession of the “word” as unstable, unauthorized and outside the general masculine “canon,” Coetzee adopts the figure of the white woman whose awareness of the limitation of white woman’s narration as well as their limited access to narration, best exemplifies the suspicion and self-reflexivity of Coetzee’s own writing position. The voice of the white woman narrator closely approximates to Coetzee’s strategy of “writing in the middle voice”. In the novel, Magda’s passionate desire to be, “the medium, the median” (*HC* 145), corresponds to the in-between position of the middle voice, that has the potential to bridge the gap between the contraries of a South African society torn by apartheid. As the white woman inhabits the interstices of colonial power, her ambivalent position between the master and black servants, corresponds to Coetzee’s equivocal position of power and powerlessness. Coetzee conceives of his position as a white male in South Africa occupying a “lonely throne,” shrouded by a “veiled unfreedom” (97) that is manifested in the scene of writing, where he finds himself without the moorings of authority. He conceives of himself as “without authority” (392), because he rejects the authoritarian connotations that are linked to his position as a white male in South Africa. Coetzee therefore makes a deliberate choice of aligning himself with a position of necessary complicit marginality that is best demonstrated in his white woman narrator.

The non-position of the white woman narrator, who is placed outside the premises of authority and writing, forms Coetzee’s strategic position of weakness from which he can dismantle authority. Magda’s position as a white colonial daughter in the novel enables her to address the follies of colonialism’s perceived wisdom. Her voice dominates the narrative and like her, she is aware of her unique position between unreason and insight. Magda realizes her limitation and undermines the seriousness of her own narrative, “I am not a philosopher. Women are not philosophers and I am a woman” (*HC* 130). As a displaced subject, poised on the verge of unreason, Magda dramatizes Coetzee’s crisis of authority and representation in writing and provides him with a model of marginality that necessarily disrupts the hegemonic power to frame and signify him.

As Kharshiing explores the concept of “self” in the novel in that she underlines that Magda’s story not only brings into conflict authority and subversion but also problematizes colonial patriarchy and gender, Poyner argues that the female narrator, Magda inhabits the psychically and textually precarious position of being both oppressor, as white colonial, and oppressed, as female. She further states that the preoccupation of the novel is the female colonial writer’s psychic struggle with identity through the portrayal of an author-figure. She argues that it is the representation of Magda as writer that goes to the heart of the work. It is by resisting and then succumbing to writing that Magda battles against the “specter of reason” that oppresses her (*HC* 150). Yielding to this specter means submitting to the patriarchy and Afrikaner literary history that are her masters.

In Magda’s search for self-understanding, her psychological stability is threatened by the colonial encounter, namely, her interaction with her servants, Hendrik and Klein-Anna, who in the politically inclusive sense are black. Stephen Clingman traces the link between madness, colonialism and miscegenation in South African fiction, focusing on the effect on the other of repression. Clingman argues that, “in the colonial setting the analytical consideration of madness is intrinsically connected with a search for significant limits,” those distinguishing the colonizer from the colonized that without such limits, “the colony falls apart” (247-248). For those within the colony, Clingman says, “it is no surprise that lines of demarcation form an integral part of other kinds of delineation” that is, living space, ownership of land, economic and political rights, social and cultural practices and behaviors (248).

It is through the tensions generated by the confluence of gendered and raced oppression that Magda’s insanity can be traced. Poyner argues that in her struggle to retain her sanity and her sense of self, Magda is confronted with a Coetzian double bind: as a character in a book, she must represent herself through writing if she wants to assert her autonomy but to do so means subject to discourse, which in this novel is always already patriarchal as well as colonialist.

The experience of alienation, Clingman suggests, “from the foreign land the continent, and its peoples is the reality of the colonial enterprise” (236). Magda feels alienated by the (sexual) relationships that she imagines have been built between the black servants Hendrik and Klein-Anna, and between her father and Klein-Anna, “lines have been drawn, I am excluded from communion” (*HC* 57). Clingman suggests that miscegenation

constitutes a “return of the repressed;” once the white South Africans’ fantasies about black bodies become reality madness ensue as a consequence of such testing of the social limits (240). The novel also rewrites the South African tragedy, which, as Ian Glenn suggests, “typically portrays a doomed romance between the mixed couple that threatens the preserve of white purity” (131-32).

Since critiques of patriarchy and colonialism are implicitly parallel and set in opposition in the text, understanding Magda’s plight entails addressing a “hierarchy” of oppressions, those of women and colonized people. The effect of Magda not only being oppressed by the structures of Afrikaner society, but also her attempts to institute oppression over her servants is one of displacement in the “equation” of injustices, that of gender/sexuality and race.

In her relationship with her servants, Magda is unable to reconcile her needs as a woman with her position as a colonizer. What is more, this relation inverts Fanonian discourse. In “The Psychopathology of Blackness” Fanon writes, “when the Negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place. If his psychic structure is weak, one observes a collapse of the ego” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 154). Fanon deconstructs the conceptually dubious notion that “race” is a biological category in “The Fact of Blackness,” arguing that “blackness” can be historicized and is therefore socially constructed. Moreover, black people adopt the white masks bestowed by whites: blackness masquerades as whiteness. “The essay details the effects of racism on the psyche of black people by tortuously staging a drama of consciousness” (Parry 189). Fanon imagines this psychic confrontation with his own otherness, “I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things ... and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects” (*BSWM* 109). In a similar way, Magda struggles to define the boundaries of her own self when she rejects Hendrik’s remonstrance that as racially marginalized he and Klein-Anna will be punished for the murder of Magda’s father; ironically, Magda does this, in part, by distinguishing herself from other whites in her resistance to the other’s (Hendrik’s) objectifying gaze, “Do you think I am too spineless to acknowledge my guilt? ... I am not simply one of whites, I am I. I am I, not people. Why have I to pay for other people’s sins?” (*HC* 128).

Through the deconstruction of “blackness” the novel tacitly critiques the obsessive racial categorization that went to the heart of apartheid thinking as well as the racism inherent

in colonialist ideology, which served, in part, to obscure the economic motivations behind the will to colonize. “Blackness” in the novel is defamiliarized by its subversion as a biological category. “Black” typically describes everything but Hendrik’s or Ann’s black skin, destabilizing Magda’s sense of self as white: Magda conceives of herself as “a miserable black virgin,” a “black bored spinster,” whose story is, “a dull black blind stupid miserable story, ignorant of its meaning” (*HC* 5). She casts herself as the deadly black widow spider, spinning her tale around her, lamenting that, “From wearing black too long I have grown into a black person” (*HC* 105). She imagines Hendrik “throwing his heavy black words” at her when she is unable to pay her wages (*HC* 114).

The narrative self-consciously plays into and parodies the colonialist fantasy of black-on-white-rape, which remains a pathological anxiety of white South Africans today. The colonial rape complex is a well-rehearsed trope in South African literature. Magda believes that Hendrik raped her to seek retribution from her father, firstly, for entering into sexual relations with Klein-Anna, and, secondly, for subjecting him in the colonial relation. Magda’s narrative records a shift in the dynamics of master-servant relationship. Hendrik with the aid of Klein-Anna apparently gains “ownership” of both the farm and Magda by means of rape and sexual intimacy. The white woman’s body in this novel is perceived by the victim as both a commodity within a patriarchal system of exchange and as a site where master-slave relations are acted out.

To conclude the novel depicts the failure of the protagonist to subvert the racist and patriarchal patterns of dominance. The sexual oppression as a result of power shift leads to her alienation and subjugation. Her two-fold failure, the failure to secure a subject position within history and her failure to establish an equal and reciprocal relation between the races leads to her disorientation when she completely loses her power over Hendrik and Klein-Anna.

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