

An Exposition of the Harassment of Women as Registered in J. M Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*

1. GILBERT MARY. J

Research Scholar,

Department of English,

St. Joseph's College (Autonomous),

Tamil Nadu, Trichy, India

2. PROF. AMUTHA .M

Assistant Professor

Department of English,

St. Joseph's College (Autonomous),

Tamil Nadu, Trichy, India

Abstract

J. M. Coetzee is a prolific South African writer whose literary contribution has been acknowledged as something phenomenal in the literary arena of today's world by great writers. His proficiency and expertise of the subject has won for him numerous prestigious awards including the Noble prize. All his works offer a soulful rendition to the diasporic experiences of the black people and their ordeals, which are manifested in the form of racial discrimination, sexual violence and apartheid. The author while articulating the sufferings of women in a colonial context in general does not fail to disclose the pitiable plight of the white women in particular. J.M. Coetzee in his illustrious novel *In the Heart of the Country* offers a vivid presentation of the predicaments of a woman protagonist, who is not exempted from harassment just because she hails from a white community. It explains how the woman having been caught between an irresponsible white father and a revengeful black servant suffer and thrives to survive.

Key words: Violence, suppression, domestic violence, power of language.

J. M Coetzee in his novel *In the Heart of the Country* speaks of three types of violence and its implications. He explicates about the physical, psychological and sexual violence that women undergo. When many writers fail to present the unique identity of women in a patriarchal context the author clamours to assert women's role and their identity even in a colonized context.

The identity of women in a male dominated community is always coloured and vitiated. Generally, the men folk who are at the helm of affairs decide the destiny of women's identity in relation to them. Thus, it is impossible for women to construct an identity of their own. Therefore the identity of a female is always defined in the language of the patriarchy. This effort of the male-chauvinism does not do justice to women. Therefore, Judith Gardiner in reiterating the unique identity for women says that the "female author is engaged in a process of testing and defining. Various aspects of identity chosen from many imaginative possibilities" (Gardiner, p. 349). Although many writers ignore the identity of women in their literary presentation, J.M Coetzee does justice to allocate a rightful space for women, which Judith Gardiner compliments.

The novel articulates about the plight of women in contemporary African society where she becomes a victim under the patriarchal oppression. The author spins his story around Magda, the protagonist, who hails from a white community. Her dad, who is a symbol of colonial oppression, does a great damage to his servants and unfortunately, her only daughter becomes a victim too. Magda's father was selfish to the core that without considering the spinster status of daughter takes Anna, the black woman as his wife. His obsession to experience sexual pleasure with Anna forces him to alienate his own daughter and he continues to remain indifferent towards her. Magda having experienced aversion and isolation from her father longs for his paternal care and love. When she is deprived purposefully of legitimate rights she feels hurt and wounded. Her anger and fury triggers her to conspire against her father and ultimately plans to murder him.

Magda's does not attempt to endanger her father's life in reality. However, the constant agony that she experienced within herself forced her to kill father in imagination. She gets enraged upon her father because she could not accept her father getting married to a black woman. Having been born in a dominant white community she felt disgusted the activity of her father. The idea of the superiority of the white was ingrained in her very much. Thus, the reality of taking a black woman as a wife was something obnoxious in her perspective. She gives vent

to her feelings in her imagination as she kills him and black mistress, where she says, “My father lies on his back, naked... The axe sweeps up over my shoulder” (*In the Heart of the Country*, p. 11). Magda does not feel guilt for annihilating her father and his mistress in her imagination. She says, “All kinds of people have done this before me, wives, sons, lovers, heirs, rivals, I am not alone” (*IHC*, p. 11). Thus, she justifies her act of revenge.

Magda recalls her life history as an episode of agony and despair. She feels that she was an epitome of humiliation and suffering. Her unhappy childhood events resulted in changing the course of her life drastically. She tells “The land is full of melancholy spinster like me, lost to history” (*IHC*, p. 3). She feels lonely and empty within herself as she did not have any neighbour of her community to cater her needs. The greed for power and authority deviated Magda’s father from his duty as a father. His irresponsibility and callous nature fuels Magda to become indignant. The author gradually shifts his presentation from his protagonist’s movement in unleashing violence on the white father, who ceases to exist according to Magda, since; she has eliminated him in her imagination.

The predicament of Magda does not come to an end with the demise of her father. She thinks that it would be an act of dishonor for her to communicate in the language of the blacks and therefore she was hesitant to come down from her supreme status of the white. She tells:

I cannot carry on with these idiot dialogues. The language that should pass between myself and these people was subverted by my father and cannot be recovered. What passes between us now is a parody. I was born into a language of hierarchy, of distance and perspective. It was my father-tongue. I do not say it is the language my heart wants to speak, I feel too much the pathos of its distances, but it is all we have. (*IHC*, p. 97)

She feels tormented in her mind as she is not able to compromise her status. She believes it is something detestable for her to speak in the language of the colonized. Therefore, she undergoes psychological pain in him.

The term ‘political language’ is captivating as it resonates the ideas of Gilroy and Foucault with that of Apter and Benjamin that power relations lie at the centre of the use of language.

“The antagonistic approach to identity pioneered by Michael Foucault could not accept that the appearance of a political language of race and its growing relationship to the administration and reproduction of governmental power were incidental developments”. (Gilroy, p. 7)

The novelist after articulating the physical and psychological violence of Magda proceeds to elucidate the sexual harassment in his novel. Sexual harassment is a haunting experience inflicted on women by men. In an attempt to elucidate the predicaments of sexual torture and other dehumanizing evil elements, the Special Rapporteur presented a report during the armed conflicts in 1998 which said that the sexual violence refers to “any violence, physical or psychological, carried out through sexual means by targeting sexuality”

(Gay, p. 3). This explanation includes physical as well as psychological onslaught targeted at “a person’s sexual characteristics, such as forcing a person to strip naked in public, mutilating a person’s genitals, or slicing off a woman’s breasts”.(Gay, p. 3)

The author offers the pitiable plight of the protagonist, who has been thrown into the snare of sexual slavery. Magda’s father serves as a symbol of a predator that satisfies his sexual urge in attacking and molesting his housemaid, who was the wife of Mr. Hendrik, a black servant who works in his farm. In spite of the acts of discrimination of the blacks Magda’s father continues to sexually harass the female sex. He feels that he has been endowed with power and authority to act according to his whims and fancies. He considers that through sexual violence on the blacks the superiority of the white can be established. Thus, he indulges in the act of raping Mrs. Hendrik who looked after his house chores. The onslaught of sexual violence on Mrs. Hendrik is a classical example of how the members of the oppressed community have been victimized for ages. Mrs. Hendrik who has been indoctrinated with the false belief that the blacks are meant to be subservient to the whites continues to yield to the demands of her master without any dissent. The autocratic nature of Magda’s father in controlling and dominating the indigenous blacks refers to the myopic mindset of the white community, which takes pride in ill-treating the natives. It is ironic that the native of Africa gets alienated in his own country by the white, who is a colonizer.

It is obvious that not only Magda's father becomes a colonizer but Mr. Hendrik as well. Mr. Hendrik having been hurt by the sexual violence inflicted on his wife by Magda's father looks for an opportune time to retaliate and pulverize the pride and honour of Magda's father through raping Magda, the spinster. He feels vanquished when he unleashes sexual harassment on Magda in the absence of her father. He believes that his pride has been salvaged in inflicting sexual violence on Magda. Violence which was used as a tool to subjugate and dehumanize the blacks has been used in retribution by Mr. Hendrik to avenge the whites.

Jean-Paul Sartre while reflecting the resurgence of the colonized in colonizing the colonizer indicates in his preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, where he explicates the impact of colonization on the colonizers. He foresees that when colonizers become "powerless to crush the 'native,' violence turns inward, bottles itself up deep inside us, and seeks an outlet" (Fanon, p. Ixi). In this context J.M Coetzee presents Magda as one who represents the colonizer becomes the colonized eventually.

Women in African society have been looked as objects of pleasure, whose duty is to entertain and please the male through sex. Mr. Hendrik whose ego has been hurt by the pervert mindset of Magda's father pays back to Magda through raping her. It is to be noted that not only the black woman become victims of sexual violence but also the whites. Magda feels suffocated for having been caught in between her irresponsible father and Mr. Hendrik, a black servant. She dreams to escape into reality where she would experience peace in joy. She was convinced that in order to have sustainable development a woman must strive for social, political, educational, cultural and economic freedom.

The novelist while portraying the pathetic plight of women folk of both black and white community in African society offers a new hope for better future of women.

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