

THE SENSE OF ALIENATION: PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL DESOLATION OF WOMEN IN J M COETZEE'S IN THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

K M Deepa¹, Dr R Saravana Selvan²
 Research Scholar¹, Professor and Head²
 Department of English and Foreign Languages,
 Bharathiar University Coimbatore-641 046, India.

Abstract: Alienation has been one of the universally most debated predicaments of human existence. Very often the term alienation has been attributed to men as an existential issue, whereas women are considered as either the second sex or the weaker sex. There are writers who have discussed the existential issues of the women, even the black women, but debates or discussions on the existential predicaments and alienation of the white women are scarcely found in the literary arena. This paper attempts to throw light on the existential predicaments and the physical and emotional desolation of white women, who experience the sense of alienation caused due to colonisation in different ages of South Africa. This article is an attempt to study the physical and emotional desolation of women in J M Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*.

Key points: Alienation, Desolation, Oppression, Colonisation, Patriarchy, Estrangement, Seclusion, Imperialism.

Alienation has the characteristics of a concept, a pragmatic reality, a theory, a philosophy or even a fictional state of the mind, which has been given a prominent space in literature as a literary device since time immemorial. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (IX Edition) defines alienation as "the feeling that you do not belong in a particular group". Woman has never been considered or accepted as an individual, class, separate entity or category. She is always looked upon as the subordinate or dependent of man. She is beleaguered in the hands of the representatives of patriarchy. The sense of alienation in the white women characters of this novel *In the Heart of the Country*, who are relocated from their homeland, either by chance or by choice, infusing the characteristics of powerlessness and helplessness. These white women characters are victims of estrangement, seclusion and alienation, which they encounter and experience very often. The social and psychological oppressions that they undergo make them doubly marginalised, namely by the imperialists and the patriarchal social constructs.

The white woman in *In the Heart of the Country* reside in the new land, i.e. South Africa, experiencing and attempting to adopt an unaccustomed culture; interacting with strange new faces; questioning their sense of belonging and in the course of time, suspecting their sense of being; being rudderless and anchorless; and becoming an embodiment of separation and loneliness. All these human conditions make them feel alienated at different levels, especially socially, emotionally and psychologically. As Peter L. Berger opines, "the essence of all alienation is the imposition of a fictitious inexorability upon the humanity constructed world, by which choices become destiny".

Alienation, as part of human existence, is prevalent in every part of the society as well as the individual. When a person loses his identity, it leads to the failure of his psycho-physical system, which ultimately leads to alienation. As such, in psychological terms, when a person fails to locate his identity within himself and in the family and the society at large, there prevails the sense of alienation. No man can be free from the sense of alienation, since identity, the defining element of alienation, is neither stable nor static. Every step of an individual's life is a battle with the self and the society for the establishment of identity and affirmation. Alienation can be classified into different types on different grounds. The most common classification of alienation could be social alienation and self-alienation. Social alienation is caused when the individual is not able to cope with the oppressive anticipations of the society, tradition and culture. The individual stands aloof from the social system and keeps himself away from every social activity. Self-alienation is the offshoot of social alienation, in most cases, where the individual loses contact with other individuals in the society. He/she feels incapable of maintaining social relationships with other individuals. When social alienation is the consequence of the disappointment with the social structures or system, self-alienation is the result of the disappointments with the individuals in the society. Self-alienation can lead to a sense of rootlessness, which damages the psychic development of the individual. It is a potentially dangerous situation that disturbs the mental balance of the individual. Such people are often threatened by the absence of forgiveness, love and mutual acceptance, leading to a sense of insecurity.

J. M. Coetzee's most important portrayals of woman are found in one of his novels *In the Heart of the Country*. In this novel the woman occupy many diverse roles within the patriarchal society which defines female as a "reserve of purity and science in the materiality of its traffic with the world and its noisy discourse" (Jacobus 28), the women are all adversely affected because of the colonization they undergo. In *In the Heart of the Country*, the novel's geographical setting is deliberately unclear, placing importance on the universal struggle by those who are not in power mainly the women. The women are the colonizer or the colonized or the ones who experience an emptiness that they cannot explain. All his women in one way or another undergo physical abuse that eventually leads to mental illness. In this novel, the first one of the colonial narratives takes place during agrarian settlement when white controlled the land and used non –

white for labour. Magda, the narrator attempts to see herself into the context of the frontiers but finds that she does not belong to her father's history. She belongs anywhere else. Throughout the novel, she negotiates her relationship with her father and the black servants Hendrik and Klien – Anna. During her search for wholeness, her relationship often turns violent and become none about her need for recognition and identification. In the relationship with her father, she is not successful in gaining his affection. She fails also in her desire for recognition shown thorough her Hegelian relationship with the servants Hendrik and Klein – Anna. At the end of the novel, she is no closer in identifying herself as someone who is mentally insane and who struggle to reconcile with her own self and people around her goes in vain.

Magda having grown up as a member of the group of established rulers or the colonizers (the white South African's) should be comfortable in her role, but she is not satisfied with her role. She sees herself as incomplete, as a hole to fill, and she attempts to fill that emptiness. She does go through the attempted separation from her father and through her relationships with the servants. These relationships are the efforts by Magda primarily to separate herself from her ancestors' legacy and help her create her own identity; the relationships often turn violent, however, Magda's desire for control and her need for recognition from others. In addition, her incessant focus on herself and her ironic false presentation of truth are determined to her search for a new identity. The seemingly simple issue of fact becomes a complicated question in the novel because Magda tells and retells different versions of the same stories, implying that even she does not know what the truth in showing a decaying state of mind. Her arguments and fabrications are a result of her incompleteness and insaneness. Magda's mental emptiness shows her desire to fill it but her search for and ultimate distortion of the truth immediately works against that desire. As the representative colonizer, Magda should feel in control and she should feel that she has power. She should know who she is and where she came from. In essence, she should feel that her established role competes her. Instead she feels empty and uneasy with her existence.

In the course of fine love and affection and identification, Magda fantasizes about Hendrik, her black servant. During these sexual fantasies, she often turns him into a predator, more animal like than humans. Again, she does not see him as a full human being, but instead as a being with instinctual animal needs. Because of conflicts within herself, Magda finds her identity in the relation with her servants. Furthermore, if she desires reconciliation with them and moves forward, these exchanges between herself and Klien – Anna do not help. These incidents are simply Magda's attempts to feel significant through Klein – Anna's recognition of her. 'Isolation' is found in people who maintain their own personal borders, have borders imposed upon them or find themselves unwilling to cross other people's borders. Invasion is found when a border is crossed and the isolation of the character is violated somehow. Invasion happens on both a physical and a psychological plane: outside and inside. This novel demonstrates an invasion on the personal level; rape and torture. Both constitute writing on the body, and in both cases female bodies are written upon. The personal level of abuse can be seen as a representation of the abuse and oppression on a more collective level. Invasion through acts of rape or torture is an attack both on the body and the mind of the victims.

The protagonists of Coetzee most often considered only the psychic truth that is totally different from the reality that they encounter. In the course of time, they experience anxiety, obsessions, and even psychological and mental disorders. As time passes by, the sense of alienation and desolation makes them withdraw from the family and the society. The major causes for their alienation are their inability to communicate their emotions and feelings with others and the tendency to mull over their existential problems in the adopted land and its culture. Alienation and isolation are found among women who mostly maintain their own personal borders, but in the case of Coetzee's fiction, his women characters cross all the borders and compromise with others for the better standard of life. In *In the Heart of the Country*, the woman finds herself in a gendered isolation. The mother is no more and the rest of the women are servants. Being surrounded by males and trapped within the male colonial discourse, Magda is prevented from speaking the master's language. It is an attempt by Magda to cross the border between the 'I' and the 'other' and to try hard to succeed in it by being one among them and lowering her standards to that of the servants.

Despite her inability to speak and understand the language of the oppressor, she tries all attempts to share the language of the servants and she experiences the real status of the oppressed and she even claims to have spoken like that of the children of the servants. Magda tries to define herself and the truth by trying to create a better relationship with the servants that would in turn be an opening for the search of her identity and completeness in herself but it results in failure. When the servant Hendrik first appears with his wife, the scene appears to be a repetition of her father's entry with his new wife. She implies that Hendrik is again a replacement of the authority figure of her father or someone who Magda fears, in spite of his inferior position in the colonial society. She feels that she feared her father in the first place and now she fears the new oppressor in the form of her own servant. Her situation gets even more complicated with the new oppressor. Actually Magda, instead of looking inward at herself and seeing her father's image there, should look outwards to identify herself. In looking outward, her purpose is to gain recognition from Hendrik. Her stories of compassion are boundless. She needs to be needed, with no one to need her. She is baffled and bewildered. She does not explain everything. It is understood that Magda should have been the angel of the house easily, as she inhabits her current role, she just needs someone else to give (her) a lead. She states how she would have a better daughter had her father only needed something. So her craving to be needed is connected to certain people around her. To get recognised by her father, she seems to be stalking him, and spying on him through a chink in the curtain.

The patriarchal Africans believe that a woman is not only a child bearer, who is “responsible for both continuing the African race and sustaining its purity” but also “her role is strictly defined and subordinate”. Magda states very clearly in the early part of the narrative that her activities are “reading and writing or fighting migraines”. The loneliness in her life seems to have spurred her imagination and her writing. As she feels, “nothing ever happens on the farm”. She often has moments of self-reflection for herself, yet she continually leaps to conclusions on the basis of her imagination. The descriptions that she gives to herself in mostly repeated negative visions as a “spinster,” an “absence,” a “zero, null, a vacuum,” and a “mad hag,” as sour and sweaty and stupid with anxiety,” as “black” and being a “hole” reflect what is lacking. Moreover, she talks on how she could improve her appearance through changing the diet, pulling out some tooth and plucking her eyebrows, yet she remains in her self-loathing attracted as she is to the “gloomy, the hideous, the doom-ridden”. Justifying her imagination to her isolated existence, she states, “deprived of human intercourse, inevitably overvalue the imagination”. It shows her state of mind when she admits that she is waiting for visions, pressing her knuckles into her eyes. She seems to create a new world due to the lack of companionship of her own.

Thus, Magda struggles to give life to her world. She realises that the natural world alone cannot give life to her. She will not be transformed into an “elementary state” of “pure anger, pure gluttony, pure sloth” but neither does she have the tool to tame nor the authority to over herself. Her struggle to find and gain authority over the world and herself is part of what make her narrative. The quest for her own life is a search of identity in terms of gender, cultural as well as racial identities. “I seem never to have been anywhere, I seem to know nothing for sure, perhaps I am simply a ghost”. Her continuous use of words like “seem” and “probably” questions the existence of reality. Her isolation and alienation have prevented her from having her identity recognised by others. “I, who . . . have never beheld myself in the equal regard of another’s eyes have never held another in the equal regard of mine”. This holds the sad truth. It can be argued that Magda writes her own story rebelling for freedom from the tradition of the Plassroman, the African way of life and the typical female experience of life in the colonies. Yet, what choice does she have? Being the ‘absence’ and the ‘hole longing to be whole,’ Magda has no choice but to accept the fate of the other colonial daughters like her and disappear in silence.

References

1. Berger, Peter L. “The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion” (1967). Anchor Books 1990.
2. Coetzee J M, “ In the Heart of the Country”, Vintage, 2004.
3. Mary Jacobus, “Toward a Feminist Poetics: Women Writing and Writing about Women”, Croom Helm, 1979.