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MAGDA AS NARRATOR: COUNTER/DEMYTHOLOGIZATION IN J.M COETZEE'S IN THE  
HEART OF THE COUNTRY

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ABSTRACT

The research paper titled “ Magda as Narrator: Counter/Demythologization in J.M Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country*” tries to enquire into the ways in which J.M Coetzee has tried to present Magda, the woman narrator of his text *In the Heart of the Country* as a counter/de mythologizing figure. She communicates a counter mythical stance serving as a fused signifier for the African pastoral mythology on the one side and the dominant myth of colonialism. She is as much part of the dominant Afrikaner, settler society as much as the native Blacks whose rhythms she yearns for in an attempt to manage a language that would transcend the divide. She is also the voice of the woman well past its feminine, feminist limitations asserting the fluid female stance in a true development of the self.

Key words: Counter/Demythologization, female stance

“I make it up in order that it shall make me up” (Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country* 73)

*In the Heart of the Country* is a complicated novel by J.M. Coetzee written in the year 1977. This has been often spoken as an allegory of decolonization, of the pastoral myth and of the woman’s question. The novel is in the form of an interior monologue by “a poetess of inferiority” (Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country* 43) as the narrator herself claims. It represents the self cancelling dubious internal consciousness of Magda, the colonialist daughter caught in the throes of negation/isolation occupying the liminal space of not being part of certitudes. The text is like an undated journal, a kind of diary entry running into several paragraphs, representing Magda’s life in the veld surrounded by the colonialist Afrikaner and the native black interface. There are two hundred and sixty six numbered sections and the notable aspect of the narration is that it is often contradictory and paradoxical.

The bare story would reveal a barren spinster whose age is a clever surmise as she is an eternal daughter capable of belonging to any age.

The story spans around 70 years from the late 19th century to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, caught between the transitional gap between the pastoral utopia and a deadening contemporary dystopia.

The fragmented monologue begins at a point when Magda’s father brings home a new bride the narration of which gets displaced at a later entry with the details getting deranged. The entire story becomes a search of Magda for the “vision of a second existence passionate enough to carry [her] from the mundane of being into the doubleness of signification” (6). In the course of this journey through the heart of the country with a passion that lacks the will to carry it through the narrative as he herself claims, she is represented as one struggling to rewrite the myth of the patriarchal hero, but one who is convinced of her inability to do so for the words that will translate her “into the land of myth and hero “(5) eludes her in her “dowdy self in a dull summer heat that will not transcend itself “ (5)

The role of Magda as a woman narrator performs many functions for Coetzee the male

white South African writer. Posited between the Afrikaner and the native Black, Magda inhabits the middle voice, the space in the median which is a happening interim space for Coetzee the writer. She is an embodiment of his colonial post colonialism" (Attwell112) voicing his liminality and double sidedness. She communicates a counter mythical stance serving as a fused signifier for the African pastoral mythology on the one side and the dominant myth of colonialism. She is as much part of the dominant Afrikaner, settler society as much as the native Blacks whose rhythms she yearns for in an attempt to manage a language that would transcend the divide. She is also the voice of the woman well past its feminine, feminist limitations asserting the fluid female stance in a true development of the self.

Magda as a narrator is both dubious and complicit. The first person monologue unravels the material and psychological identity of the speaker, who is an allegorical daughter of colonialism, a kind of Miranda like figure. The "stony monologue" (Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country* 114) of Magda's life is beyond the question of veracity and she proves to be a narrator beyond the claims of truth. Her accounts go on erasing themselves, giving into new versions of the old stories, still leaving greater scope for rewriting.

Magda is not only the narrator, but is the author of her story. *In the Heart of the Country* is the story of Magda's rage and its sequel and she claims the authorship of the story vehemently "even if it is a dull black stupid miserable story, ignorant of its meaning and of all its many possible untapped happy variants" (5). But as an author/narrator she lacks authenticity. Magda is an unreliable narrator as the events narrated in her journal gets cancelled at a later occasion rendering it as misplaced monologue, probably taking place in the various realms of her mental geography. The unreliability can be seen with regard to her description about her father's wedding and also about Hendrik and Klein-Anna. She seems to grope for details and it is as if she is living in a "myth of expulsion" (8) incapable of explaining her aches to herself.

Authorship /authority is achieved only with the death of the father imaginary or otherwise. The

quest for authority is carried or along with the desire for perfecting her language, a language that can sustain "a lost world of men, of cold nights, wood fire, gleaming eyes, and a long tale of dead heroes in a language I have not unlearned"(8). The entire narrative is a self conscious one aiming to achieve a level of self- realization but lacking it reaches in "discourse of failure" (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 62).

Magda as a colonialist representative serves the function of executing without the authority, existing on the fringes of patriarchal/ colonial domination, without its poisonous sting. The double sidedness of Magda enables her to function both as a victim and an agent of colonialism. She is the impact and the effect of colonialist dominance in stunting, destabilizing notions of subject hood. She signifies non-authoritative authority and powerless power in a single signifier.

Magda as a middle space is a study in isolation. She seems to signify a world where her boundless compassion has been rendered insignificant and the colonialist epistemologies have given rise to a self in which "with no one to need her she is baffled and bewildered" (Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country* 6). Magda occupies a realm of alienation, not inhabiting the conventional space of the mother-martyr" (Baral 30). The Woman narrator is an agent of colonialist project, a symbol of the sensitive Afrikaner consciousness, caught in the dividedness of neither here nor there. Her interim position "of neither alone nor in the society" (*In the Heart of the Country* 9) is the way she has been strategically located betwixt the native Black community and the colonial authority. The dominant colonialist is dormant in her waking self with her inability to engender a discourse of equal and reciprocal relationship between the races. "I , who living among the downcast have never beheld myself in the equal regard of another's eye, have never held another in the equal regard of mine" (9). She is a stunted colonialist symbolizing the decolonization at hand, who lacks the authority and power that her father symbolized. She also partakers of a discourse of affiliation with the natives, sensitive to the love of the flora, fauna and people as much as he love of the land.

In spite of Magda's complicity with the dominant discourses, her location in the median does not allow her to proceed on the colonial way without self critique. Her rumination on the school house and what it did to the late generation are replete with doubts, inconsistencies of education and ceaseless confusions and endless flow of questions.

"How many generations can have intervened between those children chanting the six times table and my dubious self? Could my father have been one of them? ... If so where has all the humane learning gone? What did he learn from Hansel and Gretel about fathers who lead their daughters into dark forests?" (9).

The demythification of colonialism is intricately connected with the nostalgia for the human wisdom communicated through the stories of the past.

Magda's effort to record her monologue is an effort to write herself and she remains the lone signifier for the inscription of the self. This signifying process of the self is communicated by Magda when she says that "I am spoken to not in words, which come to me quaint and veiled, but in signs, in conformation of face and hands, in postures of shoulders and feet, in nuances of tune and tone, in gaps and absences whose grammar has never been recorded" (9).

In Magda, one perceives a narration self conscious and reflexive enough to offer "explanation for her predicaments" (Roberts 21), sometimes even undoing the critic's role. In this aspect, she occupies the postmodern pedestal of critiquing from within. The inconsistencies and the apparent flaws and revisions in her text necessitate explications from the narrator level, and the narrator is conscious about the power conferred by the colonizer's language and its right use. The Schizophrenic narrator is a true symbol of a land of mis/non-communication, of a community divided through racial animosity leaving unbridgeable chasm between discourses that can never be made right. It is this lack of belonging that renders her as an unreliable, frenetic narrator, with a castrated self-consciousness and fractured identity.

Magda also embodies the interrogative and transgressive aspect of the postcolonial political. All her fantastic interior monologues emphasize challenge of power, dominance and authority. Through the fragmented, fractured and hybridized post colonial self, she is constantly trying to decode and rewrite the existing patterns of racial domination and subordination. This process of demythification is achieved through constant patricide, more at a spiritual level than at a material level. She kills and goes on to bury her father, more as part of a neurotic fantasy revealing a desire to dominate and claims authority of her story. Another conspicuous thwarting of the colonial legitimacy has been rendered through the occupation of the school house by black servants. The school house has been synonymous with dominant discourses and its methods of shaping obedient citizens with school mistresses modelled on colonial ideology. The school house notably imparted instruction related to themes on a par with colonial impulses like expansion, conquest and hegemony. The occupation of the school by Jacob and Anna, the black natives is indicative of the degeneration of the old Afrikaner system giving into the discourse of decolonization.

Gallagher comments that "the meditations of Magda with their contradictions, fluid quality, feminine imagery- embody a counter myth" (Gallagher 84) to Afrikaner Nationalism. Magda as a demythifying agent becomes significant in dual perspectives. She is neither the guardian of racial purity nor the eternal mother as symbolized in South African farm novels. Primarily, she becomes the counter discursive figure to the maternal as the fountain and source of life, purity, sacrifice and humanity embedded in the African culture. Magda as an agent/signifier of demythification happens at this level of non-conformity to the expected roles in a traditional African society. She is a passive subject of colonialism, the antithesis of the natural, the obedient ways, partaking of coloniality and its outdated ideologies of domination in all its dried up, inhuman aspect. As a counter native African cultural force she symbolizes the barrenness of colonization. But Magda is a dichotomous, complex figure. She is a symbol of the counter myth of colonialist revival also. With her being positioned delicately and subtly

in antithetical discourses, she undermines the cause of the colonial and the postcolonial leaving her a futile, fruitless spinster amidst the waking voice of emergent discourses.

Magda's role as an agent of demythification is a complex process. The constantly revised narrative and the negation of earlier accounts, suggesting multiple versions and the reiterating admission of fallibility and incompleteness of the narrator make the account an implausible one. Hence ascribing agent status to Magda becomes an act of utmost uncertainty. She negates the myths on two levels; from the perspective of the native other, she is a subversion of the mother myth, the foundation and the fountainhead of the race, the mama on whose able shoulders the community rests. Mother in a true African household is not just a tool as Magda claims. "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 servant" (*In the Heart of the Country* 5)," ... a hole trying to be whole" (50). She is a murderer, a sinner who has committed double patricide in the dark recesses of her mind. She harbours shady, gruesome thoughts and abhorrent violent emotions and hence undoes the maternal celebrated in native African farm novels. Denial of responsibility and the peripheral status in the life of the community renders her as a deconstructive symbol of African pastoral utopia. Sans claiming agency and subject hood, Magda goes on to inhabit the realm of the interim, embodying counter myths on her ugly, frail shoulders.

As a counter myth to colonialism, Magda is more of reliable significance as the text abounds in references to the lost era of humanity and humaneness, of a love borne, not only for the land and the profits which it would invariably bring, but also for the love of its people, its flora and fauna. In this level Magda yearns for that pastoral Utopia undoing all the violent dystopic eruptions. Magda mourns for the loss of the traditional in her story and her dry tale as she puts it, "what was once pastoral has become one of those stifling stories in which brother and sister, wife and daughter and concubine prowl and snarl around the bedside

listening for the death rattle or stalk each other through the dim passages of the ancestral home"(7)

In an extensive allegorical status, critics have also spoken of Magda as an allegory of the situation in South Africa, her "spinster fate" referring to the isolated position of contemporary South Africa due to its policy of the subtleties of Apartheid and its exclusionist racist attitude.

Magda occupies a pivotal position as the sole narrator of a saga, not only of the interim position of the sensitive white colonial wanting to thwart the colonialist designs, but one can also perceive her as a victim of the Elektra complex as well. Yearning to be like the father figure, desiring the unquestioned authority that her father enjoys over the native blacks, vying for his attention, simultaneously envying his amours and affairs with other women, hating him and his concubines, weaving disturbing mental pictures of his sexual relationships, fantasizing constantly about the authoritative figure of the master of the household- her father – torn between shifting and stifling emotions of love/hate, anger/ jealousy, obedience and resistance , she remains inconsistent and baffled between her Elektra like stance and Miranda like purity.

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