

## **The Shaft of Power to Powerless Zones in the Novel “In the Heart of the Country” By Coetzee**

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### **Abstract**

J.M. Coetzee's novels have been scrutinized by literary critics for a variety of reasons, including his language methods, allegorical themes, and representations of native characters. By investigating the identities of the primary white characters in Coetzee's novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, this article seeks to understand the shifting zone of power to impotence in the literary conversation. The protagonists in the novels are essentially incomplete as members of the hegemony, and they seek to remake themselves through connections with individuals who have been subjugated by their power group. They are unable to achieve self-actualization because they cannot break free from their dominant history. Because of the protagonist's shortcomings, the characters are unable to redefine themselves and, as a result, are unable to reconcile with the colonized people.

**Keywords:** Protagonist, Power zone, self-actualization, Powerlessness and Inability.

### **Introduction**

Under the patriarchal colonial regime, white women were thought to occupy an ambiguous position between the colonial master and the colonized subjects, with her gender posing a barrier to achieving the status of “master” and her white skin posing a barrier to gaining the goodwill of the colonized blacks; the superiority, power, and authority associated with white skin were frequently overshadowed by the vulnerability of her “gender.” This ambivalence put her in a position where she obviously belonged nowhere, resulting in a lack of identity as she can't fully identify with either side, finally leading to an existential crisis [1]. Identity is a complicated concept. It is dependent on a lot of circumstances, some of which are beyond our control, and hence it cannot be entirely formed or reconstructed according to one's desires. Regardless of what we stand for as individuals, our identity is frequently influenced by and judged in relation to the greater group to which we belong. Different forces might sometimes impose different identities on a person, leaving him or her with nowhere to go.

Power and powerlessness dynamics are not absolute in the sense that they are constantly susceptible to change, even when no intentional attempts are made to bring about

such change. Power structures never remain static since power is not something that can be owned or possessed by a person; it is only “exercised” to achieve certain desirable or undesired goals. Power never exists in an equitable proportion in society, but always exists in a state of disequilibrium, giving one set of individuals influence over the other set of people who are therefore dubbed powerless. Nobody can be completely powerless, hence no one can be completely powerful. Even the weakest, poorest, and most exploited members of society have some power if they know how to use it [2]. In his works, Coetzee concentrates on the exerted and unexercised power wielded by an individual, a group of individuals, or the state.

Power can be displayed or kept hidden. Force, brutality, torture, exploitation, and oppression are visible manifestations; ideology, opinion, hegemony, propaganda, and so on is invisible manifestations. Because power is intimately linked to privilege, governments and nations frequently aim to bestow specific privileges on underprivileged groups in order to bridge the gap between the haves and have-nots. Coetzee's second novel, *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), focuses on the ties between colonizers and colonized people. Though all connections based on any element are in some manner power ties caste, class, race, gender, area, and religion - power is most overtly the organizing force in the colonizer-colonized nexus [3]. It portrays the narrative of a dominant patriarch, a white colonial settler, and his spinster daughter Magda's mental collapse as a result of her loneliness on their secluded property due to a lack of equal or reciprocal company.

The narrative takes the form of a monologue by Magda, who, in order to give her existence some substance, imagines and re-imagines a series of situations, frequently blurring the boundary between real and imagined. She's stuck on the farm with individuals she can't have a conversation with since her father, the patriarch, is above her and her servants are beneath her. She is completely disregarded by her father and reviled and mistrusted by her servants because she is one of the whites responsible for their slavery [4]. She has never felt a sense of connection with anyone. The character of Magda's father, who went from being a powerful colonial patriarch whose every word was an order that no one dared to disobey to a sickening old man after being wounded by a rifle shot fired by Magda as a revenge for ignoring her as well as a punishment for getting into an illicit relationship with Hendrik's young wife Klien-Anna, depicts the scene of declining colonial power.

After spending his final days on the mercy of others, reliant on others even for his most personal tasks, unable to move from the pool of blood and puss oozing from the wound and other body wastes that made him unbearably stinky, he succumbs to his fatal injury, dying in a state of complete powerlessness, deprived even of a proper burial. Magda is no longer able to compel respect or obedience from her servants as a result of his death, which completely reverses power dynamics on the farm (Hendrik and Anna). They now control rather than being dominated by the ‘white master,’ to the point when Hendrik raps Magda for not being able to pay their salary following her father's death.

Magda seeks to reconcile with Hendrik and Klein-Anna rather than retaliate, demonstrating the amount of power reversal, especially considering they are the only human presence left on the farm beside her and the only people she has ever known [5]. Coetzee's conscience is flavoured with a sense of guilt, involvement, and responsibility for the past crimes committed by his white race against blacks, something he is unable to avoid throughout his life, and it shows in his writings. He has been acutely aware of the long history of oppression linked with the skin color into which he was born (which he cannot escape), even if he bears no responsibility for the crime, his sympathies being with the oppressed, as opposed to his own race.

*"He must be a simpleton in need of protection," he realises, "if he thinks he can get by on straight looks and honourable deals when the ground beneath his feet is steeped in blood and the deep backward depths of history echo with yells of fury." (Coetzee, 17)*

His situation in South Africa was exactly how Nadine Gordimer portrayed it in *The Essential Gesture* (1988):

*"our skin-color designated us as oppressors to the blacks, and our ideologies labelled us as traitors to the whites." (Coetzee, 32).* Hendrik's act of dressing in his dead master's robes and shoes suggests a total turn-around on the farm, signifying the end of colonisation and the complete conquest of power by the previously powerless subjects. He is no more the docile [6], meek slave or servant Magda

has known, but the master to whom she must now surrender.

She really wants to break free from the colonial order by making herself accessible to him "randomly, humiliatingly, and fiercely sexually" as a slave, but the emotional or mental gap produced by centuries of segregation and oppression is too great for her efforts to transcend. Because of his lack of compassion and attachment, her sexual relationship with Hendrik fails to give her any emotional support [7]. She, like Coetzee, suffers from their (Hendrik's and his wife Klein-Anna's) mistrust due to her white skin, which makes it impossible for her to be regarded as an individual in isolation from the oppressor gang to which she is born and which she cannot change despite her shouting:

*"I am not simply one of the whites, I am I!" "I am not a people; I am myself." (Coetzee, 128).*

Power, which leads to societal hierarchies, is consequently depicted in the novel as an isolating force [8]. It can only govern people, not win them, and as soon as it dwindles, everything falls apart and goes topsy-turvy, forcing its perpetrators to pay either physically or mentally. Magda's mental disorientation near the end of the novel, when she is left alone on the farm by her servants, demonstrates the extent of harm done by colonization to whites themselves, implying that power does not ruin only one-dimensionally, that one's skin color cannot save one from suffering and victimization, or that skin color has no role to play, and it is all about "power."

*"Racism (and sexism) are about power, not about race or gender!"*

*They can so affect anyone, regardless of gender, race, community, culture, or country, who values power over the need to respect others. The concept of group rivalry, or the striving for power, is at the heart of racism (as well as sexism). The issue isn't race; it's systems that do evil on others and then justify it by blaming the victim." (Coetzee, 144).*

It's all a game of stereotyping to prove one group of people inferior to others so that their exploitation can be justified by rendering them incapable of ruling themselves and thus fit to be ruled by others [9], or by projecting them as a threat to "civilized" society in order to keep them under the thumb of those who consider themselves superior, more capable of benefactor's humanity while in fact doing the most harm to it by enacting their selfish motives. This stereotyping can be done on the basis of anything, including race, religion, caste, class, and gender, which are all just justifications based on "Otherness."

In practically all of Coetzee's writings, the race serves as the organizational basis for power relations [10], as the country is locked in a racial war between the white minority and the black majority, with an unnatural pattern of power concentration.

*"Coetzee's emphasis on race and colonialism appears to have been the outcome of biographical accident rather than the product of a goal for accurate historical portrayal," writes David Attwell. (Coetzee, 225).*

In South Africa, the racial aspect is so strong that it leaves no room for themes other than violence, discrimination, oppression, conflict, and so on, all of which revolve around the concept of power – power obsession, power delusion, power disequilibrium, and power deficiency – all of which are responsible for the world's most serious problems [11]. Despite being deeply concerned about the situation in South Africa and mourning for it, Coetzee's works offer no solution to change it; they offer no way out of this maze of power and powerlessness, owing to Coetzee's 'apolitical' stance, in which he rejects both parties 'maneuvers while remaining aloof from both sides of the conflict. In Attwell's words, his writings are a manifestation of "*his tangled postcoloniality*" (Coetzee, 267). However, just as "unbelief is a belief," how being "apolitical" can simultaneously be a "political" decision is a different tale.

The novel *In the Heart of the Country* is a traditional mode novel that treats oppressed subjects' silences as powerlessness, loss of agency, and absence; however, for Coetzee, it is more of an act of defiance on their part to engage with their oppressors on any level in order to deny them access to their inner self. Their bodies may be under others' control and observation, but they refuse to let any peeks into their thoughts, leaving the 'other' impotent to know what is going on within [12]. It becomes important to take a stand in competing situations between powerful and powerless people, and this responsibility falls primarily on the intellectual strata, which is seen as a society's conscience keeper and has the power to shape public opinion for or against a situation. In times of crisis, when

injustice and oppression against specific groups of people become rampant, remaining neutral is tantamount to abdicating your role to keep society in check. As a result, Coetzee's 'apolitical' posture has been heavily challenged, as being apolitical can often be a highly political option.

### Conclusion

Coetzee tries to keep his novels' settings and characters as far away from South African reality as possible in order to avoid being labelled as a writer of a specific region and time, with the goal of becoming a universal writer and the responsibility that comes with it: the responsibility to reform and provide solutions. His allegorical manner of narration, his postmodern consciousness, and his existential outlook on life are owing to his significant influences, where Magda lives in *In the Heart of the Country*, and his choice of issues that are irrelevant to the South African reality. No attempt is made to investigate Hendrik's or his wife's minds in *In the Heart of the Country*. The inability to read these characters' minds is hampered by their silence. In fact, Coetzee appears to believe that the subaltern 'cannot' talk while still underlining that it may be 'heard,' creating a fascinating dichotomy.

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