



Magda's Ethical Problem in Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*

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ABSTRACT

This research article focuses on the ethical problems of Magda, the protagonist, and narrator of John Maxwell Coetzee's novel In the Heart of the Country. Here Magda, a white spinster, has been presented as an immoral and hypocritical woman. In the beginning, she hates the immoral activities of her father and wants to struggle with him for the sake of her own identity. Later, she is involved in an illegal sexual relationship with her black servant, Hendrik. She becomes ready to destroy the lives of black servants, Hendrik and his wife Anna because of her racial prejudice and hypocrisy. Magda forgets her ethical values and widens the gap in her relationship with others. By applying qualitative research, the researcher had taken the novel In the Heart of the Country as a primary text and analyzed it from the perspectives of ethical criticism, basically the ethical theories of Emmanuel Levinas. This research demonstrates how ethics and morality are required for a correct understanding of Coetzee's 'In the Heart of the Country'. In it, ethics and morality are essential to solve the mystery of the self and others. The self-and-other conundrum will remain difficult unless we assign ethics and morals to this story. Magda's egotism is revealed in her attitude toward others and herself. She's worried about the horror that her involvement in apartheid's white criminality, as well as her seduction of her servant, has instilled in her. From the study, the researcher concluded that Magda is responsible for her downfall and falls in disgrace because of her hubris. It is due to the fact that racism causes an ethical crisis in South African society.

KEYWORDS: *apartheid, ethical issue, hypocrisy, prejudice, racism*

1 INTRODUCTION

J.M. Coetzee, a well-known South African-Australian novelist, won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2003. Coetzee started his fiction writing career in 1969, as his first novel, *Dusk Lands*, was published in 1974. He won South Africa's CNA prize with his seminal novel *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) and was published in Britain and the USA as well.

The issue of moral construction of apartheid is raised in the response of his novels. During apartheid, moralization was a means of reaching a compromise between the West and South Africa, interpreting it in universal terms while maintaining it at a safe distance. This is contingent on the depiction of ties between distant contained regions, such as South Africa and the rest of the globe (the West).

We anticipate literature to be viewed as a unique instrument for articulating apartheid critique in a moral register. One of the tragedies about South Africans who are victims of racism is *In the Heart of the Country*. South African society is portrayed as being racist. The sole significant axis of power is defined as the South African race. Magda, the white South African spinster who serves as the novel's narrator, is seen as a strong symbol of antiquated customs and the effort to dismantle them.

Though Magda, the white spinster, is capable of breathtaking emotional expression, her story revolves around her rage, bitterness, self-pity, loathing for her father, and attraction to the servants, Hedrick and Anna. Magda kills her father by shooting through the window with her knife after he takes Anna to his bed. Magda is thus imprisoned in a selfish and egocentric subjectivity, unaware of the other characters' ideas, feelings, and motives. Her hedonistic lifestyle does not make her happy.

J. M. Coetzee rigorously expresses his writing from the South African realities in its historical and political complexities. Mostly,

the failure of human sympathy is caused due to the penalty of colonialism in general and apartheid in specific. Every book he writes is deeply rooted in existing social and political situations and their psychological impact.

In this novel, Coetzee tries to present the South African reality. For instance, Magda has the physical desire, she cannot express it directly. She is sexually attracted even towards her father. But later her sexual desire is fulfilled by her servant, Hendrik. Her father kills her mother because of the extreme sexual obsession and marries another woman. Thus, Coetzee presents the morally dreadful conditions of irresponsibility, crime, and corruption among most of the white characters in this novel.

1.1 Review of Literature

The novel *In the Heart of the Country* has been reviewed by many scholars from different perspectives. Many critics, scholars, and writers have revisited the novel from different perspectives, like racial, feminist, linguistic, and narrative techniques. Among them, critic Dodd (1987) has analyzed this novel from the psychological point of view:

Magda's perception of herself is shaped by her having absorbed the lessons of literature and suggests that she may be framed by circumscribed by literacy and psychoanalytic discourse, which is ill-suited to her specific space and time experience. This frame, once Magda is scripted by our dominant psychoanalytic discourse to identify her as wanting to be seduced by her father. (139)

In this, Josephine makes comments based on her knowledge of literature and psychoanalytic discourse, and she appears close enough to her father to satisfy her sexual desire.

In the Heart of the Country, Coetzee's selection of a white female narrator is also linked to the post-structuralists' views of the

feminine as inherently disruptive to narrative. It implies that Coetzee employs a variety of feminisms and the feminine to overcome narrative and discourse difficulties. In it, Coetzee makes a scathing critique of Anglo-American feminist rhetoric. Probyn (2019) objects to Coetzee's portrayal of the narrator:

Magda is a parody of Adrienne Rich's *Dover in Diving into the Wreck*, and she is a parody of the feminist quest for an identity beyond phallic discourse that novel represents a kind of liberal Anglo-American feminism which privileges a contradictory reversal of positions over a deconstruction of positionality purpose. (15)

In the above excerpt, Coetzee is rectifying an erroneous and universalizing feminist stream of thought. His use of feminism is linked to a wider phenomenon of using the feminine as a vehicle for postcolonial settler identity crises, authorial power, and representational conflict.

Setiwan (2011) concludes that

Magda, the main female character in Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*, suffers from neurosis, which later develops into psychosis. The first mental disorder can be seen from both psychological and physical symptoms. Psychologically, she is an angry, low self-esteemed, and anxious young lady. She also suffers from a terrible headache, which does not have a valid medical cause. The neurosis develops into psychosis when she starts to have delusions such as fantasizing the murder of her daddy and mistress and the coming of insects. The serious mental problems in the young lady result from her unsuccessful resolution of her sexual desire towards her own father.

In the above quote, Setiwan shows that Magda had a problem of neurosis and later it turned into psychological problem. Sinha, (2021) wrote, "Magda's story, by design, is not

palatable or even believable: the false stories, the dream-like sequence of events, and frequent inconsistencies make her tales suspect."

Critiquing Coetzee's novel, Watson (1998) wrote, "*In the Heart of the Country* is concerned to demonstrate that realism is not real at all, but simply a product of language, a code that people have come to accept as natural" (375). But, Tiffin (1987) sees Coetzee's intentional eschewing of realism as "a way of emphasizing the complicity of Western narrative and history" (32). Dovey (1988), opines, "Coetzee deliberately adopts the models and theories inhabiting them in a way that closely approximates the Derridean strategy of deconstruction" (10).

Like this, *In the Heart of the Country* is studied from several angles by different critics, reviewers, and essayists in terms of feminism, racism, psychoanalysis, linguistics, and narrative techniques. By seeing the real situation of South African society, the researcher sees this novel as very appropriate in the case of ethics. An ethical problem is a common and prominent issue created by the different characters. Through the lens of ethical action, all the characters, and especially Magda, the white colonial woman, and the narrator show immoral and neglected behavior. She first despises her father's immoral behavior, but she subsequently participates in immoral behavior herself, including sexual intercourse with the black servant, Hendrik. Magda demonstrates self-centeredness, racial prejudice, and hypocrisy in *In the Heart of the Country*, which are the primary causes of individual and societal degeneration. As a result, she loses sight of her ethical principles and widens the chasm in her interpersonal relationships.

Leaving aside the various points of view of numerous commentators, an ethical critique may be applied to every aspect of this story. The moral principle that governs or influences a person's conduct is called "ethics". It has

something to do with ethos, habit, and custom. In the form of dialectics, it deals with the issues of right and wrong, goodness and evil. It is a concept mediated by physical reality and the circumstances of men's and women's lives. To be ethical, one must talk and seek to bring reality and value together.

The aforementioned researchers and writers have interpreted Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* from different perspectives. They have explored different dimensions of this novel. But, they haven't touched and they have ignored the issue of ethical problem of Magda in it. The gap is filled from this research and it is a completely new and most dominant issue for the study of this fiction.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research paper is based on the qualitative analysis of the novel *In the Heart of the Country*. An analytical study has been conducted by applying the concepts of ethical criticism to this research. In this research paper, the ethical theories of different philosophers have been used as a tool to interpret and analyze Magda's ethical problems. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* has been taken as a primary text, and ethical theory has been used as a tool to interpret it. Textual evidences have been extracted and interpreted in the light of the ethical theories of different theorists.

For this research, the researcher has taken the literary theories related to ethical issues as the tools written by different writers and philosophers; especially Socrates, Augustine, Immanuel Kant, Hegel, Martin Buber, Irish Murdoch, Emmanuel Levinas, Richard Rorty, and Jacques Derrida to analyze, *In the Heart of the Country* from an ethical perspective. This ethical study is delimited by inter-racial intra-racial and interpersonal relations, i.e. racial issues more than issues concerning class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and so on. The issues of class, gender, sexuality, and nationality are considered to be the primary

concern in this novel. For that reason, ethical criticism is taken as a theoretical tool to interpret the fiction for this study.

2.1 Concepts on Ethical Criticism

Ethics is the study of what is right and wrong, good and evil, in nature and human behavior. The Greek ethos is linked to ethics. Socrates, a Greek philosopher, says that man's sense of right and evil teaches him what is correct. For him, correct knowledge leads to correct conduct, and only those who do the right thing can be called virtuous. He thinks that it is people's reason, not society, which allows them to discriminate between good and wrong. He believes that no one can be happy until they are acting against their better judgment, and he believes that if he learns how to obtain happiness, he would do so. As a result, someone who knows what is right will do what is right.

The bad quality of fleshly passion, according to Augustine, is obvious in the humiliation that accompanies its manifestation unfettered by the rational will. He believes that the source of evil does not reside in matter because it is God's creation and hence good. He claims that man is no longer free to choose his or her own path in life based only on his or her rational will; not only because of circumstances beyond his or her control, but also because he or she is unknowingly restricted by ignorance and emotional conditioning.

Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher, claims that the distinction between good and evil is a matter of reason rather than feeling. Everyone is aware of what is good and bad, not because they have learned it, but because it is innate in their minds. According to Kant, everyone possesses a practical reason, or the intelligence that allows us to determine what is good or wrong in any given situation. The law of morality, in his perspective, is just as absolute and universal as the rule of causation, which cannot be shown by reason but is still absolute and unalterable. When Kant talks about the

law of morality, he's talking about human science. Kant goes on to say:

But if you have a relationship with others only to be popular, you are not acting out of respect for the moral law. You might be acting by moral law but if it is to be a moral action you must have conquered yourself. Only when we do something purely out of duty it can be called a moral act. (Quoted in Tarnas 335)

As a result, Kant's ethics is referred to as "obligation" or "responsibility" ethics. He claims that it is this goodwill that decides whether or not an action is ethically correct, but not its results.

The key figure of twentieth-century continental philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, takes ethics to be an asymmetrical relation with a solid other that decenters the ego-subject. According to him, the relation (or encounter) between 'self' (ego) and 'other' is primary to understanding. So, the self cannot become a subject if it is not always about an object from which it finds its space. Levinas (1985) says, "To become a subject, the self first must exist about an object to which it can pronounce itself linguistically as ' I '. Subjectivity arises when a being is confronted by another being to whom it can speak" (302).

The ego maintains itself in its dwelling with 'labor' and 'possessions'. Levinas says this egotism the 'economy of being'. He also terms this egotism as 'self-identification. The body, home, labor, possession, and economy are the structures of the ego that are caught in the realm of the same egoism. The 'self' works to assimilate and possess. It misses the opportunity to become a truly responsive and responsible subject as long as it does not risk expression in the form of dialogue with another. He finds the possibility of escape from inferiority and anonymous selfhood in the social relationship with others.

Levinas calls subject is impossible as freedom for itself which is reformed by responsibility for another. The meaning, according to Levinas, of the first person singular is responsibility. Although frequent statements such as "we call justice this face to face approach, in conversion, seem to reinforce this impression, there is a crucial displacement between ethics and justices" (71). Ethics is transformed into justice by the 'third party'. The 'third', synthesis in Hegel, here refers to an income at the level of plurality. That is to say, the third party is not anthropological, but the other's other, who is another to me.

As per Jacques Derrida, ethics is violent without politics. It emerges because, in actuality, because of the self's unconditional responsibility for the other's uniqueness, ethics ignores the world's other 'unique others.' There is a requirement for politics. Politics is, in some ways, essential for the sake of ethics. The authoritarianism of the Western subject-object binary, which is an inherent part of the imperialist past of the western academia, including the institution Derrida aims to use oppose discursively, is used in Derrida's denunciation of apartheid as "the greatest racism" in the globe. The authenticity of the art display, which formerly served to build the other, now serves to dismantle it.

"Racism's Last Word" by Jacques Derrida examines racism as a worldwide issue while also portraying apartheid as an object unsuited for its stunning otherness. In his great article "Violence and Metaphysics," he considers the alternatives available to a discourse that claims to transcend ontology: confess its participation with ontological language or abandon philosophy in favor of empiricism.

3 RESULTS & DISCUSSION: ANALYSIS OF MAGDA'S ETHICAL PROBLEM

The novel *In the Heart of the Country* depicts hypocrisy and brutality, as well as whites' exploitation of blacks. On the surface, Magda,

the female heroine, appears to sympathize with apartheid victims. But in truth, racial prejudice causes a variety of ethical issues there.

Magda seems showy and artificial in terms of love and affection with her servant, Hendrik and his wife. She says about the newlyweds that it is Hendrik who has brought home a new wife. So, in appearance, she seems to be a reliable narrator, but in reality, she turns to be an unreliable character. Magda was from a white and bourgeoisie family which couldn't understand the feelings of black servants. When Hendrik comes at her home to get a job, her father shows the dominating role upon the black. The following dialogue clearly demonstrates his role:

'Are you by yourself?'
'Yes baas, I am by myself now.'
'Do you know the people on my farm?'
'No baas, I know no one around here'
'Now listen carefully, what is your name?'
'Hendrik, my baas'.(22)

This dialogue shows how dominating and brutal Magda's father was. He wants to know each and everything about Hendrik who represents the marginal character as 'other'. On the other hand, Hendrik, the black servant, is timid who articulates the term like 'Yes baas', 'No baas' and 'My baas'. As Hendrik comes to Magda and asks for a job for his wife Anna, she also plays an important role of master. Though she was also female, Magda also shows her inhumane behavior. She compels Anna several works.

Magda's hypocritical nature is presented in the novel. She shows sympathy upon Anna but it was just her dual nature. Her father lures Anna to fulfill the sexual interest. She does not revolt against the ill-treatment of her father. Magda seems entirely disturbed and discarded by her father. She feels;

In a month, I can see it, I will be bringing my father and my maid breakfast in bed

while Hendrik lounges in the kitchen eating biscuits, [...] father will buy new dresses for her while I wash out her soiled underwear. He and she will lie abed all day sunk in sensual sloth while Hendrik tipples jackals devour the sheep, and the work of generations falls to ruins. (54)

As her father gets Anna and entices her to have physical pleasure, Magda, too, relents Hendrik for the fulfillment of sexual desire at any cost. Until her father is alive, she considers him as if he were a black servant.

[...] I know how to use a gun, but I do. There are several things about me one would not think. I am not sure that I can load a magazine in the dark but I can slip a single cartridge into the breach and slide the bolt to my palm are unpleasantly clammy for someone who is normal day to the point of scaliness. (64)

When Hendrik opposes, she makes different tricks to adopt him: "I begin to hurl things at Hendrik, a kettle handful of spoon and knives, plates" (72). She also accuses him of stealing: "Where is the bottle? Tell me! Where is the brandy? Where did you get the brandy?" (72) Hendrik hesitates to come nearby her and she expresses her anger, "You sot, you filthy sot, you're finished here, I swear it! Pack your things and get out! I don't want to see you here again" (72).

Magda expresses her mastery over a servant Anna and takes a way to show her grudge and jealousy. Besides, Hendrik, the servant, is also victimized by Magda's threats and domination. She shows her power to engage in any kind of job or to dismiss her from the job. She argues:

Because of Hendrik, I am telling you here and now, if you give trouble I wash my hands of both of you, you can get out today. I want to make myself quite clear.

What happens between you and Anna is none of my business; but if she comes to me and says you have been cruel to her, beware! (81).

From this it is justified how cruel Magda as an employer is. She does not take any interest to know the other. She does not try to understand how others are living in miserable conditions. She depicts her characters and behaviors as exploiter, cruel and immoral. She always lacks moral responsibility.

As a result, she has been able to speak on her life in her own voice throughout and has "chosen of every moment in her voice throughout and has "chosen at every moment (her) own destiny" (139). She abandons her ethical ideals in favor of sexual indictment with the assistance of a black servant named Hendrik. She declares:

I have no breath left, everything has been gasped out, and I cover my head and fall slowly and awkwardly back to the floor: Yes!. . Yes!. . Yes!. . says Hendrik, beating me, I raise myself on hands and knees and begin to the door. [...] This is how a bitch must look; but as for what happens next, I don't even know how it is done. He goes on kicking at my thigh. (114)

It shows that Hendrik visits Magda regularly during the night, and she also is doing her best to learn the ways of physical love.

The whites, such as Magda and her father, engage in physical and mental dominance over the servants. Magda is sexually envious of Anna, despite the fact that they are of different genders. Magda is tormented by words and sounds when her father takes Hendrik's wife as his mistress: "the bitter child straining her ears behind the door at the far end of the houses" (52). For that reason, she constructs her version of the primal scene, her spying on them which climaxes in her imagined murder of the father. Magda approaches Anna once

more, ordering her to return to Hendrik. She notes about her use of the language of power: "It comes of itself one need no lessons, only meek folk around one and a grudge against them for not speaking back" (74).

So, Coetzee presents Magda as a hypocritical woman who seems helpful and cooperative, whereas the servants like Hendrik and his wife are portrayed as untrustworthy, insensitive, and unkind people. In other words, Magda's narrative attempts to present herself as a reliable white woman. The subaltern or marginalized people are presented as unreliable people. Magda seems to be a reliable character but in reality, she turns to be unreliable. She tries her best to provide an image of herself through self-justification and misreads others because of her ethical ignorance. She misunderstands others as a white lady and focuses as if she knows everything. So, her arrogant and proud nature directly shows that she is superior to others, blacks.

From this, it is proved that Magda is unable to understand the blacks, is untrustworthy, insensible, unreliable, and upholder of racist ideology. It shows why Coetzee's novel demands ethics and morality for the proper understanding of the novel. So, Coetzee sensitively presents his narrator ironically to show the clash between the appearance and reality of the white character.

There is a lack of mutual understanding between father and daughter, and they have no co-operation at all. Her father does not regard Magda in his personal and family matter. Without considering the future of her daughter her father proceeds with his every task according to his own will. He makes Magda alone forever, taking his new wife. So, she expresses:

I should have been standing ready to greet them with smiles and offers of tea, but I was not. I was absent. I was not missed. [...] To my father, I have been absent all

my life. Therefore, instead of being the womanly warmth at the heart of this house, I have been zero, null, a vacuum towards which all collapses inward, turbulence, muffled, grey, like a chill draft eddying through the corridors, neglected, vengeful. (2)

Because of the feeling of sadness, she wants to revolt against her father and the traditional ideas that impose the bad rules over a youngster like her. She does not feel any kind of liberation from her father: "I like inside a skin inside a house. There is not act I know of that will liberate me into the world" (10). Though her father does not express directly, he wants to control her keeping in a certain boundary. Magda compares herself as 'a straw woman' and a 'scarecrow'.

Her character cannot remain in beauty and gentleness as usual. Her virtues do not remain within certain boundaries. She demonstrates her hypocritical tendencies by displaying interest to the black servant Hendrik, and his wife Anna, guided by her family background. Anna plans to kill her father by firing through the window with his gun when he takes Anna to his bed. Thus, to challenge her father and his illegal relation with the servant, Anna, she also creates sexual politics. She gets involved in the physical relation with Hendrik. It shows that Magda can utilize her freedom only through the distraction from her father and having a good relationship with the servants. For the sake of balance, she chooses Hendrik as her sexual partner and fulfills her desire.

To express her anger towards her father, Magda wants to remain far from him and kill him forever. She says:

A smile will pass behind my back. A crime was committed. There must be a criminal. Who is the guilty one? I am at a terrible disadvantage. Forces within me belonging to the psychology I so abhor will take possession of me and drive me to

believe that I willed the crime, that I desired my father's death. (76)

Magda kills her father twice, once in her memory and once, presumably in fact, in an attempt to undermine the hierarchy and abdicate her historical place. However, she gradually realizes that destroying the old order, as personified by her father, will not allow any subversion of power ideology since that ideology is already entrenched in language. Indeed, shortly after killing the father, Magda discovers that she must invert the order of the master/slave or self/other discourses with both Hendrik and his wife Anna. Magda confronts Hendrik with a gun after asking him twice to assist her with her father's composition, and after two refusals, she eventually receives his consent.

So, the disagreement between both father and daughter could not be determined in the entire narrative because of their self-interest and different polarities. Even in the same family and the same race, settlement cannot be achieved because of their weaknesses, i.e. self-centeredness, racist and patriarchal norms and values.

4 CONCLUSION

The ethical problem in South African white writing is presented in the novel *In the Heart of the Country*. Based on the research findings, the researcher came to the conclusion that Magda is to be blamed for her downfall and that she is in disgrace as a result of her hubris. The reason for this is that racism causes an ethical crisis in South African society. In it, Magda forgets her ethical values and widens the gap in her relation with Hendrik and Anna. She is self-centered, racially prejudiced, and hypocritical in nature. In the beginning, Magda was against the immoral activities of her father, and she was ready to kill him. But later, she engages in immoral activities together with her black servant. This novel has been inserted into a dominant moral depiction of apartheid. Magda tries her best to supply a

positive image of herself through self-justification and misreads others due to her ethical ignorance in terms of race, gender, and sexuality. She has racial and gender illiteracy. Being a westernized rationalist and ex-colonizer, she is anxious by apartheid crime and acts, thinks, and focalizes confidently. She misunderstands others but pretends as if she knows everything. She considers herself to be superior to others as being white. Magda is portrayed by Coetzee as untrustworthy, insensible, neo-Oriental, and a chauvinist who misunderstands not just marginalized individuals like Hendrik and Anna, but also her father and herself. It demonstrates that a correct interpretation of Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* necessitates ethics and morals. Ethics and morals are required for the comprehension of the self and others' puzzles in *In the Heart of the Country*. The conundrum of the self and others will remain perplexing until we give ethics and morals for this story. Magda's attitude toward others and herself reveals something about her egotism. She is concerned about the terror that her participation in the white crime of apartheid, as well as her seduction of her servant, has instilled in her.

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