

**Experiencing the Abject Female Body
and Writing the Female Self:
Body Narrative of *In the Heart of the Country***

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Abstract:

In the *Heart of the Country*, the second novel by J. M. Coetzee, has been traditionally read as a disembodied writing that focuses on the problem of writing per se instead of the reality. This paper contends that the work is actually a body narrative that explores the visceral pain suffered by Magda whose infertile body impedes her being a qualified subject. As the heroine in a postcolonial novel, Magda is not just a body that is restricted and constructed by the politics of the body, but also a thinking and writing body that consciously questions and resists the gendered bodily norms under whose yardstick her subjecthood is barred. Written in the metafictional manner, Magda's narrative of the body is not just a record of her corporeal experience, but also a self-conscious negotiation with, and challenge of, the bodily norms under whose yardstick her body has been debased or, in terms of Judith Butler, abjected. Taking her female bodily experience as the starting point, Magda writes a feminine text that values passion, fluidity and non-linearity to disrupt the patriarchal discourse underpinned with logical reasoning. The feminine body narrative endeavors to achieve a new way of communication through which a reciprocal cross race/gender relationship might be established.

Keywords: J. M. Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country*, Abject Female Body, Body Narrative, Feminine Text

Composed of 256 pieces of diaries, most of which are the heroine and narrator's conscious critique of various sub-genres of previous writings, *In the Heart of the Country*, the second novel by J. M. Coetzee, has been traditionally read as a disembodied writing that focuses on the problem of writing per se instead of the reality. Magda's situation of being imprisoned in the network of words has intrigued Freudian or Lacanian reading of the novel. For instance, Sheila Roberts contends that Magda is "a latter-day Electra killing the Father for the loss of the Mother and not vice versa; a Circe prepared to wreak vengeance on all careless men" (Roberts, 1992, p. 29). Teresa Dovey maintains that *In the Heart of the Country* is a parodic rewriting of "the pastoral romantic", a literary genre popular among the white writers in colonial Africa, and that the novel subverts the genre as a dominant discourse by "inhabiting it in a way that closely approximates the Derridean strategy of deconstruction" (Dovey, 1988, p. 4). Chiara Briganti, in line with Dovey, explores the self-reflexivity of the novel, arguing that the novel "is explicitly engaged in a dialogue with psychoanalytic discourse", especially "Freud's *Studies on Hysteria*" (Briganti, 1994, p. 35). These studies overemphasize Coetzee's self-conscious exploration of the discursive power of the narrating subject at the cost of ignoring his deep concern with the unbearable suffering and the abject existence of the unnamable oppressed. Explicitly engaged in dialogues with various sub-genres, *In the Heart of the Country*, however, is a body narrative that explores the visceral pain suffered by Magda, an Afrikaner spinster whose infertile body impedes her being a qualified subject. Written in the metafictional manner, Magda's narrative of the body is not just a record of her corporeal experience, but also a self-conscious negotiation with, and challenge of, the bodily norms under whose yardstick her body has been debased or, in terms of Judith Butler, abjected.

As a matter of fact, the body narrative nature of *In the Heart of the Country* has been addressed by Brian May who argues that the body in Coetzee's novels resists any interpretation because it "insists on its own thinness" (May, 2001, p. 389). May's ultimate concern is to demonstrate that the surrealistic style of *In the Heart of the Country* is actually reality-based. May's emphasis on the metaphorical meaning of the body, however, has virtually led to his blindness to the corporeal pain that Magda has suffered. This paper maintains that Coetzee's concern in this novel is more about the lived experience of Magda as the abject body than the metaphorical meaning of the body. Magda's abject body is portrayed by Coetzee to provide the rea-

der with a possibility of living through the cruelty of colonization and apartheid in South Africa. The point where the characters in the novel fail to read the body is exactly the point for the reader to start to analyze the power that has inscribed, wounded and abjected the body.

According to Judith Butler¹, the abject refers to those populations who are currently denied subject status by the standards of physical norms erected for everybody in the world, populations “whose living under the sign of the ‘unlivable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject” (Butler, 1993, p. 3). The dominant ideals reinforce the power of certain groups, for instance, men and heterosexuals, over others. These others, including women, homosexuals, transsexuals, who live with differently abled bodies or differently shaped bodies, are treated socially as outsiders, the abject, and are subject to social punishments. Abjection, thus, is a question of ontology that describes the process whereby certain persons are excluded from particular normative ideals of subjecthood. Alongside those subjects who can “lay claim to ontology” because they “count or qualify as real,” there are those who “do not have claim to ontology” (Butler, 1993, p. 3) and who are, in some sense, unreal because their material bodies do not “matter.” Although these bodies fail to qualify as subjects, as bodies that breathe and

¹ Butler’s account of abjection is an adaptation of Juliet Kristeva’s term, but it is crucially different from Kristeva’s. For Butler, it is a category of exclusion created by discursive norms. For Kristeva, the abjection, however, is a psychological response to something that disgusts us. This term is introduced by Kristeva in response to Lacan’s argument that the sense of self or subjectivity is inescapably imprisoned in the order of language or the “symbolic order.” For Kristeva, our sense of self is not established solely through a conceptual positioning in the symbolic order, but prior to that in a bodily way. Something closely related to us yet rejected by us, something abject, often evokes a bodily reaction of nausea, or a sense of abjection, blurring the boundary between being and non-being. Kristeva proposes that an open wound, excrement, nail clippings, menstrual blood, even the skin on the top of milk can all invoke such responses. These responses are, for Kristeva, a reaction to aspects of the world which threaten our sense of boundaries, boundaries between ourselves and the world, or between ourselves and others. For example, Kristeva explains, as an infant, “nausea makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it ... ‘I’ expel it... but since food is not an ‘other’ for ‘me’ ... I expel myself ... within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself” (*Powers of Horror* 3). What she is drawing attention to here, with the category of the abject, is the existence of that which is in between myself and other, both me and not me, and consequently that which reminds us of the constructedness and instability of the boundary which is taken to constitute a single subject; to what “disturbs identity, what does not respect borders, positions, rules” (*Powers of Horror* 4). Introducing the term of abjection in her account of the formation of the subject, Kristeva offers a picture in which the establishing of self is necessarily depended on the other, and therefore, justifies a model of the necessity of a non-violent inter-subjectivity, which can provide us with a basis for ethical thought. In Judith Butler’s theoretical framework, however, the term “abjection” refers to individuals’ correction and self-correction under the social norms imposed on them.

talk, they are not inert objects either. As a result, these bodies occupy an in-between zone that disrupts the boundaries between the subject and object, destabilizing the border between the self and the world.

Magda lives in an abject body, and, as the narrator of the novel, she is deeply aware of the relationship between her abject existence and her “wrong body,” stating it clearly in the narrative that her life is wrong because she “was born at the wrong time, in the wrong place, in the wrong body” (Coetzee, 1982, p. 51). The “wrongness” with Magda’s body could be understood on several levels. First, living on a remote farm dominated by her patriarchal father, Magda’s female body has predetermined her subservient existence. Second, in the colonial situation where women’s productivity and fertility are urgently needed and valued to enhance the bio-power of the colonial state, her infertility makes her body an abject one. And third, as a woman who is deeply aware of the power of the bodily norms on whose scale her body is constantly weighed and who simultaneously attempts to challenge the norms, Magda is caught between the role of the traditional woman and the new one, attempting to correct her body with reference to the bodily norms on the one hand and resisting them on the other. All of these elements reveal Magda to be an ambivalent being, a woman who inhabits the position of a white colonist yet “is not one of the primary agents of colonization but who lives in the conditions created by such agents, and who endures the consequences this position entails” (Attwell, 1993, p. 56).

Set in an isolated farm and in the tradition of the farm novel where, as Coetzee states in his *White Writing*, women are “imprisoned in the farmhouse” and “confined to the breast function” (Coetzee, 1988, p. 72), the subversive power of *In the Heart of the Country* lies in that its heroine, Magda, shares little in common with the heroines in the traditional pastoral novels which are discursively implicated in the formation of Afrikanerdom. It is Magda’s body, instead of her will, that renders it hard for her to be the ideal Afrikaner woman who is either a heroic mother or a docile daughter, the characters who frequently appear in the traditional pastoral novel. Her physical characteristics are antithetical to the Afrikaner ideal. She is weak, scrawny, dried up, and sterile. Her breast is “flat sour” (1992, p. 42), and her womb is “a withered apple” (1992, p.50). Such a body does not fit in the spirit of the epoch of Afrikaner’s colonial expansion in which this novel is set. In an age in which a bigger population was urgently needed by the Afrikaners both to inhabit the vast land they have conquered from the indi-

genous people and to strengthen their force to combat the British, the reproductive function of women was strongly emphasized. Women were responsible for both continuing and strengthening the Afrikaner race and sustaining its purity: "it was because of her willingness to accompany her husband into the wilderness that the racial purity of Afrikanerdom had been preserved; it was to the woman that God had entrusted the task of bearing and raising Afrikaner children in the true civil faith" (Moodie, 1975, p. 17).

The first thing that impedes Magda to live up to the bodily norms of the colonial society is that she refuses to get married, the first step for a woman who lives in the period of colonial expansion to contribute to the project of colonialism. Different from other farm girls who take marriage as their salvation, Magda is disinclined to marry a farm boy. She refuses to adjust to the existing social, political and cultural codes, and she refuses "to be plain placid empty-headed heiress anxious not to be left on the shelf, ready to commit herself body and soul to the first willing fellow to pass by, a pedlar even, or an itinerant teacher of Latin, and breed him six daughters, and bear his blows and curses with Christian fortitude" (1992, p. 22). Obviously, the reason that Magda is not ready to "commit herself" to any fellow is that, in the marriage system in the colony, women have been debased to a body to be used, to "breed him [man] six daughters," and to be abused, to "bear his [man's] blows and curses" (22).

Magda is acutely aware of how the gendered politics of the body has constructed willingly subordinate women like her mother, but still, she has difficulties in transgressing the bodily norms. What is worse, she constantly assesses her own body in accordance with the value system of Afrikaner colonialist and patriarchal codes. As a result, she develops a deep self-hatred of her own body which she thinks hinders her to be a "true" woman, and consequently she experiences the pain of living in an abject body.

Magda's self-deprecation results from her psychological response for failing to meet the bodily norms established for the white females. The self-deprecation even destabilizes her sense of self as a white. She conceives of herself as "a miserable black virgin," a "black bored spinster, whose story is "a dull black blind stupid miserable story, ignorant of its meaning" (1992, p. 5). Jane Poyner reads Magda's conception of herself as a "black virgin" in terms of Fanon's theory of the "fact of blackness" (Poyner, 2006, p. 39) and explains, not unreasonably, that the mis-identification indicates Magda's or Coetzee's attempt to subvert the concept of "blackness" as a "biological cate-

gory” (Poyner 2006, p. 39) and to emphasize its constructedness. Poyner’s reading underplays the issue of gender. Identifying herself with a “black virgin” indicates more of Magda’s self-contempt of her sexually unattractive body than her challenge of the white-black boundary.

Magda’s feeling of abjection is intensified by her awareness of the power of bodily norms. Although Magda is not inclined to get committed to any man, she understands that the only way for her to gain self is, paradoxically, to lose “possession of herself” to a man who would give her a baby. Unwilling to follow the tradition, yet unable to live beyond the traditional principle, Magda is rendered a Hamlet-like figure, powerless to act. Susan Gallagher contends that Magda is a self-consciously rebellious woman, an “anti-Mary” in “defiant rebellion against her father and her destiny” (Gallagher, 1991, p. 94). Gallagher’s interpretation ignores the psychological contradictions battling inside Magda all through the narrative. The rebellious power of *In the Heart of the Country* does not lie in portraying a self-consciously resisting woman-figure, but in exploring the painful consciousness of an abject woman who vacillates between being assimilated by the existing bodily norms or following the heart of her true self. She keeps on thinking about how to turn herself into a physically attractive woman. She ponders upon “cosmetically tempering” her face to make her a pleasant, “true woman,” plucking her eyebrows, “doing something about her teeth” (1992, p.41), taking fruits and morning exercises to change the complexion of her face. In another moment, she is keenly aware that the physical “correction” and marriage cannot bring her what she desires: “I do not have it in me to believe that the mating of farmboy with farmgirl will save me. Whatever save may mean, at least for the time being. ... I believe myself reserved for a higher fate” (41). The “higher fate” Magda thinks she is reserved for is to challenge, especially through her writing, the gendered politics of the body that has appropriated the female body and degenerated women to an abject existence.

Magda’s abject experience finally results in acts of violence. When she discovers that her father sleeps with Klein-Anna, their black servant Hendric’s wife, a woman whose body is fertile and sensual, able to arouse and satisfy all of her father’s desires, she shoots through the bedroom window and fatally wounds her father. Magda’s patricide is not simply an instinct-driven act of an Oedipal daughter. It is more an attempt to challenge the master/slave or mind/body dualistic power structure that dominates the farm where Magda, Hendrik and Anna are appropriated as useful bodies. Magda is

aware that the language she speaks has already been “subverted” by her father who is also the symbolic Father and that talking in this language only distances her from Hendrik and Anna. Each word she says will transform into an order and solidify the master-slave relationship between them: “Anna is oppressed by my watching eyes... She is oppressed particularly by my talk” (1992, p.113). Understood in this context, Magda’s murder of her father is a gesture of moving beyond the prison house of reason and language embodied on the figure of her father and exploring the possibility of communication by means of bodily identification, a means called for by Frantz Fanon to “simply try to touch the other, feel the other,” and to “discover each other” (1963, p.78), instead of framing the other in the epistemic structure of the self. It seems that this method works, at last temporarily, and Magda and the servants form “harmonious oneness” after the death of the master. They labor together, and Magda feels intimate with them. She writes: “Our labor brings us together” (1992, p.82).

As the heroine of the novel, Magda’s bold action of patricide proves futile in her attempt to undermine the patriarchal order. However, as the narrator or the writer of her story, Magda has successfully resisted the destiny of being used as a reproductive body. Intellectually dwelling on the problem a woman with an “abject” body in the colonial and patriarchal situation faces and writing down her bodily consciousness in an unusual and fluid style, Magda has transcended the traditional female role of a passive body, proving that she is not just a body but a thinking body. The subversive power of Magda’s writing lies in that she manages to replace the codes of patriarchal discourse with her *écriture féminine*. Associating the rational and the logical discourse with the symbolic realm of the Law-of-the-Father (as defined by Lacan), French feminists, including Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, describe feminine discourse as subjective and instinctive, refusing the traditional values of clarity, logic, and linear continuity while questioning the supposed superiority of rational discourse over instinctive or discontinuous discourse. The distinctive characteristic “widely recognized” as forming the feminine discourse is that, according to Ann Jones, it is “a language of the mind and the body, conveying both ideas and the reality of the body itself” (1992, p. 88). Magda’s writing, both in its content and form, is permeated with the characteristics of *écriture féminine*. First, as far as the form is concerned, devices such as the repetitive structure, ambiguous expressions, and abrupt shifts are employed to disrupt the

patriarchal discourse that prioritizes order, rationality and linearity¹. Second, on the plane of its content, Magda's writing is focused on her bodily consciousness, trying to convey "both ideas and the reality of the body itself" (Jones, 1985, p. 88). Her diaries express her visceral feeling of living in a body that is marked as abject by the gendered politics of the body.

In addition, in her writing that "springs from the archaisms of the instinctual body" (Leland, 93), Magda aims to disrupt the bodily hierarchy based on the categories of race and gender through repeatedly making reference to bodily functions, especially excremental ones. The above passage in which "the song of birds" and "the smell of dung" are juxtaposed has already hinted this feature of Magda's narrative. In another place, Magda writes against the social demands for "proper and clean" bodies and uses disturbingly scatological language to describe her and her father's feces. In a civilized society, excrement and other bodily wastes have traditionally been abhorred and considered taboo for their filthiness. Juliet Kristeva, however, proposes a different interpretation for the abhorrence against filth: "it is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abhorrence but what disturbs identity, system, order," and that "filth is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a boundary and, more particularly, its other side, a margin" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 6). In terms of Kristeva, excrement and its equivalents, such as decay, infection, disease, and corpses, being that part both inside and outside the body, stand for the danger to identity and the threat to the boundaries. Kristeva, therefore, defines the bodily waste, especially excrement and menstrual blood, as the abject. What Kristeva tries to draw our attention to, with the category of the abject, is the existence of that which is in between self and other, both me and not me, and consequently that which reminds us of the constructedness and instability of the boundary which is taken to constitute a single subject. To put it literally, Kristeva thinks that the bodily waste disrupts and transgresses the bodily boundaries.

In light of Kristeva's theory, Magda's scatological description of her and her father's bodily waste is an attempt to disrupt the bodily hierarchy pres-

¹ As has already been pointed out in the previous discussion, *In the Heart of the Country* is composed of 256 pieces of diaries by Magda, whose awareness of abject existence has made her a very unstable and unreliable narrator. Her narrative, consequently, is not driven by linear order or logical argumentation but by her emotional response to the bodily norms according to which her subjecthood is barred. Or, in Magda's words, her weapon is lyricism: "Lyric is my medium, not chronicle" (1992, p.71). Understood in this context, Magda is writing for the possibility of a new woman, free from the bondage of patriarchal bodily norms, through evoking the emotional response of the reader rather than logical argumentation.

cribed by the racialized and gendered bodily norms. The disgusting bodily waste, in sharp contrast to the image of father riding on his horse in his waxed riding-boots, reminds the reader that the father is not only a body that is decently dressed up and elegantly eats, it is also a body that defecates. The hierarchically formed race and gender order is thus dissolved in the form of the interwoven male and female turds or the “embrace” of “father’s red snake and the daughter’s black [snake]” (1992, p.32).

The excremental image Magda presents also works counter-discursively against the discourse of colonialism that stereotypically associates the colonized with filth, reading them as a threat to health and a restraint on civilization. In his “Excremental Postcolonialism,” Joshua Esty argues that, in postcolonial writing, the description of shit can “redress a history of debase-ment by displaying the failures of development and the contradictions of colonial discourse and, moreover, by disrupting inherited associations of excrement with colonized and non-Western populations” (Esty, 1999, pp. 25-26). With the detailed description of her and her father’s disgusting excrement, Magda demystifies the colonialist’s myth of the “clean and proper” body of the white and unveils the cost of the maintenance of that body. After the colonizers excrete, its disposal is left to Hendrik who is responsible for “inspecting the bucket,” “emptying it,” “washing it out” and “returning it to its place” (1992, p.32). Obviously, the scatological language Magda uses in her narrative functions to bring to light the labor exploitation, the essence that maintains the economic mechanism of colonialism.

Focusing on the bodily consciousness of Magda, *In the Heart of the Country* explores the various political and cultural norms that have inscribed the bodies of women, especially of white women, in the colonial and patriarchal context. As a heroine in a postcolonial novel, Magda is not just a body that has been restricted and constructed by the politics of the body, but also a thinking and writing body that consciously questions and resists the gendered bodily norms under whose yardstick her subjecthood is barred. Taking her female bodily experience as the starting point, Magda writes a feminine text, with its emphasis on passion, fluidity and non-linearity, to disrupt the patriarchal discourse underpinned with logical reasoning, so as to achieve a new way of communication through which a reciprocal cross race/gender relationship may be established. Magda’s writing is also her effort of rewriting self and probing for a new possibility for her and other women living in the colonial and patriarchal situation where their bodies are appropriated by the colonial state and man as well.

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