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Subversive Bodies: J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* and Psychoanalytic Feminism

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Abstract

Using the theories of Kristeva, Lacan, and Freud, this article offers a psychoanalytic feminist explication of the language of the body in J. M. Coetzee's novel *In the Heart of the Country* (1977). A lonely spinster in a remote South African farm, the narrator constructs a subversive vision of the body to counter patriarchal social and linguistic constraints. In a colonialist setting duplicating patriarchal oppression, the undifferentiated "semiotic" is used to help the narrator construct a dissident counterpart to the "symbolic" master narrative of patriarchy. The transgressive "semiotic" disrupts the ordered "symbolic" in the hysterical reveries of the narrator, Magda, who weaves a discourse that writes back to patriarchal discourses on hysteria and colonialist ones subjecting women. The narrative dramatizes feminist concerns about identity and (in)equality, and the daring visceral, sexual, even obscene, language of some entries challenges the authority of master discourses. Lacking structure or logic, Magda's diaries embody semiotic signification as opposed to the cultural and social levels of meaning ascribed to patriarchy and even an extreme form of the semiotic, the "abject" as the excluded realm writing back to phallocentrism. The novel documents an oscillation between the symbolic and the semiotic dimensions of language to defy superimposed gender identities and oppressive binaries.

Keywords: Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country*, Psychoanalytic Feminism, Body, Farm Novel, South Africa, Kristeva, Semiotic, Symbolic, Genotext.

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1. Woman as the Negation of Man and the Colonized Other

Readers and critics of J. M. Coetzee's second novel *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) – hereafter abbreviated as *HC* – often find an unconventional text taking the form of a sequential diary or journal entries (specifically 266 numbered narrative sections) by a single speaker, a lonely spinster "in the middle of the veld in the middle of nowhere" (119). Essentially, *HC*, which resonates with echoes of fantasy and imagination from which to draw sublimity, is an epitome of a postmodern unstable narrative with a self-conscious nature and explicit inwardness. Such a narrative has the power to conflate "ethics" of sexism and racism, promoting an ethic of equality and mutual respect. The psychological disorientation of the narrator enhances the unreliability of the account as the entries contradict and revise each other. Magda – "a poetess of interiority" (35) – is imprisoned inside her "locked diary" (13). This monologist says that she deals in "signs merely" (27). Language constitutes her only reality and her sole defensive escape from social and cultural clutches and confinements. However, Magda's identity is trapped in language and (male-controlled) discourses dictated by her father in the absence of her mother who has died before the story begins. Hence, Briganti (1994) sees her as "a perfect example of the decentered subject of post-modern texts" (37). It would be legitimate, however, to explore how she attempts to counteract the center or simply challenge the margin she inhabits within her patriarchal culture.

Magda lives on a Boer farm in the South African Karoo, and she is aware that her existence must be endorsed by others, mainly her father, in order for her to carve a valued identity. Her stance on her plight is reminiscent of Hegel's Master/Slave dialectic as a struggle for recognition. Feelings of inferiority compel her to use a subversive form of language that counters the hierarchal language of her masters, giving voice to the marginal subaltern Magda. She complains that her words "are not words such as men use to men" (8). Alone in her room, she creaks: "into rhythms that are my own, stumble over the rocks of words that I have never heard on another tongue. I create myself in the words that create me, 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. While I am free to be I, nothing is impossible" (8). This need for different words, for an alternative dissenting discourse, constitutes the essence of this contraposition with the semiotic set against the symbolic patriarchal language. The result is a form of écriture feminine that Kristeva calls the "genotext." *HC* has as an underlying pattern of bodily drives and fluids, which corresponds to the "genotext" aspect of the signifying system and the semiotic abject à la Kristeva. Marginalized and excluded, Magda opts not for the language of her masters, but for an alternative means of self-expression and dissent, one that undoes the gender-based divide and eschews the polarization of the sexes.

Magda realizes that the major form of her oppression is a discursive one, which should justify her lapse into a disruptive language that counters the rigid man-woman binaries as well as other complex power structures. Magda is not only oppressed by the language of her father, but also by a related patriarchal literary tradition in which she is caught up. She, however, recounts a travesty of the farm novel genre (the

plaasroman of Olive Schreiner and Pauline Smith in the South African literary tradition);[i] life on the farm is one of boredom and desolation, incest and broken taboos. Heat, insects, and flies spoil farm life. She ends up not writing a pastoral or an idyll but an anti-pastoral narrative about "the lonely farmhouse and the stone desert" (12) and the boredom that makes her imprisoned within her empty monologue. In her story, the neat farm falls apart; the servants get to challenge the authority of their masters; fowls desert the farm, and the sheep get lost to jackals. Reflecting on this decline, Magda says, "The potatoes have gone to seed, the fruit has rotted on the ground. The dog has departed, following Hendrik. The pumps spin monotonously day and night, the dams flow over. The farm is going to ruin" (120). Magda's words, hence, reject the established conventions of the farm novel of Afrikaner mythology. The anti-pastoral form of the novel seems to foreground its subversive content about the oppressed female body within patriarchal traditions. Moreover, *HC* rejects the linear master narrative and adopts, instead, a diffuse and chaotic nonlinear writing style, (one employing repetitions, reproductions, contradictions, gaps, etc.) in line with its subversive structure and conflated nature.

An outraged, frustrated maiden, Magda conforms to the stereotypical hysteric female who feels ineffective because of her spinsterhood. She negatively views herself as "a miserable black virgin" (5), "a thin black beetle with dummy wings who lays no eggs and blinks in the sun" (18), a "brittle, hairy shell with the peas of dead words rattling in it" (37), and "a black widow in mourning for the uses [she] was never put to" (40-41). She thinks of herself as "a straw woman, a scarecrow, not too tightly stuffed, with a scowl painted on [her] face to scare the crows and in [her] centre a hollow, a space which the field mice could use if they were very clever" (41). Her dark imaginings, as manifested in such examples, are full of negative conceptualizations and self-denigration. To put it in Freudian parlance that defines women in terms of lack and difference from men, i.e. castration and penis envy,[ii] she says, "If I am an O, I am sometimes persuaded, it must be because I am a woman" (41). However, she re-envisions these preconceived notions in order to assert that she is more than that – "I am an uneasy consciousness but I am more than that too. When all the lights are out I smile in the dark. My teeth glint, though no one would believe it" (3-4). She refuses to be invisible and disenfranchised, not to become "one of the forgotten ones of history" (3). It is, therefore, legitimate to assess the disruptive potential of her conflated monologues in what follows hereinafter, looking at those textual aspects that seem to pose a threat to established conventions and structures.

Right in the first entry, and cancelling the possibility of her memory about watching the arrival of her father with his new wife, Magda asserts her status as a colonial subject subordinated by patriarchy: "I am the one who stays in her room reading or writing or fighting migraines. The colonies are full of girls like that, but none, I think, so extreme as I" (1). Indeed, in presenting herself as a colonized subject, desolate Magda foregrounds the framework of the dynamics of traditional, patriarchal, and colonial oppression. Put plainly, she is triply victimized and mistreated by gender-based polarizations, by her domineering father (and later by his new wife) and a black servant called Hendrik, and finally by the colonial forces that exacerbate the situation of already subjugated women and the land on which they subsist. She

poses questions, and she herself offers ample answers to them: "Who is behind my oppression? You and you, I say, crouching in the cinders, stabbing my finger at father and stepmother" (4). Although Magda articulates the social and sexual dynamics of oppression to which she is subjected, the cultural oppression she faces as a result of gendered/oppressive language and discourse (together with her counter discourse) needs further examination.

This wavering position of Magda at the intersection of social and historical oppression-patriarchy and colonialism-has been studied and ascertained by many critics. According to Dominic Head (2009), Magda "enacts the psychological confusions and divisions of the colonial mindset" and thus "occupies an ambivalent position, as both victim and perpetrator of colonialism" (43). As a white woman within a colonial structure, her complicity and subordination are manifest. Hence, Sheila Roberts (1992) calls her "a second-in-command colonizer" (22), being both a colonizer and a colonized. For David Attwell (1993), Magda is a "displaced subject" and "not one of the primary agents of colonization but who lives in the conditions created by such agents, and who endures the subjectivity this position entails" (56). For Jane Poyner (2009), Magda "inhabits the psychically and textually precarious position of being both oppressor, as white colonial, and oppressed, as female" (33). However, how does Magda envisage a way out of such entangled relations between oppression caused by patriarchy and oppression caused by colonialism (as both forms have historically tried to silence women and appropriate their language)? It is the purpose of this article to answer this complex-in-demands question by looking at ways of breaking the discursive violence of patriarchy and colonialism into two master narratives.

Magda's linguistic structuring of her existence comprises a discourse revolving about the body. She, therefore, uses language, i.e. the main tool of her oppression, against itself, against this very oppression. It is with this transgressive language that she resists patriarchal domination and cultural conceptions of submissive womanhood. This harsh patriarchal language justifies what Briganti calls the "obsessively frequent descriptions of herself as a scrawny, rickety scarecrow of a woman" (38). The abusive, insulting language Magda uses is more than an attempt to "construct a narrative of her own desire" (Briganti 38). In being unpredictable and unconventional, Magda is resisting silence and established forms of injustice or negative stereotypes. In fact, she twists, rethinks, and exploits the established literary and psychoanalytic patriarchal discourses and power structures that she relies on, inviting those patriarchal (Freudian, Lacanian, and Hegelian) discourses only to subvert them. Counteracting the master-narrative, she is asserting her "yes" to the patriarchal "eternal no" of her father and her "no" to the sexually demanding "yes" of the farm-hand Hendrik. The discourse and rhetoric Magda has received as part of her sexist and colonial education is that of the masters, not the language of the heart, passion, reciprocity, or communication. Rather, it is a discourse inherited from and corrupted by colonial legacies fostering discrimination and lack of equality. Hence, she seeks an alternative means of self-expression, mainly a semiotic-driven discourse rather than a symbolic one, as will be demonstrated in the following discussion.

A product of "a cruel culture that considers daughters inferior [to sons], Magda gets no recognition from her father" (Kumar 2016: 23). The drama of sexual rivalry and violence in the novel revolves around the insatiable sexual appetite of Magda's father (bringing in a new wife after the death of Magda's mother and then sleeping with Hendrik's wife) and the subsequent vengeful sexual humiliation (rape) of Magda at the hands of Hendrik during the absence or after the death of her father and Magda's own murderous fantasies of patricide. In reality or in her mind, Magda's body becomes the new colonizable space for the black native whose land and woman had been exploited in colonial history. Expressing her feeling of marginalization and inferiorization, the psychotic Magda complains: "My father pays no attention to my absence. To my father I have been an absence all my life. Therefore, instead of being the womanly warmth at the heart of this house I have been a zero, null, a vacuum towards which all collapses inward, a turbulence, muffled, grey, like a chill draft eddying through the corridors, neglected, vengeful" (2). Manifesting a negative form of Oedipal complex, she makes her father a major problem in her psychic and social development and the source of her hysteria. Her father, for instance, never forgave her mother for not bearing him a son. A patriarchal culture, we know, places much emphasis on having a son that carries the father's name. Lamenting her lost mother, Magda accuses her father of murdering her mother: "His relentless sexual demands led to her death in childbirth. She was too frail and gentle to give birth to the rough rude boy-heir my father wanted, therefore she died" (2). On the one hand, Magda characterizes her father as a patriarch and sexual master/monster over women on his farm. On the other land, she mourns the loss of the maternal impulses in her life, which made the phallocentric order of patriarchy more dominant.

Her father, the Afrikaner patriarch, and the black servants are essential for our understanding of this context on the grid of power relations of master-slave dialectics. Magda is the victim of this struggle for power between the white settlers and natives and masters and slaves. She is the abused and seduced daughter of the colonies: "Wooed when we were little by our masterful fathers, we are bitter vestals, spoiled for life. The childhood rape: someone should study the kernel of truth in this fancy" (3). Freud (1989) has highlighted the sexual factor in the aetiology hysteria. A sexual experience in the past, e.g. sexual abuse or seduction during the childhood years, constitutes, for Freud, the hysterical state, without physical symptoms. He asserts that "the aetiology of hysteria lies in sexual life" (101). For Freud, hysteria is but a common neurosis causing trauma and affecting "a pathogenic action later, when they [the sexual experiences] have been aroused after puberty in the form of unconscious memories" (106). Evoking Freudian logic about women being distorted versions of men, Magda claims, "I am incomplete, I am a being with a hole inside me, I signify something, I do not know what, I am dumb, I stare out through a sheet of glass into a darkness that is complete, that lives in itself, bats, bushes, predators and all, that does not regard me, that is blind, that does not signify but merely is" (9). She refers to herself as a "hysteric" and invites Freudian interpretations of her case: "I blush for my own thin smell, the smell of an unused woman, sharp with hysteria, like onions, like urine" (86). Confirming the etymology of hysteria as the wondering womb

and Freud's studies on hysteria, she asks: "But who would give me a baby, who would not turn to ice at the spectacle of my bony frame on the wedding couch, the coat of fur up to my navel, the acrid cavities of my armpits, the line of black moustache, the eyes, watchful, defensive, of a woman who has never lost possession of herself? ... Who would wake my slumbering eggs?" (10). Magda hints at a possible link between her spinsterhood and her ugliness, which makes her physically unattractive for potential suitors. If she is subtly and consciously constructing her identity as a "hysteric," it is merely to dismantle this patriarchal logic and give her the freedom to ramble against patriarchal structures and fixities.

While contemplating murdering her father and his new bride with an axe, Magda continues to construct herself as a hysteric. She establishes the patriarchal context of hysteria only to deconstruct it as we will argue in the next section. She refers to her father's maleness and by extension to male authority as the cause of her hysteria, as "the tired blind fish, the cause of all my woe, lolling in his groin (would that it had been dragged out long ago with all its roots and bulbs!)" (11). For Lacan (1999), the phallus as the supreme signifier-of desire, authority, rationality, presence, and power-is not the male organ. However, it is related as men can "pretend" to possess it by virtue of their anatomy. In "The Signification of the Phallus," Lacan argues, "It should not be forgotten that, of course, that the organ that is endowed with this signifying function takes on the value of a fetish thereby" (583). The phallus still carries the connotations of the male member together with meanings of power and authority. It is simultaneously the penis and the recognition of lack or absence of it. Since the symbolic realm for Lacan is phallic, one based on recognition of lack and desire for fulfillment, Magda is not subject to this symbolic order. Magda's narrative carves out a copious horizontal space of subversion and counterdiscursivity for resistance and challenges patriarchal discourses on sexual difference, Lacanian and Freudian in this case. The female body becomes an arena for all kinds of sexual violations, a typical medium for oppression as well as Magda's vision of emancipation from real and imagined restrictions and demarcations.

As she is absorbed in her diaries, Magda, it can be argued, issues empty complaints or threats that do not move beyond words. However, it is the transgressive and eruptive potential within her words that we seek to investigate here. For example, Magda ponders,

> Though I may look like a machine with opposed thumbs that does housework, I am in truth a sphere quivering with violent energies, ready to burst upon whatever fractures me. And while there is one impulse in me that tells me to roll out and erupt harmlessly in the great outdoors, I fear that there is another impulse-telling me to hide in a corner like a black widow spider and engulf whoever passes in my venom. 'Take that for the youth I never had!' I hiss, and spit, if spiders can spit (39).

The next segment explores those "violent energies" and hidden impulses in her diaries and shows her attempts to contest and transcend any reductive paradigms, dominant narratives, hegemonic apparatuses, and traditional superstructures (which accede to traditional gender roles of women rarely involving women in decision-making

processes) vis-à-vis this symbolic realm of meaning and structure via the semiotic and abject as theorized by the French feminist critic Julia Kristeva.

2. Subversive Language: The Semiotic, the Abject, and the Symbolic

At one point early in the novel, Magda evokes the indecent content of her diaries that we will relate to the semiotic aspect of language. She asks,

> Is there something in me that loves the gloomy, the hideous, the doom-ridden, that sniffs out its nest and snuggles down in a dark corner among rats' droppings and chicken-bones rather than resign itself to decency? And if there is, where does it come from? From the monotony of my surroundings? From all these years in the heart of nature, seven leagues from the nearest neighbour, playing with sticks and stones and insects? (23).

She questions and yet suggests the subversive nature of her entries which function as counter-discursive postures thwarting dualistic thinking, transcending the foundations of patriarchy, and denying the overriding stereotypes about the docility and submissiveness of women. In a French feminist spirit, Magda becomes her body and the language she uses to describe this "hideous" body, nothing more. Roberts (1992) asserts that Magda's descriptions of her ugliness are "unimaginably comic" and that she offers a "sustained verbal comedy and thought-provoking philosophizing" (30). However, Magda's ruminations are not necessarily "comic." The logic of her writing finds parallels in the unconscious of pre-Oedipal drives and instincts. It is in line with the id and nature as opposed to the superego and culture. Kristeva reacts to the phallocentric logic of psychoanalysis and the exclusion of women from representation and participation. She argues that the semiotic and the symbolic are two components or modalities of the signifying system in a dialectical process, two dispositions manifesting relevant dichotomies like unconscious-conscious, nature-culture, and id-superego. We can view the interaction between the semiotic and the socio-linguistic symbolic to be analogous to Lacan's conception of the distinction between the imaginary and the symbolic. Magda dwells on the semiotic aspect of language in her diaries and even on the extreme form of this language, the abject, by way of uncovering a feminine identity and voice negating or counteracting patriarchal logic that draws more on the symbolic level of signification.

In her book *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984) – an academic treatise originally published in French in 1974 – Kisteva draws a crucial distinction between the oscillating semiotic and symbolic aspects of language: "These two modalities are inseparable within the *signifying process* that constitutes language, and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse (narrative, metalanguage, theory, poetry, etc.) involved" (24). The semiotic is ordered by the maternal body around which drives are structured (27-28). It is the pre-Oedipal bodily processes and drives that are located in what she calls "the chora," the realm of plenitude and oneness with the mother's body. So, this semiotic space can be enigmatic, contradictory, mysterious, unstable, and plural. It better suits the feminine realm because it is not repressed. Kristeva disrupts power relations and refutes the trajectory of inequities,

structural rigidities, gender, caste, and race constituencies. The semiotic, as a pre-Oedipal provisional and chaotic flow of bodily force and drive energy, makes identity precarious and contingent. The symbolic, by contrast, corresponds to grammar and syntax, i.e. meaning or language structure. Kristeva stresses that "Because the subject is always *both* semiotic and symbolic, no signifying system he [or she] produces can be either 'exclusively' semiotic or 'exclusively' symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by indebtedness to both" (24). The semiotic disrupts the symbolic, functioning through the gaps, repetitions, digressions, and absurdities in Magda's narrative. It becomes more appropriate for positions of marginality and oppression in juxtaposition to dominant language, discourse, and ideology. It dominates Magda's subject position at the expense of the (patriarchal) symbolic.

The same intersection Kristeva articulates between the semiotic and the symbolic in her book also applies to "genotexts" and "phenotexts." Texts having the underlying structure of drives are "genotexts." Those issuing from social, linguistic, and cultural rules and are meant for communication and obey rules are "phenotexts" (86-87). The signifying process, Kristeva concludes, "includes both the genotext and the phenotext" (87-88). Kristeva states,

> What we shall call a *genotext* will include semiotic processes but also the advent of the symbolic. The former includes drives, their disposition, and their division of the body, plus the ecological and social system surrounding the body, such as objects and pre-Oedipal relations with parents. The latter encompasses the emergence of object and subject, and the constitution of nuclei of meaning involving categories: semantic and categorical fields (86).

In this regard, Magda's narrative is also a "genotext" functioning on the borderline of the symbolic. It is an instance of the semiotic, feminine "genotext" negotiating the symbolic, masculine "phenotext" of social rules and linguistic codes.

The psychoanalytic feminism of Kristeva can be seen as a revision and elaboration of Lacanian psychoanalysis. For Lacan, his major work being *Écrits* (1966), the three registers of psychic subjectivity include the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real.[iii] It is the Symbolic that refers to laws, rules, social practices, structures, and meaningful traditions of cultures and societies, all intertwined with language and socialization. At this level of the Symbolic, paternal authority acts as a disciplinary force through associations of symbolic castration and desire to possess the Phallus as the supreme signifier of desire which both men and women lack and aspire to identify with. Lacan makes the symbolic order of language essential for human subjectivity as reality makes sense and has meaning through words (language) on the page. However, Lacan's theory is phallocentric because the phallus is associated with masculinity, with pretending to have the phallus. The paternal metaphor is essential for his theory of subjectivity and sexual difference. The law of the father is his way of expressing the relationship between law and language through a paternal prohibition of incest and taboos. Lacan's and Krsiteva's relevance to this argument is evident. For instance, Magda retains that "Words alienate. Language is no medium for desire. Desire is rupture, not exchange" (26) and that she gets to know about life from the dictionary. However, she objects to the old, "correct" language of her father,

renouncing subsumption or co-optation to the center of power. Magda, in the Lacanian tradition, defines desire in terms of lack. The signifier of the other's desire for Lacan is the Phallus, which she does not possess – being a woman and a spinster – and cannot even "seem to" have as men would. In Lacanian logic, a man is castrated by not being the wholeness the phallus grants. By contrast, a woman is castrated by not being male. Like Freud, Lacan seems to subordinate female sexuality by privileging the male in relation to the phallus.

When Magda looks in the mirror, in a subversion of Lacan's mirror stage that marks the transition from the imaginary to the symbolic, she does not see wholeness or feel satisfied. Looking at a mirror in her room, she says, "It gives me no pleasure to pore over reflections of my body" (21). For Lacan (1999), the subject is caught up "in the lure of spatial identification" in this stage ("Mirror Stage," 78), transforming fantasies about a fragmented body into an "'orthopedic' form of its totality" ("Mirror Stage," 78). Instead, Magda smiles at her image facing her and even talks to it (21). She is not deceived by her image à la Lacan. Rather, she sees an ugly face:

> It is at times like these that I notice . . . how thickly the hair grows between my eyes, and wonder whether my glower, my rodent glower, to mince no words, I have no cause to love this face, might not be cosmetically tempered if I plucked out some of that hair with tweezers, or even all of it in a bunch, like carrots, with a pair of pliers, thereby pushing my eyes apart and creating an illusion of grace and even temper (21-22).

Rather than wholeness and satisfaction, her reflected image offers a sense of fragmentation and inadequacy. If she is trapped in Kristeva's semiotic, she is equally stuck in Lacan's pre/counter-symbolic imaginary. In both cases, we are dealing with a stunted psychosexual development, and thus an inadequate socialization vis-à-vis language. Magda makes us question the rational, ordering the potential of language and the coherent subjectivity of the speaker/writer.

In addition to challenging the novel's form/genre, as noted earlier, Magda's text dwells on the bodily in language, on the semiotic that underlies representation and disrupts unitary meaning, to give her a language of her own, not the symbolic language of patriarchy. She laments not being able to access "the doubleness of signification" (4), i.e. meaning and representation attached to signs or the relationship between signifiers and signifieds, and she reaffirms the lost or repressed maternal connection to the symbolic order, i.e. culture and civilization. She mourns the split from the maternal body that may have caused her bleak existence. "Do I truly believe that stuffed in a crack between my soft mother and my baby self lies the key to this black bored spinster?" (5). The fluid, imaginative language she uses counters the regulations and prohibitions of the symbolic. Her language is one of rhythm and images, not structure and syntax. Confirming this, Magda says, "I live neither alone nor in society but as it were among children. I am spoken to not in words, which come to me quaint and veiled, but in signs, in conformations 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" (7). This pre-verbal, pre-Oedipal nuanced language she alludes to is the semiotic language of the body negotiating the margins of

the symbolic. It is the pre-linguistic, raw femininity unrefined by hegemonic culture and its oppressive language. In this light, the borderline existence of Magda (living not alone and not in society but among children) acquires additional meaning.

Compelled to use writing, i.e. the Law of the Father as the paternal metaphor of signification, against her silence and marginalization, Magda uses a subversive form of this writing to vent her frustration and anguish. And since this form of feminine writing gives primacy to the body by way of defying phallocentric logic, it negotiates the symbolic through the semiotic. Magda forges her identity in a semiotic discourse that defies patriarchal and colonial discourses of domination. She complains: "The language that should pass between myself and these people was subverted by my father and cannot be recovered. What passes between us now is a parody. I was born into a language of hierarchy, of distance and perspective. It was my father-tongue. I do not say it is the language my heart wants to speak, I feel too much the pathos of its distances, but it is all we have" (97). The hierarchical language of patriarchy revolves around splits and divisions between subject and object, child and mother, man and woman, nature and culture, and master and slave. Unlike Magda's suppressed voice, the language of her masters is the language of the rigid mind as opposed to the impulsive heart. This language that her father passed on to her and which she acquired through the colonial South African farm context has already distorted any possible communication or reciprocity between her and the servants. According to Lacan, the symbolic order of language consists of relations of exclusion and sexual difference, which allows for socialization through the regulation of desire. Magda's references to "hierarchy", "perspective", and "distance" in patriarchal language can be understood in this light.

In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982; originally published in French in 1980), Kristeva describes the semiotic in terms of the abject and revolting. She defines the abject as the excluded, what is outside the realm of meaning. She views the abject as a reaction to repression and a reminder of a former unity between the ego and the world: "The abject is the violence of mourning for an 'object' that has always already been lost. The abject shatters the wall of repression and its judgments. It takes the ego back on its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away-it assigns it a source on the non-ego, drive, and death" (15). It is essential that we understand the revolting abject in terms of the repressed maternal principle as opposed to the paternal symbolic. Patriarchal societies attempt to repress the maternal impulse as a threat to the formation of subjectivity. Simply put, the abject is what is banished in the course of identity-formation, including the mother's body and bodily fluids. It reveals the weakness or inherent fragility of identity and all forms of subject-object dyads.

While for Lacan the symbolic Law of the Father censors and represses what might disrupt the rational order of language, the semiotic abject for Kristeva threatens the established social order. The symbolic law represses drives and what threatens the ego. The semiotic, by contrast, asserts those drives and rhythms and brings the body back to signification against exclusion. The result is a subject in the making rather than a fixed, coherent identity. Kristeva contends that the abject abides by no rules:

"The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them" (15). The abject is what threatens the subject, what disturbs identity and rules. It is what the subject needs to discard in order to have an independent identity. Abjection, being an instance of the semiotic impulse in language, is what threatens the subject, what puts it in danger and breaks rules and laws. Hence, abjection for Kristeva is "a *precondition of narcissism*" (13), for a self-sufficiency against the authority of the masters. "These body fluids, this defilement, this shit," ponders Kristeva, "are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border" (3). Such abject wastes assume the space where the body is not, occupying the border area between the body and the world. Vomit, waste, semen, dung, blood, and urine are the other side of life that must be abjected so that the "I" is born and thrives. Kristeva argues, "And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master" (2). Being "radically excluded", the abject, Kristeva theorizes, draws us "toward the place where meaning collapses" (2), which is why it is dangerous for the self and others. Significantly, Magda describes herself early in the narrative in terms of this abject as "a vacuum towards which all collapses inward" (2). If her diaries deconstruct patriarchal language, it is by way of creating new meanings and correspondences beyond confines.

In Coetzee's text *HC*, Magda abjects herself; she goes through a painful delivery through language so that she upsets the forces of her oppression. The language of abjection challenges patriarchal system/order and signals a difficult birth from that order and a desire for wholeness. Echoing Lacan's conception of the phallus, Kristeva asserts that "all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded" (5). One pivotal scene in the novel in which Magda vents the abject is when she says,

> In the cloister of my room I am the mad hag I am destined to be. My clothes cake with dribble, I hunch and twist, my feet blossom with horny callouses, this prim voice, spinning out sentences without occasion, gaping with boredom because nothing ever happens on the farm; cracks and oozes the peevish loony sentiments that belong to the dead of night when the censor snores, to the crazy hornpipe I dance with myself (8).

In this language, Magda vents the semiotic content of her diaries through references to repulsive dribble and callouses existing at the borders to the body. She dwells on the obscene, the ugly, and the grotesque by way of expressing her frustration at male domination and at her being neglected. This uncensored language, which seems to be provoked as a result of hysteria, is an insult to the reticence of the hegemonic "yes" or "no" and the patriarchal language of commands.

In another expression of the semiotic abject, Magda utilizes the image of intertwined feces in defiance of her marginalization by her father, thus achieving a perverted form of intimacy with her oppressor. A lengthy quote can illustrate this blurring of boundaries Magda captures in her semiotic discourse:

> Every sixth day, when our cycles coincide, his cycle of two days, my cycle of three, we are driven to the intimacy of relieving our bowels in the bucket-latrine behind the fig trees in the malodour of the other's fresh faces, either he in my stench or I in his. Sliding aside the wooden lid I straddle his hellish gust, bloody, feral, the kind that flies love best, flecked, I am sure, with undigested flesh barely mulled over before pushed through. Whereas my own (and here I think of him with his trousers about his knees, screwing his nose as high as he can while the blowflies buzz furiously in the black space below him) is dark, olive with bile, hard-packed, kept in too long, old tired.…Where exactly the bucket is emptied I do not know; but somewhere on the farm there is a pit where, looped in each other's coils, the father's red snake and the daughter's black embrace and sleep and dissolve (32).

Fecal matter is an obvious example of the abject in Magda's language that threatens the ordered language of patriarchy, the symbolic realm of signification. Bodily wastes exist at the border of civilization and culture. They are banished for the sake of order, cleanliness, and sanity. Such descriptions allow her to overcome Oedipal and castration complexes and reach a state of Lacanian jouissance, of freedom from the hegemonic symbolic order of the phallus. In this uncensored language, Magda attains Kristeva's semiotic chora, that pre-Oedipal disintegration of boundaries and dissolution of prohibitions and signifying systems.

After an accident her father has, she and Hendrik try to handle the body. In this scene, we have more fecal imagery suggesting the abject at work. Magda says,

> We pick up the body and carry it to the bathroom, Hendrik taking the shoulders, I the legs. We strip off the nightshirt and unwind the bandages. We seat the body in the bath and pour bucket after bucket of water over it. The water discolours and strings of excrement begin to float to the surface. The arms hang over the sides of the bath, the mouth gapes, the eyes stare. After half an hour's soaking we clean the clotted hindparts. We bind the jaw and sew the eyes to (82).

In this case, the abject indicates the weakness of her father and lack of distance among the father/master, the oppressed daughter, and the slave worker. The abject also signifies lack of rigid identity borders. Identity is fluid, leaky rather than dichotomous. Caught up in a masculine world of representation, Magda uses a distorted form of this representational medium, one favoring inclusion rather than the exclusion of patriarchal discourses.

Magda kills, or she thinks she kills, her father and his new bride with an axe in a grotesquely bloody scene. Like vomit, semen, and faeces, blood is another instance of abjection and the borders of the ego. Her father lies head and arms over the edge of the bed "black with his heavy blood" (14). "How fortunate at times like these," Magda contemplates, "that there is only one problem, a problem of cleanliness. Until this bloody afterbirth is gone there can be no new life for me. The bedclothes are soaked and will have to be burned, though not today. There is a quag of blood on the floor and there will be more blood when I shift the bodies. What of the bodies? They can be burned or buried or submerged" (15). She even has thoughts about cutting the bodies.

In the same entry, she says "Am I strong enough to move them unaided in a wheelbarrow, or must I hack away until I have portable sections? Am I equal to carrying even a single monolithic trunk? Is there a way of portioning a trunk without obscenity? I should have paid more attention to the art of butchery" (15). This language breaks taboos because it entails patricide and then an obscene way of getting rid of the corpse. If it is simply a fantasy, then it is a violent one at the psychic level, breaking psychological barriers against male oppression.

One last significant instance of abjection Kristeva highlights and we find in Magda's diaries is "semen" as a bodily fluid challenging the borders of the ego and forcing a rethinking of the relationship between what is and is not us. Magda gets raped (or she has fantasies about being raped) by the black servant Hendrik. This rape seems to happen many times (in reality or simply in her mind). Those diary entries in which she describes this rape have multiple references to the semiotic abject: blood, bodily odours, spit, and semen. At one point, Magda refers to Hendrik's angry, violent semen seeping out of her body. After he finishes and goes away, Magda says, "Now I know for sure he was inside me, now that he is out and all the ache and clamminess sets in. I press my fingers into my groin while beside me he fastens his trousers. It is beginning to seep out of me, this acrid flow that must be his seed, down my thighs, on my clothes, on to the floor" (106). Such language allows Magda to better discover her identity even if she is a victim of rape in many entries. Those bodily fluids existing on the threshold of a radical identity revolution cause revulsion and thus reclaim the ego back on itself. Like blood, vomit, mucus, and other bodily fluids, semen indicates the troubled relation between the self and other, the clean and unclean, and what is "me" as opposed to what is "not me." This merging of bodily fluids between Magda and Hendrik signals a threat to the established social order of patriarchy and colonialism as well as the taboos of miscegenation. To clarify, she, a white girl, shares a lot in common with a black man due to forces of imperialism, reduction, and subsumption – they have common denominators, concerns, and adversaries transcending any racial or gender-based boundaries.

3. Conclusion

William Collins (2014) comments on the nature of this elusive text saying, "At the end of *Heart*, readers may have powerfully real impressions of certain events having transpired, yet no reading of the novel can determine which events are or were 'real' without giving priority to one of two or more conflicting episodes" (48). Coetzee wrote an experimental postmodern text that writes back in form and content to established orders and hierarchies. Weaving the canvas of his conventions and stance on injustice, Coetzee dramatizes Magda's attempts to be brought back to language by discharging bodily drives in her language. Magda uses the semiotic aspect of language to discharge the body and its drives in the symbolic language of patriarchy from which she has been excluded and which was used to silence her. Functioning at the intersection of psychoanalysis and feminism, *HC* is a rich text signifying the eruption of the abject semiotic into the ordered symbolic of language and representation. It signals the structure of identity as fluid or leaky. The borderlines of identity are as

significant as the center. The margin not only challenges the center, but it is also essential for self-constitution and self-understanding. If patriarchal and colonial discourse has been a key tool in oppressing her, Magda finds an alternative in this very language, the most effective tool to contest the dynamics of hegemony and oppression. She allows the semiotic aspect of this language to negotiate/redefine the symbolic. The result is a "genotext" that inscribes the banished female body and experience with language and challenges masculine modes of representation.

Coetzee has successfully contributed a unique text to the project of discursive historical revisionism by allowing a female character to object to and dismantle systems of oppression-colonial and patriarchal-through a subversive language that takes the body and its drives as a starting point. This real and fictionalized context of relations situates female objectification and silence within the larger history of the world. Coetzee's text incites us to rethink and modify prevailing gender-based classifications, established belief systems, and concepts (often patriarchal in orientation) that are obfuscated to further subdue oppressed women. Since phallocenctric logic pervades language and culture, *HC* presents us with a diffuse subversion of male biases and secure notions of selfhood. Critics have often highlighted the postcolonial and historical/political dimensions of Coetzee's oeuvre with relation to South Africa. However, his oeuvre-as evidenced by this novel-invites gender-oriented interpretations, feminist commentaries, and poststructuralist readings. Coetzee has given us insights into the necessary implication of language in contested power relations and has provided us with a possible vision of language transcending/transgressing gender norms.

Notes

(i) See J. M. Coetzee's article (1986) on "Farm Novel and 'Plaasroman' in South Africa." In this article, Coetzee argues that the African farm in Schreiner's works functions as a "microcosm of colonial South Africa: a tiny society in the middle of the vastness of nature, living a closed-minded and self-satisfied existence" (p. 2).

(ii) In his famous article on "Female Sexuality" (2000), Freud argues the sexual development of children, stating that a male child finds an evidence of castration in "the sight of female genitals" (p. 24), which ultimately resolves Oedipus complex positively with the internalization of paternal authority and the formation of the super-ego. Freud equally talks about "a certain amount of disparagement" in the attitudes of men towards women "whom they regard as being castrated" (p. 24). On the other hand, Freud speaks of the little girl's discovery of "her organic inferiority" (p. 25) for lacking a penis. This tradition of thinking renders women as inadequate, unsatisfactory versions of men.

(iii) For a cogent and simplified account of Lacan's theories, see Sean Homer's (2005) guide entitled *Jacques Lacan* published as part of *Routledge Critical Thinkers* series.

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