

The Intersection of Postcolonial Ecofeminism and Gendered Trauma in J.M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*

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ABSTRACT

*This study explores the interrelation between trauma and postcolonial ecofeminism in J.M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*, examining how intersecting forces of colonialism, patriarchy, and ecological domination contribute to the psychological fragmentation of the protagonist, Magda. Through close textual analysis, the study reveals that Magda's traumatic experiences—including maternal loss, sexual violence, and social isolation—are intimately reflected in the desolation of the South African landscape, positioning her body as both a site and symbol of colonial violence. This study engages with trauma theory, postcolonial criticism, and ecofeminist thought to examine Magda's fragmented subjectivity in the novel. Her fragmented consciousness, her confinement within the farm, and futile longing for affection reveal the deep psychological scars left by colonial isolation and patriarchal domination. These fractures in her identity point to a broader, historically embedded trauma that connects human suffering with ecological and gendered oppression. This study offers a multidisciplinary lens for understanding the psychic costs of domination in postcolonial literature.*

Keywords: Trauma; Postcolonial Ecofeminism; Colonialism; Patriarchy; J.M. Coetzee

INTRODUCTION

In today's world marked by ecological degradation and gendered injustice, literature serves as a powerful medium through which the wounds of domination are inscribed and interrogated (Gaard, 2011). Within the field of postcolonial ecofeminism, writers frequently explore how women and nature alike suffer under intertwined systems of patriarchy and colonial power. J.M. Coetzee, as one of South Africa's most critical voices, engages profoundly with these issues. His novel *In the Heart of the Country* (Coetzee, 1982) depicts the historical realities of colonialism through a fictional lens, vividly portraying the fragmentation of Afrikaans women's identities. Set against the harsh, isolated landscape of colonial South Africa, the story follows Magda, a white woman confined to her father's remote farm. In the novel, the story unfolds through 266 diary entries or inner monologues of the protagonist, Magda, presented without explicit date markings but characterised by subjective fantasies and emotionally charged narratives. Magda's fantasies centre on three key scenarios. In the first, her father marries an African bride, provoking intense jealousy in Magda. Consumed by this emotion, she imagines wielding a short-handled axe—likened to the

“weapon of the Valkyrie” (Coetzee, 1982, p. 11)—to murder both her father and his bride. The second scenario revolves around her father's illicit relationship with Anna, the wife of the servant Hendrik. Enraged by this betrayal, Magda envisions herself shooting her father in the abdomen and leaving him to die slowly in pain. The third scenario depicts Magda succumbing to her suppressed desires and fantasising about a sexual relationship with Hendrik, the male servant, in an act that challenges the self-imposed superiority of white colonisers. However, this relationship fails to bring her any emotional fulfilment. Hendrik remains indifferent and devoid of tenderness, ultimately fleeing the farm with his wife, Anna, to avoid potential complicity in her father's death. This abandonment leaves Magda isolated and confined to a desolate and uninhabited landscape.

J.M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*, with its experimental narrative and rich symbolism, explores the complex entanglement of female marginalisation, ecological destruction, and gender trauma under colonial rule. From a postcolonial ecofeminist perspective, the novel reveals how women, subjected to dual oppression by colonial and patriarchal systems, are further alienated, a condition that resonates with the degradation of the natural environment. The farm symbolises not only the colonial exploitation of natural resources but also the patriarchal subjugation of women. Magda's fragmented diary records her struggle to reconstruct her subjectivity while reflecting the non-linear, fractured nature of traumatic memory. Through these symbolic elements, Coetzee critiques colonial and patriarchal systems, exploring how trauma infiltrates individual psyches. This literary portrayal reflects broader historical and social dynamics, and to better contextualise it, the experiences of colonial women and the structural realities of colonial society must be considered.

During the colonial period, male colonists seized land and worked primarily in agriculture to secure dominance and “[...] create and control markets abroad for Western goods, as well as securing the natural resources and labour-power of different lands and peoples at the lowest possible cost” (McLeod, 2013, p. 7). Female colonists, however, managed domestic and social aspects of colonial life, often in isolation from their spouses, leading to diverse experiences documented in their self-narratives. While white female colonists were racially aligned with hegemonic power, their stories predominantly reflect isolation, loneliness, and depression. These women endured psychological conflicts in their relationships with both white male colonists and colonised native men. However, the literary and critical focus often prioritises the doubly marginalised native women over their white counterparts.

This paper shifts attention to the white female colonist, examining how J.M. Coetzee intertwines postcolonial ecofeminism and trauma to critique colonial patriarchy, environmental exploitation, and the psychosocial consequences of systemic oppression. By bringing together trauma studies and postcolonial ecofeminism, it argues that Coetzee's representation of Magda's fragmented consciousness and her alienation from both land and community reveals the psychosocial trauma engendered by systemic oppression, thereby reconfiguring the relationship between gender, ecology, and power in colonial discourse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since its publication, *In the Heart of the Country* has attracted a range of critical interpretations, though it has not received as much scholarly attention as some of J.M. Coetzee's other major works. Nonetheless, the novel's complex engagement with colonialism, patriarchy, and narrative form has prompted sustained critical inquiry. A central thread in existing scholarship concerns Magda's dual

positioning as both a participant in and a victim of colonial and patriarchal systems. Dodd (1987) contends that Magda is a victim of double colonisation, emphasising her simultaneous subjugation under patriarchal authority and “the cultural hegemony of the First World” (p. 149). Similarly, Fisher (1988) observes that Magda is “a part of the patriarchy, but she is also repressed by it” (p. 9), suggesting that Coetzee uses her character to illuminate “the terrible effects that colonialism has on human nature” (p. 12). This early debate establishes the critical recognition of Magda as a figure embodying structural contradictions, yet I argue that it leaves open questions regarding her psychological and ecological positioning.

Building on these foundations, Danta et al. (2011) interpret Magda’s narrative as a dissenting critique of colonial and apartheid-era authority, while Rody (1994) emphasises her psychosexual dislocation under intersecting racial and gender hierarchies. Despite these studies agreeing on her transgressive potential, these readings rarely engage systematically with the novel’s environmental or ecological dimensions, leaving the relationship between human oppression and landscape largely unexplored.

Scholars focusing on Coetzee’s narrative techniques provide further insight into how form mediates content. Shi (2024) analyses the feminine narrative voice and its role in expressing Magda’s subjectivity, while Kriz (2020) emphasises the structural indeterminacy of the diary entries as mirroring her liminal consciousness. Nader and El Bakal (2024) extend this formalist reading, interpreting the novel’s disorienting structure as reflecting broader postmodern anxieties about identity and meaning. While these studies illuminate narrative strategies, they largely treat form and content separately from ecological and trauma dimensions. I suggest that integrating these aspects provides a more comprehensive understanding of Magda’s complex interiority.

Trauma-focused and ecofeminist readings address part of this gap. Ahmad and Ammari (2022) argue that Magda’s marginalisation—by both her white father and the Black servant Hendrik—undermines her colonial privilege and contributes to her descent into madness. Her psychological unravelling, therefore, may be read not only as victimisation but also as a subversive resistance to patriarchal hierarchies imposed upon her. Hassanin (2021) further extends this view by linking Magda’s barren body to the exhausted landscape, demonstrating how women and nature are simultaneously consumed under colonial and patriarchal structures. Yet, while these studies illuminate Magda’s gendered and ecological alienation, they often consider these dimensions separately. My reading highlights their convergence—Magda’s bodily trauma, psychological fracture, and environmental entrapment operate as a unified mode of embodied resistance that Coetzee uniquely stages in the novel.

Taken together, existing scholarship establishes Magda as a figure of structural contradiction, psychosexual dislocation, and narrative instability. Yet, few studies integrate postcolonial, ecological, and trauma perspectives to examine how her fragmented consciousness simultaneously reflects the oppression of women and the degradation of the environment. The present study addresses this gap by adopting a postcolonial ecofeminist framework, situating Magda’s trauma at the intersection of gender, race, narrative form, and ecological desolation. By combining trauma theory with postcolonial ecofeminist critique, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of Magda’s suffering and the systemic forces shaping it, extending prior scholarship and offering new insight into Coetzee’s critique of colonial patriarchy and environmental exploitation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In postcolonial and patriarchal societies, women have historically been relegated to subordinate roles, often reduced to reproductive instruments and symbolic carriers of male-centred power. This study adopts a postcolonial ecofeminist and trauma-informed perspective to examine how Coetzee portrays the compounded oppression of white women under colonial patriarchy, with Magda exemplifying a subject caught at the intersection of race, gender, and psychological suffering.

Since the establishment of patriarchal society, women have long been relegated to an oppressed and marginalised position, defined as tools serving men rather than as independent subjects. The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates confined women's duties to managing household affairs and obeying their husbands, laying the historical foundation for their subordinate status (Singpurwalla, 2024). De Beauvoir (2016), in *The Second Sex*, pointed out that women in a male-centred society are regarded as the "Other", lacking subjectivity and reduced to reproductive tools for perpetuating the patrilineal lineage. Such dualism between men and women has reinforced the legitimisation of patriarchal violence against women and the subjugation of marginalised groups. As Hernawati (2021) notes, "masculine culture has led to patriarchal ideologies and responses normalizing the exploitation and oppression of both women and nature with the assumption that women and nature possess the innate function to serve and perpetuate masculine power" (p. 261). Such a perspective resonates with Mies (2014), who defines patriarchy as "the system which maintains women's exploitation and oppression" (p. 37), revealing how gender, power, and environmental subjugation operate within a mutually enforcing structure.

As a relatively new concept, postcolonial ecofeminism "recognises that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are intimately bound up with notions of class, caste, race, colonialism and neo-colonialism" (Kaur, 2012, p. 100). Therefore, it aims to examine how colonial power dynamics have marginalised indigenous peoples and non-Western societies. Rich (1995) states that "in the history of [...] slavery and racism, white women have been impressed into its service, not only as the marriage-property and creature-objects of white men, but as their active and passive instruments" (p. 281), serving to uphold the dominance of white patriarchy in South Africa. Within this framework, characters like Magda and her mother are shaped not only by male authority but also by the colonial social and environmental structures that surround them.

Trauma theory further illuminates the psychological and cultural dimensions of oppression. As Caruth (2016) observes, trauma involves experiences that overwhelm one's capacity for comprehension and return belatedly through haunting repetitions and disrupted memories. Rather than a single, isolated event, trauma becomes a lingering presence that unsettles the boundaries of time and self. In postcolonial and patriarchal contexts, chronic marginalisation—manifested through everyday oppression such as sexism, racism, and colonial domination—can inflict deep but often unacknowledged harm, extending the reach of trauma beyond isolated incidents. Building on these psychological and social insights, LaCapra (2002) shifts the discussion toward historical and structural trauma. He argues that collective forms of violence like colonialism and apartheid leave lasting scars on both personal and cultural consciousness. Durrant (2004) likewise suggests that these collective traumas shape how imagination and memory function within postcolonial narratives, revealing how literature registers the lingering effects of domination. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that trauma is never purely individual. It is layered, recurring, and often sustained by cultural structures that normalise violence.

By combining postcolonial ecofeminist and trauma frameworks, this study provides a lens for reading Coetzee's novels by situating Magda's experiences of isolation, anxiety, and environmental estrangement within a broader context of intertwined systemic oppressions. Building on these theoretical foundations, the following analysis examines how Magda's obsessive self-reflection and eventual psychological collapse embody the invisible yet persistent violence of colonial patriarchy—an insidious trauma that intertwines the personal with the political and how her personal trauma mirrors the exploitation and domination of both women and the natural environment.

DISCUSSION

BETWEEN SOLITUDE AND SUBJUGATION: A POSTCOLONIAL ECOFEMINIST READING OF MAGDA

In the novel, Magda's father is determined to have a male heir, but her mother “fails to bear him a son” (Coetzee, 1982, p. 2) and ultimately dies quietly in her bed, leaving little trace behind. Her death, much like the fate of many white women in colonial contexts, renders her a vague figure in the family's history. She is even described by Magda as those who “look into mirrors and see nothing, walk in the sun and cast no shadow” (Coetzee, 1982, p. 23). Magda can only discern her mother's appearance through an old photograph and piece together fragments of her life from her father's sparse recollections. Her mother's body left no lasting legacy for the family, serving solely as a vessel for reproduction. Even in her father's memories, the mother departed with deep regret for failing to produce a male heir for the family. As J.M. Coetzee remarked when discussing South Africa's patriarchal society, it is a “patriarchal society worshipping a male God, in which women are invisible” (Coetzee, 1985, p. 12). Under colonialism, patriarchal culture intensified the multiple layers of oppression, further stripping women of their subjectivity and voice.

Magda's mother endured a life constrained by both patriarchy and colonial authority, revealing the paradoxical position of white women in the colonial world, where privilege coexisted with subjugation. Her death during childbirth underscores how the demands of empire and the expectations placed on women's bodies could be both destructive and silencing, leaving the household emotionally hollow and morally directionless. The same mechanism of domination extends into Magda's own life, where domestic labour replaces affection, and isolation takes the place of maternal connection. She recalls,

And mother, soft scented loving mother who drugged me with milk and slumber in the featherbed and then to the sound of bells in the night, vanished, leaving me alone among rough hands and hard bodies—where are you? My lost world is a world of men, of cold nights, woodfire, and gleaming eyes.

(Coetzee, 1982, p. 7)

Bound to the farm since infancy, Magda navigates a space that is both physically restrictive and psychologically oppressive. The H-shaped farmhouse, with its separate rooms for father and daughter, and the barren Karoo landscape, together create an environment of confinement. Her daily routines—performing household tasks, staring vacantly out the window, retreating into silence—reinforce her isolation, as she writes, “I live, I suffer, I am here” (Coetzee, 1982, p. 3). Beyond its physicality, the farm functions as a metaphorical site where colonial authority, patriarchal control, and ecological alienation converge. As Coetzee (1988) argues in *White Writing*, the farm embodies the duality of nature and civilisation, landscape and settlement. Within this desolate geography, the Karoo's emptiness mirrors Magda's fragmented subjectivity, where her solitude is both imposed and internalised.

Institutionalised racism, understood as the systemic and legally sanctioned discrimination embedded in South African society during the colonial and apartheid periods (Fredrickson, 2015), further intensified Magda's sense of isolation. Within the historical context of South Africa's colonial plantation economy, white settler families typically depended on a rigid domestic hierarchy that both naturalised women's labour within the household and restricted their social mobility. In this system, women like Magda were confined to domestic duties and caregiving, with little opportunity for self-expression or social engagement, which compounded her profound loneliness and psychological isolation. This sense of isolation is repeatedly reflected in her monologues: "fraternal intercourse would not have left its mark upon me... the mark that has been left upon me instead is the mark of intercourse with the wilds, with solitude and vacancy" (Coetzee, 1982, p. 41); "Too much misery, too much solitude makes of one an animal. I am losing all human perspective" (Coetzee, 1982, p. 53); and "Things are happening in my life, it is better than solitude, I am content" (Coetzee, 1982, p. 55). These monologues deeply reveal the psychological torment caused by Magda's loneliness and the oppressive nature of her living environment. As J.M. Coetzee (1988) observes in *White Writing*, "In the farm novel, we find women, in effect, imprisoned in the farmhouse, confined to the breast function giving food to men, cut off from the outdoors" (p. 9).

Marginalised by all possible sources of identity, Magda is plunged into profound loneliness, ultimately losing her sense of direction by the novel's conclusion. The root of this tragic situation lies in both the oppression of patriarchy and the systemic impact of racial segregation policies. In the racist structure of postcolonial South Africa, Magda's life is defined by her relationship with her father. However, his attitude towards her is indifferent and cold: "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" (Coetzee, 1982, p. 2), a solitary being doomed to perform her existence in isolation. This deep-seated loneliness and repression further marginalise Magda's subjectivity within a colonial patriarchal society, effectively continuing her mother's fate. As Oladeji (2025) contends, Magda is constructed as a "disability subject" within a socio-cultural system that marginalises unmarried white women who deviate from patriarchal expectations. Her psychological breakdown and descent into delusion are presented as consequences of the structural marginalisation imposed by male-dominated familial and cultural institutions.

Patriarchal and colonial systems operate as mutually reinforcing forces that systematically marginalise women, constraining their agency and shaping their lived experiences. From a postcolonial ecofeminist perspective, Magda's solitude is inseparable from her subjugation. It reflects both her personal suffering and the structural pressures that shape women's lives. Magda's life on the farm exemplifies this dynamic: her spatial confinement, the erasure of maternal care, and the relentless domestic labour imposed by her family illustrate how these intersecting systems produce both social and psychological fragmentation. Rather than representing an isolated case of individual suffering, Magda's experience reflects a broader postcolonial reality in which women are denied access to economic autonomy, political voice, and social recognition. Coetzee's narrative thus functions as a postcolonial ecofeminist critique, revealing how women's bodies and subjectivities become sites of control and invisibility within colonial and patriarchal hierarchies. By linking Magda's personal alienation to historical structures of power, the text foregrounds the entanglement of gender, race, and space in producing both oppression and trauma, demonstrating that solitude and subjugation are structurally and historically embedded rather than merely personal afflictions.

BETWEEN LOSS AND REPETITION: A POSTCOLONIAL ECOFEMINIST
READING OF MAGDA'S TRAUMA

Magda's fragmented consciousness in *In the Heart of the Country* reflects the cyclical nature of trauma experienced by women trapped within the intersecting structures of patriarchy, colonialism, and ecological desolation. Her sense of loss—emotional, spatial, and symbolic—manifests as repetitive patterns of alienation and breakdown. Her trauma is not merely an individual psychological wound but a structural condition produced by gendered and colonial hierarchies. Breuer and Freud (2009) proposed in *Studies on Hysteria* that hysteria is a psychological disorder rooted in suppressed emotions and traumatic memories embedded in the subconscious. These emotions often stem from childhood experiences, which, due to the child's limited cognitive and linguistic abilities, become unprocessed and inexpressible. As a result, such memories are stored unconsciously and later resurface as psychological or physical symptoms. Magda's trauma in *In the Heart of the Country* originates from the early death of her mother, which deprived her of a vital emotional bond and left a profound void in her psyche. Throughout the novel, Magda repeatedly invokes her mother, a textual pattern that signals the intrusive return of traumatic memory. Her effort to reconstruct their relationship through fragmented recollections fails to compensate for the emotional loss, instead intensifying her psychological fragmentation. As Magda confesses,

And the absence of my mother. My father is the absence of my mother, her negative, her death... He has murdered all the motherly in me and left me this brittle, hairy shell with peas of dead words rattling in it. I stand in the empty kitchen hating him.

(Coetzee, 1982, p. 37)

Her mother, associated with tenderness and life, stands in stark contrast to the coldness and symbolic death embodied by her father. This juxtaposition deepens Magda's emotional alienation and psychic instability.

In the absence of maternal care, Magda redirects her emotional dependency toward her father. However, this redirection proves deeply ambivalent, marked by both longing and resentment. In her diary, she expresses a desperate desire for paternal affection: "She needs to be needed" (Coetzee, 1982, p. 5). She recalls with conflicting emotions the rare tenderness of his touch: "His hand is on my forehead... How tender, how comforting! But what he wants to know is whether I am feverish, whether at the root of my desolation lies a microbe" (Coetzee, 1982, p. 56). Her father's emotional indifference, alongside his preference for the maid, exacerbates Magda's feelings of exclusion and intensifies her inner turmoil. Trapped between need and rage, Magda remains psychologically tethered to her father, who is both her only relative and the embodiment of patriarchal domination. The unresolvable conflict culminates in her fantasy of patricide—a symbolic act of resistance and expression of repressed emotional trauma. Here, Freud's view that repressed emotions often resurface in distorted symbolic forms intersects with Caruth's argument that trauma returns belatedly and disruptively, shaping not only memory but behaviour (Caruth, 2016).

The existence of multiple versions of the patricide in Magda's narrative further underscores the cyclical nature of trauma. As Caruth (2016) theorises, trauma is not fully experienced in the moment but returns in belated, disruptive repetitions. Magda's fragmented and contradictory narration reflects her inability to process traumatic memory in a coherent, linear form. Her narrative becomes a site of trauma's reenactment, where unresolved experiences are compulsively repeated. These repetitions reveal her entrapment in psychological time and her failure to separate

past from present. The instability of her account also reflects the postcolonial condition of historical rupture, where personal trauma and collective memory intertwine and defy conventional narrative resolution. This cyclical structure supports Freud's and LaCapra's perspectives: that unprocessed trauma lingers and resurfaces in repeated, symbolic behaviour and language.

Freud (1900) maintained that repressed emotions can manifest symbolically as neurotic symptoms. Magda's imagined act of patricide—carried out with a fire shovel—functions as a symbolic gesture against patriarchal oppression and emotional abandonment. The fire shovel becomes a tool not only of violence but of psychic articulation. Her narrative self-description reveals the consequences of internalised trauma: she calls herself “a miserable black virgin”, telling “a dull blackblink stupid miserable story” (Coetzee, 1982, p. 5), “the crazy old lady” (p. 6), and “a mad old bad old woman” (p. 123). These self-inscriptions reveal her fractured identity, shaped by both emotional deprivation and social alienation. Her confinement within the H-shaped farmhouse—a space she describes as “a theatre of stone and sun fenced in with miles of wire” (Coetzee, 1982, p. 3)—mirrors her psychological entrapment. The sterile geometry of the house and the arid, sun-drenched Karoo landscape outside evoke a symbolic ecology of desolation. The internal “dried” emotional landscape mirrors the external ecology: Magda's parched subjectivity finds no outlet or nourishment. In Caruth's (2016) view, trauma is marked by belatedness and a persistent return to the unassimilated past, and Magda embodies this unresolved repetition—unable to move beyond shock into recovery or reconnection.

Magda's trauma is situated at the intersection of gendered oppression and colonial legacy. According to *The New York Times* (1987), Coetzee observed in his Jerusalem Prize speech that colonial and apartheid systems distorted not only external power structures but also inner emotional lives. Under apartheid, human intimacy was systemically suppressed, resulting in emotional estrangement and psychosocial damage. Magda's attempted emotional engagement with the Black farm labourer Hendrik exemplifies this distortion. She seeks emotional resonance across racial and gender lines, but the effort collapses. During their sexual encounters, she repeatedly asks, “Am I doing the right thing, Hendrik? ...I don't know anything about this, Hendrik- do you understand? All I want to know is whether I am doing it right. Please give me just that little help” (Coetzee, 1982, p. 110). Hendrik's silence renders her questions void, turning her pleas into soliloquies. Her need for validation transforms into compulsive self-questioning, signalling the reenactment of trauma. As LaCapra (2002) argues, trauma persists through repetition when unworked through, trapping individuals in cycles of emotional reenactment. The disintegration of mutual understanding in this relationship reveals how colonial hierarchies inhibit the possibility of ethical recognition and emotional repair.

This entrapment is further intensified by Magda's ambiguous position within racial and gender hierarchies. Fanon's observation in *The Wretched of the Earth* that colonised men may pursue relationships with white women as acts of inverted resistance and symbolic domination (Fanon, 1963, p. 14) proves particularly relevant here. To Hendrik, Magda embodies both the privileges of whiteness and the complicity of patriarchal authority. His rape of her, therefore, functions as a violent reversal of colonial power structures. As Salih (2023) argues, Magda's body becomes the site where colonial violence and patriarchal desire intersect. Her repeated objectification and her own fantasies of violent sexual submission—such as her imagined yielding to Hendrik—highlight her complete loss of bodily autonomy. No longer self-defined, her body is scripted by overlapping structures of racial and gender oppression. Rather than achieving emancipation or solidarity through cross-racial intimacy, Magda's subjectivity is further destabilised. She is not only victimised by violence but also symbolically entangled in the very

systems of domination she seeks to escape. Her identity collapses under these contradictory forces, giving rise to a profound psychic and spiritual void. This dynamic reflects what ecofeminist theory describes as the dual subjugation of women and the land—both rendered inert, both colonised as silent, passive entities beneath patriarchal and imperial regimes.

Magda's shifting identity highlights the dissonance between her perceived role as a white coloniser and her lived experience as a woman marginalised within patriarchal structures. Her interactions with Black servants reinforce this paradox: she asserts dominance while feeling colonised by Hendrik. Rather than achieving true authority, Magda can only imagine forms of intimacy and coexistence that reality continually denies her, revealing the gulf between colonial power as ideology and its lived emotional consequences. Her failure to locate a stable position within colonial hierarchies leads to her psychic breakdown. The collapse of her subjectivity illustrates the internalisation of colonial violence and the impossibility of coherence in fractured systems of power.

Magda's suffering is not an isolated phenomenon but a shared condition among white women in the colonial outpost. As she claims, "The colonies are full of girls like that" (Coetzee, 1982, p. 1), and "The land is full of melancholy spinsters like me, lost to history... spoiled for life" (p. 3). These women, deprived of both maternal affection and paternal care, embody the psychosocial residue of colonial and patriarchal greed. Magda's yearning—"With no one to need her, she is baffled and bewildered" (Coetzee, 1982, p. 5)—emphasises the emotional deprivation that defines this demographic. Her story, thus, is not merely personal but representative of a structural trauma that echoes across generations.

Magda's repeated attempts to articulate her isolation and desire reflect the perpetual cycle of trauma embedded within colonial and patriarchal structures. Coetzee uses Magda as a lens through which the enduring legacies of colonialism, patriarchy, and ecological domination are not only recalled but symbolically reenacted. Her inability to achieve healing is not a reflection of personal failure, but rather a revelation of the structural impossibility of reconciliation within a world shaped by intersecting forms of injustice. As such, Magda's trauma transcends the boundaries of the text, prompting deeper reflection on the enduring psychological costs of colonial modernity. As Diakhaté (2021) insightfully notes, her emotional collapse arises not only from historical and social trauma but also from her futile attempts to construct a stable female identity through failed emotional and sexual ties. Her longing for her father's approval and the shame following her relationship with Hendrik do not bring empowerment; rather, they deepen her alienation. These episodes expose the marginalisation of white women within the intersecting racial and patriarchal structures of the colonial order—trapped in a relentless cycle of yearning, loss, and psychological unravelling.

THE LAND AND THE BODY: COLONIAL VIOLENCE, ECOLOGICAL CRISIS, AND FEMININE TRAUMA

In the Heart of the Country may initially appear to narrate the survival of a white woman in postcolonial and post-apartheid South Africa, but it fundamentally reveals the interwoven dynamics of postcolonial ecofeminism and trauma, which deeply shape the fate of its female protagonist. J.M. Coetzee explores not only the psychological and emotional consequences of trauma on a female individual but also the broader ecological, social, and spiritual crises that haunt her existence. The violence inscribed upon Magda's body and mind illustrates how patriarchal authority and colonial power operate together, binding women and land to parallel forms of dispossession. As Warren (2000) further elaborates in *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, "there are important

connections between the unjustified dominations of women, people of colour, children, and the poor and the unjustified domination of nature” (p. 1).

Using the microcosm of the farm, Coetzee intertwines colonial oppression, patriarchal authority, and traumatic experience. The farm becomes more than a site of daily life—it symbolises both the physical manifestation of imperial violence and the inner landscape of the protagonist’s trauma. As a product of settler exploitation, the farm is depicted as a barren and hostile space, echoing the spiritual desolation that afflicts Magda. Her father’s authority over the land signifies patriarchal control, and Magda’s place within this space—deprived of agency and recognition—deepens her internal crisis. The isolation of the farm mirrors her emotional estrangement, and her gradual descent into madness reflects the cumulative burden of gendered and colonial violence. From a postcolonial ecofeminist perspective, the farm represents not only colonial exploitation but also the intertwined subjugation of women and the environment. Both are treated as objects to be conquered, controlled, and rendered silent. As Graham (2015) observes in *State of Peril*, “the South African pastoral, which presents a vision of the ‘husband-farmer’ as custodian of the feminine earth, has been discursively implicated in the colonial appropriation of territory” (p. 150).

The ecological crisis can be read as inseparable from systems of domination that position both women and nature as objects to be controlled and violated. Within this framework, the metaphor of rape emerges as a powerful symbol within this discourse, representing both the physical violence inflicted on women and the environmental degradation wrought by colonialism. In her analysis of *Rapes of Earth and Grapes of Wrath*, Gudmarsdottir (2010) argues that this metaphor “not only underscores the intrinsic connection between women and nature but also elevates individual female experiences of violence to a universal dimension” (p. 206). The metaphor thus transcends the literal, signifying broader historical patterns of domination and control over both land and female bodies.

After her father’s death, Magda becomes the victim of sexual violence by the servant Hendrik, marking a shift in her subjugation from patriarchal to racialised forms of control. This traumatic event destabilises her further and reflects the ongoing cycles of oppression under intersecting systems of power. The metaphorical link between Magda’s violated body and the colonised land emphasises the widespread erosion of both ecology and subjectivity under imperialism. As Gqola (2015) explains, rape is “always gendered and enacted against the feminine... it appears everywhere: in a political speech about decolonization as the legitimate response against the rape of the continent/land, repeatedly as something that happens to women who are out of control” (pp. 21–22). In this view, the female body becomes a symbolic site of colonial conquest, much like the African landscape. Magda’s imaginative language—“my husband ... clapping the livid babyface to my flat sour breast” (Coetzee, 1982, p. 42); “I can surely feel far away the withered apple of my womb rise and float, boding all ill” (p. 50)—depicts a body marked by abandonment, intrusion, and decay. These descriptions do not merely express personal trauma but resonate with a larger critique of how both women and nature are brutalised under systems of colonial and patriarchal domination. Magda’s physical and psychological suffering illustrates the postcolonial ecofeminist argument that women and nature share a common fate of exploitation. Her body, like the arid South African land, bears the scars of repeated violation. The trauma she endures is not merely a product of individual history but is rooted in the systemic violence of imperialism, making her story emblematic of a broader collective wound.

CONCLUSION

The trauma narratives in *In the Heart of the Country* show that Magda's story functions not simply as a psychological portrait of an isolated woman. Rather, it reveals how colonial, patriarchal, and ecological systems jointly generate trauma. We can see this in her fragmented consciousness, her confinement within the farm, and her repeated attempts to articulate loss. These experiences highlight the insidious nature of structural violence and demonstrate that her suffering extends beyond the personal. The death of her mother and the emotional absence of her father further illustrate how patriarchy consumes women's bodies and silences their subjectivity. Her futile longing for affection, combined with her eventual descent into madness, makes clear the psychic cost of inhabiting a world where intimacy and communication are shaped by unequal power relations. In this sense, Magda's story does not merely recount individual pain—it reflects the broader patterns of oppression women experience under these intersecting systems.

From a postcolonial ecofeminist perspective, her suffering is part of a network of trauma shared by both women and the natural world. The farm, barren, overworked, and voiceless, mirrors her inner desolation. Her violation by Hendrik transforms her body into a symbolic landscape of colonisation. This moment shows how gendered and racialised violence intertwine with ecological degradation. It is through these experiences that Coetzee exposes the impossibility of healing within a society that sustains its order through the domination of both women and nature. The narrative itself contributes to postcolonial ecofeminist criticism by revealing the interdependence of human and nonhuman suffering. Coetzee dismantles the illusion of colonial authority and lays bare its emotional and environmental costs. Magda's fragmented identity, positioned between oppressor and oppressed, becomes emblematic of South Africa's fractured history and the ongoing legacy of inherited trauma. Her voice, oscillating between confession and delusion, not only narrates her personal disintegration but also resonates with the silenced histories of women and landscapes marked by violence. By situating Magda's trauma within intersecting structures of gender, race, and ecology, Coetzee asks readers to confront the ethical and emotional consequences of domination and to imagine the possibility of reconciliation beyond it.

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