

**J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*:
Magda's Search for a New Language**

***En medio de ninguna parte* de J. M. Coetzee:
la búsqueda de Magda de un lenguaje femenino**

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Resumen

Irigaray ha indagado y analizado cómo tanto el psicoanálisis como la filosofía han excluido a las mujeres de posiciones significativas. En su obra *El espejo de la otra mujer*, demuestra cómo nuestra civilización occidental se ha construido sobre una base ideológica masculina que silencia a las mujeres en su discurso. Además, enfatiza que las mujeres necesitan ocupar el lenguaje para crearse una identidad separada. En este artículo, vincularemos sus ideas feministas sobre el lenguaje con Magda, la protagonista de la novela *En medio de ninguna parte*, de J.M. Coetzee, una obra que fue publicada durante la segunda ola del feminismo. Analizaremos cómo Magda trata de reinventarse a sí misma fuera del mundo patriarcal que habita, y descubrir un lenguaje nuevo que le permita trascender el imaginario masculino y los límites que este impone. También indagaremos en sus alianzas con otras escritoras como Perkins Gilman, Plath y Woolf.

Palabras clave : Coetzee, *En medio de ninguna parte*, Irigaray, lenguaje, Woolf.

Abstract

Irigaray has explored and analysed how both psychoanalysis and philosophy have managed to exclude women from a meaningful existence as independent subjects. In her work *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), she demonstrates how Western civilisation has been articulated according to a masculine ideology that silences women in their discourse. She also emphasizes that women need to occupy language in order to create a separate identity. In this article, I will link her feminist ideas on language with Magda, the

protagonist of J.M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), a novel that was published in the middle of the second-wave feminism. I will analyse how Magda tries to reinvent her identity outside the patriarchal world she inhabits and discover a new language in order to transcend the masculine imaginary and its boundaries. I will also explore her remarkable alliance with other female writers: Perkins Gilman, Plath and, above all, Woolf.

Keywords: Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country*, Irigaray, Language, Woolf.

In Irigaray's view, women start in an impossible position. Women are in a position of exclusion. [...] Man's discourse, inasmuch as it sets forth the law...[knows] what there is to know about the exclusion. The exclusion of women is "internal" to an order from which nothing escapes: the order of (man's) discourse. (J.M. Coetzee, 1996: 27)

1. COETZEE'S WOMEN NARRATORS

All Coetzee's novels examine and illustrate relations of power and different manifestations of hegemony, which are usually established, among other ways, by means of language. Moreover, in an interview with Sévry, Coetzee mentions: "I think there is evidence of an interest in problems of language throughout my novels. I don't see any disruption between my professional interest in language and my activities as a writer" (1986: 1). On the other hand, many of his most interesting characters are women and most of them interrogate structures of power, authority and language, but they are different from other characters in that they want to dominate their narratives, albeit the difficulties they encounter and, at the same time, they are all aware of their limited access to their stories.

Coetzee depicts very powerful women narrators in *In the Heart of the Country*, *Foe* (1986), *Age of Iron* (1990) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003); one could even name them female warriors because of the obstacles they encounter to pursue their writing and their resistance to continue. These female narrators remain relatively unexplored because they are often conflated with Coetzee's own paradoxical position as a white liberal writer in South Africa trying to question authority. For example, Attwell has mentioned that it is possible that Coetzee has used a female voice in some of his novels as "a strategic way of positioning oneself on the margins of authoritative traditions" (2015: 142), but I will argue that another possible interpretation is that he links his female main characters with the storytelling of their experiences to show that writing is a way to transcend their subordinate place in the patriarchal imaginary.

Coetzee's female characters illustrate relationships of power. Most of them express their desire to narrate their own existence and not to be narrated. His four female protagonists,

Magda, Susan, Mrs Curren and Elizabeth Costello, assert their need to tell their stories through their own voices.¹ They write their stories in different forms: Magda keeps an intimate diary, Susan narrates her experiences on an island in *Foe* until she engages a writer to produce a novel based on her unique adventures,² Mrs Curren follows the epistolary tradition in *Age of Iron*,³ and Elizabeth Costello publishes and reads her controversial academic papers in Coetzee's homonymous novel. Some of them link their writing to their bodies, as if writing were their nature. This is especially evident in the case of Mrs Curren:

So day by day I render myself into words and pack the words into the page like sweets: like sweets for my daughter. [. . .] Words out of my body, drops of myself, for her to unpack in her own time, to take in, to suck, to absorb. ([1998] 1990: 8)

Later in the novel, when she mentions: "The words come from my heart, from my womb" ([1998] 1990: 133), she is making it even more evident that writing is linked to her femininity.

Of all these and more very interesting examples where women need to bequeath their words to the world, I am going to analyse the protagonist of Coetzee's second novel, Magda, because she is by far his most transgressive female character and his most powerful representation of the rejection of patriarchy. As a white woman in a patriarchal Boer society, Magda is constrained to an unmovable role where she cannot transcend her subordinate position nor progress; she becomes obsessed with reimagining her identity in a world where women are revered as wives, mothers and child bearers, then marginalized to silence. In order to do so, she searches for a new language that will enable her to reinvent herself.

¹ Other female characters decide to remain silent, at least according to the masculine narrators, like Lucy in *Disgrace* (1999) and the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). In the case of Lucy, a very plausible interpretation is that she does not report the rape because she does not want her story to be appropriated.

² Susan tries to bring to life her singular story as the first female castaway, but the writer she engages seems to be more interested in her maternity and she tells him: "I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire" ([1987] 1986: 131). At the end of the novel she has been narrating, she starts to disappear as a character, because *Foe*, the author, is taking more control of the narration and diminishing her achievements.

³ Mrs Curren recounts the events that mark the last days of her life in a long letter to her daughter in *Age of Iron*. She asserts her need to write as if her life depended on it. In fact, it is evident that she is afraid of the void that will present itself when she cannot write anymore. She writes in order to postpone her imminent death and at the same time, she acknowledges the power of her writing: "Death may indeed be the last great foe of writing, but writing is also the foe of death" ([1998] 1990: 115-116).

2. IN THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

In the Heart of the Country is Coetzee's second novel and a very complex and experimental work. It is also a postmodern construction with references to Blake, Freud, Hegel, Lacan and Rousseau and, as Coetzee has stated, deeply influenced by *le nouveau roman français* and the film-makers' movement *la nouvelle vague* (1992: 60). While in the process of becoming published in South Africa, the national political situation deteriorated, especially owing to the Soweto uprisings, a student revolt that began because of a requirement that all schools conduct their lessons in English as well as in Afrikaans and where hundreds of black students were massacred. Coetzee had originally written the novel in Afrikaans and English, but he finally decided to translate the Afrikaans passages into English in case the novel would be censored and also to meet the demands of a more global readership (Wittenberg, 2008: 134). This decision also reflects, or is at least consistent with, the general anti-Afrikaans mood, which prevailed in the country after the Soweto uprisings against compulsory bilingual education (Wittenberg, 2008: 139). Coetzee finally published, almost simultaneously, a monolingual edition for the Anglophone market and a bilingual version in his own country, which is the only example of a Coetzee novel written and published in both languages. This is relevant in so far as it shows the importance of the language context Coetzee was immersed in at the time.

One of many of the novel's achievements is that *In the Heart of the Country* engages with many aspects of the *plaasroman*⁴ from the perspective of a white woman who inhabits both the central part and the margin of her story, as she is both colonizer and colonized, and she provides a very powerful figure of Otherness. Coetzee has written on the *plaasroman*, the South African pastoral novel, in *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988), his first non-fiction book, where he points out that the *plaasroman* exalts patriarchal values and uses a language full of gendered connotations. In this literary utopia, roles are unmovable: women are child bearers and devoted wives, blacks do not exist, except when they contribute to whites' existence and comfort.

It is difficult to summarize *In the Heart of the Country*'s plot owing to the unreliability of its narrator, Madga, an Afrikaner woman who tells her story in 266 numbered units of thought as if it were a dream. In her reveries she presents herself as an angry spinster who lives on a desolate Karoo farm together with her father and their servants. Magda starts the novel telling of her father's new wife and of her murder of the newlyweds, while they are in bed together. Without any explanation, her father comes back to life and the reader

⁴ The novel follows this literary tradition and more specifically, Olive Schreiner's *A Story of an African Farm* (1883), a novel Coetzee has written about in *White Writing*.

wonders if Magda has dreamt about the previous events. On a different occasion, she commits parricide again after her father has seduced Klein-Anna, the wife of their servant Hendrik. She buries her father and tries to establish a rapport with Hendrik and Klein-Anna, but the relationship fails. According to Head, Magda may be interpreted as the “symbolic daughter of colonialism” (2009, 43), but I will analyse her as an allegorical representation of the rejection of patriarchy.

It is obvious that Magda tries to find her place outside the restraining traditional and patriarchal world she inhabits. In fact, although the novel has not received much literary attention to date,⁵ most of the articles that deal with it focus on feminist issues.⁶ Coetzee is aware of the subordinate place of women in the traditional pastoral novel, and mentions: “In the farm novel we find women, in effect, imprisoned in the farmhouse, confined to the breast function of giving food to men, cut off from the outdoors” (1988: 9). Magda is conscious about the role of women and speaks about her destiny to become the property of a man through marriage, but she knows she would be suffocated in this constraining role and rejects it. Although she is expected to become an obedient and dedicated *vrou en moeder*,⁷ a feminine ideal that according to Stone “was used to both discipline the females of the culture and to promote masculine power and authority” (2003: 217), she does not accept her situation and there are several instances in the novel that she rebels against. Magda is a parody of the submissive Afrikaner *vrou en moeder*. Instead of fulfilling her destiny as a progenitor, she is a barren spinster. Moreover, she does not conform to the reiteration of the heterosexual norms that give stability to her Afrikaner community because she is not married and remains a “miserable black virgin” ([2004] 1977: 5). Therefore she is undervalued and dismissed by her father and their community.

3. COETZEE AND IRIGARAY

Trapped in the masculine imaginary, Magda appropriates and uses phallogocentric modes of thinking about women in order to subvert them. One example is how she echoes Lacan's

⁵ Glenn mentions that it is “the least read and has had the least critical attention” (1996: 120).

⁶ See for example: Briganti's “A Bored Spinster with a Locked Diary: The Politics of Hysteria in *In the Heart of the Country*”, Onega's “Trauma, Madness, and the Ethics of Narration in J.M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*”, Robert's “Cinderella's Mothers: J.M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*”, Stone's “Good Housekeeping, Single Women and Global Feminism in J.M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*” and Wright's “Displacing the Voice: South African Feminism and J.M. Coetzee's Female Narrators”. There are also two book-length studies that analyse the novel: Dovey's *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* and Graham's *The Use of the Female Voice in Three Novels by J.M. Coetzee*.

⁷ The phrase means wife and mother in Afrikaans.

theory of sexual difference and, probably following Irigaray, she tries to dismantle it as well. We know Coetzee has read Irigaray because he quotes several sentences from her that are relevant to my interpretation of Magda:

In Irigaray's view, women start in an impossible position. Women are in a position of exclusion...Man's discourse, inasmuch as it sets forth the law...[knows] what there is to know about the exclusion. The exclusion of women is "internal" to an order from which nothing escapes: the order of (man's) discourse. (1996: 27)

Lacan understands feminine sexuality, when compared with the masculine, as a void. Irigaray is a leading contributor to feminist theory and one of Lacan's most incisive critics; she asserts women need to be considered independently from men and denounces the idea that men are regarded as presence and women as absence:

She functions as a hole-that is where we would place it at its point of greatest efficiency, even in its implications of phobia, for man too-in the elaboration of imaginary and symbolic processes. But this fault, this deficiency, this "hole," inevitably affords woman too few figurations, images, or representations by which to represent herself. It is not that she lacks some "master signifier" or that none is imposed upon her, but rather that access to a signifying economy, to the coining of signifiers, is difficult or even impossible for her because she remains an outsider, herself (a) subject to their norms. She borrows signifiers but cannot make her mark, or re-mark upon them. Which all surely keeps her deficient, empty, lacking, in a way that could be labeled "psychotic": a latent but not actual psychosis, for want of a practical signifying system. ([1985] 1974: 71)

Magda echoes this idea when she asserts: "If I am an O,⁸ I am sometimes persuaded, it must be because I am a woman" ([2004] 1977: 44).⁹ Another very relevant example is Magda's description of herself:

I move through the world, not as a knifeblade cutting the wind, or as a tower with eyes, like my father, but as a hole, a hole with a body draped around it, the two spindly legs hanging loose at the bottom and the two bony arms flapping at the sides and the bid head lolling on top. I am a hole crying to be whole. ([2004] 1977: 44)

While Magda's father is a *knifeblade*, she is a *hole crying to be whole*, but before that she had already called attention to the arbitrariness of that definition when she pointed out

⁸ Elizabeth Curren is also represented by this absence when she explains how she feels: "I am hollow, I am a shell" ([1998] 1990: 103).

⁹ The "O" can also be traced to Coetzee's readings of the French feminist Monique Wittig, and more particularly to her work *Les Guérillères* (1969), which features O's as symbols of feminine excess, or that which logocentrism has relegated to a position outside representability. We know Coetzee has read Wittig because he quotes her and mentions: "The O, the circle, the hole are symbols of that which male authoritarian language cannot appropriate" (1992: 404).

that it is her father who has constrained her in this role: "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, a null, a vacuum" ([2004] 1977: 2). Later in the novel, Magda, the virgin, also mentions: "I am not ignorant of my anatomy...not unaware that there is a hole between my legs that has never been filled" ([2004] 1977: 41). Coetzee engages with this supposedly feminine symbol of lack in order to challenge Lacan's theory and his articulation of the masculine phallic order based on purely sexual physical differences.

Magda describes herself again and again as a black virgin, a suffering body craving to be heard and spoken to, as a woman crying out loud to be noticed. According to Coad, her main desire is "to claim right as an ontological subject, to transcend nothingness, and she sees this possible through filling the hole, that is substituting absence with presence" (online). She starts daydreaming about how her servant Hendrik talks to his wife about her need to become a sexually active subject:

He tells her that I need a man, that I need to be covered, to be turned into a woman. I am a child, he tells her, despite my years, I am an old child, a sinister old child full of stale juices. Someone should make a woman of me, he tells her, someone should make a hole in me to let the old juices run out. ([2004] 1977: 94)

She then narrates how he rapes her and retells it in different units of thought.¹⁰ Her wish for sexual contact is an attempt to become a sexually attractive object because she is aware of the power of such a representation. Apparently, she believes that this act can turn her into a woman and is later disappointed when she discovers that nothing has changed:

Am I now a woman? Has this made me into a woman? So many tiny events, acts, movements one after another, muscles pulling bones this way and that, and their upshot is that I can say, I am finally a woman, or, Am I finally a woman? ([2004] 1977: 117)

Magda's wish to be "made a woman" can be analysed as a critique on Lacan's interpretation of women's sexuality. However, since she tells the story in an interior monologue and retells several fragments of the argument, we are never really sure of what happens between them.

¹⁰ Since the subject of this article is language and its connotations, it is worth mentioning that Attwell notices that "Magda's appeals to Hendrik for tenderness after being raped have a quality of anguish in the Afrikaans that the English can't fully match" (2015: 51).

Similarly, Irigaray criticises that women are regarded in masculine terms and assimilated to the male order and claims:

We can assume that any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the "masculine." When she submits to (such a) theory, woman fails to realize that she is renouncing the specificity of her own relationship to the imaginary. ([1985] 1974: 133)

According to the feminist philosopher, the masculine imaginary is based on identity, rationality and philosophy. *In the Heart of the Country* tries to illustrate how women have been excluded from philosophy, culture and language. Magda echoes this idea when she mentions: "I am not a philosopher. Women are not philosophers and I am a woman" ([2004] 1977: 119), but Coetzee is, in fact, creating a philosophical character that quotes Hegel and Rousseau and denounces the fact that women's achievements are kept silent and made invisible by philosophy and history. Thus Magda comments: "With cunning and treachery, if necessary, I fight against becoming one of the forgotten ones of history" ([2004] 1977: 4).

While Irigaray tries to dismantle patriarchy in her writings and shows the dangers of linking men to culture and women to nature and motherhood, Magda is trapped in a dysfunctional family that represents the negative legacy of patriarchy. Her father is characterised as a servant of Eros,¹¹ like many of Coetzee's male characters;¹² he is a negative presence, "an ogre-like figure" (Onega, 2011: 114), but he is also characterised as a gentleman:

My father has never ceased to be a gentleman. When he goes out riding he wears his riding boots, which I must help him off and which Anna must wax. On his inspection tour every second week he wears a coat and a tie. In a study box he keeps three collarstuds. Before meals he washes his hands with soap. He drinks his brandy ceremonially, by himself, from a brandy-glass, of which he has four, by lamplight, sitting in an armchair. ([2004] 1977: 24)

Magda's mother, on the other hand, is an absence because she died under her father's thumb when trying to bear their second child:

My mother was a frail gentle loving woman who lived and died under her husband's thumb. Her husband never forgave her for failing to bear him a son. His relentless sexual demands led her 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. ([2004] 1977: 2)

¹¹ This phrase is used to characterise David Lurie (1999: 52).

¹² For example: the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) and David Lurie in *Disgrace*.

Roberts quotes Irigaray in her article on the novel. She reminds us that Irigaray defines our culture as matricidal and that the relationship between a mother and her daughter is usually broken so that the girl can become a woman in the patriarchal sense and focus on her father/husband. The mother becomes silent, absent, as it is the case in so much Western literature (Roberts, 1992: 23) and as it is the case of Magda's mother:

Magda has been deprived of the mother and verticality and is thus the “bitter vestal” of the father, “spoiled for life” (3). She belongs to the father/husband but in no mature womanly way: she remains a virgin, incapable of jouissance even in her fantasies. (Roberts, 1992: 24)

Irigaray also criticises that women are exchanged between men as a commodity. We also find an example of this in the novel in Hendrik's wife, Klein-Anna, when she becomes Magda's father's mistress in exchange of a bottle of brandy he gives their servant, Klein-Anna's husband. She is lured to him with a small packet of sweets and a silver coin, as if she were a child. However, we should remember that we are locked into Magda's narration and that she, as a colonizer, has no means to discover the complexity of Klein-Anna's thoughts.

Magda, who knows she is a character in a story, rebels and declines inhabiting such a novel, mainly for two reasons: the first one is her marginal position as a woman on the farm that prevents her from existing behind the sphere of the home and achieving an identity in a patriarchal society:

Men's talk is so unruffled, serene, so full of common purpose. I should have been a man, I would not have been grown up so sour, I would have spent my days in the sun doing whatever it is that men do, digging holes, building fences, counting sheep. What is there for me in the kitchen? The patter of maids, gossip, ailments, babies, steam, foodsmells, catfur at the ankles – what kind of life can I make of these? ([2004] 1977: 22)

The second one is the inability of the social situation to reproduce a language of reciprocity. Magda's life is dictated by the contamination of colonialism and patriarchy, which demonstrates itself through the linguistic structures where she is imprisoned. She aims to dismantle the gender and racial discourses she lives in, but neither English —the language she uses to express her thoughts and links her to a cultural tradition that Coetzee has inherited—nor Afrikaans—which Coetzee uses for Magda's dialogues with their

servants and is, thus, a symbol of the power that the whites have over the native population—¹³ allows her to do so.

Attwell has mentioned that most of what happens in *In the Heart of the Country* is “an act of language” (1993: 60) and I would like to add that its protagonist is a truly linguistic expert. Magda is not only well aware of the power of language when she mentions: “It is a world of words that creates a world of things” (Coetzee, [2004] 1977: 146), but she also symbolizes how difficult it is for a woman to bring the female imaginary into language. Coetzee deals with this as follows:

It is futile to imagine that, from a pocket within man's discourse [...] women can substitute feminine power for masculine power [...] while seeming to be a reversal, this “phallic” seizure of power would leave women still “caught up in the economy of the same” (1996: 27)

While Irigaray has claimed that women need to be aware of their subordinate position in language, there are several examples in the novel that show that Magda acknowledges that she is using the language of patriarchy:

The lips are tired, I explain to him, they want to rest, they are tired of all the articulating they have had to do since they were babies, since it was revealed to them that there was a law they could no longer simply part themselves to make way for the log aaaa which has always been enough for them... I am exhausted by obedience to this law, I try to say, whose mark lies on me in the spaces between the words, in the spaces between the pauses, and in the articulations that are set up the war of sounds. ([2004] 1977: 84)

Magda admits that what she says “comes from the realm of male interpretation and the male gaze, her father's disappointment that she is not a son” (Wright, 2008: 19). She would like to express herself outside this “law” and says: “My words are not the words such as men use to them” ([2004] 1977: 8), and complains with the following words: “I was born into a language of hierarchy, of distance and perspective” ([2004] 1977: 91).¹⁴ At a different level, Madga can be interpreted as a linguistic sign with a clear signifier, an unattractive body craving to be seen, heard and spoken to, but with no obvious signified. She says: “I signify something, but I do not know what” ([2004] 1977: 10). Her goal is to achieve recognition from her father, Hendrik or Klein-Anna, but she cannot succeed. Referring to her father she mentions: “Whatever it is he has been doing today (he never

¹³ In the South African bilingual edition.

¹⁴ This can refer to the language of patriarchy but also to Afrikaans, which she uses to speak to her servants in the bilingual edition and thus represents segregation.

says, I never ask)" ([2004] 1977: 34), and she demands that he talk to her: "Speak to me! Do I have to call on you in words of blood to make you speak?" ([2004] 1977: 78). Her relationship with Hendrik is also unproductive. She says to him: "Speak to me! Why do you never say anything?" ([2004] 1977: 118), and the problem with Klein-Anna is that she is only able to answer in monosyllables and cannot call her by her name: "I am just Magda, and you are just Anna. Can you say Magda? Come say Magda for me. No, miss. I can't" ([2004] 1977: 111). There is not one single example of exchange between them in the whole novel.

4. LANGUAGE

Several critics have noticed the importance of language in the novel. For example, according to Wright, "Magda's narrative is a narrative of desire, the specific desire for language, for sex, for connection, and for salvation, within a context that repeatedly negates those desires" (2008: 18). Magda craves to establish contact with other human beings, but ordinary spoken language fails as a means to communicate. She cannot escape the ideological matrix of language and, I believe, she tries to invent her own discourse in different ways. For the first one, I would like to go back to both Dovey's study of the novel as a Lacanian allegory and to Graham's and Canepari-Labib's interpretation of Magda as a hysterical character. It is obvious Coetzee was influenced by some of Freud's concepts regarding female hysteria and Lacan's definition of womanhood when he developed Magda as a character and this demands our full attention.

Graham and Canepari-Labib establish a comparison between Magda and Dora, Freud's most well-known hysterical patient. Graham gives a more accurate analysis of Magda as a subversive character and links her both to hysteria and the Lacanian allegory of the woman as a vacuum, what Irigaray precisely criticises in her work *Speculum*, as I have explained. Canepari-Labib interprets Magda's incestuous desires for her father with the help of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) and also focuses on her search to communicate. Magda even subverts Freud's talking cure when she says: "There was a time when I imagined that if I talked long enough it would be revealed to me what it means to be an angry spinster in the heart of nowhere" ([2004] 1977: 4).

Graham points to a relevant symptom of her apparent mental disease, which is her difficulty to give a chronological account of what happens—or what she imagines in her stream of consciousness—and this is even more interesting to analyse. Showalter notices a parallel between hysterical patients' linguistic disorder and their rejection of the law of the father. She mentions, referring to one of Breuer's patients: "Anna O's rejection of the

patriarchal order became her rejection of the father language" (2014: 156). In the case of Magda, she asserts she was born into a "father-tongue" ([2004] 1977: 106), but she rejects it expressing: "I do not say it is the language my heart wants to speak" ([2004] 1977: 106). We can interpret that Magda's linguistic disorder, like that of Anna O's, is linked to her rejection of patriarchy, and one of the attempts she will undertake to create a new language. Unfortunately, her revolt against the law of the father is not efficient in terms of communication.

While Magda shows some of the symptoms of hysterical patients, I would like to mention that hysteria was associated with an uncontrolled or unfulfilled sexuality in Victorian terms, which was according to Showalter "the major, almost defining symptom of insanity in women" (2014: 74). Magda, the virgin,¹⁵ seems to long for a sexual intercourse and this could be another symptom of her mental disease, but we should not forget Coetzee has advised us in *Doubling the Point* not to interpret her as a mad character.¹⁶ Since Magda has acknowledged the impossibility for her to communicate through language when she says that "words alienate" (1997: 28) and expressed her deep desire for "a language such as lovers use" ([2004] 1977: 97), her need to reach communication assumes the form of sexual desire for the three characters she shares the novel with: her father, in form of an Oedipal infatuation, Hendrik and also Klein-Anna. Having been rejected by her father, she starts daydreaming about having a relationship with Hendrik. The rape she imagines, and retells, is also a way to search communication through her body because her need to interact with other human beings has failed on a verbal level. Unfortunately, all these attempts to achieve an identity fail.

5. WRITING

Being aware of the difficulties imposed on her through spoken language, such as English or Afrikaans, I have mentioned Magda attempts sexual intercourse, another form of communication, to achieve contact with and recognition from another human being, but it also fails. In spite of this, Magda tries again to speak through her body on different occasions. She tries the sign language with the 12-year old postman who runs away from her when she makes indecent gestures with her hands, and another example of body language is when, knowing that her ugliness cannot seduce the aircrafts she interprets as

¹⁵ Maagd means virgin in Afrikaans and Dutch.

¹⁶ Coetzee says: "Magda is passionate in the way that one can be in fiction (I see no further point in calling her mad), and her passion is, I suppose, of the same species as the love I talked in the Jerusalem address—the love for South Africa (not just Africa the rocks and bushes and mountains and plains but the country and its people)" (1996: 61).

sky gods, she pretends to be more attractive and “depicts herself as a younger woman, her figure fuller and with legs parted” (Canepari-Labib, 2005: 190). At the end of the novel Magda abandons English and Afrikaans and tries what seems to be imperfect Spanish, or at least something similar, to communicate with the sky gods.¹⁷ She also speaks to them by making a fire, dancing or writing sophisticated messages with stones that become real poems and are supposed to be read from the sky, but again this attempt to communicate does not succeed because the sky gods never answer back. Neither spoken nor body language help her achieve any recognition.

While her story is a continuous lament on her lack of communication in her own environment, she will, on the other hand, search for a path to communicate through her writing and this will evoke her alliance with other female narrators, what Cixous, K. Cohen and P. Cohen have called *l'écriture féminine* in “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976).¹⁸ The French feminist defends an alternative feminine practice of writing capable of allowing women to address their needs and claim their identities outside phallogentrism. This writing should be able to subvert structures of thought that relegate women to secondary positions:

woman has never her turn to speak [...] writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures. (Cixous et al., 1976: 879)

Magda is obviously the main character of the novel, but she also indicates, in the very first page, that she is also the narrator of her story when she mentions: “I am the one who stays in her room reading or *writing* or fighting migraines” ([2004] 1977: 1, italics mine). Magda has given us several examples that make it clear she is a female writer when she asserts: “I am simply sucking this story out of my thumb” ([2004] 1977: 50). She obviously invents her story as she writes and considers the plot and reinvents again and again, like Penelope undoes part of her shroud every night, what she believes is the story of her life. She probably does it to consider which part fits her story best and even mentions she has no time to change the plot:

¹⁷ For Onega: “The fact that the messages are phrased in Spanish, rather than English, adds a specifically imperialist touch to them, since, for a Boer woman of Dutch origin, Spanish is the Ur-language of imperialism” (2011: 127).

¹⁸ Although this link between Magda's necessity to write and Cixous's call out for women to write is still unexplored, Wright affirms: “Magda's voice is an attempt for Coetzee to imagine the ways that a white South African woman of a certain time period — a period that comprises at least a century— might attempt to write that body in Cixous's sense, to claim the body” (2008: 18).

I thrust his memory farther and farther from me, til today it recurs to me with all the remoteness of a fairy-tale. End of story. There are inconsistencies in it, but I have not the time to track down and abolish them, there is something that tells me I must get out of this schoolhouse and back to my own room. ([2004] 1977: 52)

As the sole narrator of her story she reminds us that she is not necessarily presenting the truth to the readers. Moreover, Magda starts the novel mentioning she writes “in her room” ([2004] 1977: 1). The importance of having a room of one’s own was materialised by Virginia Woolf in her essay *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), a genuinely feminist text that addresses the limitations women face when they want to produce literature. One of Woolf’s most well-known sentences is: “a woman must have money and a room if she is to write fiction” ([1989] 1929: 4) and it is surely not a coincidence that Magda uses a similar sentence on the first page of the novel.

If hysteria was the female malady *de la fin du siècle*, I believe schizophrenia suits Magda’s passionate condition better. She shows most of the disease’s symptoms: irritability, hallucinations, disorganised thinking, lack of emotion and suicidal thoughts. Showalter explains that “the schizophrenic woman has become as central a cultural figure for the twentieth century as the hysteric was for the nineteenth” (2014: 204). Some feminists believe that schizophrenia is the perfect metaphor for the female condition because it shows the split between women’s vulnerability to cultural messages about femininity and their own expectations of developing themselves intellectually.¹⁹ In many cases it is associated with female writers as we see in Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) or in Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963). In fact, the description Magda makes of her father when she says “My father is the one who paces the floorboards back and forth, back and forth with his slow black boots” ([2004] 1977: 1) reminds us of Plath’s poem “Daddy” where the poet asserts her need to kill her father (Graham, 1996: 18). In this sense, Magda also reminds us of these protagonists in that she is not a conformist, has an incredible imagination, needs to break free from the oppressive structures of the society she finds herself in, but the difference is that Magda is not confused about her place in the private and public sphere and knows she needs to escape patriarchy. If she can be interpreted as a mad character, it is precisely because she is a metaphor of the insane ideology she cannot escape. Magda is imprisoned in boredom and a tedious existence. The prevailing social conditions at the time had the power to drive her, and in this sense she echoes many more

¹⁹ See Showalter’s chapter “Women and Psychiatric Modernism” (2014).

women writers such as Woolf, to a state of mind that could be close to madness. In fact, Magda's attempts to commit suicide also remind us of Woolf's and Plath's madness and link them to their role as writers.²⁰ She even mentions:

Far down in the earth flow the underground rivers, through dark caverns dripping with crystalline water...I waded out in to the tepid dam looking for the sinkhole which in our dreams beckons from the deep and leads to the underground kingdom. My skirt billows and floats around my waist like a black flower...Of all adventures suicide is the most literary, more so even than murder. With the story coming to an end, all one's last bad poetry finds release. ([2004] 1977: 14)

In 1979, two years after *In the Heart of the Country* came out, Gilbert and Gubar published *The Madwoman in the Attic*, where they examined how 19th century female writers were trapped in the imaginary of an overwhelming male-dominated society that expected them to embody the Victorian idyllic "angel in the house", a term coined by Woolf in her famous essay:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it — in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all — I need not say it — she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty — her blushes, her great grace. (Woolf, [1993] 1931: 3)

Magda's dialogue with Woolf is evident in the following lines:

The Angel, that is how she is sometimes known. The Angel in Black who comes to save the children of the brown folk from their croups and fevers. All her household severity is transformed into an unremitting compassion when it comes to the care of the sick. Night after night she sits up with, whimpering children or women in labour, fighting off sleep. An angel from heaven! they say, their flatterers' eyes keen. Her heart sings. In war she would lighten the last hours of the wounded. They would die with smiles on their lips, gazing into her eyes, clasping her hand, her stores of compassion are boundless. She needs to be needed. With no one to need her she is baffled and bewildered. Does that not explain everything? ([2004] 1977: 5)

Magda is also a grotesque character that represents the rage and confusion experienced by a female author trying to assert herself and find a room of her own. In order to do so, she

²⁰ Graham mentions that her suicidal attempts also link her to the Afrikaans poet Ingrid Jonker (1996: 81).

has to kill her father, representative of patriarchy. While she manages to kill her father twice —and what her father represents—, she cannot liberate herself from the patriarchal sexual and social dominance and her father comes back to life again.

6. CONCLUSION

In the Heart of the Country's main character's search for identity makes this novel unique and re-interpretable at many levels. I have shown that Magda can be understood in Irigarian terms as a symbol of the female search for a new language. She has tried the language codes she was born into without success, because they reflect the racial and gender discourses that rule the farm and she wishes to find "the true language of the heart" ([2004] 1977: 145).

Despite her desire to liberate herself from patriarchal structures of power, her "father-tongue" ([2004] 1977: 106) does not allow her to reconfigure her identity as a free woman in South Africa because, as Graham says, "the language of the father is not only a *Père-reversion*, it is also a perversion" (1996: 90). Magda remains voiceless even after she has murdered her father because she acknowledges that "she inhabits the voice of authority when speaking to the servants" (Macaskill, 1994: 465). Similarly, in order to avoid the ideological matrix embedded in spoken language, she has tried to communicate through her body and elaborated her own disordered mad language, in an attempt to escape her tedious existence, but she has not achieved real communication either. Rather than being mad, Magda is a literary protest against patriarchy through a revision of ideas from Freud and Lacan she appropriates and subverts in a South African context, where "the female bodies that mattered in Afrikaner culture in the 1970s were the long-suffering obedient wife and the prodigiously fecund mother" (Stone, 2003: 214).

However, Magda, the writer, has fabricated her own story and turned it into an interior monologue, which reminds us of Woolf's stream of consciousness. Unlike Susan in *Foe*, who depends on a writer to tell the story of her life and exist as a character, Magda, as the writer of her own diary, has achieved a subject position in the first person of her narration. While Cixous et al. mention: "Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history— by her own movement." (1976: 875), Magda has similarly told us: "I create myself in the words that create me" ([2004] 1977: 8). She is aware of the power of language to re-describe the world and, in an exercise of creativity, she has applied this lesson and, to a certain extent, invented herself and also her own imaginary world: "I have uttered my life in my own voice throughout (what a consolation that is), I have chosen at every moment my own destiny" (1997: 151). It is exactly through her writing and through

her alliance with some of the most remarkable feminist writers that she has challenged and deconstructed her role as an obedient Boer woman in South Africa and as a madwoman in the attic by positioning herself in the middle of the story of her life.

Magda is a feminine subversive consciousness. She tries to subvert patriarchy and Lacan's understanding of women, and emphasizes that our culture needs to accept alternate paradigms of womanhood. While both Cixous and Irigaray have been criticised for offering a representation of the female that does not show multiplicity, Magda has also proved that her signifier is not an exclusive and unmovable ontological position. She has demonstrated there is not just one way to read a story or to interpret a character. Magda signifies, like Dora, through her body and particularly through her speech, the protest her condition as a woman made unspeakable in words used in a patriarchal world and, above all, the search for a new language she has finally found in communication with us, her readers.

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