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Printed by Nakanishi Printing Co., Ltd.
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FACTORS AFFECTING THE USE OF MODERN PRENATAL AND MATERNITY SERVICES IN GOT AGULU SUB-LOCATION, WESTERN KENYA

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ABSTRACT  A main goal of the Kenyan government’s Safe Motherhood Initiative is to increase the number of babies delivered in modern health facilities. Mothers are encouraged to begin prenatal care visits early in their pregnancy and to continue care until the fortieth week. However, research carried out among the Luo people in Got Agulu, western Kenya, indicates that mothers may not actually initiate prenatal care early in pregnancy. This lack of use may be due to the Luo cultural belief that it is improper for childbirth blood to be spilled outside the father’s homestead. Further, the Luo do not view pregnancy as an illness that should necessitate numerous prenatal visits. This paper analyzes factors behind the low use of prenatal and maternity services within modern health facilities in the Got Agulu sub-location of western Kenya.

Key Words: Childbirth blood; Luo; Maternity services; Placenta; Prenatal.

INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies have shown that most non-Western cultures do not view pregnancy as an illness. Instead, pregnancy is socio-culturally constructed as a normal condition associated with a woman’s life cycle (cf. World Bank, 1993). These cultures view pregnancy as a necessary biological function as well as a very desirable and axiomatic component of human existence (McKinlay, 1972; World Bank, 1993). According to Sich (1981), non-Western societies tend to construct pregnancy as a cultural process that has the specific purpose of perpetuating for eternity the identities and personalities of individuals. This belief may partially explain why women in some developing countries may not seek prenatal care and maternity services at modern health facilities (cf. McKinlay, 1972; Karbo, 1987; Kaseje et al., 1987; Browner & Sargent, 1990; Jayawardena, 1993; Kawango, 1995). Other researchers have examined the various rituals and cultural injunctions associated with pregnancy and childbirth in non-Western communities. Some of these ritual prohibitions may bar expectant mothers from actively seeking prenatal services in modern health facilities (cf. Karbo, 1987; Kaseje et al., 1987; Browner & Sargent, 1990; Sargent & Rawlins, 1991; Jayawardena, 1993; World Bank, 1993; Sindiga, 1995).

Pregnancy may be a normal condition, but some diseases routinely afflict expectant mothers. According to Tinker (1994), pregnancy exacerbates anemia, protein-energy malnutrition, hepatitis, malaria, tuberculosis, sickle-cell anemia,
diabetes, and heart diseases. Pregnancy-related complications can also cause long-term damage to a woman. For instance, the Hausa of northern Nigeria frequently suffer from serious maternity-related complications such as vesicovaginal fistula (cf. Rehan, 1984; Thaddeus & Maine, 1994; Murphy & Baba, 1981; Longhurst, 1982; Wall, 1998). Further, the World Health Organization (WHO, 1993) found that in 1990, 15 million women developed long-term disabilities as a consequence of maternity-related complications. Failure to diagnose and treat complications brought about by pregnancy contributes to the high maternal morbidity rates in non-Western countries. In fact, the World Bank and WHO have estimated that more than 500,000 women in the developing world die annually from pregnancy-related causes (cf. Tinker, 1994; Wall, 1998; Filippi et al., 2000; Pittrof & Campbell, 2000; Shiffman, 2000).

According to the WHO (1994), 9–15% of pregnant women require medical care above the level of “minimum care,” which is the care that produces the best results among a population if it is provided to all expectant mothers and their newborn babies (cf. Pittrof & Campbell, 2000). Bouvier-Colle et al. (1998) pointed out the now widely accepted belief that it is not possible to predict accurately which women will experience severe obstetric morbidities. However, Shiffman (2000) suggested several interventions that may be critical to reducing maternal mortality: family planning services, safe and legal abortion, trained medical attendants during delivery, prenatal care, and emergency obstetrics. According to Maine (1993), providing prenatal care can give medical practitioners the opportunity to treat existing conditions that could cause complications during pregnancy. For example, iron foliate pills may be provided to expectant women with anemia, a condition that increases the risk of hemorrhaging during delivery. Sedatives and bed rest may be prescribed for pregnant women with pre-eclampsia, a common precursor to some hypersensitive disorders that could lead to maternal deaths (Abou-Zahr & Royston, 1991; Wall, 1998; Pittrof & Campbell, 2000). Prenatal checkups can also help medical staff identify expectant mothers at high risk for complications during delivery. For example, practitioners can predict the likelihood of obstructed labor by measuring the size of the cervix.

The main goal of this study was to identify major factors associated with the low use of prenatal care and child delivery services in modern health facilities among expectant mothers in the Got Agulu sub-location of western Kenya.

THE SETTING

This research was carried out in 1997 in several villages of the Got Agulu Sub-location of the Bondo District, western Kenya, on the shores of a large lake. According to the 1999 Kenyan census, Got Agulu had a population of 4,490 (2,210 males and 2,280 females) in 1,181 households spread over 11.8 square kilometers, for a population density of 381 persons per square kilometer (Kenya, 2001a; 2001b; 2001c). This area is home to the Nilotic-speaking Luo.
Individuals from various ethnic groups from other regions of Kenya and neighboring countries who worked in public institutions in the study region, as well as married women from other ethnic communities of Kenya also lived in the area at the time of study.

The study region had a relatively poor health status, primarily because it contained only two health facilities: the Got Agulu and Got Matar Dispensaries. These two health facilities faced numerous constrains including a lack of technical staff, chronic shortages of drugs and relevant consumables, non-functional or lacking equipment, poor access and transportation, inadequate community participation, and poor management of existing services as well as the unfriendly attitude of some service providers (Kenya, 1989; 1994; 2000). Several researchers observed that a significant segment of the population in this area managed their ailments at home. According to Nyambedha et al. (2001), locals tended to consult community health workers (CHWs), injectionists, traditional healers, and drug retailers and to self-medicate when they felt unwell. Pregnant women within this and other rural areas in Kenya often resort to traditional medicine and traditional birth attendants who are mobile (cf. Okumu & Gachuki, 1996; Mulemi, 1998; Ouko, 1998; Ouko, 1999; Khayundi, 2000; Watkins, 2000; Mulemi & Nangendo, 2001). The government of Kenya (2000: 22) has reported that traditional birth attendants and other healers still play a significant but unquantifiable role, especially in rural areas.

STUDY POPULATION AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Fifty pregnant and non-pregnant Luo women were interviewed during the field research. Interviews were conducted in the local Dholuo language, although some informants were proficient in Kiswahili and English. Interviews were carried out by three local research assistants affiliated with the Kenya-Danish Health Research Project (KEDAHR, n.d.). The interview guide consisted of both closed and open-ended questions designed to collect both descriptive and quantifiable data. Open-ended questions included queries regarding how the women perceived prenatal care and services, pregnancy, childbirth, and contraception. Thus, informants were asked about their obstetric history, whether they intended to have more children, and about their knowledge and use of both modern and traditional contraceptives.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Study Sample

Informants ranged in age from 15–51. Of the total sample, 12% were 15–20, 26% were 21–25, 14% were 26–30, 36% were 31–35, and 12% were older than
36. All informants were currently married; most were in monogamous marital unions, although one 51-year-old informant was a second wife in a levirate relationship.

Knowledge and Traditions of Midwifery in Got Agulu

Some expectant mothers in Got Agulu relied on traditional birth attendants (TBAs; locally, nyamureche, sing. nyamurerwa). Of the women surveyed, 19% had sought prenatal care and child delivery services from TBAs. Prenatal services offered by these TBAs included massaging the backs and stomachs of pregnant women. Informants elaborated that massaging was normally accompanied by the use of traditional herbs locally known as manyasi. The medicinal herbs and massaging were intended to ensure that the fetus was resting in the proper womb position to allow normal fetal presentation during delivery. Many respondents were aware that normal fetal presentation is when the brow, or the back of the head, appears first. Some women said that they had personally experienced abnormal fetal presentation including initial presentation of an arm, leg, buttock, or face.

TBAs also boiled and administered various traditional herbs for pregnant women to drink. One of these traditional herbs was locally known as nyath agulu. Pregnant women were required to drink this herbal concoction in the mornings and evenings. Informants believed that this herbal mixture would make the growing fetus strong and healthy. The herb was also intended to protect the fetus from being infected by rashes and a skin infection locally called yamo (Mulemi & Nangendo, 2001). Apart from this herbal mixture, pregnant women were required to drink cow milk to avoid complications during delivery.

Informants explained that women face many complications when delivering babies at home, including prolonged or obstructed labor, antepartum and postpartum hemorrhaging, fainting, a fetus too large for normal vaginal delivery, abnormal fetal presentation, and stillbirth. Some of the other problems mentioned included the need for an operation or stitching and the umbilical cord being cut improperly. A few informants said that some TBAs sometimes used blunt knives or stalks of sorghum to cut the umbilical cord. Finally, more than three-quarters of informants mentioned that they had retained the placenta (locally biero) in their body for a long time. In the words of one informant:

When I gave birth for the first time I did it at home. I was writhing in labor for too long. The blood of childbirth did not come out. The placenta was also stuck for more than 12 hours. It refused to come out for such a long period of time. And even today I cannot give birth easily because that first baby was too big.

However, respondents also said that TBAs normally ensured that the placenta was not retained after delivery, that the mother did not bleed excessively, and that the umbilical cord did not choke the infant. They also stressed that the
TBAs were very experienced and skilled in midwifery and respected by both men and women within the study area. Many of these traditional midwives lacked formal medical training in midwifery; their skills were “learned through family tradition and perhaps by assisting other midwives in the community” (Wall, 1998: 435).

Perceptions about Home Birth

Most informants (74%) said they had delivered most of their babies at home. The most common reason given was that labor came as a surprise. Another reason was that labor began at night, leaving pregnant women with no other option but to deliver at home. A considerable proportion of the same women added that delivering a baby at a modern health facility would violate Luo taboos regarding pregnancy and childbirth. They felt strongly that delivering a baby in the father’s homestead (dala) obeyed the tradition of ramogi (cf. Nangendo, 2005). Within this culture, such a tradition must not be violated, as this would constitute a moral, social, and spiritual transgression. Specifically, the Luo strongly believe that childbirth blood must be shed in the father’s homestead because this is where the original act of creation took place. Also, they believe that all the ancestors must congregate at the father’s homestead during birth to shower blessings on the infant, the parents, and the community at large.

More practically, informants pointed out that little money is required to deliver a baby at home. This is primarily because some TBAs only accept or demand token payments in the form of cooked foods, grain, chicken, salt, milk, or sugar. Alternatively, regardless of sex, a newborn baby could be named after the TBA, which would constitute payment for services rendered. Many TBAs are also neighbors, friends, and/or relatives of the mother, so may not charge anything for prenatal, maternity, or post-natal services.

A few informants mentioned that according to the tradition of ramogi, a TBA’s services should be offered freely to community members. However, the data indicate that some TBAs in the study area did charge for prenatal, maternity, and postnatal services in amounts ranging from Kshs. 200–500 ($1US is equivalent to Kshs. 75 at current exchange rates). Most respondents still considered these fees more affordable than the ones levied at the nearby modern health facility. Only one interviewee felt that the fee charged by TBAs was too exorbitant for a majority of women in Got Agulu. Some cases of tension have arisen between TBAs and mothers regarding non-payment of prenatal, maternity, and postnatal fees because some TBAs demand that the whole amount be paid upfront, while the women giving birth prefer to pay in installments.

The interviewed women indicated that the disadvantages of delivering a baby at home by far outweighed the advantages. One woman said delivering a baby at home should be completely discouraged because if a major complication arose, a woman would be rushed to a modern health facility anyway. Another was against delivering a baby at home because, as she said,
Once a woman gives birth, she is required to start working immediately. This is to ensure that there is enough food in the house and the child is clean. I personally feel this is a great burden to women in our sub-location.

Perceptions of Hospital Birth

The women were asked how far the Got Agulu Dispensary was from their home. The dispensary was 8 km from the homes of 20 informants and less than 2 km from the homes of most; all the informants claimed that they lived within walking distance of this local modern health facility.

The respondents were also questioned about prenatal and post-natal clinic attendance and treatment. Of the informants, 80% said they usually sought both prenatal and post-natal services at Got Agulu Dispensary, 19% sought services from TBAs, and a minority (1%) relied on prayers and faith healing. Respondents were then asked about the advantages and disadvantages of delivering babies at the local health facility. While 80% of the women claimed there were absolutely no disadvantages, others mentioned disadvantages such as the cost for gloves, razors, and kerosene, as well as dispensary cards. They also mentioned other costs including admission and ward fees, community levy stamps, and charges for treatment/drugs. These costs ranged from Kshs. 200–500 per day. The majority (70%) of these Luo women considered these costs affordable, but two women claimed the costs were only affordable for affluent families within the Got Agulu Sub-location.

Another complaint shared by a majority of respondents concerned medical staff at Got Agulu Dispensary. One woman summarized the collective opinion:

The behavior of the nurses and other dispensary staff really makes many pregnant women in Got Agulu shun the services there. The nurses are rude, harsh, abusive and quarrelsome. Oftentimes the nurses are absent from duty or when they are there they simply ignore patients. This is actually not very good when one is expecting a first child. Also, nowadays girls start giving birth when they are still very young. And it is only at the local health facility where they can get proper services and care yet the nurses do not just care.

Finally, some informants complained that the amount charged was exorbitant, and that women were expected to remain in the maternity ward for three days following a normal and uncomplicated delivery. The following section describes in detail how this three-day period greatly violates Luo traditions surrounding pregnancy and childbirth. Still, several women confessed that prenatal care offered them an opportunity to learn from medical practitioners about nutrition, personal hygiene, and symptoms that might indicate pregnancy-related complications. To verify the consistency and validity of the answers, these women were asked to explain why a majority of women still delivered at home instead of at
the nearby Got Agulu Dispensary. The most common explanation was that generally pregnant women in Got Agulu Sub-location fear modern health institutions. This fear is intimately associated with Luo cultural prohibitions surrounding pregnancy and childbirth.

One member of the Legio Maria Christian faith remarked that modern health institutions will never offer proper prenatal and child delivery services. This particular respondent normally consulted TBAs and also used Luo traditional medicine. She said that some of her friends, neighbors, and relatives did the same. This choice was based on the belief that Luo TBAs and indigenous medicine are more efficacious than the personnel and medicine at Got Agulu Dispensary. Other women stated that staunch believers in the Legio Maria faith should never utilize either biomedicine or Luo traditional medicine because Legio Maria followers are expected to believe in the potency and efficacy of prayers and faith healing.

Cultural Prohibitions

The goal of this study was to determine whether there were any cultural injunctions against delivering a baby in a modern health facility. The data indicate that 26% of respondents claimed there were no cultural restrictions, while 1% said they were not aware of any prohibitions. However, 73% said they were aware that among the Luo, a number of cultural injunctions prohibit delivering babies in hospitals. The most crucial cultural prohibition concerned the symbolism of the placenta (biero) in Luo culture. Respondents said that in their tradition the placenta must never be buried outside the father’s homestead. Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo (1989: 25) reported similar findings: “the weak and awkward are those whose placentas were buried outside their homesteads. Such individuals are referred to as outsiders (or locally jooko).” Specifically, Luo culture demands that the placenta of a girl must be buried on the left-hand side of her mother’s house, while the placenta of a boy must be buried on the right-hand side of the house. Within the Luo’s cosmological and symbolic systems, the left symbolizes weakness, impermanency, and vulnerability, while the right is a symbol of strength, permanency, and authority. Thus, girls because of their impermanency will move outside the homestead after marriage but boys will remain (cf. Kibiti, 1996; Nangendo, 1996a; 1996b; 1998; Ocholla-Ayayo, 1976).

Informants also explained that in Luo culture, the blood of childbirth must always be spilled in the homestead. Specifically, individuals not related to the couple must not see this blood. In addition, this blood and all other items used during the delivery must subsequently be buried in a secluded location that other people will not see. This practice is based on the Luo belief that witches and evil spirits (locally juogi) could use the blood of childbirth for malevolent intentions such as bringing magical harm and misfortune to a particular couple (cf. Mulemi & Nangendo, 2001; Acholla-Ayayo, 1976).

Informants also noted that among the Luo, a couple’s first-born child must be delivered in the father’s homestead; ignoring this cultural imperative means that
if this couple has any other children, they must also be born outside the homestead. Indeed, the Luo believe that if this cultural prohibition is violated, any child born in the homestead will not survive. Some informants later revealed that in Luo culture, it is definitely an impropriety for any child to be born outside the father’s homestead.

Responses also revealed that if the first wife did not spill the blood of childbirth in the homestead, no other wife should be allowed to deliver within the homestead. Among the Luo, the first wife must initiate an activity before any other wife may follow suit. Finally, informants revealed that after childbirth, traditions require that a mother remain secluded indoors. This seclusion depends on the sex of the baby. The mother is secluded for three days if the baby is a girl, or four days if the baby is a boy. Further, the umbilical cord of an infant girl is traditionally tied three times while that of a boy is tied four times (cf. Kibiti, 1996; Acholla-Ayayo, 1976).

Young girls who have not yet reached menarche are responsible for cooking food for a mother who has just given birth. These girls must be virgins because the Luo believe that sexual intercourse can have a ritually polluting effect on a newborn and the mother. Therefore, food cooked by sexually active and experienced women is considered polluting. However, some respondents pointed out that herbal remedies (locally manyasi) can be administered to rectify the condition of an individual who is deemed to be ritually polluting. If midwives or TBAs have not attained menopause, the Luo believe they might ritually pollute the mother and newborn. Also, TBAs should be related to either the husband or wife because the Luo believe that non-kin TBA could also pollute the mother and infant. These cultural restrictions associated with pregnancy, childbirth, the placenta, and the blood of childbirth may explain why many pregnant Luo women within the research had not made optimal use of the prenatal and child delivery services at Got Agulu Dispensary.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A majority of informants said that home births should be discouraged completely in Got Agulu Sub-location, citing pregnancy-related complications that had occurred. Many of the informants had experienced pregnancy-related complications, including prolonged and obstructed labor, antepartum and postpartum hemorrhaging, fainting, a fetus too large for normal vaginal delivery, or an incorrectly positioned fetus. Some of these complications can be addressed during prenatal checkups and emergency health care during child delivery in a modern health facility.

However, the study results indicate that women attended prenatal clinics only intermittently. Some informants stated that during their pregnancy, they did not feel that they were suffering from any serious ailment that would warrant constant hospital visitations. In the Luo culture, pregnancy is not seen as a sickness even though both men and women in other societies might view it in this
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way. Similar beliefs could explain why few expectant mothers frequent prenatal clinics throughout Kenya.

Okumu and Gachuki (1996) found that in general, Kenyan women tend to seek help for disease and illness at clinics and hospitals after the problem is too advanced. Part of the reason for this is the extreme demands on women’s time, especially in rural areas; Kenyan women rarely have time to frequent modern health facilities that may be far away (cf. MacCormack, 1982; 1989; Sargent & Rawlins, 1991; Sindiga, 1995; Khayundi, 2000).

Many pregnant women in Got Agulu still prefer TBAs. In many rural areas of Kenya, these TBAs are very important in providing much-needed obstetric services to expectant mothers. TBAs nevertheless need to be trained and equipped with simple instruments and drugs to carry out their services effectively (Kenya, 1989). However, MacCormack (1989: 685–686) suggested that in developing countries the training of traditional midwives has been under-funded and blighted by professional rivalry. Very few traditional midwives are taught allopathic technological skills related to childbirth and childcare, even though traditional midwives provide substantial health care in most areas of developing countries. Many local people in non-Western countries also highly respect TBAs for their experience in obstetrics as well as their knowledge of traditional remedies for medical conditions other than pregnancy (cf. Bouchier-Colle, 1984; Ityavyar, 1984; Jeffrey et al., 1984; Wall, 1998; Bianco, 1991).

Finally, a number of Luo beliefs and injunctions concern pregnancy and childbearing. The Luo strongly believe that it is a cultural impropriety for any Luo child to be born outside the father’s homestead. The blood of childbirth must be spilled within the homestead, the placenta must be buried at the homestead, and the mother and infant must be secluded. The Luo feel that if any of these injunctions is violated, magical harm and misfortune from supernatural entities may result. Therefore, the combination of these beliefs and cultural prohibitions could prevent optimal use of obstetric services and care at modern health facilities. Any outside medical intervention with the goal of encouraging use of public health facilities by expectant mothers such as those in Got Agulu must first address these cultural beliefs and taboos.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS I thank the University of Nairobi, especially the Institute of African Studies, for logistical support and the Kenya-Danish Health Research Project (KEDAHR) for funding the field research. I am also grateful to Professor Simiyu Wандibba for reading early drafts of this article and for the assistance of Elizabeth, Peter, and Timothy, KEDAHR Field Assistants, and Mr. Peter Ouma, KEDAHR Field Coordinator. Lastly, I acknowledge with gratitude all the informants who provided the information presented in this article. Thanks also to the anonymous reviewers at African Study Monographs.
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——— Accepted June 1, 2006

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AGENTS OF PROGRESS OR PROBLEM-MAKERS?: MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE IGBO LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT During the second half of the 19th century, Christian missionaries became active in various areas of southern Nigeria, including Igboland. Missionaries later learned and developed indigenous Nigerian languages in order to reach the people and spread their gospel. In particular, the missionaries worked hard to study and develop the Igbo language. However, rivalry between various missionary groups may have resulted in crises and conflicts that adversely affected the language as well as attitudes toward it. This study investigates the roles played by Christian missionaries in the development of the Igbo language, with the goal of determining whether they were in fact agents of progress or problem-makers.

Key Words: Conflict; Development; Igbo Language; Missionaries.

INTRODUCTION

Igbo is one of Nigeria’s three major languages. Along with Hausa and Yoruba, Igbo is an indigenous ‘national’ language and serves as a regional lingua franca for southeast Nigeria. Spoken as a first language by over 20 million Nigerians in the five southeastern states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo as well as in the Delta and Rivers states, Igbo belongs to the ‘new’ Benue-Congo (Bendor-Samuel, 1989) or the West Benue-Congo language families (Williamson & Blench, 2000).

During the development of Igbo, the language has been the focus of a number of crises and conflicts, which continue to be reflected in the attitudes people have toward their language, in their perception of the adequacy or appropriateness of the language as a medium for literature and mass media, in their appreciation of the language’s relevance in modern education, and in the measure of their loyalty and love for the language. Declining interest in the Igbo language, which may be connected with these crises and conflicts, has been a major worry for many Igbo people.

Christian missionaries laid the foundation for the study of the Igbo language. Their efforts produced a written version of Igbo, creating a legacy for the Igbo people. The missionaries paid considerable attention to the development of Igbo, sometimes against the wishes of both the Igbo people and the colonial government. Ayandele (1966: 301) offers the following insight:
In Igboland, as far as the Church Missionary Society was concerned, the Bible, which by 1910 was being translated in Union Ibo at great cost in time and money, was the main book the society wanted its pupils in Iboland to read, and not the English version. This meant that emphasis must be placed upon the vernacular, which the administration did not recognize.

Missionaries have often been correctly credited with bringing most West African languages, including Igbo, to global attention. The Christian missionaries not only initiated the processes of developing these languages, they also encouraged vernacular education with an emphasis on religious instruction. However, for several reasons, which may be blamed largely on the missionaries themselves, the Igbo language did not develop to the same degree as Hausa and Yoruba. In this respect, Hair (1967: 98) referred to the case of Igbo as ‘disappointing’ because, in particular, of the low volume of printed Igbo literature compared to the size and variety of materials printed in Hausa and Yoruba. In other words, by an accident of history, the missionaries laid the foundation for lingering crises and conflicts relating to this language that continue to threaten its growth. Tracing the origins of these crises and conflicts is important for clarifying the history of the Igbo language.

EARLY STUDY OF IGBO

A brief account of the early study of Igbo is necessary to acknowledge the contributions made by early missionaries as well as to trace the beginning of the problems related to the language.

The trans-Atlantic slave trade, which involved the shipment of thousands of black Africans to Europe and the Americas, was one factor motivating the early study of West African languages in general, and Igbo in particular. One of the greatest problems encountered during this trade was that of communication between European slave dealers, African middlemen, and slaves. To solve this problem, slave dealers needed either to learn the language of the slaves or to teach the slaves a European language. Europeans tended to focus on learning African languages for two main reasons. First, learning an African language from slaves would enable Europeans to directly deal at coastlines instead of having to rely entirely on the services of middlemen. Second, apart from the confidence produced by knowing the language of African customers and slaves, Europeans reasoned that knowing the language of the slaves would help slave masters to keep slaves in check, particularly in the event of possible plans for mutiny.

Any study of Igbo should make mention of G. C. A. Oldendorp, a German pastor of the Moravian Brethren, who visited the West Indies in 1766–1767 to collect materials for a history of the Brethren’s Caribbean mission. Oldendorp became interested in the slave population he encountered and wrote about their
African origins and languages. Hair (1967: 72) reported that of Oldendorp’s 28 brief vocabularies of African languages (published in Germany in 1777), two were Igbo, and titled ‘Ibo’ and ‘Kalabari’.

Ex-slaves also played an important role, particularly Olaudah Equiano, an Igbo ex-slave who, in England, transcribed some Igbo words in his 1790 autobiography, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vasa The African. In 1828, Quaker missionary and educationist Hannah Kilham collected the vocabularies of several African languages, including Igbo.

Up to this point, all efforts toward developing the Igbo language had taken place outside Igboland. The first study of Igbo within Igboland was conducted by Edwin Norris (assistant secretary to the Royal Asiatic Society) during Macgregor Laird’s Niger expeditions of 1841 and 1845. The published account of the expeditions included a list of 70 Igbo words.

While Norris prepared his guide to languages of the Niger, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) arranged to send two missionary-linguists on the expedition (see Hair, 1967: 74). The two men selected were J. F. Schön, a German missionary and Samuel Crowther, an African school teacher, both mission staff in Freetown. Schön had previously been studying a Sierra Leonean language and, with his new task in mind he began to study Igbo and Hausa while still in Sierra Leone. By 1840, he had collected a vocabulary of 1,600 Igbo words and had translated a few Bible prayers. Later that year, as the expedition sailed up the Niger through Igboland, Schön attempted to communicate in Igbo. He was greatly disappointed to learn that the dialect he had spent so much time learning in Sierra Leone differed greatly from the dialect generally used in Igboland. His greatest shock came in Abo, where he read a prepared Igbo address to the Abo chief. Unable to comprehend Schön’s pronunciation and intonation, the chief became bored and interrupted the reading.

Schön’s problems were related to his failure to realize that Igbo had several dialects and, more importantly, that the Isuama Igbo he had learned in Freetown was a pidgin Igbo that was spoken in Sierra Leone but not understood in Igboland. Schön was so disappointed at this setback that he abandoned the study of Igbo for Hausa and only resumed its study 20 years later. Schön’s frustrating experiences with Igbo dialects were only the beginning of the setbacks that occurred in relation to this language.

Following discussions with Baikie (commander of Macgregor Laird’s next expedition), Crowther wrote to CMS authorities recommending that a mission be instituted on the Niger, with headquarters at Onitsha in Igboland. The recommendation was accepted, probably for two reasons. First, establishing a station at Onitsha would satisfy the wishes of the Igbo ex-slaves in Freetown. Second, the Niger was seen as a new route to Hausaland (a long-time objective of missionaries). Consequently, Crowther was instructed to prepare for a mission to Igboland. He quickly sent for Simon Jonas (who had served as an interpreter during the 1841 and 1845 expeditions), and the pair then spent some time in Lagos to study Igbo.

On July 26, 1857, the mission arrived at Onitsha after a brief stopover at
Abo. The CMS mission consisted of Crowther, a number of Igbo-speaking catechists from Freetown, including Simon Jonas who was to serve as interpreter, and Rev. J. C. Taylor. Taylor was born in Sierra Leone of Igbo parents who did not speak the same dialects; he was, however, familiar with Isuama Igbo.

While Crowther and Baikie continued up the Niger, they left Taylor, who was specifically ordained for the Onitsha mission, to organize the headquarters. Taylor had only limited knowledge of Igbo, so he traveled to England to learn the language from Schön (who at the time was carrying out his language studies at Chatham). This constituted another setback for the language; Schön was probably still only familiar with Isuama Igbo. However, after studying for several months with Schön, Taylor began to publish in Igbo. According to Hair (1967: 83):

His journal published in 1859, included a small collection of Ibo proverbs, and in the same year he published a catechism in Ibo. In 1860, he followed these with an Ibo sermon (preached in Freetown) and translations of a Gospel and extracts from the Prayer Book, and he also revised Crowther’s primer.

Taylor returned to the Niger in 1860 and continued his translation work there. In 1866 he finished translating the New Testament into Igbo and published the remaining Gospels, Acts, and most of the Epistles between 1864 and 1866. Taylor and his assistants at Onitsha also published a few hymns in 1871 and most of the Prayer Book from 1871–1872. Taylor’s study of Igbo ended in 1871 after he was transferred from Onitsha to Igbebe, and then to the Sierra Leone mission due to ill health.

Crowther’s work developing the Yoruba language was more successful than Taylor’s work in Igboland. As a Yoruba man, Crowther was widely accepted and also spoke the language fluently. Because Taylor did not speak an acceptable dialect of Igbo, he was regarded as an outsider. He also made no serious attempt to utilize the locals at Onitsha, which was part of his undoing.

Schön’s earlier problems with dialect divisions must have influenced Crowther to adopt the Isuama dialect in 1857. A conference of Igbo translators held in Onitsha in 1875 to discuss problems related to the Igbo language made the following decision:

The standard and reading dialect of this language is strictly to be that of Isuama, it being the one which all the other dialects will learn to speak while Isuama will yield to no other, hence translations will be universally received by the nation.

It was unrealistic to expect that a mixed dialect, which had only served as a contact language for a small Igbo community in Freetown (which had been long separated from the language and culture) would be acceptable in Igboland. Designation of this as a ‘standard’ Igbo dialect was an unfortunate decision; the
missionaries could have learned about the risks of continuing with this experiment from Schön’s 1841 attempt to address an Abo audience.

UNION IGBO

The early Niger mission failed (as a result of several factors unrelated to this study) and was subsequently reformed under the guidance of a new group of highly committed and more productive missionaries, particularly Englishmen H. H. Dobinson and J. J. Dennis. They conducted linguistic exercises and translated many works.

By the beginning of the 20th century the increasing number of Igbo Christians produced an urgent need to translate the Bible into Igbo, as the majority of Igbo Christians did not understand English. Regarding this point, thus far, diversity and divisions among dialects had prevented translation of the Bible. To resolve disagreement about dialects, a conference was held in Asaba on August 14, 1905, at which Rev. T. Dennis imposed what he called ‘Union Igbo,’ an amalgam of features from various Igbo dialects including Onitsha, Bonny, Unwana, Arochukwu, and Owerri.

Union Igbo was adopted for the translation of the Bible in spite of strong opposition because it was not spoken anywhere in Igboland. As expected, Dennis was charged with carrying out this responsibility and, with the assistance of a few other individuals, the Union Bible was published in London in 1913. Union Igbo was also used for translations of other books including the Hymn Book and the Prayer Book. Obiamalu (2002) claimed that the arrival of the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) at Onitsha and its subsequent adoption of the more acceptable Onitsha dialect was one factor that caused CMS to abandon Isuama Igbo for Union Igbo. If so, this was due purely to rivalry.

Union Igbo has been vehemently criticized as an esperanto dialect (see Achebe, 1979, 1999; Emenanjo, 2001; Uwalaka, 2001). Chinua Achebe, a leading Nigerian novelist of Igbo origin, has been the greatest critic of Union Igbo. He indicated that the emergence of Union Igbo was a curse rather than a blessing, writing:

The ultimate result of his task (Dennis) has been more disastrous to the emergence of a creative Igbo language and literature than any other single factor (Achebe, 1979: 34).

Achebe (1999: 41) later illustrated the difficulty of understanding the Union Igbo Bible by citing Basden (1918):

Bible reading becomes a burden, rather than a duty and a pleasure … One cannot find Lancashire, Devonshire, Cornish and Somerset dialects mixed up in one Bible. Why should such a system be inflicted upon a poor educated people …?
Dennis rejected Taylor’s translations, claiming that he had a poor understanding of English. He rejected Taylor’s translation of the Bible and substituted his own translation. Achebe (1999: 39) observed that the introduction of Union Igbo was not necessarily based on the goal of improving the language; it ensured that the Bible was translated in only one variety of Igbo, which was more economical than publishing the Bible in more than one dialect. Dennis also obstructed or halted any further publishing of the Bible in Isuama Igbo or in any other dialect; for instance, Dennis and his backer Bishop Tugwell frustrated attempts by the Niger Delta Pastorate (a branch of CMS based in Bonny and led by Dandeson Crowther) to publish their own translation of the Bible.

Although Union Igbo was used until 1941 when Ida Ward introduced Central Igbo, it was continually subjected to criticism and controversy, which delayed the language’s development.

CENTRAL IGBO

The Central Igbo dialect was introduced in 1941, and was a product of Ida Ward’s research, which was conducted to:

Examine a number of Igbo dialects from the point of view of sound usage and constructions in order to find out if there is a dialect which would be used as a literary medium for African writers and for school publications, which would be acceptable over a considerable area of the Ibo country which might form the basis of a growing ‘standard’ Igbo (Ward, 1944: 7).

Emenanjo (1995: 219) aptly summarized the problems with Central Igbo:

Central Igbo was a living phenomenon fed by contiguous dialects. But it was the handiwork of manipulation by Ida Ward. The permutation and combination involved was artificial. Again the tendency of some of the dialects to substitute for Central (a part for the whole) as well as the attempts at hijack by different speakers (and missionaries) of the component parts made Central Igbo suspect in the eyes of the other Igbo groups who did not want to identify with it especially immediately after the Biafran experience when short-lived local linguistic independence was the consuming vogue.

Although the central dialect was introduced with good intentions, it added to the confusion and frustration of writers, who were unsure of an authentic dialect in which to write. Before the central dialect was introduced, the CMS had used both Union Igbo and the Owerri dialect to translate religious documents and to produce school texts, respectively. The Roman Catholic Mission, on the other hand, was using the Onitsha dialect to produce both religious materials and school texts.
PROBLEMS AND CRISES RELATED TO DEVELOPMENT OF THE IGBO LANGUAGE

Emenanjo (1998: 46) blamed crises in Igbo language development on the ‘acephalous nature of Igbo political culture.’ However, Emenanjo’s claim that ‘the non-existence of an Igbo dialect with a pan-Igbo recognition and patronage’ was a factor in the introduction of the three esperanto-like Standard Igbo varieties (Schön’s Isuama Igbo from 1852–1899, Archdeacon Dennis’s Union Igbo from 1900–1927, and Ida Ward’s Central Igbo from 1929–1972) is unlikely. The kind of dialect to which Emenanjo refers could not have emerged from out of the blue. Like the Oyo dialect of Yoruba, a Standard Igbo dialect would probably have evolved naturally if missionaries had avoided making their initial mistakes.

Rather than blame missionaries, Afigbo (1981) showed in detail how the Igbo people themselves were the real reason behind the language’s underdevelopment. Emenanjo wrote, ‘one of our weak points as a people is that we do not know how to manage crises, adversity, failure or misfortune’ (2001: 27), indicating that, in the interest of a common language, the Igbo should have resolved their differences much sooner and adopted a particular standard variety. Achebe (1999), however, blamed the current problems with the Igbo language solely on Dennis and his Union Igbo. However, Dennis and his Union Igbo were not the only setbacks to Igbo; the entire missionary era should share responsibility in this instance. Additionally, the Igbo language faced crises resulting from other factors, associated with the Igbo administrative setup, which was ‘socially fragmented’ (Afigbo, 1972: 7) and ‘politically disintegrated’ (Green, 1947: 3). The language has also been affected by other factors, such as Nigeria’s civil war (1967–1970), problems associated with attitudes to the language, and neglect by the governments of Igbo-speaking states (see Igboanusi & Peter, 2005). While all of these factors have contributed to crises associated with the Igbo language, this study has traced problems that occurred during the development of Igbo to mistakes made by missionaries and the conflicting interests of various Christian denominations, which encouraged unhealthy rivalry.

The following sections critically examine crises and conflicts that occurred relating to dialect and orthography.

I. The Dialect Factor

Many studies have examined how the multiple dialects within the Igbo language have constituted a major setback to the language. Unlike Isuama and Union Igbo, Ward’s Central Igbo was a living and functional dialect. It was more commonly used than the other two varieties and was accepted as a written language by writers, publishers, and educational authorities.

The dialect factor began with the troubled initiatives made by the early missionaries. Schön’s experience with Isuama Igbo at Abo should have revealed that Isuama was an unused dialect for Igbo. Rather than abandoning this project, Taylor went to the United Kingdom to learn Isuama Igbo from Schön.
Taylor could have learned Igbo from native Igbo speakers within Igboland, but chose to go to Britain. Again, he failed to utilize the services of Igbo interpreters to examine a living dialect. If Schön and Taylor had learned and spoken a dialect from within Igboland, the history of the language would have changed. Samuel Crowther (who approved the use of Isuama Igbo) should have realized that his introduction of the Oyo dialect in Yorubaland was successful because the dialect had a home base. This experience should have led him to select the Onitsha or Owerri dialect from the beginning. If this had been the case, the Igbo people would have had no choice but to accept it. They rejected Isuama mainly because they could not understand it. Native Igbo speakers also considered it to be a pidgin variety of the language and therefore to have low status.

The missionaries thus created room for disagreement and controversy. They were responsible for Dennis’ introduction of Union Igbo, even after the failure of Isuama. Explanations blaming failure on the fact that Isuama was foreign and Union was considered an indigenous experiment are unconvincing. In fact, both versions of the language were related and artificial.

Like many languages, Igbo consists of several dialects that are highly mutually intelligible (Emenanjo, 1998). If handled properly, the multiplicity of Igbo dialects should not have led to problems. It was the rivalry between the various leading religious denominations that constituted a serious problem for the language. For example, the RCM rejected Union Igbo in favor of the Onitsha dialect simply because Union Igbo was a product of the CMS, which had also adopted it. This rivalry caused more harm to the language than any other factor in the 20th century.

II. The Orthography Factor

The orthography controversy was another important factor that delayed the development of Igbo. Introduction of the Adam-Ward Orthography in 1929 led to a bitter and long-drawn dispute over orthography from 1929 to 1961. On one side of the dispute were the Government, I. C. Ward, R. F. G. Adams, and the RCM, and on the other side were the CMS and the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC). Onyekaonwu (1986: 141) identified three reasons for Catholic support of the new orthography:

One was that they wanted to use the opportunity to undo their archrivals, the C.M.S., who had already published their religious materials in the old orthography. Secondly, they shrewdly adopted the New Orthography as a strategy for getting government grants for the expansion of their numerous schools that did not emphasize the teaching of Igbo as they did the teaching of Latin. Thirdly, unlike the C.M.S. who had been identified with the Lepsius Orthography, the R.C.M. had not been identified with any and so anyone other than that associated with the C.M.S. would be acceptable to them.
The RCM only became interested in Igbo language development following the 1926 Education Ordinance, which led to Ida Ward’s New Orthography. The Catholics would neither use the old (or Lepsius) orthography nor be identified with any works credited to Crowther and Dennis, since they were associated with the CMS. They therefore allied with R. F. G. Adams (then the Chief Education Officer for Eastern Nigeria) to ensure the enforcement and implementation of the New Orthography. It is widely believed that Catholic support for the New (or Adam-Ward) Orthography was not based on genuine concern for indigenous language development; rather, it was adopted to discredit and negate any earlier endeavors of their archrival: the CMS. In contrast, CMS rejected the Adam-Ward Orthography, with strong support from the SPILC, principally because it would require republishing all earlier works into the new orthography. The divide along lines of Christian denomination made this controversy dangerous and volatile.

This controversy discouraged both writers and publishers from creating any serious work in Igbo because of the likelihood of its rejection by the opposing side. The uncertainty about what might happen next, possibly an entirely new orthography, also caused many potential Igbo writers to write in English (see Igboanusi, 2002) and started what is now known as Onitsha market literature (cf. Obiechina, 1971).

Although the orthography controversy was finally resolved in 1961, with the emergence of the Ọnwụ Orthography, it had a devastating impact on the language. The Ọnwụ Orthography was instituted following the resolutions of a committee set up by the government to resolve the protracted orthography controversy. The committee was headed by Dr. S. E. Ọnwụ, Assistant Medical Director for Eastern Nigeria. Following a series of meetings, during which proposals from groups and individuals were examined, the Ọnwụ Orthography, consisting of 36 letters, was accepted in 1961 as the standard writing system for Igbo. The controversy preceding the adoption of this orthography discouraged many writers from writing in the Igbo language. Potential writers either switched to English or abandoned the idea of writing completely. Publishers were also discouraged from investing in the production of Igbo texts.

CONCLUSION

Missionaries initiated study of the Igbo language and put it into writing. Igbo received considerable attention from missionaries, but compared with the development of Hausa and Yoruba within the same period, particularly with respect to the quantity of materials published in these languages, Igbo was at best unsatisfactory.

Problems associated with Igbo language development began with the missionaries’ failure to choose an acceptable variety of Igbo. These problems were further compounded by orthographic controversy, which was fought along the lines of varying religious denominations. Crises relating to the Igbo language, which
were chiefly manifested in conflicts over dialect and orthography, did not only affect the status of the Igbo language in the fields of education, literary creativity, and the publishing industry. They also affected the attitude of the Igbo people toward their language; it created a negative attitude which is the real bane of the Igbo language.

The major setbacks for the language were the controversies, arguments, and disagreements that tended to follow each phase of development. Introduction of Isuama, Union, and Central Igbo all resulted in long struggles over rejection or acceptance, which generally caused breaks in the production of serious works in the language.

The missionaries made a surprising choice when they experimented with Igbo in ways that have not been done with any other language. A standard language may evolve naturally through ‘dynamic forces of infusion and exclusion’ (Emenanjo, 1998: 46), but certainly not through the artificial infusion of a few selected dialects within a definite period. The evolution taking place in the current Standard Igbo is gradual.

Igbo politics currently involves issues relating to intransigence, ‘overdemocratization’ (Uwalaka, 2001), selfishness, obduracy, and uncompromising attitudes, and these have all contributed in important ways to disagreements about dialect and orthography. In addition, some religious fanatics and conservative scholars have continued to write in Igbo using defunct orthographies or local dialects in spite of the seeming resolution among orthographic and dialect conflicts. Still, missionaries were the real agents of conflict with respect to the Igbo language, because they constructed a framework of discord among the Igbo people over dialects and orthography. This problem is still manifested in the disdain with which the Igbo people treat their language. Many people are under the uninformed impression that stubborn dialect and orthographical problems are unsolved, while others consider the language to be inherently difficult to use. Yoruba and Hausa speakers have a comparatively greater loyalty and love for their languages (for patterns in language preference see Igboanusi & Peter, 2005). This difference can be attributed to the solid foundation laid for them by the missionaries. In contrast, missionary activities in Igboland over the 19th and 20th centuries continue to undermine development of the Igbo language, even in the 21st century, by having a negative influence on the psychology of the Igbo people, who still consider their language to have little value.

NOTE
This is a revised version of a paper that was presented (by proxy) at the International Conference on Igbo in the Twentieth Century: A Tribute to Simon Ottenberg, Ithaca, New York, April 4–5, 2003.
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PATRIARCHAL SUPPRESSION AND NEUROSION: AFRICAN WOMEN’S PLIGHT IN J. M. COETZEE’S IN THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

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ABSTRACT This paper analyzes the socio-political status of African women with regard to notions of femininity, masculinity, and sexism. The discursive strategy involves a concept of feminism that deploys psychoanalytic theory. It also relies on sociological and anthropological analytical tools. The paper critically examines a J. M. Coetzee novel - In the Heart of the Country. Among the issues discussed are the following: What kind of femininity is suggested in the novel? In what way do the implied female qualities mirror a society structured by a racial and gender schism? What are the techniques employed by Coetzee to foreground women’s plight in the novel? Generally, Coetzee’s depiction of African women subverts and disrupts patriarchal modes of representation and containment. It also suggests that African women’s full enjoyment of their human rights is a prerequisite for their empowerment, and constitutes the trademark of democracy in their continent. Magda, the protagonist of the novel, is simply one voice in a chorus that is calling for an end to patriarchal suppression in Africa, as well as for order, unity, security, and gender equality. Coetzee’s text mediates the idea that African women should be empowered to decide freely on matters relating to all aspects of their lives.

Key Words: Feminism, Patriarchy, Empowerment, Suppression, Neurosis, Coetzee.

INTRODUCTION

That the African continent is a chaotic and violent place to live is an observation that has often been made, especially when the racist, ethnic, and sexist tendencies that have been allowed to develop in African societies are considered. To a great extent, African women are being relegated to the background in the social, political, and economic arenas of their societies. This has had a negative effect on the development of the continent. Corroborating the claim that violence and discrimination against women is a developmental problem in Africa, Olayinka (2006: iv) states:

If women, who often constitute at least 50% of the total population, should bear any burden, it can only be reasonably expected that the rest of the society will have to either directly or indirectly bear part of the burden.

However, African women, conscious that they have been relegated to a position from which they function as mere appendages to men, have always strug-
gled to achieve recognition as human beings in their own right. Literary works serve as a means by which the predicaments of women in this continent can be represented and condemned. Rushdie (2003: 338) comments on the relevance of literature in the depiction of social issues and aspirations thus:

“...a work of literature offers its readers a clearer, deeper understanding of the opaque events being reported in the press and on TV, whose shadowed truths the half-light of journalism fails to illumine.”

In this context, Coetzee’s novel is understood in this study to be both strongly humanistic and feminist. However, his representation of African women in general has been under-examined in previous collections of criticism of his work – a critical imbalance that this essay seeks to redress. This study examines Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country* (1976) as a story that dwells on the travails, aspirations, upheavals, and achievements of African women. It also focuses on the feminist aesthetics of the novel.

The theoretical framework of the paper derives from the assumption that, in his fiction, Coetzee uses feminism as a social theory and as a philosophy (Madoo & Niebrugge, 1996). Feminism, as a theory, proposes that a just society must be inclusive and seek equality for all, across gender, race, and class. As a philosophy, feminism sets out principles and ideals that people should uphold and live by. Feminism, as depicted in Coetzee’s text, offers a critique of social relations with respect to gender that highlights inequality, and it promotes women’s rights, interests, issues, etc. Through the diary of Magda, issues such as gender discrimination, stereotyping, objectification (especially sexual objectification), oppression, patriarchy, etc. are examined. The philosophical orientation of Coetzee’s fiction is that African people should fight against the desires that emerge from the patriarchal cultures that inform their societies. Our basic hypothesis is that Coetzee uses the life, psychology, and mental dissonance of the protagonist of his story (Magda) to chronicle the extreme sexism that is rampant in African societies, and to advocate the empowerment of African women. Magda’s dilemma is also used to depict the alienation of African women generally. Patriarchal suppression and alienation have a negative impact on Magda’s psyche. She sees herself as unfit and, as a consequence of her experiences, develops emotional problems and becomes psychologically unstable. The text foregrounds symptoms of madness that emerge as a result of excessive patriarchal suppression. These include memory lapses and forgetfulness. This is why Magda keeps on repeating the phrase “or perhaps,” a semiotic signifier of mental atrophy. She also suffers from migraines as a result of the oppression that she experiences in a phallocentric society.
As a testimony to the fact that Coetzee offers in this text a realistic documentation of oppression of African women by African men, Bartnik (2006: 43) has noted that Coetzee is one of the South African writers who bear “witness to injustice happening around them, and their role is to ascertain the truth by describing life as adequately as possible.” The agony of Magda stems from the fact that she is overshadowed by figures or structures of patriarchal power in her society. She is rendered almost transparent, even non-present. The hostile social climate that she lives in renders her mute and marginal. She does not have a genuine status of her own, and she becomes, barely, a reflection of other, overpowering figures. However, as a radical feminist who cannot be perennially suppressed, Magda voices her plight and demands recognition from the margins. She expresses her desire to participate in social discourse and condemns a society that is rigidly controlled by men. She knows that if she fails to empower herself socially, she will become totally invisible and silenced by the figures of power.

Magda is used in the novel as a symbol of Coetzee’s quintessential African emancipated woman. This claim is in consonance with a similar one made in the press promotion of the novel:

“Magda’s response to an Africa that will not respond to her is violence and madness.”

She believes that, although patriarchal suppression is a global problem, her situation, as an African woman, is particularly outrageous. In her words:

“The colonies are full of girls like that, but none, I think, so extreme as I.” (pp.1-2)

Magda is passionate, obsessed, and absurd. These and many other qualities contribute to her ability to survive in a hostile environment. The text examines what it means to be a woman in contemporary African society, in which patriarchal oppression is particularly onerous and evident; it also envisions a new African community in which men and women are liberated from the societal structures that have led to oppressive male roles and to battered women’s syndrome, as well as to the ills of domestic violence and rape. Her father represents the African patriarchal order of appropriation and epitomizes the oppressive symbolic law of that culture. In fact, she functions, as Foucault’s paternal ‘No’. This is because the father represents not only himself but also the colonial and patriarchal milieu. Magda is a fictional character who is universal with respect to her struggle for self-expression and desire to tell her own (hi)story using language that does not alienate her. She struggles to become an agent of her own (hi)story, thereby rejecting cultural and historical definitions of her sub-
jectivity. Magda and her father live in a secluded place, on an isolated farm. In the father-daughter dissonance that emerges in the novel, the father is a symbol of the colonial order, a representative of a colonial system in which the colonizers have an overbearing presence. Magda, the archetype of Coetzee’s radical women, questions cultural stereotypes and reverses a jaundiced portrayal of women. She gives a Freudian explanation for her predicament, thereby highlighting her private experience and public dilemma (Ashcroft, 1998).

The situation of women in the society portrayed in the novel is harsh. From the beginning of the story, Coetzee prepares the mind of the reader for an African woman’s descent into neurosis by selecting and paralleling a series of incidents that, on the surface, appear insignificant and unconnected, but which, taken together, are ultimately instrumental, not only to shaping the course of her life but also in transforming the narrative into an artistic whole. Magda can be said to be a literary sister to Adela Quested in E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, who suffers following her relationship with Dr. Aziz. Similar to Adela’s situation, Magda’s emotional tumult is revealed in her bouts of hallucinations. In addition, Magda is as garrulous as the two tramps in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (Estragon and Vladimir). However, unlike the two tramps, Magda matches her words with actions. She challenges the oppressive character of her society:

“by changing the very language of identity, by allowing the feminine to speak.” (Gallagher, 1991: 92)

In this way, Coetzee is able to objectively present the crisis of domestic violence in African societies. That is, the problem is not the exclusive preserve of African men; there are also women who beat their husbands regularly.

The patterning of the actions in the novel is part of the novelist’s technique and helps to define the novel’s theme and purpose. This design is presaged in Magda’s meditation at the beginning of the novel. She is in dire need of something with which to calm her mind, which is constantly plagued by depression and neurosis:

“I look upon any poor man as totally undone, whispers a voice (in my solitude I hear voices.)” (p.36)

She is a victim of alienation, and she suffers from emotional anguish and a host of other internal mental crises, as a result of the constraining forces of isolation. Coetzee portrays this African woman as encumbered by dissonance and pain. Wade (1993: 122) describes *In the Heart of the Country* as a novel that:

“presents South Africans and their landscape as a closed system dominated by neurotic structure, of behavior and perception, from which no escape is possible.”
In line with Wade, Cantor (1994) sees the text as exploring the manifold problems arising from decolonization, gender dissonance, national liberation, and ethnic identity. Indeed, the novel raises important questions relating to race, gender, and class. Nobody in the text understands anyone else. Magda does not understand her father, and he does not understand her motives and plight. She does not understand Hendrik and his wife. She does not even comprehend herself. This is the plight of women in the world of the novel, where gender and interracial relations are conflicted, and individuals operate in a climate of ignorance. However, in this arena of conflict, it is the woman who suffers most. It is glaringly evident that any time that there is a war or crisis in any African state, it is women who suffer the most. Some are widowed too soon; some lose their children, and some are deprived of their parents, siblings, or other relations.

African women, as portrayed in the novel, are bedeviled with skewed interpersonal relationships. Therefore, the images of women that pervade the novel are characterized by powerlessness, social isolation, and abnegation. Magda is used by Coetzee as a confluence of all the agonies that beset African women. Coetzee is not a writer who reflects the socio-political problems of his people uncritically; rather, he refracts the troubles of Africa and Africans by suggesting alternatives. To him, men and women should live together peacefully because gender war in any society portends danger for both sexes. Hence, through Magda, Coetzee calls for the liberation of all women from oppression. Magda can therefore be called a tool in the hand of the novelist, one that can raise the consciousness of African women, so that they can rise up and fight for their freedom and empowerment. To existentialists, alienation is a permanent condition; human beings are essentially self-ali enated. Therefore, it is futile to expect that human beings will, one day, disalienate themselves. However, in Marxism, disalienation is possible for a willing mind. To the Marxist, human beings were not originally self-ali enated, but became so, through the course of history. Hence, human beings can return to themselves in future (Eagleton, 1990). Disalienation is therefore possible through a radical transformation of society that permits (w)men to lead a more fulfilled human existence. This is the philosophy that Coetzee seems to be artistically propagating in this novel. Some African societies have suffered and are still suffering untold social, political, economic, and physical agonies. One reason that has been given for the pandemic nature of such woes in Africa is gender warfare. Coetzee, through his portrayal of Magda, believes that this is not an insurmountable problem; people could participate in changing the socio-political and economic climate of their continent through a reordering of their society along lines of mutual understanding among its various strata and groups of people.

Magda has a domineering, rigid, possessive, and assuming father, a true male sexist who rules over his household with an iron hand. He does not spare the rod in maintaining discipline over his daughter and servants. In fact, Magda is confined to the domestic sphere. She both fears and hates her father for refusing to give her paternal affection. This father-daughter schism has a deep psy-
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chological effect on Magda. The reader knows and hears nothing about her mother (her gold), and the father who is supposed to be her consolation is a bully. Throughout her monologue, hints of his Spartan discipline emerge. The dissonance between Magda and her father leads to her accidentally killing him while discharging a shotgun through the bedroom window because he has coerced Klein-Anna, the wife of Hendrik, the farm laborer, into his bed. As the world in the novel does not readily grant the satisfaction of (wo)man’s desires, Magda murders her father. Thus, Coetzee captures the chaos, confusion, and disorder that characterize the postcolonial African world, reminding the reader of the problem of gender dissonance that is inherent in contemporary African societies. The picture of Africa that emerges in the novel is one of a crisis-ridden continent, a world destroyed by fascism, hate, and racism; in this context a tragic conception of history, as an eternal cycle of human stupidity, is formulated. Pitiably enough, Magda’s rebellion violates the peace of the family and introduces chaos, division, and strife.

Capitalism has eroded the sense of unity and egalitarianism that characterized a number of pre-colonial African societies. Even the unit of the family, assumed to be a conflict-free setting, is now marred by cut-throat hatred. Recourse to violence becomes a pattern in the family of Magda’s father. She has witnessed violence meted out to her peers and neighbors by her father. This has a negative effect on her psyche, and it is reflected in her aggressive behavior (bullying and fighting), emotional disturbance (depression, continual fear, anxiety), criminal activities (vandalism and murder) and general emotional trauma. Through Magda’s capacity to kill her father, Coetzee seems to be upholding a basic tenet of Amazon Feminism, which focuses on physical equality between males and females. It opposes gender stereotypes and discrimination against women based on assumptions that women are supposed to be, look, or behave, as if they are passive, weak, and physically helpless. Magda’s ability to murder her father is Coetzee’s rejection of the idea that certain characteristics or interests are inherently masculine or feminine. By this act, Coetzee, the male Amazon feminist, envisions, upholds, and explores a vision of heroic womanhood.

The daily experiences of Magda, and by extension African women generally, as witnessed in her monologue, reveal that women, in the world of the novel, are inundated with all kinds of intractable ecological, economic, social, and psychological problems. These are shown in a number of horrifying apocalyptic images that appear in the novel. These images include experiences of madness, isolation, rape, murder, alienation, and paranoia. We can conclude, through the imagined ordeals and experiences of Magda, that human beings are both savage and civilized and governed by contradictory impulses. Ward (1989) sees Magda as a literary symbol of white South African society, most especially after the trauma of Soweto. However, in this paper, Magda is conceived of as being more than simply a symbol of an African nation. This is because, in her deeds and revelations, it is possible to observe some of the pain and trauma of African women in general. The society depicted in the novel is one character-
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ized by struggle, where survival of the fittest is the order of the day:

“We have to destroy other things and people... in order not to destroy ourselves, in order to protect ourselves from the tendencies to self-destruction.” (Osborn, 1965: 25)

This is, in fact, the socio-political mood of most African states, scarred by civil wars, violence, ethnic strife, and other forms of conflicted relationships.

Pacifist measures in the world of the novel, and by extension, the African continent, tend to be ambivalent because, under conditions of stress, they reveal themselves as aggressive impulses. Psychoanalysis has demonstrated that certain kinds of mental process and specific instincts make the individual who (s)he is. Magda is frustrated because of patriarchal hegemony in her home and society. Psychological explanations abound for Magda’s deviant behavior. Her manner is a product of defective primary socialization. The absence of a warm, loving relationship between Magda and her father ensues in her deviant acts. Some believe that children from broken homes or polygamous homes always engage in deviant acts because they are acting out the feelings of guilt and frustration that they suffered in adolescence. This confirms a popular Yoruba adage:

“Bi odede o dun, bi igbe ni ilu ri.” (“if all is not well with the family, the town will look like a dung pit.”)

The problem that African women face is that they encounter hostile social and cultural elements that are embedded in the social structure of their societies. These elements continue to undermine the welfare of women in Africa. Among the multiple problems faced by African women that are revealed or tangentially observed in the monologue of Magda are child marriage, female genital mutilation, widowhood rites, nutritional taboos, body scarification, tribal marks, and tattooing, among others. These practices have effects on the physical, social, and psychological well being of African women. Many constitute acts of violence against women.

Given the tortuous experience of Magda, a symbol for African women, it is no surprise that she becomes paranoid. One cannot excuse Magda’s brutality in relation to her father and her stepmother on any grounds. However, it is important to see beyond that act, which constitutes a symptom, and to seek out the circumstances that could turn a sane person into a beast-like and crazed being. This, we think, is one of the important messages mediated by Coetzee’s text. He wants the reader to understand the fate of the majority of African women, who are gradually destroyed physically, mentally, psychologically, and even spiritually by societal dissonance and sexist attitudes, and who are looking to retaliate. However, this cannot (nor does Coetzee intend it to) excuse the brutality and parricide committed by Magda. The real enemy, in this case, is sexism, which perpetuates prevailing notions of race and class.

Despite the rational explanation of chromosomal influence on the sex of
a fetus, when a woman gives birth to only female children, she is blamed. Magda’s problems result from her mother’s ‘inability’ to bear her husband a son. The institution of marriage in Africa is primarily a union between two families, rather than between two individuals. Preference for male children predisposes the girl-child to danger (physically and psychologically), from birth to adulthood. She is seen as a burden, not an asset, to the paterfamilias. A boy child is seen as a person who can enlarge the family. On the other hand, a girl child is seen as one who will reduce the household, because she can be ‘acquired’ by another family as a wife. Therefore, gender inequality in African societies is strengthened by early childhood experiences, which lead men to see themselves as highly valued, and women to see themselves as being of less social value. These perceptions of gender lead to a social system that is dominated by men. Pressure is put on a woman who does not ‘produce’ a male child. She may resort to having more children until a son is born, or until, as in the case of Magda’s mother, she dies in childbirth. In this situation, the husband, as represented by Magda’s father, will either marry another woman who, hopefully, will bear him sons or, if he is married according to Ordinance Law or Christian marriage, he tries to have a son outside his marriage. Contrary to the glowing portrait of marriage set out in magazines and other media, African women see marriage as a bad bargain (Yusuf, 1999). This is because they are disadvantaged in many spheres of marital life, due to the patriarchal structures upon which their societies are built. Thus, in In the Heart of the Country, Coetzee dwells on the predicament of women living in states of crisis and displacement, and in an agonistic relation to oppressive sexual and political circumstances. This representation includes the idea of the general challenge inherent in the condition of postcolonial African women, the problem of their relation to the Other, gender wise (Stone, 2003). In Coetzee’s literary exploration of the problem of racial conflict in South Africa, there is a general acknowledgement of the idea that gender inequality constitutes a debilitating problem in Africa.

In such a context, it is not surprising to note that polygamy is allowed in African culture. An African man may marry another woman as a reprieve when his first wife is unable to have male children. In fact, as is seen in the plight of Magda’s mother, a woman’s place is not consolidated until she bears a male-child. A woman who cannot have a male-child has defaulted, and can even be divorced for that reason. A woman who does not reproduce figures of authority, power, and supremacy in the form of sons is not regarded highly by her husband (the chief figure of power), or by her in-laws or society at large (Akande, 1999). The fact is that a woman who ‘produces’ only girl children is as ‘useless’ as a barren woman.

We can offer some sociogenic explanations for Magda’s seemingly anti-social behavior, which is socially induced in that it arises from the conflict and pain experienced in her home and social environment. We can support this claim with the Anomie Theory of Deviance propounded by Robert Merton. The behavior of Magda reveals that there is a breakdown of order in the normative structure of her society, a society that fails to provide individuals with
opportunities to achieve the goals that are considered desirable. People react differently to situations of anomie. For instance, in this text, Magda reacts to societal pressures rebelliously. She not only rejects conventional cultural goals and the means of attaining them but also endeavors to establish a new and radically altered society, devoid of class schism, racism, and sexism. She is against authority, patriarchy, racial dogmatism, and any kind of impediment to the rendering of her story by herself. This revolutionary temper makes things very difficult for her. The problems that women face in Africa, as a result of various forms of prejudice, are of such dimensions that, even religion, the traditional haven of battered souls, cannot give Magda the required peace or psychological relief. The church is presented in Magda’s soliloquy as one big theatre of hypocrisy. She cannot reconcile herself to the morality of a world that disseminates the attractive values that are the foundation of Christianity but at the same time treats women, half the human race, as inferior beings.

Magda suffers from a phobia of total displacement in her father’s household. She thinks that if Anna graduates to the status of mistress then, automatically, she will retrogress to the status of servant. To prevent this, Magda murders her father, the perceived source of her impending servitude. We should, however, look beyond the death of Magda’s father and see it as the end of a value that has been held sacred by an entire race. This may be seen in Machiavellian terms. An individual has to protect his or her status and role with whatever means to hand, even if that entails using means that are socially unacceptable. This said, dissonance and pain are key characteristics of any human society; they are ubiquitous and perennial. Magda seems to have jumped from the frying pan into the fire; she is unable to escape the weight of her father. Her attempts to wipe away her life-pain appear fruitless. In pain, Magda asks:

“What are pain, jealousy, loneliness doing in the African night?” (p.9)

The imagined death of Magda’s father brings more problems to her: the arrival of locusts, insects, plagues of caterpillars, predators, and wasps, among other pests. This is a replica of the plight of African women who have experienced, successively, slavery, colonialism, perverted independence, military dictatorship, castrated democracy, neo-colonialism, etc.

Magda’s reaction to loneliness, helplessness, and frustration is similar to that of Firdaus in El Saadawi’s Woman at Point Zero, who has to murder the pimp, Marzouk, who is considered her oppressor. This is a course that is inviting to any neurotic. Magda also finds an equivalent in Raskolnikov, the hero of Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment, who commits murder for no clear reason and goes into penance for the rest of his life. Magda’s isolation, therefore, becomes a metaphor, not only for the fate of women in the hostile gender and class structure of African society but also for humankind’s isolation in general. She claims: ‘The land is full of melancholy spinsters like me’ (p.3). She is, in large measure, starved for attention and affection. Her story has a tragic core: pathos ensues from the hostile social and sexist circumstances that she has to
face. Her trajectory is one of despair, sterility, loneliness, madness, and vengeance. She sees herself as a void, a hole, a ghost, and a vapor, frequently on the verge of dissolving into complete insubstantiality. She is left miserable and shut off from the whole world at the end of the story.

Magda’s existence is also bedeviled by disease, including migraines, ennui, and speculative languor. Pain has become part of her life:

“Many things I fear but pain does not seem to be one of them.” (p.22)

Implying that pain is an eternal problem of humanity, Magda traces it to the fall of man in the biblical Garden of Eden (p.23). She is hardly master of her own fate; rather, she is buffeted by broad changes in socio-political life that render her, from time to time, more or less powerless and dependent. Women’s condition in the referent society of the novel, and by allegorical extension, the postcolonial African world in general, is analogous to that depicted in T. S. Eliot’s ‘The Hollow Men’ and ‘The Wasteland.’ Magda herself declares:

“If I am an emblem then I am an emblem. I am incomplete. I am a being with a hole inside me, I signify nothing….” (p.9)

The absence of her father on the farm portends the ruin of the farm. This is aggravated by the subsequent departure of Hendrik and Klein-Anna, leaving Magda virtually isolated. Since people are not naturally monologic, but dialogic, Magda attempts a linguistic metamorphosis by setting up a dialogue with assumed celestial and subterranean beings. Her communion with the sky-god is a substitute for human communication and an attempt to find a language that is not mediated by social division (Attwell, 1993). She struggles against aphasia, and her speech is disrupted by the hostile societal pressures, harsh social structures, and a painful emotional climate. Her speech disorder is a consequence of severe emotional and psychological stress, caused by her social context and family (Mwihaki, 2003). She is mentally tortured and experiences a series of oppositions or opposed needs. She suffers from schizophrenia (dementia praecox), a severe mental dissonance characterized by emotional desensitization, intellectual deterioration, social isolation, disorganized speech and behavior, delusions, and hallucinations. She sees things that are not there, hears voices and experiences various kinds of mental delusion.

In fact, sexism has scarred the psychology of Magda, as it has that of other women in Africa. Some African myths portray Africa as a fertile ground, pleasant and temperate, a land of many heroines and heroes. However, the monologue of Magda opposes this notion by foregrounding some of the painful realities of existence in Africa. Magda is thus an oppositional figure in African feminist-humanist historiography. She gives the reader a subversive counter-discourse and deconstructs an existing notion of African consciousness by foregrounding certain painful realities of existence in Africa, which is depicted as a godless place of brutes and sexists, lacking language, government, humanity, and apparel.
Child sexual abuse is pandemic in African neocolonies. This is a result of a number of economic and social factors, which include overcrowded housing units, poverty, alcoholism, and child labor. The problem of rape in Africa is seemingly perennial. Cases are under-represented in electronic and print media, and those that do come to the attention of the law enforcement authorities are not always pursued to a logical end. The dissonant relationship between Magda and Hendrik offers a good example of the climate of rape and assault in which African women live. After the death of his boss, Magda’s father, Hendrik takes the baton of male patriarchy. Suddenly, he becomes lionized and rules over his wife, Klein-Anna, and his new boss (Magda) with an iron fist:

“He only creeps into her bed and takes her in the small hours of the night. He comes in the night like a ghost.” (p.110) 

Thus, Magda is humiliated by yet another man (Hendrik). There is little or no chance to talk to each other. All Magda wants is companionship, a little peace between them (male and female), which seems unattainable:

“Magda now washes the dishes. Hendrik now starts to vanish into the night.” (p.110)

He suddenly metamorphoses into a brute, physically abusing and raping Magda. He also refuses to see Magda as a lover. Instead, he treats her like a whore, refusing to engage in any phatic communion with her. What ensues between them is only painful sexual intercourse, without mutual acceptance. Magda speaks her mind about this ‘sex without love’:

“You do nothing, but shout at me, you never talk to me, you hate me.” (p.106)

The experience of physical and sexual abuse has a negative impact on Magda’s health. She sustains many injuries and experiences chronic pain, gastrointestinal disorders, anxiety, and clinical depression. Coetzee underscores the racial implication of the act by subsuming it under a gendered orientation:

“This is my fate, this is a woman’s fate” (p.106) says Magda.

This reflects how some men treat women in many African societies. In African neocolonies, women are vulnerable to sexual exploitation because of high poverty levels; many have no option but to engage in dangerous activities like prostitution. The belief of Coetzee, as reflected in his portrayal of Magda, is that women should strive to lift themselves out of despair. They should strive to improve their economic, social, political, legal, and cultural status with a view to guaranteeing both sustainable development and economic growth. This is reflected in Magda’s defiant rebellion against her father and male-constructed destiny.
Magda attempts to escape the master/slave dichotomy by learning to live in reciprocity, equality, intimacy, and true freedom. She believes this will engender global peace. However, Magda’s vision may be a Herculean task, because the perversion of human relationships in Africa has become so entrenched. The process of reconciliation is a very difficult one. Magda herself tries to mend fences by attempting to create an androgynous and raceless society on her farm; however, the black couple (Hendrik and Klein–Anna) are still wary of her, and she doubts their love. There is a fear of reciprocity in the society. The yearning of Magda for racial, social, and gender consonance is also unfulfilled, as it is dependent on individuals, a scenario that often ends in futility or violence. For cultural and societal change, the efforts of individuals are not enough. Such revolutionaries or iconoclasts always end up being perceived as insane, or as social pariahs. This is the fate of Baako in Armah’s *Fragments*, and Ezeulu in Achebe’s *Arrow of God*. Therefore, individual will, with respect to the extermination of societal conflict, is a necessary but insufficient means for the redemption of societal life. This is one of the reasons why the story is gripping, especially when it comes to the dissonant and painful scenes. Although Coetzee employs the stream of consciousness technique in the novel, the events seem to be linked to produce a general effect of frustration, mental dissonance, and self-abnegation. It is powerful because it provides an imaginative catalogue of the sexist practices found in postcolonial Africa while revealing the basic similarities between human beings, color, gender, and class notwithstanding.

AN ANALYSIS OF COETZEE’S TECHNIQUES IN THE REPRESENTATION OF GENDER-INDUCED WOES

The power of Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country* lies in the combination of thematic focus with superb techniques. For instance, one of the formal features of the story is a demonstrable desire to explain the dilemma of African women in the neo-colonial period allegorically. Coetzee’s ideological stance is that human societies are much the same the world over. Thus, the allegorical mode of his fiction allows him to conceive of racism and sexism from a ubiquitous and transcendental perspective, instead of the more usual synchronic and localized perspective found in many contemporary African novels. Coetzee is a writer who recognizes the evils of gender inequality in African societies and imagines a number of alternatives to this situation in his text. Stotesbury (1991: 147) opines:

“Novel after novel contains, structurally and thematically, an awareness of alternative to the real world of South Africa.”

One innovation in Coetzee’s narration of the woes emanating from sexism in African societies is the postmodernist style that characterizes his text. This seemingly anti-realist style is akin to storing old wine in a new bottle. It
may be said that Coetzee’s fiction, with its apparent anti-realist posture, is still based in actuality. To decipher Coetzee’s fiction, the reader should be familiar with the relevant semiotic codes in African societies – linguistic, historical, and social. Boehmer’s (1995: 8) assertion is relevant here:

“any piece of writing is a product of its time.”

The allegorical style in Coetzee’s fiction, in the final analysis, does not obscure contemporary social, political, economic and cultural realities of Africa. This is because behind the allegory lies an indictment of sexism as well as its concomitant effects.

It is apparent that Coetzee has a penchant for transforming the picture of African gender relations into a surrealist nightmare, by means of the allegorical method. The characters seem intended to function as symbols of the oppression that women have experienced in neo-colonial African states; the effects of sexism on men, and their inhumanity to women, are also shown. The text shows the effects of sexism on the psychological composition of both the oppressors and the oppressed. This is similar to the allegorical style employed by Brink in his The Wall of the Plague.

Coetzee also uses symbols in depicting the burdens carried by women in African societies. This gives the work an aesthetic richness, given that symbols lend themselves to various interpretations. Recurring symbols in the text revolve around solitude, madness, hunger, rape, impotence, and muteness – all signifying the various unfulfilled yearnings and frustrations of African women and girls. Characters and episodes are at once symbolic and yet quite distinct, owing to the allusive nature of Coetzee’s allegory of ‘illness’ and ‘madness’. To be specific, In the Heart of the Country is an allegorical story about the generalized unease that characterizes the contemporary condition of African women; this said, it is more existential than social in its preoccupations. Thus, the novel is an exploration, using fable and allegory, of a sexist reality that emerges through the monologue of Magda. In fact, the text offers an Aesopian visual metaphor for Africa itself, through the metaphor of Magda’s father’s farm, i.e., the farm that apparently looks beautiful and fertile is actually a place of woe and stagnation.

Closely related to the foregoing is the fact that the novel is densely populated with images of despair. The pervading mood of the novel is one of brutality. This atmosphere has a negative impact on women’s psyche, inducing paranoia. It is a situation in which women are hemmed in by racism, sexism, dejection, segregation and fear. Coetzee employs an extensive and striking use of physical settings as a backdrop for the actions in the novel. He shows how the environment mirrors the moral decay inherent in most African neo-colonies. His text suggests that the disintegrating condition of the physical environment is indicative of the larger political world of gender schism that brings with it the physical and psychological degeneration of the people. He gives the reader a picture of a society that drains its female citizens of life and hope, a society
where little or no love is demonstrated. The characters seem to experience only neuroticism, conflict, and pain.

There are two additional marks of postmodernism in Coetzee’s fiction. On the one hand, there is the liveliness that comes from topicality and, on the other, there is the difficulty that comes from intellectual abstruseness. Emerging from the intricate roadmaps of Coetzee’s fiction is a non-conservative ideology in the form of a cynicism in relation to all popularly held beliefs. Magda calls into question the social mores of her time. She critiques her society and brooks no gender or racial compromise. She completely rejects a society that imposes limitations on human aspirations by interrogating the patriarchal society and hostile social structures that she lives in. This posture may be seen as representing the efforts of African women generally in their attempt to move from the margin to the center. Given that literature is always a reflection and refraction of the realities of its enabling society, it constitutes a tool with which Coetzee can depict African women’s plight in a patriarchal world. It is a fact that African women of today are beginning to make their mark and assert themselves; they are seeking self-respect, dignity, self-assertion, and a new moral code as part of their new quest for redefinition and self-esteem.

Coetzee’s fiction also offers metafictional commentaries on particular subgenres of white writing in South Africa, especially the pastoral novel, colonial travel writing, and historiography, as well as various canonical works. By this, the novelist is able to refract the agonies of African women generally from the painful experiences of South African women, especially during the period of apartheid. The metafictional quality of Coetzee’s novel can best be discerned in its sense of drift. For instance, Magda is never sure of the time at which events took place, since she is herself a fiction. She asks at one point, “How shall I be saved?” (p.16). Her public outcry against patriarchal brutality manifests the desire of Coetzee that he and other androgynists register their opposition to sexism. The statement, like many others in the text, foregrounds the inability of African and black women generally to transcend the constant violence and injustice that beset their lives (Dovey, 1997). Thus, the ubiquitous nature of women’s pain and mental dissonance that is created in any sexist and racist society is manifested.

Another technique used by Coetzee as a thematic vehicle in this work is that of stream of consciousness. This is commonly used to characterize the unbroken flow of thought and awareness in the waking mind (Abrams, 1981). In Coetzee’s novel, we find an introspective incursion into the minds of the characters. For instance, throughout the narrative, there are long passages of introspection that provide a picture of Magda’s mind. This can be seen in a series of numbered paragraphs that reflect the consciousness of the lonely and passionate Magda, the archetypal deprived and subordinated African woman. This is a strategy for highlighting the predicaments of various sets of people in that society; it also allows for vivid narration. Additionally, the stream of consciousness technique is used to illustrate internal disruption of a hitherto smooth flow of thought, action, and events. Since events do not unfold smoothly in the con-
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temporary African world, a world wracked by war and conflict, it is reasonable to represent this incoherence in the inner consciousness or minds of the characters. Using this technique, Coetzee is able to foreground the mental dissonance and neurosis of Magda and of African women in general.

Rhetorical questions are another stylistic device that is used by Coetzee in the novel to foreground the plight of African women and to offer a redefinition of what it means to be an African woman. This is in consonance with the ‘new’ African women’s thirst for knowledge and growth, and a more fulfilling existence. The strategy of piling up rhetorical questions is seen most often in confrontations, rushes of emotion, or when sudden changes of outlook occur. A few examples will suffice:

“What are pains, jealousy, loneliness doing in the African night?” (p.9)
and
“How should I be saved?” (p.16)

The use of rhetorical questions in the text is a means of mediating the seriousness of the novelist’s message, and a way to wring meaning out of the suffering of African and black women generally. The rhetorical questions found in the novel constitute a symptom of the psychological disturbance in Magda’s psyche. Thus, the rhetorical questions in Coetzee’s text are a means of confronting life’s pain and a way of seeking a way out of human solitude. They are used as a vocabulary for the horrors found in postcolonial African societies and to mediate the fragmentation of a mind into a shocked subjectivity as a result of gender and social dissonance.

CONCLUSION

The above analysis of Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country* reveals that it is a strongly feminist text. Coetzee’s artistry appears unique, in that his text manifests a mode and cast of literary expression that bears little resemblance to that of other contemporary African prose writers. In Coetzee’s fiction, Africa’s gender and social problems emerge as a synecdoche for the universal problems of women in any society. African women are depicted as a point of convergence for all manner of oppression. Even when men are also victims, women suffer more. It is on her back, like the footstool of the human race, that the burden of society lies and, like a mule, she has been exploited and dehumanized by all and sundry. However, it should be noted that African women’s reaction to patriarchal repression has not been simply one of acceptance. On the contrary, these women have struggled and are still struggling to re-define themselves. Magda is an example of these determined women and, in the process of her re-definition, like a prophetess, she envisions a better future for the children of tomorrow, male and female. Through the portrayal of Magda, Coetzee contributes immensely to the imaginative unsettling of the patriarchal foundation on
which the traditional ideas associated with African women are set. The novel reveals that African women are a force to be reckoned with. Magda can be understood as a symbol of African womanhood insofar as she is an individual who is searching for self-actualization in a dignified way (Chukwuma, 1994). In fact, Magda, the radical African woman, has rejected the definition of womanhood imposed upon her by a patriarchal society. Despite the maltreatment, persecution and marginalization of the women in her milieu, she sticks to a hope that change can occur (Gallagher, 1991). In line with the idea of Probyn (2002), Magda steps out, beyond the limitations imposed by (phal)logocentric thinking, in order to interrogate structures of power, authority, and language. Concerning the issue of who will bring about positive change to the plight of women in her milieu, Magda comments, “It is up to me” (p.23). Thus, in Coetzee’s text, the idea emerges that African women should personally fight for their own, individual empowerment, and reclaim their true identity. This is an urgent task, as the development of the continent depends on tapping and harnessing the potentialities of women. The artistic credo of Coetzee in In the Heart of the Country is that of women’s empowerment. Through the predicaments and actions of Magda, he canvasses for compulsory education for all girl children, an end to violence against women, and the granting of socio-cultural, economic, and political rights to women. Through Magda, Coetzee seems to be saying that African women need a level playing field, not domination by African men. African women should have a voice of their own; the situation in which men are the sole voices should be discouraged. African women’s destinies should no longer be in the hands of men. This is why many African women are now shedding their cocoon of silence, speaking for themselves, and seeking solutions to their problems through their own actions and initiatives.

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——— Accepted October 18, 2006

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Fossey (1979) pictured them ...

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