Chapter 3
Politics of Gender: The White Woman’s Burden

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the main developments in feminist thought and the present challenges in the South African context. The issue of gender becomes more complex when it operates along with race as a site of power struggle. My focus is on the feminine in Coetzee’s work and its relation to black feminism. His work shows a keen sensitivity in presenting the dilemma of white women trapped in their duplicitous urge to subordinate and treat the Other as an equal.

Gender inequality is all pervasive in our society. Feminist theory attempts to study the factors responsible for the subjugation of women and seeks to set right the power imbalance in society. Feminism questions the deep-rooted patriarchal ideologies and strives to offer alternative possibilities. Contemporary feminist theory defies the possibility of fixing stable, objective meanings. Jane Freedman uses the term ‘Feminisms’ to describe the diverse and multi-faceted grouping of ideas and actions. The broad range of stances and conflicts in this field are aptly described by A. Nye as a “tangled and forbidding web” (Freedman 6). Nonetheless all feminists call for changes in the social, political, economic, or cultural order, to reduce and eventually overcome discrimination against women.

Feminism had its origins in the struggle for women’s rights that began late in the eighteenth century more particularly with Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). Other seminal works were J.S.Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and Margaret Fuller’s *Woman in the 19th Century* (1845). Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) wrote about the cultural, economic, and educational disabilities which women face in
Coetzee’s work has a special significance for feminist thought as he strives to highlight the oppressiveness of patriarchy.

In France, Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) highlighted the cultural identification of women as ‘Other’ whereas man is the dominating ‘Subject’ who is supposed to represent humanity in general. She professed herself a socialist for a long time before she declared herself a feminist. Beauvoir defines feminists as women and men who are fighting to change the women’s condition. In America, modern feminist criticism began with Mary Ellman’s deft and witty discussion in *Thinking About Women* (1968) about the derogatory stereotypes of women in literature written by men. Kate Millett in her best selling Ph.D. thesis *Sexual Politics* describes the nature of power relationships between the sexes. In her thesis, she seeks to prove that “However muted its present appearance may be, sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concepts of power” (25). She defines sexual politics as: the process whereby the ruling sex seeks to maintain and extend its power over the subordinate sex. Toril Moi describes her book as “a powerful fist in the solar plexus of patriarchy” (26).

Since 1969 there has been an explosion of feminist writings that is aptly described by Elaine Showalter as a religious awakening. Feminist criticism is not, as Toril Moi observes, “just another interesting critical approach” but a powerful attack on other modes of criticism. It is one of the most important social, economic, and aesthetic revolutions of modern times. Feminists examine
the experiences of women from all races, classes and cultures viz; African American, Latina, Asian American, American Indian, lesbian, third world women and so on. Annette Kolodny aptly describes this richness as a “playful pluralism” for its tolerance and interdisciplinary links.

Feminists have adapted various psychoanalytic, Marxist and post-structuralist approaches. Elaine Showalter has observed that “English feminist criticism, essentially Marxist, stresses oppression; French feminist criticism, essentially psychoanalytic, stresses repression; American feminist criticism, essentially textual, stresses expression” (186). Marxist feminist criticism focuses on the relation between reading and social realities. Marxist feminists attack the prevailing capitalistic system of the west, which they view as sexually as well as economically exploitative. In Marxist feminism personal identity is not seen as separate from cultural identity. Marxist feminists thus combine the study of class with that of gender. Coetzee’s depiction of feminism shows a blending of these ideas.

Toril Moi is of the opinion that the work of Marxist theorists such as Antonio Gramsci, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno holds special promise for feminist critics. She is of the view that their insights into the problems of representing the tradition of the oppressed can be appropriated for feminism. Pierre Macherey’s concept of trying to decipher the silences, gaps and absences in the text is quite relevant here for in trying to fathom these; the critic can get at the ideology that pervades the text.

The work of Freud and Lacan is especially relevant for French feminists. Lacan describes the unconscious as structured like a language; like language its power arises from the sense of openness and play of meaning. The gaps in the language are the evidence of the unconscious. Thus écriture feminine disrupts the unities of western discourse, pointing to its silences. Julia Kristeva talks about the repressive influence of the language of the father and links it to the
subject's madness. Coetzee's understanding of the power of language is clear in *In the Heart of the Country*.

Helene Cixous is known for the concept of feminine writing. Her work is heavily influenced by Jacques Derrida. According to Cixous, "feminine texts are texts that work on the difference", strive in the direction of difference, struggle to undermine the dominant phallogocentric logic, split open the closure of the binary opposition and revel in the pleasures of open-ended textuality. These features of feminine discourse are clearly seen in *Foe*. Cixous is also of the opinion that even if a text is signed by a male author it can be a feminine text. Cixous is quite keen to get rid of terms like male or female because she has a strong belief in the inherently bisexual nature of all human beings.

A brief glance at the history of feminism reveals the appearance of strong feminist movements as a series of waves. First wave feminism refers to the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century movements that were concerned with gaining equal political rights for women. Second wave feminism refers to the resurgence of feminist activity in the late 1960s and 1970s and this time the struggle was for equal rights in the areas of family, sexuality and work. These waves were periods of intense struggle for women's liberation. Another attempt to classify feminism is their categorization into different theoretical families. One version is to divide feminism into three loose groups: liberal feminism, Marxist or socialist feminism, and radical feminism. Liberal feminists are those who campaign for equal rights for women within the framework of the liberal state. Marxist and socialist feminists link gender inequality and women's oppression to the capitalist system of production. Radical feminists see men's domination of women as the result of the system of patriarchy, which is independent of all other social structures.

Many writers in South Africa have addressed the problem of gender. Nadine Gordimer, Andre Brink, Lewis Nkosi, and Doris Lessing have opposed
the ruling white regime in their work. However, their relation to feminism reflects more ambivalence. Robin Visel points out that the novels of Gordimer and Lessing depict fraught mother-daughter relationships and offer no easy sisterhood among women. Their commitments to left-wing and anti-apartheid politics takes predominance over their gender identification. Gordimer has stated that women’s equality is secondary to racial equality in South Africa. Daphne Rooke has depicted male violence in her novels. Coetzee points out in *Stranger Shores*, that she invokes:

a myth of the black man - and even more the black woman - as a creature of nature in instinctive touch with his/her own desires, a myth which the greater colonial enterprise had no difficulty in incorporating into its stock of received ideas, particularly since its obverse side is that the black is slave to his or her own desires, incapable of those sublimations from which higher cultures grow.

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Josephine Dodd believes that the South African literary establishment should be taken to task for its unexamined sexist assumptions and practices. She criticizes Lewis Nkosi, Andre Brink and J.M. Coetzee for promoting “a version of South African literature which panders to the prurient expectations of a First-World audience, supplying details of terrorist rape and interracial sexual excitement?” (158).

J.M. Coetzee’s feminism is feminism with a difference. His work has strong ecofeminist leanings. A glance at history tells us that there was a time when women enjoyed power in society. Patriarchy is only 5,000 years old. Women were held in high regard in the Neolithic settlements prior to the Bronze Age. It was also the time when Earth was revered. The transition from hunting to agricultural phase coincided with the denigration of earth and women. As pointed out by Rosemary Radford Reuther, this phase brought a new sense of
land as owned by the family head, passed down through a male line of descent.
The possession of women, slaves, animals, and land all got symbolically and socially linked together.

Ecofeminism is a relatively new offshoot of feminism that draws attention to the linked domination of women and nature. Francoise d' Eaubonne coined the term as eco-feminisme in 1972 in *La feminisme ou la mort*. Every culture has noticed the deep affinity between Nature and women. “Just as the flow of earth’s life giving waters follows lunar rhythms, so, too follow the tides of a woman’s womb” (Spretnak 181). As Nature produces bountiful life forms; woman can produce both sexes from her body and transform food into milk for them. Western culture’s nature/culture dichotomy too links woman with nature and man with culture. The western notion of ‘progress’ and ‘development’ has resulted in the death of the “feminine principle.” Vandana Shiva maintains that this model is inherently patriarchal as it is based on nature’s destruction and women’s subjugation.

Ecofeminism is the union of “deep ecology” and feminism. Deep ecology believes that the richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the flourishing of human and non-human life on earth. Reuther very pertinently describes the ecofeminist ethic. She avers that we need to discover our actual reality as latecomers to the planet and our utter dependence on the great life-producing matrix of the planet in order to learn to reintegrate our human systems of production, consumption and waste into the ecological patterns by which nature sustains life. Ecofeminist culture seeks to reshape our basic sense of self in relation to the life cycle. All racist, sexist, classist and anthropocentric assumptions of the superiority of whites over blacks, males over females, managers over workers, humans over animals and plants must be culturally discarded.
Charlene Spretnak describes the relation between feminism and ecofeminism. Ecofeminism continues the progression within traditional feminism from attention to sexism to all systems of human oppression such as racism, classism, ageism and heterosexism. It also recognizes that naturism, i.e., the exploitation of nature, is also a result of the logic of domination. Ecofeminists strongly believe in the concept of caring and in biological egalitarianism, i.e., all species have inherent worth.

Coetzee’s work has links with black feminism. Black feminists have challenged the white women’s ability and right to speak for black women. bell hooks is a prominent black feminist who underscores the importance of the history of racial and sexual violence in the US and the way it has structured the lives of black women. Women’s oppression can no longer be theorized in a global fashion. Jane Freedman raises a pertinent question in this regard, “For if the primary oppression is that of white over black and not that of women over men, then how can white women’s and black women’s oppression be theorized in the same manner?” (78) Audre Lorde, a black lesbian feminist also points out that there has been a deliberate ignorance of differences of race, sexual preference, class and age and the homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood does not exist.

Some feminists consider sexism as more oppressive than racism whereas most black feminists consider racial and sexual violence as inextricably intertwined. Freedman points out that Valerie Smith rightly argues about the inextricability of race and gender:

> Within dominant discourses, race and gender are treated as if they are mutually exclusive categories of experience. In contrast, black feminism presumes the ‘intersectionality’ of race and gender in the lives of black women, thereby rendering...
inapplicable to the lives of black women any ‘single-axis’ theory about racism or sexism. (81)

Critics argue that the universalizing and essentializing approach of feminism has served to obscure many differences of race, ethnicity and class that exist between women and this has harmed many women. They feel that the ‘first-wave’ and ‘second-wave’ feminist movements and theories were overly dominated by white, middle-class women who generalized their own experiences. These theories were Euro centric and undervalued the lives and experiences of women in the Third World and the way these lives have been affected by the conditions of colonialism.

In South Africa, given our specific history of apartheid, the claim of “sisterhood” is necessarily complex: a challenge to its universalism and its hidden power relations has to be pursued simultaneously with efforts to establish a community of purpose within the recognition of “difference”. (Daymond XIX)

Coetzee’s work addresses the questions of racism and sexism. It provides the other side of black feminism. What do white women feel when trapped in the power hierarchy? Coetzee’s women protagonists/narrators are neither oppressors nor hapless victims but strong women who emerge stronger from their ordeals. Nonetheless, they are vulnerable, humane individuals, full of compassion and endurance. Troubled too much by social malaise, they spontaneously turn to nature and other living beings. In a world driven to frenzy by violence and greed, these women strive to bring some sort of harmony. Sue Kossew refers to Dorothy Driver in her discussion of Coetzee’s white women narrators. Driver has pointed out the contradictory and ambivalent position occupied by white women in the colonial equation. While imperial discourse and patriarchal signifying systems tend to place white women and the indigenous people in the same category of abject otherness, white women, she
suggests, are also assigned a “mediatory role,” which, in turn, places them in a
position where their “sympathy for the oppressed and their simultaneous
entrapment within the oppressive group on whose behalf they may desire to
mediate complicates their narrative stance.” (“Critical” 168) This chapter would
focus on *Disgrace* from the feminist perspective making intertextual references
to the novel *In the Heart of the Country*.

In *Disgrace* (1999), Coetzee delves into the white dilemma in South
Africa. Set in post-apartheid South Africa, the novel takes the eviction
movement as an important theme in which white farmers were violently evicted
from their farms by squatters. Coetzee describes land ownership as “an emotive
issue” that generates a whole gamut of power tussles. Lucy, the protagonist in
the novel is the most poignant woman character as yet in Coetzee’s oeuvre.
Being white, she leads a precarious existence on a smallholding in Eastern Cape.
Lucy instinctively bonds with Nature and Mother Earth. “Lucy’s bare toes grip
the red earth, leaving clear prints. A solid countrywoman, embedded in her new
life” (62). The flora and fauna are of great significance in her life. She takes
ample care that nature’s meagre resources are not wasted. She considers herself
fortunate that the wild geese pay her annual visits. She has learned to live an
independent life, growing crop and keeping dogs in the kennels. She is an
intelligent businesswoman who gets excellent returns from her produce. “The
dogs, the gardening, the astrology books, the asexual clothes: in each... a
statement of independence, considered, purposeful” (89). On market day, she
strikes a warm note with all her customers because of her entrepreneurial skills
and David Lurie is a proud father receiving compliments.

Lucy defies the conventional gender role assigned to a woman by
society by renouncing heterosexuality. Lucy is a lesbian who explores female
companionship with Helen. “Perhaps they sleep together merely as children do,
cuddling, touching, giggling, reliving girlhood-sisters more than lovers”(86)
David Lurie who finds refuge with her daughter after his disgrace at the university thinks that his presence is keeping the two women apart. He is not happy with Lucy’s choice but he dare not question her. Lucy prefers to shun male company and live a life of her own. When Lurie sees his daughter suffering, he realizes that perhaps women would be happier living in each other’s company. Many feminists see heterosexuality as a social construct that is based on the premise that the needs of men come first. Similarly, lesbianism is generally taken as a sexual interaction. Adrienne Rich, for instance, argues against a narrow, primarily sexual definition of lesbianism. She talks about the ‘lesbian continuum’. Within this continuum she includes not only sexual acts but “many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support...” (648).

Like Elizabeth Curren in Age of Iron, motherhood determines Lucy’s identity to a great extent. She is akin to Mother Earth who nurtures the seed thrown in her. She decides to keep the child in spite of her father’s strong exhortations not to do so. She feels she cannot sustain the trauma of an abortion and wants to take her own decisions. Lucy defies the image of country life as one of harmonious existence. Man’s domination of nature has shattered the vital link between man and nature. Country life is no longer a blissful coexistence of human and non-human elements, rather a sordid picture of ruthless competition. Disgrace is an anti-pastoral novel in which the country people like Petrus are steeped in evil machinations and intrigue.

There is a powerful nexus of race and gender in a Coetzee text. Racial and gender politics are inextricably intertwined. The two operate like a seesaw. In Disgrace and In the Heart of the Country gender politics is a corollary of racial politics. The oppression and injustice faced by white women is often the result of a vicious urge to settle scores on racial grounds. Susan Brownmiller
points out that the myth of the heroic rapist is inculcated by society in impressionable, young boys and they begin to see it as a privilege. “...rape is not a crime of irrational, impulsive, uncontrollable lust, but a deliberate, hostile, violent act of degradation and possession on the part of a would-be conqueror, designed to intimidate and inspire fear…” (324).

Lucy’s peaceful existence is shattered when she and her father become the victims of three black men. Her house is rummaged and her father brutally assaulted. Lucy, a lesbian and victim of gang rape suffers the worst outrage a woman can at the hands of men. “Hatred...when it comes to men and sex, David nothing surprises me any more. May be, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting” (158). Her plight is more pathetic than that of a virgin. She compares sex (rape) to murder, the bloodshed and the violence like being stabbed with a knife. In her trauma, she treats even her father as an outsider. Her anguish is too intense to be shared with a man “Lucy is healing too, or if not healing, then forgetting, growing scar tissue around the memory of that day, sheathing it, sealing it off” (141).

The assault on Lucy is a double revenge; of men who can’t tolerate a strong, independent woman and of blacks, who instinctively hate the whites. Lurie has the impression that he and his daughter were chosen at random by people who did not have enough. “Too many people, too few things. What there is must go into circulation, so that every one can have a chance to be happy for a day...Not human evil, just a vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant.” (98). But the way events unfold; it becomes apparent that it was a ploy contrived by Petrus to throw Lucy out of her land. Lucy realizes that a woman needs protection and agrees to become Petrus’ third wife.

Lucy chooses to maintain a defiant silence, which is an outcome of her acute understanding of the kind of society South Africa is. She knows that her violation was not only because she is a woman; it had very deep roots. “The
reason is that, as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not” (112). The novel is set in the post-apartheid years when the power equation has changed. The whites are now at the receiving end and white women like Lucy, most vulnerable. She thinks that the wrongs of the historical past are visiting her and she has to pay a price in order to live. “They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors” (158).

Lucy’s alienation is the outcome of the realization that woman is socially vulnerable. For women, the more things change, the more they remain the same. She knows that in order to survive she has to make a compromise,

Petrus is not offering me a church wedding followed by a honeymoon on the wild coast. He is offering an alliance, a deal.
I contribute the land, in return for which I am allowed to creep in under his wing. Otherwise, he wants to remind me I am without protection, I am fair game. (203)

The hub of country life is land and its ownership. Farmers like Petrus yearn for sons and think it is a burden to have daughters. Coetzee exposes the oppression at the heart of the genre of the farm novel. This genre sidelines women as marginal because land is owned by men. Women are confined to the domestic sphere. Thus, it performs an ideological function in South African society.

Brownmiller’s work has been instrumental in bringing rape on the feminist agenda. Her work created awareness in society about how rape is used as a tool to keep women subjugated. Patriarchy destroys Lucy and shatters her confidence, “I am a dead person and I do not know yet what will bring me back to life.” (161). She prefers to remain in her shell.

She would rather hide her face, and he knows why. Because of the disgrace. Because of the shame. That is what their visitors
have achieved; that is what they have done to this confident, modern young woman. Like a stain the story is spreading across the district. Not her story to spread but theirs: they are its owners. How they put her in her place, how they showed her what a woman was for. (115)

The nexus of race and gender politics reduces Lucy to a zombie. “Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity” (205).

Lucy lends a helping hand to Bev Shaw who runs a clinic from the old premises of the Animal Welfare League. She has been associated with animal lovers since a long time. She is painfully aware that it is a losing battle as there is no funding; animals do not count on the nation’s priority list. She staunchly believes that humans should share some of their privileges with animals and give them a life worth living. She regrets that humans have always treated animals like furniture. “They do us the honour of treating us like gods, and we respond by treating them like things” (78). She finds it odd that humans consider themselves superior because they think they have souls. “…there is no higher life. This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals.” (74).

Bev Shaw works actively for restoring some kind of dignity to the lives of animals. She administers euthanasia to the ill and unwanted creatures. Shaw treats the animals with loving compassion and even talks to them. Working at the Animal Welfare Clinic, Lurie discovers a bond with neglected, malnourished dogs. He can read in their eyes that they know they are going to die. He takes care that the bodies of the killed dogs do not get dishonoured.

Lucy’s heart is wounded when her pets are killed in the terrible assault. She is a living example of what Elizabeth Costello says in The Lives of Animals, “.... there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being
of another” (35). David Lurie too feels touched at the sight of sheep Petrus has brought for slaughter. He can’t bear to hear their doleful bleating. “Sheep do not own themselves, do not own their lives. They exist to be used, every last ounce of them, their flesh to be eaten, their bones to be crushed and fed to poultry” (123). Lurie feels an intense disgust in him for consuming meat. A vague sadness fills him as he is haunted by their death. “Is it proper to mourn the death of beings who do not practise mourning among themselves?” (127).

Lucy’s sensitivity to animals increases after her violation. She finds it impossible to sleep where offal, bones and butcher’s meat is kept. She refuses to eat meat after that. Inspite of her trauma, Lucy chooses to stick to the countryside. “She is here because she loves the land and the old, landliche way of life” (113).

Elizabeth Costello is the protagonist of The Lives of Animals (1997) and of the eponymous novel Elizabeth Costello (2003). Costello, the well known Australian novelist invited by Appleton College to deliver the annual Gates Lecture, chooses to speak on a “crime of stupefying proportions”: the abuse of animals. She criticizes Philosophers like Kant who place extraordinary emphasis on ‘reason’ as the guiding principle of the universe. We think we are justified in abusing animals because they do not have the faculty to understand the universe. Descartes opines that an animal lives like a machine. It does not think, hence it is second-class.

Costello likens the tortures inflicted on animals to the horrors of concentration camps. She avers that viewing the animals as ‘Other’ and closing our hearts to them makes us cruel. “If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life” (35). Her views clash with her daughter-in-law Norma’s who believes that animals are just biological automata. “Reason provides us with real knowledge
of the real world” (48). Mrs. Costello talks about Rilke and Ted Hughes in her discourse. The latter’s poems teach us “to imagine our way into that way of moving, to inhabit that body” (51). Mrs. Costello highlights the importance of ecofeminist faith when she thinks that Ted Hughes “believes he is recovering an attentiveness that our faraway ancestors possessed and we have lost.” (52). She also talks about shamanism in the context of Hughes. “When Hughes the poet stands before the jaguar cage, he looks at an individual jaguar and is possessed by that individual jaguar life” (53).

Costello talks about the ecological balance in nature when she mentions the complex dance of the creatures with the earth and the weather. “The whole is greater than the sum of the parts” (53). Man thinks that he has the capacity to see into the workings of nature, so human beings behave as “the managers of the ecology.”

Costello cites the work of Jonathan Swift and raises the question, “If it is atrocious to kill and eat human babies, why is it not atrocious to kill and eat piglets?” (56) She also responds passionately to Prof. O’Hearne’s statement that animals are imbeciles. She asserts that this is a profoundly anthropocentric view and the experiments are imbecile. O’Hearne also advocates that animals fail to see death as humans do. He argues that it is licit to kill animals because their lives are not as important to them as humans’ lives to them. She urges the audience to see how the whole being of an animal struggles against death. “...I urge you to read the poets who return the living, electric being to language; and if the poets do not move you, I urge you to walk, flank to flank, beside the beast that is prodded down the chute to his executioner” (65).

Amy Gutmannin the Introduction of the book points out that in The Lives of Animals John Coetzee attempts to unite aesthetics and ethics.

Coetzee stirs our imaginations by confronting us with an articulate, intelligent, aging, and increasingly alienated novelist
who can not help but be exasperated with her fellow human beings, many of them academics, who are unnecessarily cruel to animals and apparently (but not admittedly) committed to cruelty. (5)

Mrs. Costello’s perspectives create conflict in both the personal and professional sphere. She does not get along with her daughter-in-law who dismisses her exhortations as mere food fads. Norma detests Costello’s moralizing about vegetarianism and interference in the children’s food habits. Her analogy of cruelty to animals to Third Reich offends Abraham Stern, an aging poet. He refuses to break bread with her and writes a note to her expressing his anguish. Elizabeth Costello is an old woman and when the narrative begins, John Bernard is shocked to see how his mother has aged. “Her hair which had had streaks of gray in it, is now entirely white; her shoulders stoop; her flesh has grown flabby” (15). Like Elizabeth Curren, her words do not come from a position of power, being the words of an old woman. Barbara Smuts, the primatologist comments on the lack of real experiences of Mrs. Costello in the narrative in a commentary appended to the text. She terms the animals “non human persons.” “Whatever her (or Coetzee’s) reasons, the lack of reference to real-life relations with animals is a striking gap in the discourse on animal rights contained in Coetzee’s text.” (108) She endorses Costello’s view that the limitations we encounter in our relation to animals are not their shortcomings but our narrow views.

Like Coetzee’s other women characters, Elizabeth Curren (Age of Iron) too is a compassionate woman who strives to genuinely relate to the black people in her life. She is a retired classics professor. There are numerous references that indicate that her time is going to end. She drives an outdated Hillman and fights a painful battle with bone cancer. Motherhood determines her identity to a great extent. Not only do we see her evolving in the context of
her daughter, but also she is a mother figure to the homeless Vercueil, and the unprivileged John and Bheki. She nags them not to waste their lives and they behave like reluctant children.

When blankness takes hold of her, she derives great succour in thinking that she has brought a daughter into this world and seen her to adulthood. When pain overpowers her, she thinks of her daughter in America and feels sane. She shares with Vercueil what it is to bring a child in this world. “Your life is no longer with you, it is no longer yours, it is with the child.” (76). Mrs. Curren’s motherly instincts are so strong that she lavishes love and affection even when the other person resists. She feels bad for John who is confined in the hospital. She senses the futility of her gesture when he stiffens and recoils under her touch. “My words fell off him like dead leaves the moment they were uttered. The words of a woman, therefore negligible; of an old woman, therefore doubly negligible; but above all of a white” (79). She realizes that the children of ‘Age of Iron’ do not need a mother.

Mrs. Curren too has the ecofeminist streak in her. She keeps cats in her house to ease her loneliness. She is revolted to see the slaughtering of chicken and thinks that some of the bodies must have been at her breakfast table too.

But my mind would not leave the farm, the factory, the enterprise where the husband of the woman who lived side by side with me worked, where day after day he bestrode his pen, left and right, back and forth, around and around, in a smell of blood and feathers, in an uproar of outraged squawking, reaching down, scooping up, gripping, binding, hanging. (44)

Coetzee takes up the theme of sensitivity towards non-human life in great detail in his later work.

Mrs. Curren is painfully aware of her complicity with the white regime. She thinks that she is living a doll’s life. “Were I to be opened up they would
find me hollow as a doll, a doll with a crab sitting inside licking its lips, dazed by the flood of light” (112). She feels enraged at the thought of men who created the vicious system of apartheid. Coetzee’s women protagonists feel revulsion at the world gone topsy-turvy with violence and greed.

_Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life_ (1998), Coetzee’s memoir tells us a lot about the strong role his mother played in his life. There is an intense awareness in the precocious child of his mother’s problems though his relation with her is characterized by ambivalence. He is callous towards her but at the same time he feels that she is “the firmest thing” in his life. _Boyhood_ is replete with incidents where John feels nothing but an overriding disdain for his father. He detests his father for incurring debts and ruining the family. He wants that his mother should stand up for herself and not slog to pay off the father’s debts. “But once she has sacrificed herself entirely, once she has sold the clothes off her back, sold her very shoes, and is walking around on bloody feet, where will that leave him? It is a thought he can not bear.” (158).

Coetzee’s ecofeminist sensibilities can be gauged in _Boyhood_. One of his earliest memories is the shrieking of hens, their eyes bulging under the paring knife. He shudders at the memory and thinks of his mother’s bloody fingers. Coetzee loves to go to Voelfontein, Bird-fountain. The birds that inhabit the farm fascinate him. “On the farm, it seems, there is no decay” (83). He enjoys the bounty of the earth; whatever the earth sustains tastes wonderful. He thinks that one life is not sufficient to know a place in intimate detail. His love for the place has Wordsworthian echoes. “No time can be enough when one loves a place with such devouring love” (96). The young Coetzee realizes that he has two mothers. “Twice born: born from woman and born from the farm” (96). Michael K in _Life and Times of Michael K_ also feels bonded with Mother Earth that sustains him through his ordeals.
The boy, John, watches with rapt attention when sheep are being slaughtered for meat. He feels repelled at the matter of fact way in which butchers handle meat. He also watches the castration of sheep on the farm; their despairing wails keep on ringing in his ears. “At the end of the operation the lambs stand sore, and bleeding by their mothers’ side, who have done nothing to protect them.”(99). He is touched at the meekness of sheep, their resignation to cruel fate. All these experiences of his formative years mould his thinking and find expression in his work.

_In the Heart of the Country_ (1977) also addresses some crucial issues in feminism in the context of South Africa. In this text, Coetzee explores the problematic man-woman relationship across the colour line. Miscegenation has been a taboo in South Africa and thus evokes the charm of the forbidden. Coetzee also delves into the complexity of father-daughter relationship that has Electra overtones. He explores the white woman’s lesbian bonding with the black woman and her heterosexual relation with the black man. He also highlights the difficulties faced by a woman writer in expressing herself. At the postmodern level, the novel also highlights the manner the woman protagonist grapples with the constraints imposed by the male author.

_In the Heart of the Country_ has 266 numbered sections, written in the present tense and narrated by Magda. The narrative constantly questions its authenticity as the reader is never sure of the plot. The boundary between what happens in the novel and what takes place in the protagonist’s mind is blurred. For instance, in the beginning of the narrative she murders her father and his bride in their bed. But after this she is shown jealous of his father’s attraction for the black servant and mortally wounds him. At the end of the novel, she is shown caring for her old father and communicating with the sky-gods. The novel is the most explicit reworking of Hegelian master-slave dichotomy. As Coetzee points out in his essay “Apartheid”, “In a society of masters and slaves
no one is free. The slave is not free because he is not his own master; the master is not free because he cannot do without the slave” (57). He builds on this paradigm in the novel.

Magda is a far more rebellious character than Lucy. Being a spinster, she also breaks the conventions of society. She rebels not only against the confines of patriarchal society but against her imprisonment in the text too. Her life is full of ennui; the target of her rage is her dominating father whom she considers responsible for the death of her mother. She nurtures loving memories of her mother and feels that her father’s remarriage is a betrayal of the dead woman. She feels revulsion at the kind of life she is leading with her father. Her alienation makes her communication an interior monologue. “...instead of being the womanly warmth at the heart of this house I have been a zero, a null, a vacuum, towards which all collapses inward, a turbulence, muffled, grey, like a chill draft eddying through the corridors, neglected, vengeful” (2). She describes herself as ‘a spinster with a locked diary’ and an uneasy consciousness.

Magda lives in awe of her father’s authority. He wears heavy black boots, has ramrod-stiff posture and has “the black hole of the mouth from which roars the great NO” (51). Dick Penner comments that Magda associates her father with the authoritarian and retributive god of the Old Testament (61). Throughout the novel, we see her trying to subvert his male dominance. As Susan Gallagher points out, in fantasizing about murdering her naked father in the forbidden bed, Magda empowers herself with masculine tools; she bludgeons his body with an axe; and in another scene, blows out his guts with a shotgun. “From a position of helplessness and oppression, Magda reverses the dichotomy to become the masculine force that imposes its will on others, humiliating the weak to become the strong” (100).
Magda’s relation with her father is characterized by the ambivalence of love and hate. She is full of sexual jealousy regarding his relation with the black servant Klein Anna. There are electra overtones in her relationship as is revealed in her meditations. This could account for her spinster status. Moreover, her jealousy is also an outcome of her fear that the black servant would rob her of her privileged status of the mistress. “If she ceases to be the servant who will be the servant but I” (53). Chiara Briganti comments on the significance of the novel’s opening. Magda begins her narrative with the imagined arrival of her father with his new bride. Briganti points out that Magda chooses the moment of her displacement as the beginning, the moment in which she is forced to renounce her place in the household (89).

Lucy is a realist character who never questions her status in the text. Magda like Susan Barton in Foe (1986) directs her anger against the tyranny of the literary plot. She wishes to write her own story. “....even if it is a dull black blind stupid miserable story, ignorant of its meaning and of all its many possible untapped happy variants” (5). Thus, she rebels against being written by a male author. If Lucy tries to carve a niche for herself by defying the conventional roles that society assigns to women, Magda “struggles to emerge out of text and into life” (Rody 111). Caroline Rody is of the view that Coetzee’s text [In the Heart of the Country] uses feminism to challenge the limits of the post modern. She further avers that Coetzee’s white women rage against their captivity in male writing and declare themselves to be uncontainable in white male prose. “For the day will come when I must have another human being, must hear another voice, even if it speaks only abuse. This monologue of the self is a maze of words out of which I shall not find a way until someone else gives me a lead” (17).

Coetzee addresses the politics of representation in In the Heart of the Country. Magda is unhappy with her status in the text. Paul A. Cantor points out
that Coetzee uses the Beckettian strategy of ellipses (91). It is a function of the narrator’s power over the narrative: “All at once it is morning. It seems to lie in my power to skip over whole days or nights as if they did not happen” (93). Cantor argues that Coetzee asks us to imagine how jolting it must be for a character “to be whisked from a Monday to a Thursday with no glimpse of the intermediary days, perhaps as a result of a heartless editor’s blue pencil” (90). Thus, Coetzee underscores the pitfalls of the realist narrative mode. Moreover, Magda is an unreliable narrator as she presents varied versions of the story as equally plausible. She contradicts her own narrative as she talks of her storytelling as ‘embroidering’.

*In the Heart of the Country* too displays a complex interaction of race and gender politics. As in *Disgrace*, we see the devastating consequences of the sexual encounter between the white woman and the black man. Magda feels quite uncomfortable in a superior position. After her father’s death, she attempts to build a relationship of intimacy with Klein Anna and Hendrik. She would like to be Anna’s little sister. “I would like to share a bed with her, and when she tiptoes in at midnight peep with one eye at her undressing, and sleep all night cuddled against her back” (87). She invites the servant couple to live in her home and urges that she should be addressed by her name. But now the power relations are reversed and Hendrik’s gender superiority overrides Magda’s racial superiority. Hendrik enacts the stereotypical black man’s revenge by raping the white woman. He humiliates her physically night after night and Magda is driven to tears: “Must I weep? Must I kneel? Are you waiting for the white woman to kneel to you? Are you waiting for me to become your white slave?” (118). Magda’s relation with Anna too turns futile. Like Susan Barton in *Foe* Magda is also a half-colonized character as she is unable to transcend the class barrier. Her attitude is far from liberating: “…perhaps my rage at my father is simply rage at the violations of the old language, the correct language, that takes place when he exchanges kisses and the pronouns of intimacy with a girl who
yesterday scrubbed the floors and today ought to be cleaning the windows" (43). In the scene where Magda tries to bury her father’s body and Hendrik is assisting her and the body falls off the wheelbarrow, Magda utters derogatory words in exasperation: “You damned hotnot, it’s all your fault, you and your whore!” (91). Unlike Lucy, who stoically accepts her destiny, Magda rebels at the thought of paying for others’ sins.

In the Heart of the Country also explores the painful search for the woman’s language. She feels suffocated at the language thrust on her. Towards the end of the novel, we find Magda listening to some voices from the sky that she interprets as Spanish. David Attwell points out that Magda’s “communion with the sky-gods is a substitute for...human communication and an attempt to find a language not mediated by social division” (67). Briganti understands Magda’s character and her choices in Freudian terms. She refers to the case study of Bertha Pappenheim who rejected her father tongue in favour of a plural language. For her “speaking coherent German meant integration into a cultural identity Bertha Pappenheim wanted to reject” (99).

Caroline Rody suggests that the failure of her communication with blacks has made Magda a mad, reclusive writer and this is the genesis of her obsessive monologue. All attempts to break out of monologue into real interchange with black people are defeated by the very language she speaks.

I cannot carry on with these idiot dialogues. The language that should pass between myself and these people was subverted by my father and cannot be recovered. What passes between us now is a parody. I was born into a language of hierarchy, of distance and perspective..... I can believe there is a language lovers speak but cannot imagine how it goes. (106)

Sue Kossew describes Magda as a Miranda-figure. Like Miranda in The Tempest, she finds that language is “paradoxically both the tool of oppression
and of potential liberation" (169). Magda, expresses a strong “drive and need for blacks, placing them not at the margins but at the very center of her life” (Rody 168). She feels nostalgic about her childhood when she played with the servants’ children and spoke like them. But with the passage of time, she feels “(W)e might as well be on separate planets, we on ours they on theirs.” Her attempts to strike a chord of intimacy with black servants only lead her to a vacuum: “Across valleys of space and time we strain ourselves to catch the pale smoke of each other’s signals…. Alone in my room….I create into rhythms that are my own, stumble over the rocks of words that I have never heard on another tongue” (8).

Magda makes a genuine attempt to overcome the handicap imposed by the hierarchy of her father’s language but she fails. “But in this complicated, power-tainted matrix of relationships, Coetzee shows all well-intentioned desire to backfire or merely to dead end” (Rody 174). Julia Kristeva argues that the subject’s strong links with the pre-oedipal mother figure result in some sort of mental illness.

The subject whose language lets such forces disrupt the symbolic order, is also the subject who runs the greater risk of lapsing into madness for the symbolic order is a patriarchal order, ruled by the Law of the Father, and any subject who tries to disrupt it, who lets unconscious forces slip through the symbolic repression, puts her or himself in a position of ‘revolt’ against this regime. (Moi 12)

Magda’s revolt results in her insanity and she envisions “building a great bonfire” and “screaming with wild glee as the flames sour into the night sky.” Her madness is the outlet that her rage gets. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe the monster woman as one who has a story to tell and who rejects the submissive role patriarchy has imposed on her. The figure of the madwoman
embodies the ‘feminist rage’ and becomes emblematic of a sophisticated literary strategy. Chiara Briganti points out that most critics have tended to unproblematically ascribe madness to Magda and this has resulted in the “canceling out of the heroine…and the marginalization of the novel itself” (34). Josephine Dodd points out the critics’ misreadings of Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* when she writes,

> By naturalizing Magda’s narrative as ‘really’ being about her father or South Africa or politics and so on, the (male) critic disallows Magda’s difference, renders her other and confirms his sense of Self. Criticism of this nature must be seen for what it is: an imperialist activity. (161)

These critics think that Magda is dismissed as simply mad because she is a spinster. However, Magda’s madness is indicative of her strong individuality. Her condition is a pointer to the fate of creative women who strive to carve a place for themselves in society. *In the Heart of the Country* is a feminist text as it struggles to defy binary closure and is not a linear narrative.

The position of white women in postcolonial novels is quite complex. In the power hierarchy, they are above black men and women, but below white men. Moreover, Coetzee’s women are not comfortable in occupying a superior position. Despite their humiliation, they try desperately to break the social barriers but it results only in further alienation. Coetzee brings home the painful eventuality that the egalitarian desire to cross the hierarchy can make a white woman feel trapped and can torment her psyche. Both Lucy and Magda become the victims of stereotypical black man’s revenge-rape. As pointed by Susan Brownmiller, the possibility and actuality of rape reduces woman to a commodity and a target of male ire.

Lucy and Magda break the stereotypical image of the Afrikaner woman. As pointed by Susan Gallagher, the Afrikaner woman was elevated as
representing the ultimate symbol of purity for the Afrikaner race. "Her properly regulated sexuality not only propagated the chosen race, it preserved that race undefiled" (90). The Afrikaner woman could not even think of crossing the colour line. The assault on Lucy served to demolish this edifice of racial purity whereas Magda willfully attempts to cross the colour line. Moreover, Lucy and Magda’s spinsterhood further alienates them from the Afrikaner woman’s image of a self-sacrificing mother whose chief duties were child bearing and childrearing. Magda conceives of wife and motherhood in the ghastliest terms possible.

I can imagine...giving birth to a child, with no midwife and my husband blind drunk in the next room, gnawing through the umbilical cord, clapping the livid baby face to my flat sour breast; and then after a decade of closeted breeding, emerging into the light of day at the head of a litter of rat like, runty girls, all the spit image of myself, scowling into the sun. (72)

She is among those women who find motherhood and child rearing oppressive.

Dominic Head points out Coetzee’s Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech about the failure of love in South Africa. Coetzee attaches great significance to the legal opposition to miscegenation in early apartheid legislation. He shows how the passing of a series of acts made marriage between black and white illegal. This led to “the denial of the desire to ‘embrace’ the Other, and a fear of the reciprocal embrace” (66). This accounts for Magda’s frustration in her relation with the black couple. This denial and fear ultimately finds an outlet as hatred. In the Jerusalem Prize speech Coetzee also refers to Alan Paton’s Cry the Beloved Country, and the day of reckoning prophesied by one of the black characters given the whites’ failure to love: “I have one great fear in my heart, that one day when they are turned to loving we will find we are turned to hating” (97).
Coetzee does not talk about the black woman’s burden. His position as a feminist and writer has similarities with that of Gordimer who believes that a white writer is in no position to offer advice or models. She feels that the good intentions of the white writer do not equip him to understand the black experience in its totality. Coetzee’s white women are ultimately defeated in their efforts to build intimacy and to demolish the master/slave hierarchy. Susan Gallagher aptly expresses their dilemma in these words, “Until the culture and society change, efforts of individual will are not enough. Individual efforts are necessary but insufficient means to the redemption of South African life” (99).

Coetzee’s position as a feminist has not found favour with some critics. They are against the tendency to “feminize” him as occupying a marginal position like his women narrators, being cut off from the dominant discourses of South African society. These critics talk about his powerful position as a white, male academic having access to international publishers and readership. On the contrary, Coetzee’s work has special relevance for ecriture feminine. Coetzee’s gynocentricity shows a remarkable ability to delve into the female experience and to view the world from a female perspective. Often, the politics of gender and writing work together. He addresses the theme of complicity that has an important bearing on his work as a writer. In the next chapter, I highlight how writing is a dangerous power game and the factors that hamper a writer’s creativity focusing on *The Master of Petersburg.*