



A SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN J. M. COETZEE'S *DISGRACE*

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ABSTRACT

John Maxwell Coetzee is a South African novelist and a winner of the Noble Prize for Literature in 2003. He is the first writer to win the Booker Prize twice; for Life & Times of Michael K in 1983 and again for Disgrace in 1999. J.M. Coetzee is remarkable for bringing Apartheid to global attention. Themes of poverty, crime and bloodshed foreground the post-apartheid literature. Coetzee faces the problem of cultural authority. Being a white South African writer he faced the problem of representing the black population in his novels. He needed to be extra careful in implementing racial divides into a fictional work. The present paper seeks to study the quest for identity in the novel Disgrace by J.M. Coetzee. Identity is pivotal for the existence of humans. The novel Disgrace is set in the post-apartheid period which was poles apart from the apartheid era. There was a metamorphic change in the socio-political life of the people of South Africa. The old system was replaced with the new one. Although the new government which came to power talked about equality among all but the reality was otherwise. The atrocities and racial discrimination faced by the black people by the hands of white people were avenged in a bitter manner. Power and powerlessness bring about alienation, identity crisis and revolt. The present novel shows the struggle of a white man David Lurie and his daughter in the quest of their lost identity being the victim of racial revolt and sexual assault.

INTRODUCTION

The protagonist of the novel David Lurie, aged fifty two, once a Professor of Modern Languages now is adjunct Professor of Communications finds it difficult to be rooted to a location. It is very hard for him to change his attitude toward South Africa's new power structure. Lurie finds new system very odd where the old certainties are gone. Even though the novelist uses third person narrative, David Lurie's point of view dominates the story. In this new era, he is unable to enjoy the privileges of his race. A man who used to teach Modern Languages is being made to deal with communications. He thinks his scholarship was a thing of past and he is no more than a clerk now. The fact that his students look right

through him and forgets his name further isolates him from the world of academia. Lurie seems to blame his age for his inability to reach young students. He has become tired of criticism and wants to write music. Lurie finds himself more out of place than ever. As soon as the white lost their power, Lurie loses his identity. He feels displaced, confused and helpless

David Lurie, twice divorced, has one child namely Lucy. He has several anxieties on professional as well as personal level. It's difficult for him to come to terms with his waning good looks and ageing. Another thing that he can't handle is the awareness that his appeal to women is diminishing. As a result he establishes the relationships with the prostitute Soraya and a young student Melanie. Lurie from his early childhood was always in the company of women.

*The company of women made of him a lover of women
and, to an extent, a womanizer.(P.7)*

David Lurie's affair with the student, Melanie turns into a case of sexual harassment and as a result Lurie is dismissed from the University. David refuses to confess publicly though he is ready to plead guilty to the charges brought against him. He has self respect and unfailing confidence in himself. He seems ready to face the consequences. After the banishment from the University, David enters into a world full of harsh realities of post-apartheid South Africa. He finds difficulty in facing these realities because his previous life in the academia hasn't prepared him for this. David visits Lucy, his only child in the rural Eastern Cape. He intends to get peace and solace from this rural setup. Migration of Lurie here depicts a journey in the quest of redefining identity and individuality. The small holding of Lucy is vandalized by three black men. These men assaulted David, shot the dogs and raped Lucy. Lurie suffers physical and even psychological harassment when his daughter is robbed and gang raped. David remarks about the incident in the following manner:

*It was history speaking through them. A history of wrong...
It may seem personal, but it wasn't. It came down from the
ancestors.(P.156)*

David is amazed to find out that Lucy is not ready to bring upon charges against the men. As far as Lucy is concerned she thinks that her rape is an act of personal violation, the degradation of a woman by the use of sex as a weapon. In the context of historical conflict of racism Lucy becomes a symbol of hatred of the white hegemony and atrocity over the blacks. The rape of Lucy shows the growing power of the blacks in post-apartheid South Africa. Refusing to report the matter to the authorities Lucy tells David:

...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.
It is my business, mine alone. (P.112)*

Lucy seeks a new accommodation and identity and doesn't value old dispensations like her father. Lucy seems to accept that it was history speaking through the rapists. Dominic Head pin pointedly says,

*"Lucy takes no legal action against her attackers,
and accepts the dubious arrangement offered
by her neighbor Petrus- that is to become an
additional 'wife' to him, in exchange of his protection".*

She has made up her mind to bear the child who results from the gang rape and continue to stay on the farm. She is willing to become a worker in this African land instead of being a colonizer. Lucy wants to live a quite, independent life. She is even ready to compromise and become the third wife of Petrus to stay in her homeland. She wants to atone for the colonialist's sin silently and starts on a long journey to her expiation for the past guilt as a scapegoat of the previous colonialists.

Lucy is a sign of hope for the coexistence. She becomes the symbol of redemption and reconciliation to the black and the white. Lucy redefines her identity. Lucy is no longer her father's little girl but grows into a stubborn girl. David also begins to accept his helplessness that there is nothing that he can do to check it. David is well aware that in this new era white men have been stripped of their privileges. The once powerful and respected David is left as an old man sitting among the dogs. While Petrus, the black gardener and dogman gains more and more control throughout the novel ultimately marrying Lucy and becoming the land owner. We can clearly see the transformation of David Lurie from hater of the animals to a lover and protector of the animals.

In this novel, Coetzee depicts the struggle for recognition that all individuals enact in order to be recognized by others. Thus achieving a form of identity. Tim McIntyre aptly remarks, "In Disgrace, Coetzee leaves behind the anxious soul searching of Boyhood and Youth". The depiction of the new South Africa and the changes which have taken place in the balance of power between whites and blacks clearly leads the novelist to develop his questioning of the very concept of identity. We can conclude that Disgrace is the novel in which all the main and pivotal characters are on a voyage of redefining their identities in the context of the present realities. Taking into account the special historical background of South Africa the only way to resolve the crises is the cooperation and coexistence between the two races.



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