



## J. M. COETZEE'S *DISGRACE*: A TRAUMATIC TALE OF THE POST-APARTHEID PERIOD IN SOUTH AFRICA

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### ABSTRACT

*Coetzee is basically concerned with the South African reality and represents the complexity in unfolding the issues of identity, power and freedom. He re-examines the African conditions in the context of the modern European literary tradition without undermining the basic issues that shape the African reality in the apartheid and post-apartheid segments of time in the history of South Africa. Almost all the major characters of his novels undergo the process of identity crisis and losing power and position because of the power structure of the colonizers or the changing power equations. South Africa was a British colony but now the power has shifted to the natives. With power shift the people who were dominated by the whites, dealt with cruelly, tortured in their own land, have now gained upper hand, and they are seeking revenge. They are no longer the silent sufferers they used to be. South Africa was a British colony but now the power has shifted to the natives. With power shift the people who were dominated by the whites, dealt with cruelly, tortured in their own land, have now gained upper hand, and they are seeking revenge. They are no longer the silent sufferers they used to be.*

**Key Words:** *Identity, Power, Oppressor, Oppressed, Colonial Domination.*

### INTRODUCTION

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J. M. Coetzee, the South African novelist, twice Booker Prize winner and Nobel Laureate, among the contemporary novelists, is perhaps the only one who is rigorously engaged in exploring issues crucial to the contemporary fictional discourse, choosing his own voice of articulation and in particular, locating himself in the complex historical past of apartheid and in the fractured social present of South Africa. Coetzee's reflexive self consciousness that runs through all his works informs his understanding of the historical, political and social forces as they act and interact with each other in the context of South Africa. Eric P. Louw contends,

*"Coetzee is widely considered one of the most renowned and celebrated writers, who is known for the fact-based portrayal of his native country both during and after apartheid, and is further distinguished by his acute awareness of marginalization, his affinity for rural settings, and his unique take on ethno-linguistic identity" (Louw 126).*

Coetzee is basically concerned with the South African reality and represents the complexity in unfolding the issues of identity, power and freedom. He re-examines the African conditions in the context of the modern European literary tradition without undermining the basic issues that shape the African reality in the apartheid and post-apartheid segments of time in the history of South Africa. His major novels are rooted in South Africa, implicitly and explicitly and became universal and relevant for all time as the basic tenets of identity power and freedom are questioned in more perplexing ways and re-examined. Almost all the major characters of his novels undergo the process of identity crisis and losing power and position because of the power structure of the colonizers or the changing power equations. Coetzee interweaves the critical issues of identity, power with a strong undercurrent of protest, revolt and anguish against the system of the day. His novels constantly remind us that oppression, torture, injustice and victimization are not only confined to South Africa but they are universal. Robert M. Post remarks, " By siding with the oppressed, he has become one of them" (Post 72). In such a terrible situation the very idea of identity and position crumble. Power pervades throughout and it controls, marginalizes and distorts truth and identity of an individual in the major works of Coetzee. A human being's uniqueness is brutally crushed by those in power and he has to live like an insignificant and powerless creature outside the community, history and time.

For Coetzee, the idea of European literary genealogy may be the source of a shared cultural language or the source of opposition to the force of brute history. Yet he is also sensitive to the ways in which European culture is linked to the business of colonial domination. Almost all his works are based on the theme of the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, reality and abstraction and the incapability of parents and children to help each

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other in crisis. In the post-apartheid period, his fiction became more abstract and literary having relevance to the changed times. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee presented the melodramatic and graphic story of a white woman who is raped by three black men to emphasize the hazards of life in post-apartheid South Africa, where guilt and bitterness still live side by side.

Post-apartheid is the milieu of the novel and the novel is the first attempt of the writer to delineate graphically the situation in post-apartheid South Africa. *Disgrace* has been described by Gareth Cornwell as "Coetzee's first mainly realist novel offering a pessimistic view of post-apartheid race, gender and power relations" (Cornwell 248). Gerald Gaylard remarks, "*Disgrace* is a novel with layers of intertextuality promoting a subtle analysis of cultural history" (Gaylard 315). Rita Bernard says, "*Disgrace* is indicative of Coetzee's abiding interest in the colonial pastoral and suggests that a crisis of definitions, relationships and responsibilities lies at the heart of this troubling post-apartheid work" (Bernard 384). Elleke Boehmer says, "The novel raises the question of what it is to come to terms with a history of terror and subjection, both for the perpetrator and the victim and posits a secular atonement" (Boehmer 342). The novel unfolds the dynamics of power when the changing power equations mar personal relations. It presents a bleak picture of the new South Africa where the whites have lost their supremacy and the blacks are emerging domineering and settling accounts of the history of the apartheid in South Africa. The novel asks uncomfortable questions about the relationship between the coloured and the whites and it gives grim account of the white minority on the brink of extinction because of the changing power equations in South Africa. The protagonist, David Lurie, has to accept an ever increasing pain at the end of the novel. He says, "one gets used to things getting harder, one ceases to be surprised that what used to be as hard as can be, grows harder yet" (Coetzee 219). This single sentence describes Coetzee's notion of life in the new South Africa where past cruelty has taken the place of anarchy.

South Africa was a British colony but now the power has shifted to the natives. With power shift the people who were dominated by the whites, dealt with cruelly, tortured in their own land, have now gained upper hand, and they are seeking revenge. They are no longer the silent sufferers they used to be. The system of power in our society is like a machine of which everyone becomes a part. If Melanie, the black, is raped; she is not the only one who has fallen victim to the perverse mentality of David Lurie, the white man Lurie is honest enough to sense an atmosphere of exploitation. In one of their sexual encounters, he has the uncomfortable sensation that he has forced himself upon his student, but she does not resist. All she does is, avert herself. Lurie feels that the experience is not quite rape but undesired experience. The complaint against Lurie is made not by Melanie but by her boyfriend. Lurie is told by an academic committee that he must apologize and undergo counselling. He admits his formal guilt but he outrightly refuses counselling for something that seems natural to him

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and even fine. He refuses to apologize and to avoid dismissal, he resigns. Later, David's daughter Lucy is raped by three black persons equally cruelly and she has to keep quiet saying it is a 'private matter'.

In this novel set in the Mandela era, the protagonist who is a University Professor is the victim of the great rationalisation which was the need of the hour and the African students of Cape Town University were bored with the plenty of Wordsworth and Byron and his teaching became ineffectual. David was working on the Love life of Byron in Italy as he enjoyed this all, but he has to submit to the change of power. This ultimately has led to many new things, his university changed into Cape Town Technical University where he has to teach communication skills to his students, the right use of verbs, phrases, adverbs and all that which he finds utterly 'non-sensical'. Yet he could not give up his basic nature of romanticism and goes to a prostitute Soraya on every Thursday afternoon at 2 p.m. punctually to spend ninety minutes lustfully and joyfully there. He even keeps an eye on his students who are his daughter's age. Strange enough, he describes his own daughter as a man and not as a father.

After the rape Lucy has little difficulty grasping the economic ramifications to the transfer of power that occurred with the emergence of a post-apartheid South Africa. "They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying. Perhaps this is what they tell themselves" (158). She talks to David after her decision to stay there in that farm, the trauma of rape, the fear that they would come again made her an acute genealogist, who is able to draw attention to the forces, circumstances, contexts and practices that restrict, situate and institutionalise discursive formations in her society. Here the rape of Lucy has made her confront the consequences of the apartheid and completely undermines the Enlightenment doctrines of instrumental rationality and progress. In the apartheid era, the black people were treated as minority or the marginalised ones whereas actually they were in larger number; but in the changed scenario with the coming of post-apartheid era, the white people are the real minority, less powerful and victims of Blacks' repression. Now as the times have changed, the roles of the Black and the White have also taken a different turn. Lucy is a strong character with rare determination and courage which decides her future course of action.

In *Disgrace*, we see David, a disgraced university professor, escape to his daughter's farm in the Eastern Cape after being made to resign. An English language and literature professor, he is a product of a language and a problematic colonial system. Throughout the novel, he finds himself suspended in an inept discourse, adding to his sense of alienation in a country that is no longer recognisable. He is a part of the colonial discourse that has provided him with the rigid linguistic framework through which he functions. Language, which has once aided him,



now fails him. Having been brought up in the western tradition and with the language of the Empire, he is now incapable of coping with the events and the changes that are taking place around him. When in need, he resorts to this failed discourse. Although his conventions are no longer relevant, they become valuable in times of stress. David is currently working on a chamber opera on the love life of Lord Byron which probably will never see the light, an opera that is being composed by a person he himself depicts as "obscure and growing obscurer: A figure from the margins of History" (167). His opera is as irrelevant as the language he insists on using, they both belong to a western tradition that is losing its ground in the new South Africa.

Moreover, in order that he may justify his action, for the growth of the plot, he tells her, "a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is a part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it" (16). Melanie has been detached from her physical attributes allowing David to claim that her beauty is a public property. This shows that David is cunning and clever like a fox, who is a teacher but accepts no moral bindings on him as he establishes sex relations with Melanie, his student, who is helpless, quite, and meek like a rabbit. The use of animal imagery makes the situation life like as fox and rabbit, the one is powerful while the other is powerless like the whites are powerful in apartheid South Africa. He is attracted by the beauty of Bev Shaw, the farm attendant and in another encounter he proceeds to make love to her on his daughter's bed, not only accentuating the age difference between them, but also culminating in his turning her into a mere object of desire. The fact that David makes love to Melanie on his daughter's bed introduces undertones of incest. On more than one occasion in the novel as stated earlier. David is seen describing his own daughter as a man and not as a father. He informs us that "she is too fat, negligent of her beauty, attractive in a sense but lost to men" (76). By viewing "his daughter in this manner and his desire for Melanie, David resembles an old man lusting after young girls" (Nashef 100).

Lucy's rape shows that being white in post apartheid South Africa, she is weak and the blacks are strong. The rape is conducted to manifest power as well. Her agreement with Petrus's proposed view, which clearly states that she would be considered as a part of his extended family, in effect, his third wife, also indicates Blacks' power. She strongly realises the powerlessness of the white and the powerfulness of the black characters, especially Petrus, who is depicted as a barometer of Blacks' power. On the other hand, David Lurie is reduced to speechless submission, stripped of control over his life. The gap in new South Africa is seemingly exaggerated as the author's intention is to show resistance to new power.

During the apartheid days when there was ruthless racist system, marriage between two different races was prohibited by law. Although the act goes with the system, the feeling still



remains intact in David Lurie. When Petrus informs him that he wants to marry Lucy as reconciliation for whatever happened on the farm and Lucy confirms that she agrees to his proposal for protection sake, David Lurie thinks that Lucy will never marry Petrus and resists the proposal, for the reason that Petrus is Black as well as her former assistant, hence in a lower status and position. David regards himself as a Western and a European, so he thinks that the Westerns do not do the things as Petrus's wishes. From this we can conclude that David Lurie is still in old mode of thinking. He has spent most of his life time in the apartheid system, so he is wrapped up in such thinking and his turning down Petrus's proposal of marriage with Lucy also implies his refusal of accepting the changes that come in the post apartheid new South Africa;

The two rapes that take place in the novel reflect the operations of power in each setting i.e. in the apartheid as well as in the post-apartheid. Lurie's exploitation of the black girl brings to light power dynamics at the gender level as his relationship with Melanie, the coloured girl is a clear duplicity of moral standards. In this novel, one can observe that men rape not because they wish to or they are tempted to do so, although society allows them that they can even rape women in order to keep them under proper control. This rebellious and villainous attitude is represented by Petrus when he along with his companions raped Lucy. It is significant to know that before her rape, Lucy is an independent woman who has exercised her own authority and power as she survives on her own, looks after the farm and performs every duty and responsibility without the help of any patriarchy. Her rape as a white is approved by the post-apartheid social set-up to keep her within limits and to create fear in her mind which stimulates the desires of Petrus to keep control over the farm.

When David goes to dog farm to attend and nurse them, we feel that metaphorically, animals figure the depravity and wretchedness of human life. Literally they are beings which are capable of facing suffering and pain. Let us say they are creatures with this material substance we call 'the body'. He enters an unfathomable communion with animals. Sue Kossew argues, "Lurie learns to love by humbling himself...this occurs through the tragic personal encounter with violence (as represented by the attack on the farm) and through his volunteer work at the animal clinic" (Kossew 155). The transformation of his attitude towards animals is marked by the tears that flow down his face and one evening he cannot stop the trembling of his hands when he returns home after assisting in killing some animals at Animal Welfare Clinic. "The disgrace of dying touches him just as it touches the animals he assists in killing. David's whole being is gripped by what happens in the theatre i.e. by killing the dogs at the clinic" (143). This new feeling towards animals is a great modification in his nature and it also changes his sensual desires that dominated his life in the past and also his relation to women. Deirdre Coleman comments, "Lurie's coercive relationship with Melanie, and they interpret Lurie as making partial atonement for his past transgressions against

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women, by helping to euthanize the dogs at the animal shelter" (Coleman 615). Derek Attridge's influential reading of *Disgrace* interprets Lurie as achieving "something approaching a state of grace through his work at the animal shelter, and in particular, through his service to the dead dogs" (Attridge 112). He now realises the piety of life and the misery of dying. If one carefully observes David's and his daughter's manifold disgrace in the novel, one can feel that this act is symbolic. If their disgrace is complete now, they have no future in this post-apartheid Africa except to serve the diseased/unwanted dogs. David is probably giving up an undesired aspect of his life as he is getting rid of his previous life of sensual pleasures and devoted to feeding and cleaning the animals and then disposing off their dead bodies to the hospital's incinerator.

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