

Racial Antagonism in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Abstract

Racial separation in South Africa began in colonial times under the Dutch Empire, until 1795 when the British took over the Cape. The Apartheid Legislation classified inhabitants into four racial groups such as black, white, coloured, and Indian. The last two groups which were divided into several sub- classifications and residential areas were separated. From 1960 to 1983, 3.5 million black South Africans were removed from their homes and forced to live in segregated neighborhoods. It was one of the largest mass removals in modern history.

Coetzee is one of South Africa's most accomplished contemporary novelists. He examines the effects of racism, oppression, and fear. While addressing the brutalities and contradictions associated with the South African policy of apartheid, Coetzee writes from political viewpoint that extends beyond geographic and social boundaries to achieve universal significance

This paper deals with the social, political and historical reality of apartheid South Africa. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* powerfully portrays the impressive unpleasant event of Colonialism and Apartheid in South Africa. Apartheid stood for a policy of racial segregation. It signified the rigid racial division between the governing White minority population and the non- White majority population. Apartheid was the policy of racial discrimination and segregation against the blacks during the white regime in South Africa.

Keywords: apartheid post- colonial, segregation, racial discrimination

Disgrace offers a realistic picture of the brutal reality of South African life in the twentieth century. The novel is set in the city of Cape Town in South Africa and deals with the individual life of a professor as well as with the transitional society characterized by racial discrimination and insecurity. In this respect it holds mirror to the contemporary South African society and remains an important cultural record. In spite of its apparently simple style, it has a concealed profundity and affirms the moral order behind all the events of human life.

The central part of *Disgrace* is the delineation of "human pain", "weakness" and the certain "torture" is a particular historical context. David Lurie, a twice divorced 52 years old man, having strong sexual drive, views sex not as something comforting and spiritually elevating, but as a problem. He teaches Romantic Poetry and communication skills at the Cape Town Technical University. He cannot put his heart and soul into teaching due to a lack of interest and indifference on the part of the students who are more interested in learning communication skills rather than literature. Coetzee shows a bleak educational scenario in post- apartheid South Africa. David Lurie visits Soraya every Thursday. She leads a double life, one as a wife and mother of a two kids

and the other as a prostitute. David Lurie tries to pry secretly into her respectable family life.

After Soraya's departure from David Lurie's life, he once sleeps with Dawn, the 2 department's new secretary. She is also married and wishes to immigrate to New Zealand with her husband due to lack of control and complete disorder all around in the Cape Town.

It becomes evident from Dawn's statement how lawlessness and disorder prevail in post- apartheid South Africa. However, Dawn is a failure with David Lurie on the sexual front: "Bucking and clawing, she works herself, into a froth of excitement that in the end only repels him" (*Disgrace* 9). Unlike Soraya quiet way of expressing pleasure in love making, Dawn disappoints David Lurie. As a matter of fact, sex for David Lurie has nothing to do with striking the finest intimacy with another human being. It is never ending that needs to be resolved on a day-to- day basis. Psychologically, his sexual syndrome spreads out from his supposed conquest of women, which sustains his Casanova Status.

David Lurie's actual problem starts after his attraction with Melanie, his student. She can feel that David Lurie has an eye on her, as "women are sensitive to it, to the weight of the desiring gaze" (*Disgrace* 12). He is straight in his demand to do something 3 reckless as he asks to stay with

him. Taking advantage of Melanie's hesitation and confusion, David Lurie forces her thereby thrusting himself on her. Melanie remains passive throughout the act. David Lurie becomes mad with passion when he visits Melanie in her apartment. David Lurie describes his second sexual encounter with Melanie as, Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack. Die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck (Disgrace 25). David Lurie realizes his mistake later when Melanie starts missing his classes. He takes it to be a quick little affair which is turning out to be problematic for him.

Later Melanie lodges a grave complaint against David Lurie. But the passive David Lurie refuses even to go through a copy of the complaint handed over to him. To the surprise and embarrassment of all the board members he makes no expostulations, pleads guilty and expresses willingness to undergo any punishment meted out to him. This strange state of mind signifies in two directions: either he does not want to be transformed as elaborated earlier, or he accepts the punishment as a self-willed form of contrition, a sublime act of self-purification.

It is the ambivalent behavior of Melanie that renders the questions of perception and cognition highly problematized. After her stay with David Lurie, Melanie is virtually removed completely from the narrative frame. David Lurie does not know whether Melanie filed the complaint on her own or acted under compulsion. To make something worse she does not make further appearances. Her behavior at David Lurie's house points to a well-knit conspiracy. She miserably cries with loud gasps in his arms, it seems, causing a stinging pain by conscience.

David Lurie has sex with Melanie for one more time. She is greedy for experience. At this point, she tries to relate to him. Her physical responses show an interest on her part to fill him with a surge of joy. However, David Lurie spoils everything by hurting Melanie when she asks for David Lurie's family pictures. He says, "I don't collect pictures. I don't collect women". She questions, "Aren't you collecting me?" He says, No, of course not" (Disgrace 29). This mistake is the turning point in David Lurie David Lurie's life, as Melanie feels betrayed and hurt. She tries to relate but now has no option but to retaliate. She files a formal complaint against David Lurie, which is followed by

an official investigation, humiliation, expulsion from job and inevitable disgrace. He is stripped of all dignity and stands exposed.

From the very beginning, David Lurie is watchful about his dishonest affair with Melanie. He knows that it may land him in trouble. His dismissal from job hardly makes him to feel what is peculiar about David Lurie is a strange sense of compulsion. Which makes him go out of sexual desire; it is completely beyond his control.

Later on, the students in the campus make rude mocking remarks about David Lurie and Melanie's boyfriend even threatens him and deliberately damages his car. David Lurie flees to Cape Town to his daughter, Lucy, a smallholding where he has to unavoidably behave like a decent citizen and a good father. Lucy, who lives on a farm where she cultivates flowers and vegetables, sells them in the market and earns her livelihood. She runs a business of boarding and training guard dogs. There are numerous references in the novel to post-apartheid new African society where it is not safe for a woman to live alone where the whites live in constant fear of being attacked by the blacks. The whites have to keep dogs and rifles for self-protection. David Lurie asks his daughter, "Aren't you nervous by yourself?" (Disgrace 60). She answers, "There are the dogs. Dogs will mean something. The more dogs, the more deterrence" (Disgrace 60).

The ambivalent attitude of David Lurie with regard to race and racial antagonism ultimately proves to be self-defining and at times contradictory. In the beginning he cannot afford to like Bev Shaw, the local veterinary worker. But later he makes love with her rather passionately and draws a comparison between her and Melanie. Melanie is not black and the contrast helps in place side by side himself with an inferior being and in asserting his superiority. This contrast, as it becomes clear later, outflanks the personal dimensions and reaches the wider formation of ethnic identity.

David Lurie is obviously obsessed with the memories of those happy and peaceful days when the whites ruled unopposed. It is prejudiced against the black, tends to see them as churlish and tries to set a cultural Greenwich, always with a painful awareness of paradigm shift, which runs against and scuttles the white dream. In trying to elicit the whereabouts of the three men who molested Lucy

from Petrus, he very well feels that thing have changed a lot.

In order to rehabilitate himself away from the world of disgrace, David Lurie voluntarily extends a helping hand to Bev Shaw at an animal clinic in putting down the diseased and unwanted dogs. David Lurie acquires some redeeming sense of compassion, which was absent from his life before.

David Lurie's disgraced state of mind is further made worse when Lucy is attacked on her farm, raped, her house stolen and his own head set on fire. While Lucy is convinced deep down regarding the inevitability of such savage fierce attacks, David Lurie is changed by the incident. He tries to persuade Lucy to leave the farm for good but she refuses. It is David Lurie, the father, the man, who is rendered insignificant and ineffectual in the face of the extreme anger by the robbers in gang raping Lucy- the relic of the white regime. It is the empire retaliating, which is the order of the day. David Lurie's attitude towards Lucy's rape is markedly distinct. Nowhere does he regret having abused his own student, nor does he feel burdened by any sense of guilt. This shift in David Lurie's attitude as a father is subtly observed by Anvar Sadhath when he writes: "This attitudinal shift appears to have resulted from the confronting selves- civilized and savage- in him" (73). In this way David Lurie is alive in both the situations. In Lucy's case, the savage in David Lurie turns sensitive as father of his exposed to being attacked defenseless daughter. Whereas in Melanie Issac's case, the savage is in his natural element bent upon destroying completely and attacking her freshness and youth taking an undue advantage of his position at the university. David Lurie's position is rather contrasted in both the cases. As for Lucy as well as Melanie, rape is a kind of death as they become victims of male predation and violence.

Through Lucy's rape, Coetzee has highlighted with clinical precision the devastating effects of losing power. In the post- colonial or post- apartheid South Africa the blacks have started turning hostile. It is because the decolonization is not an easy process. Being 'violent', 'difficult' and 'ugly', decolonization takes its charge. In that situation, one can either react or respond as Lucy does thereby accepting the inevitability of change. Lucy willfully gives up all the choices open before her and decides to stay back on her smallholding against all odds- a decision

that is absolutely unacceptable to David Lurie. It is really difficult to reconcile with Lucy's decision despite her fragility.

Disgrace highlights the brutalities of the long oppressed blacks against the whites. Lucy and David Lurie represent the whites, and are helpless in the face of the cruelties unleashed by the black community. Lucy's farm is raided by three blacks who at first ask for help and then attack David Lurie and his daughter, setting him on fire and locking him in a bathroom while they violently attack Lucy sexually. The attackers are full of hatred and express their extreme anger while raping Lucy. If one were to view it as retribution for racial injustice over a long period of time by the whites against the blacks, it is undeniably violent in form.

Coetzee, thus, paints vividly the post- apartheid South African society where the blacks were taking over the whites. The novel portrays the dilemma of the white minority that is the marginalized of the society, oppressed and victimized.

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