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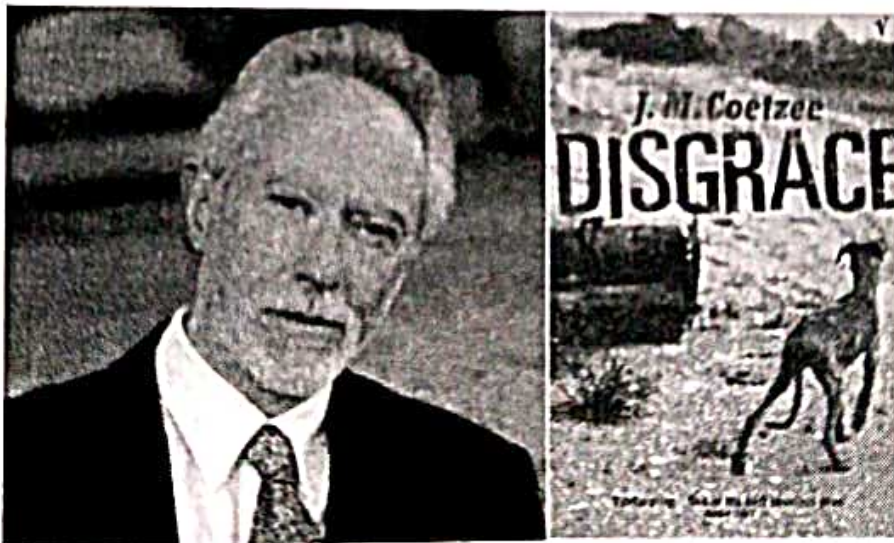
Harbinger of Post-Apartheid, Postcolonial South Africa: Study on Lucy in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Abstract

The paper is based on the novel Disgrace written by J M Coetzee. The story begins with and moves with the character of David Lurie. Here we try to analyse how the character of Lucy becomes the pointer of a postcolonial, post apartheid South Africa. Through the incidents that are repeated in different contexts, the complex situation in South Africa is brought to light. The difference is in the way the two characters of David and Lucy respond to them. In Lucy is found a resilience and a stoicism that tries to downplay her role as a white and the willingness to move on, despite all odds. This is studied in the backdrop of the historical circumstances that have led to the South Africa of today. The methodology uses the tools of post colonialism and tries to place the work in historical context. The conclusion arrived at is that the complexity of the situation in which a post-apartheid South Africa resides is borne by the character of Lucy.

Keywords: South Africa, Post-apartheid, desire, repentance.



Characters in novels carry the plot forward and often throw light on certain points of view that are inevitable for clarifying queries that are raised by time and history. In a post modern scenario, what is not in the forefront is also taken into consideration, the point being that marginalising takes place as part of the discourse of silencing and that it is not a natural course that action takes. This also throws into relief circumstances that were hitherto shadowed. Whether we may call it a new perspective or defamiliarisation, or a forcing of meaning into the questions raised by history, this act of bringing to light throws the other

characters as well as the readers into fresh angles of vision. This paper tries to analyse how Lucy in *Disgrace* acts as almost as a 'svuzhet' (used here in a broader sense), the point in the narration (plot) where the story is thrown into newer lights of relief.

The novels of J M Coetzee often introduce the characters of the margins and they play a bigger role in carrying in the philosophy of the novel forward. This also is a strong defence on the novelist who is sometimes criticised as being non-political. Coetzee's writing came under criticism perhaps because of the indirect way in which he dealt with politics in a country like South Africa. His contemporaries like Nadine Gordimer were often involved actively in struggles of liberation. While the writings of the blacks were openly discriminated against, the writings of the whites also came under governmental scrutiny. Nadine Gordimer and other writers were sometimes in the forefront of active struggle. Their writings took sides and made open proclamations against government policies of discrimination. Many of their works were banned, for example, Andre Brink's *Looking of Darkness* or Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*.

Coetzee's writings on the other hand were metaphorical renderings that were shorn of the political. His style of writing and often the way in which he chose topics for his novels, did not make open statements or act as commentaries. In his interview to Atwell in *Doubling the Point* Coetzee says that there are two types of duties; one is the responsibility a person feels in his conscience which he terms transcendental imperatives. The other is the one that society imposes upon us. Coetzee makes a distinction between the two, the person who lives and the person who creates. We see in his writing that Coetzee tries to distance himself from his writing. Benita Parry in "Speech and Silence in JM Coetzee" says that he is "... detached from the prominent modes of South African writing, obliquely situated to the prevailing intellectual formations of his native land, whether white nationalism, liberally socialist-liberationism or black consciousness, and little touched by the autochthonous transplanted and recombinant cultures of South Africa's African, Asian and Coloured populations..." (1998, p 160). At the same time his novels were strong statements that engage with the historicity of the times.

Such an instance is the depiction of the characters of the old man and his son in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The young boy and the old man is caught by Colonel Joll. They are both caught by Colonel Joll to give flesh to his story on the barbarians. Through this gesture he also satisfies the need of the colony to find an enemy. Beyond the border of what

such character is Lucy, the daughter of David Lurie in *Disgrace*. As mentioned before, this paper proposes to analyse how the character of Lucy is the focal point of the novel, in spite of being the character who was first introduced as an extension to the plot which seemed to revolve around David Lurie. The shift is subtle, but definite.

The plot of *Disgrace* puts forth two questions, the question of responsibility and the question of desire. The question is also linked to the white persona and the role that is expected of the white in a post-apartheid, postcolonial South Africa. *Disgrace* was published in the year 1999 and South Africa was already a democracy with Nelson Mandela being elected in 1994. The book received wide acclaim as also criticism. It won for Coetzee his Booker prize. The novel came under strict criticism by the African National Congress which said that the book is another form of racist portrayal. There have been critics who supported the opinion. But the novel on closer look shows how the novelist is trying to negotiate the issues in a post apartheid South Africa.

The story of David Lurie is drawn in the beginning on the terrain of desire. David is seen to meet a woman every week, Soraya. There is an urge on David's part to connect with her in more intimate terms. But the woman is not willing. This unwillingness is carried into his relationship with his student. She is still unwilling. But David takes their sexual contact as his right, and bases it on the rights of desire. The incident with his student Melanie happens quite accidentally. On his act with Melanie David says, "Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within her for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were far away." (Coetzee, 1999, p25). When the incident becomes known to all, David is called before a committee to address the issue. The unwillingness David shows throughout the questioning points to his convictions regarding desire. He strongly believes that his case is rested on the grounds of desire and therefore he will not repent. He remembers to Lucy a dog which used to whine each time it smelt a bitch. The dog was beaten each time it felt desire and it whined. As it was punished, it started to fear the desire it felt, which according to David was only natural. This reading of desire, placing it on eros, leads David not to repent in front of the committee. This is a very contracted vision of South Africa which comes from a white angle that refuses to acknowledge the wrongs done in the name of race to generations of people who were discriminated due to the colour of their skin.

This incident can be connected to the sexual violence that is done to Lucy. The incident that happens suddenly throws a different light on what happened to Melanie Issacs. Repentance is an important word in South Africa context. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up to make the healing process work. It was meant to give solace and repentance, the former for the victim and the latter for the perpetrator. This act was not welcomed by many whites who refused to repent. The question of repentance is also important in South African fiction. This is also important in the case of South Africa, the country where blacks and whites live crisscrossed by historical interventions of race and history. South Africa is a country where claims to the land were made by both the blacks and white. This has led to many strifes and wars.

In the novel after the act of sexual violence is committed on Lucy, David goes to meet Melanie Issacs and her family. The act of kneeling down before Melanie and her sister, and the act of extending his hand to Melanies's father are all acts of repentance, one that has deeper roots in history.

I am being punished for what happened between myself and your daughter. I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself. It is not a punishment I have refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being. Is it enough for God, do you think, that I live in disgrace without term? (Coetzee, 1999, p 172).

This is an act to which he is led after he is witness to what happens to Lucy, after she tells him that he cannot be the person who is guiding her forever.

It is through Lucy that David unlearns many lessons he has learnt as a white in South Africa. Though it is not explicitly stated, the actions undertaken by Lucy provide David with the answers that history makes imperative for every white to answer. She asks him to help out Petrus at the farm. David replies that he likes the historical piquancy. After the brutal incident of violence happens to her Lucy refuses to leave the farm. She says that there is no higher life we can escape to. She also thinks that the men who raped her hated her. She may be indirectly answering the seeds of violence sown by racism in South Africa. But what is important is that she refuses to rise to the bait of violence.

This is my life, I am the one who has to live here. What happened to me is my business, mine alone, not yours, and if there is one right I have it is the right not to be put on trial like this, not to have to justify myself – not to you, not to anyone else. As

for Petrus, he is not some hired labourer whom I can sack because in my opinion he is mixed up with the wrong people. That's all gone, gone with the wind (133)

It is from this backdrop that we need to analyse the novel *Disgrace*. It then becomes apparent why the publication of *Disgrace* met with a furor. Again it is in this backdrop that the actions of David gain weight. Desire is not a simple and innocent process as David is wrong to make us believe. It is desire played out against the backdrop of what is South African history. This makes the issue more complicated.

The casualness of David's responses in front of the committee is because he does not acknowledge the weight of history on his actions. This is repeated at many times in the novel. This casualness in his action is apparent in his attitude to the foreman at his daughter's farm, Petrus. He is stand offish with the character of Petrus, treating him with the knowledge that they own the farm. Attinger is another character who is reminiscent of the old order.

As against all these characters stands Lucy, who at the beginning of the novel seems to be here only to provide a home for David. But this picture is soon eroded as many incidents follow one after the other in the lives of Lucy and David and they fall prey to violence. The people who commit violence are found to be the relatives of the foreman. He also says that he will protect his people. He is also ready to protect Lucy, to marry her.

Lucy's acceptance of the violence that is done to her also leads to David's repentance. The idea of desire which David had said was private is repeated in Lucy's thought that the violence done to her is a private matter. Both these ideas residing in a single plane, points to the complexity of a post apartheid South Africa. Lucy refuses to let David be her guide, "at this time" (161), she tells him. She also accepts that what has been done to her may be debt collection. She is willing to give up the farm to Petrus but she will retain the rights to the house. She also realises that it is best to begin with nothing. Her transferring the land to Petrus's name also seems symbolic.

Spivak notes in her article "Ethics and Politics" that the novel deliberately tries to keep the focus on David. According to her, the novel has to be read from another focus. "She becomes, in the truest – and perhaps most troubling – sense of the term, a white South African, one whose subjectivity is no longer constituted through a relation of domination but one whose identity exists in a state of true hybridity alongside a plethora of other new, post-apartheid identities" (Smith, 2006, p 35)

Lucy She is
that perhaps
start" (Coetzee
someone who
let the winds

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The novel ends not by focussing on David but by the picture of David looking at Lucy. She is now pregnant and the flowers around her have started to bloom. David thinks that perhaps now he will be able to find feet, find peace, "a new footing, a new start"(Coetzee,1999, p 218). It portends another future for South Africa, as a visitor, as someone who will finally come to terms with centuries of injustice, someone who will finally let the winds rest in peace.

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Dog Days

On either side of the wall

a dog
and she,
roomed,

same walls gray.

Breath (moans),
winter outside.

No cherry blossoms
only red flowers wilting in the heat of day,
and dying light.

She hears the dog.

It whimpers in the dark
the wall thin between them,
a small sheet of pain;
she hears the paws on the floor,
hither,
thither;

thither,
hither,

she hears the unrest, her eyes growing out of the wall
and sees the dog.

Night grows,
the hardness of her cot, betrays nothing.



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On either side of the wall
the dog and she,
both hear the other breathe,
a water trickle in the sand,
dried yellow butterfly wings;

both listen,
both wait,

dawn steals sleep.

Reverie

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Calicut, Kerala

White Walks to Freedom: Negotiating Post Apartheid South Africa in J M Coetzee's *Disgrace*

Abstract

South Africa is a country whose history runs into centuries of struggle which is different from the other postcolonial countries. The special condition of the country gave it the term second world. The situation in South Africa is different from other settler countries as well. The writing in South Africa has always reflected the politics and the geography, working in a space criss- crossed by conditions of race, and mixed ancestry. This is reflected in the writings in myriad ways, and is different in the writings of the blacks and the whites.

White writing has always sought to engage itself with the volk, and was concerned itself with the angst of belonging. There were writers who actively involved themselves in the struggles of liberation like Nadine Gordimer, Andre Brink or Breyten Breytenbach. J M Coetzee was not an active participant in the freedom movements. His writings also had a detached cerebral nature to it.

*This paper tries to argue that in *Disgrace*, which is Coetzee's first post apartheid novel, he puts across a picture of what free South Africa would be like. The novel is also a quest into how both the blacks and the whites would try to survive in a changed South Africa where post-1994, the equations of power has tipped from the whites to the blacks. The paper contextualises the novel by aligning it with its history and reads it in a post colonial angle. It reaches the conclusion that Coetzee succeeds in putting across to us a realistic and hopeful picture of post apartheid South Africa.*

Keywords : Post Apartheid, Postcolonial, White

Freedom has often than not meant only one thing in a nationalist paradigm. It meant the capacity to exercise one's rights and opinions and to be free of any external forces of dominion. In a colonialist concept these lines of who was the conqueror and who were the conquered was always clear. Later in a post- colonial scenario one could also discern the harm that was done to one's own country, culture, and language. Nationalistic uprisings often hinged on reclaiming the land, the culture and language. There were clear marks in history that spoke of who the land belonged to. In settler culture, these lines of demarcation were (often) faint.



In settler countries the fight for rights was settled before the country became independent. Indigene cultures were subdued and the language wiped out. The people were killed in large numbers so that only the settler remained. This led the settler/conqueror not to have any feeling of guilt. Every sign of conquest was obliterated and wherever he looked he could find "white washed" faces of recognition and approval. This situation was less so in South Africa, the country where contending forces of colour claimed allegiance of affection to the land. The history of South Africa was made complicated by centuries of claim, that led the question of ownership of the country to be divided among the whites and the black. The earliest aboriginal people of South Africa were the Khoi-khoi and San. The Dutch who came to the land in 1652 and the French Huguenots who came later are the people who are the ancestors of the Afrikaners in current South Africa. The nationalism of these Afrikaners was fanned by later wars fought with the British, who came into the country with an imperialist eye. This led to many wars between the British and the Afrikaners that lasted for nearly a century. The Afrikaners also fought with the blacks for their rights to the land and its resources.

This history of South Africa lent the country a particular hue, one that was different from other settler nations like Australia or Canada. Both the blacks and the whites believed that South Africa belonged to them. This led the country to be categorised as the second world by Alan Lawson. The whites in South Africa truly believed that they were the true owners of the land. In the long wars that were fought between the British whites and the Afrikaner whites, the Afrikaners fought for what they believed to be their motherland. In the year 1948 the white Afrikaners came to power in South Africa. In 1961 South Africa became a Republic by breaking away from the Commonwealth.

But soon black forces were rising to power. South Africa was slowly but definitely moving towards freedom under the able leadership of Nelson Mandela, who even under imprisonment shone a light of hope in the minds of his people. In the year 1994, the country walked into democracy by electing Mandela its first black president. This definitely shifted the focus of power from the whites to the blacks. Keane in his book *Bondage of Fear: A Journey through the Last White Empire* narrates how the whites reacted to the transfer of power. He speaks of the ministers sitting there and they seem "... irredeemable lost, the map of their world, with its neat lines of separation, rent from end to end" (2).

There were different strategies that the whites employed in order for them to ascertain their purity. Apartheid or the racial policy of segregation was an ideology as well as a rule of law. Reserve lands were marked where the blacks could be housed there so that the whites could have a space of their own. In *Culture and Imperialism* Said writes that imperialism meant thinking, settling and controlling a land space which is not possessed by the colonizer. The idea of whiteness was linked to the beginning of the idea of apartheid.



The idea of the white in the transnational scenario changes and there are many works that underline this. Sarah Nuttall in *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reactions on Post-Apartheid* speaks of how a segregated political system in the country led to a segregated theory while speaking of South African literature which led to the reading of relations in strict Manichean binarisms of race, power etc. The theoretical positions that try to address the current situation in South Africa which are termed post transitional ask for a more lateral understanding of literature than strict understanding of positions. The problem of white privilege is also highlighted in Samatha Vice's article "How do I live in this Strange Place?" All these lines of demarcation as drawn by the whites were eroded when the sun of democracy dawned in South Africa.

Many white writers in South Africa claimed their allegiance to the freedom struggle. Writers like Breytenbach openly defied the government by marrying a woman from another race. He had to go into exile from where he returned in disguise to visit his beloved country. But he was caught and imprisoned for many years. In a similar vein, writers like Nadine Gordimer and Andre Brink were vocal in their allegiance to the struggle. They supported the many movements that sprang up and wrote openly about it. J M Coetzee stood apart from these writers by not taking an active part in struggles or writing openly about it in concrete terms.

Coetzee's style was what we may be called one of the intellect, one that was distanced and objective. The style of detachment earned for him the term of being non-political. In a country like South Africa to be apolitical was also to side with the conqueror, to be on the side of violence. But Coetzee has been an observer, drawing clear opinions on the country and its history, delving deep into the reasons why the country became what it was, where the whites drew their history of nationalism from. His work called *White Writing* is ample evidence to his critical acumen. But so also are many of his novels.

The first three novels (*Dusklands*, *In the Heart of the Country*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*) are allegorical thoughts that inspect colonialism from far. The next four (*Life and Time of Michael K*, *Foe*, *Age of Iron* and *Master of Petersburg*) treat the subject of South Africa though indirectly. *Disgrace* is the text written after the first democratic elections.

Among these works *Disgrace* (1999) holds an important place as it is the first novel he wrote after South Africa became a democracy. It was written four years after the election and would have been his observations regarding the country and the future it should point to. This paper tries to analyse the future that Coetzee portends for South Africa and the roads to freedom that he thinks both the whites and blacks must take in order to attain true liberation.

When the plot unfolds, we see the narrative suddenly slipping into the crux of the story; a case of sexual assault against David Lurie by his student Melanie Isaacs. The story



is also opened into the world that Coetzee wants us to see. We see David Lurie refuses to acknowledge his crime. He says

I am being asked to issue an apology about which I may not be sincere?

The criterion is not whether you are sincere. That is a matter, as I say, for your own conscience. The criterion is whether you are prepared to acknowledge your fault in a public manner and take steps to remedy it. (58)

David Lurie excuses his crime by placing it on the rights of desire. He tells his daughter Lucy about a dog that used to live in their vicinity when Lucy was a child. This dog used to whine when it smelt a bitch near. The owners of the dog would beat it till it started feeling that the desire it felt was wrong. Next time the dog smelt a bitch nearby, it would whine and act as if it was punished. David says that at the point it is better to shoot the dog at that point of humiliation.

David Lurie's unwillingness to acknowledge his guilt mimics this unwillingness to sign the confirmation of the wrong that he did to Melanie Issacs. Post apartheid scenario is a ground for white guilt, of rectifying wrongs, of compromises and reconciliations. The South African Government envisaged rainbow nation where all races would live together in harmony. As a first step the Rev Desmond Tutu was appointed as head for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Mark Sanders quotes the South African Promotion Preamble which says that the TRC meant to provide "a historic bridge between the past of a deeply divided society... and a future founded on the recognition of human rights, democracy and peaceful co-existence for all South Africans" (61). There was also call for the whites to sign in a statement that said that they were part of the racial inequality. Only 500 of half a million whites signed.

What David Lurie forgets is the laws of the land that only till recently laid down the rules of who should love whom and who one should tie the matrimonial knot with. As mentioned earlier in the paper Breytenbach went into exile as he married a woman of his choice. Many black people met with trial, judgement and punishment in a land where laws decided the direction one's affection would take.

As the novel progresses David learns some lessons from his daughter, Lucy. Lucy is the new South Africa. She has already unlearned many white truths. She has also decided to live a life that is a harbinger for times to come. Her confrontation with David is the steady stand against which David slowly realises that change he must. This rationalisation of Lucy goes well with the cover of *Disgrace* which shows a hungry dog standing in the middle of a country lane. She says that there is nothing important about the humans. They are only animals too. David also learns this from his association with the animals that he is given to put to sleep.

Lucy which is the new face of South Africa, comes to terms with violence and coming to terms with it is another very important focus in the second half of the novel. Lucy tries to make sense of the violence that is done to her. She tries to rationalise it, to therefore normalise it. Lucy chooses to be silent about the sexual violence done to her,

...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.

'This place being what?'

'This place being South Africa'.(112)

She also refuses the guideship that David offers her. Instead she tells him that she is her own mistress and she can make her own decisions.

There are many instances in the novel where white confronts the black in a changed circumstance. Lucy asks David to help Petrus in the farm. David replies that "Give Petrus a hand. I like that. I like the historical piquancy." (77). When he buries the dogs who have been wounded and killed by the black men David thinks that, "contemptible, yet exhilarating, probably, in a country where the dogs are bred to snarl at the mere smell of a black man" (110).

We find a more visible change in David when he visits the family of Melanie Issacs. We see that David still remembers the desire he felt for his student. But now his desire is not let to fly rampant, it is rather mediated by thoughts and actions. He meets the mother and sister of Melanie and bows before them in an act of seeking forgiveness.

In Petrus, Lucy's foreman and later partner, we see the direction the black race is taking in South Africa. It is a more assertive face, the face of a black man who has come home. His voice is more certain and the terms he lays before the white people are negotiations that he takes form his new found freedom. David is unable to reconcile with this. But Lucy is firm about accepting the new terms. She also tells David,

This is my life, I am the one who has to live here. What happened to me is my business, mine alone, not yours, and if there is one right I have it is the right not to be put on trial like this, not to have to justify myself – not to you, not to anyone else. As for Petrus, he is not some hired labourer whom I can sack because in my opinion he is mixed up with the wrong people. That's all gone, gone with the wind (133).

Lucy's decision to keep her child is another important symbol 126/162 1
motherhood with a stoicism that comes from having made peace with. ... pea
that Lucy has found also transfers to Lurie. The final picture we find is of David looking
on at Lucy and it is a picture of hope. This is the picture that Coetzee leaves us with. There
is white mother tending her flowers in a place where she has negotiated peace with her



black compatriot, bearing a child of mixed ancestry. She has accepted the child and its future in peace and she hopes it grows bearing both the strands of the two veins that runs close to South Africa. She has decided to run her roots here, not to go abroad, not to escape. Her child will be reared by her and the black man who has chosen to give her protection. The child is the rainbow nation, the future South Africa.

This then is Coetzee's answer to the post apartheid South Africa which seeks to find deliverance from the wounds that history cast on it.

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