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## 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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