



J. M. COETZEE'S *DISGRACE*: A JOURNEY FROM COLONIAL TO POSTCOLONIAL

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ABSTRACT

Colonialism is a practice or policy of economic domination in which a powerful country imposes political, racist, economic and cultural issues on the colonized groups through exploitation, degradation and torture, whereas, the term 'postcolonial' originally refers to describe the period after colonization. In his postcolonial novel Disgrace, J.M. Coetzee has rendered a vivid description of the oppression endured by the native Africans and how that oppression compels them to be violent. Coetzee also portrays how the misery and persecution began to take a reverse effect with the passage of time in the apartheid society. In the post-apartheid society the white people became the subject to harsh and authoritarian treatment. The natives took an upper hand and apartheid regime began to lose its ground. The long unjust racial discrimination against the native blacks forced them to retaliate the violence and oppression of the white people. Consequently, the white people became the peripheral and powerless section of the society. The present paper analyses the struggle between the oppressed and the oppressor and focuses on the struggles of an uncommunicative college Professor, his harassment case, tragic situations on his daughter's farmhouse, and the balance of power between Negroes and white people. The paper also portrays the struggle of the native Africans who were dominated in the beginning, and a sense of guilt among the white who were once in dominance in the changing scenario of an apartheid-free South Africa.

DR. KAVITA TYAGI

PREETI SINGH

1 Page



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INTRODUCTION

J.M. Coetzee's Booker Prize-winning novel *Disgrace* (1999) is a paradigmatic narrative offering an expressive critique of the socio-political turbulence, and ethnic complexities of human condition blockaded from colonial rule and legacy of apartheid. Published just half a decade after the official abolition of the apartheid regime in South Africa, this popular masterpiece provides a blunt appraisal of the troubled country's social order after the chaotic aftermath of centuries of racial oppression under colonial rule. Hence, it is a bleak tale of human suffering in post-apartheid South Africa analyzing the diverse issues related to racial discrimination, white guilt, black vengeance, relocation of political power and consequential issues of disruptive past and distrustfully shared future.

In South Africa the Post-apartheid Constitution that was adopted in May 1996 declared racial discrimination null and void. The power of governance was transferred from whites to the native Africans that mobilized the reversal of entire social set-up. After apartheid the white people suffered at the hands of native Africans. David Lurie, a 52 year old man, is the protagonist of the novel. He is twice divorced and is employed at the Technical University of Cape Town as a Professor of Communication. Lurie has a weakness for women. He even visits a prostitute, Soraya to satisfy his carnal desires. As it is clear from the following extract from the novel:

It surprises him that ninety minutes a week of a woman's company are enough to make him happy, who used to think he needed a wife, a home, a marriage. His needs turn out to be quite light, after all, light and fleeting, like those of a butterfly. No emotion, or none but the deepest, the most unguessed-at; a ground bass of contentedness. (Disgrace 05)

David Lurie teaches Communication Skills and Advanced Communication Skills at a Technical University in Cape Town. He takes classes in Romantic Literature to display his literary passion, but he enjoys most in the company of women. The company of women converts him into a natural lover of women and, to an extent, a womanizer. He anyhow managed to get women whom he desired. He involves in sexual relationship with his student. He had relationship with his colleagues' wives, with tourists and even with prostitutes.

Lurie once catches sight of young Melanie Issacs, his student of the Romantic Literature. When he converses with her, she appears reticent and hesitates even looking at him. Lurie politely persuades her to come to his apartment. When she reaches, Lurie requests Melanie

DR. KAVITA TYAGI

PREETI SINGH

2 Page



for a dinner, at first she hesitates and Lurie made use of that occasion to express his desire. He requests Melanie to stay with him that night. Professor Lurie is old enough to be the father of a girl like Melanie, still he seduces her. Consequently, the young student is sexually harassed by her Professor, representing the victim-victimizer syndrome. Lurie has one weakness that leads to a number of dishonourable affairs. But in case of Melanie, his student, it's altogether different. Laurie seduces her forcefully and this immoral act results in his disgrace.

Lurie's unrestricted steps make his behaviour questionable. His unethical actions give birth to numerous other problems. He feels quite awkward while delivering his lecture in presence of Melanie who is reluctant to have sex with Lurie. Lurie is a white Professor who misuses his position while exploiting his native student sexually. Melanie is a girl from deprived section who directly cannot resist or ignore the man in power. She is a student of Theatre Studies. She also attends Lurie's Romantic Literature class. Once Melanie couldn't appear for the mid-term test, but Lurie rather marking absent awards her seventy marks. Lurie goes morally unscrupulous and professionally corrupt because of his lustful affair with the student. As it is clear from the following quote:

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. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, far away. (Disgrace 25)

Lurie exploited Melanie for his sexual pleasure and Melanie in turn took advantage of Lurie for her own benefit. Lurie is the foremost culprit, who persuades his student to indulge in sex. Melanie's father calls the Professor and informs him about Melanie's withdrawal from the course. He requests Lurie to succour his daughter and tell her usefulness of a University degree. Her father states further that Melanie has deep admiration and regard for him, so she will definitely follow her Professor's instructions. Lurie finds himself in a very critical situation. Lurie's troubled conscience feels a pricking sensation. He felt like making confession to Mr. Issacs. He says, "I'll see what I can do. Why not come clean? I am the worm in the apple, he should have said. How can I help you when I am the very source of your woe?" (Disgrace 37). But now everything was unmanageable and Melanie's father accuses Laurie for his illicit act. Mr. Issacs says, "Professor?... You may be very educated and all that, but what you have done is not right ... We put our children in the hands of you people because we think we can trust you. If we can't trust the University, who can we trust?" (Disgrace 38).

Student Affairs Vice-Rector issues a memorandum to Lurie regarding his unethical conduct in the University. The committee inquires Laurie about the inconsistency in making a record

DR. KAVITA TYAGI

PREETI SINGH

3 Page



of attendance and awarding seventy marks to Melanie in the mid-term test in which she didn't appear. The committee also informed him about the consequences if he is found guilty. Lurie has realized very well that even if the committee keeps his name confidential, everyone is gossiping about his affair.

Soon after the students in the campus celebrate Rape Awareness week. Women shout slogans against the rapists and a pamphlet is dropped through his door with a message "YOUR DAYS ARE OVER, CASANOVA" (*Disgrace* 43). Lurie feels deeply hurt and insulted by the defamatory gossip. Lurie is forced to endure disgrace and humiliation because of his wrongful affair with Melanie.

Lurie does not want the committee to continue his investigation, and he also doesn't want to make efforts to safeguard his interests anymore. He makes an open heart confession before the enquiry committee "True enough, I was having an affair with the girl" (*Disgrace* 42). In the end when he gets ready to leave, he says "I have said the words for you, now you want more, you want me to demonstrate their sincerity. That is preposterous. That is beyond the scope of the law. I have had enough. Let us go back to playing it by the book. I plead guilty" (*Disgrace* 55). There appears Lurie's photograph in the students' newspaper. A man was shown holding a dustbin above his head like a dunce's cap. Lurie receives a call from the Chairman who advises him to apologize in writing. But Lurie wilfully replies: "Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse" (*Disgrace* 58).

Consequently, Lurie is terminated from his teaching position. He, thereafter, goes to stay with his daughter Lucy at her farm in the Eastern Cape. Lucy has a farm where she earns money by keeping dogs, selling flowers and agricultural products in the market. She has a servant named Petrus. He is a polygamous-married Black African whose farm adjoined Lucy's farm and he works for Lucy as a "dog-man". Lurie engages himself in enjoyable activities in the country side and goes for a walk with his daughter and her dogs. Lucy introduces her father to the people who visit her stall. Bev Shaw is a native woman who is a good friend of Lucy. She runs a clinic for pet animals. Her noble services to cure wounded animals make Lurie feel that Bev is a priestess, who is making effort to "...to lighten the load of Africa's suffering beasts" (*Disgrace* 84).

The next day three men force their way into the farmhouse. They pretend to need Lucy's phone to call for aid for a sick relative, but getting a chance they pounce on Lurie and also shoot down the caged dogs which Lucy is boarding, an action which David later considers was done since black people in South Africa are instructed to beware of dogs as symbols of white power and oppression. The three strangers destroy everything at the farm house. They carry off Lucy's pistol, Lurie's overcoat, shoes and his car also. Lurie is struck on the head,



so he loses his conscious. When Lurie regains his conscious, he is assaulted again and thrust into the lavatory. He gets severely injured and meanwhile they batter Lucy and raped her.

Lurie finds himself helpless and keeps shouting for help “Take everything. Just leave my daughter alone” (*Disgrace* 94). They splash some methyl spirit on him and set fire. Lurie’s scalp, eyes and ears are burnt. They crush the telephone and puncture the tyres of the car. Lurie is much worried about what the men did to his daughter. He asks her about the mishap. Lucy replies, “You tell what happened to you. I tell what happened to me” (*Disgrace* 99). Lurie wants to register a complaint about the mishap. Ettinger, an old man who lives nearby, convinces them to make safety measures in the farm because the police will not protect them every hour. J.M Coetzee portrays the widespread disorder and anarchy after the fall of apartheid. The whites were at risk and they had to bear the consequence of their brutality done to the natives. It is apt to quote Parvathy:

Only power transfer from the whites to the black natives has been affected... The socio-political ethos of modern South Africa enmeshed in a turbulent metamorphosis has shattered the dreams of prosperity cherished by the black natives and the dreams of peaceful co-existence cherished by the remaining white residents. Coetzee exposes the disgrace that soils the political image of South Africa as he describes the remaining whites seeking security by installing bars, security gates and a perimeter fence and planning to buy pistols and two way radios. (Parvathy 74)

Lurie comes to know that his daughter has been raped by the native men when he fell unconscious and confined in the lavatory. One night while sleeping soundly, he had a hallucination in which his daughter Lucy calls him to protect her. He cannot sleep afterwards because Lucy’s painful voice upsets him and also because of his physical affliction. His wrist, eyes and scalp are burnt woefully. For the first time, Lurie realizes about the trauma experienced by women. Lucy had neither marital experience nor did she has a male lover. Lurie feels sorry for his daughter who was savagely raped by three native blacks. The violent assault upon him and his innocent daughter has become the most excruciating experience, which unnerves him to the core. This occurrence has also been explicated as a sort of vengeance for the crime of sexually exploiting his own girl-student, who was of his daughter’s age.

The actual visible cause for the rape was the racial discrimination, extreme poverty and deprivation experienced by the native people in the post-apartheid regime, which drove them to attack the white people. Two policemen come to the farm house to enquire about the crime. Lucy outlies the mishappening that took place on the farm house, but Lucy doesn’t disclose anything about the rape. Lurie later argues with her why she did not inform the

DR. KAVITA TYAGI

PREETI SINGH

5 Page



police about being raped by the savages? Lucy affirms, “I have told the whole story. The whole story is what I have told” (*Disgrace* 110). Lurie and Lucy turn out to be the victims of the social and political conditions prevailing in South Africa after the apartheid regime. They make up their mind to safeguard themselves from further crimes against them.

This shows the widespread racism in South Africa during the period of apartheid. Lucy regards the mishap as, “A purely private matter” (*Disgrace* 112). She does not want to take the matter into public. Lucy assumes, “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” (*Disgrace* 112). “Lucy suggests in shielding her rape not that it is inherently, unrepresentable, but that it is unspeakable before a certain audience, one both including her father and exemplified by the law” (Anker 239). Lucy opines that it is better to hush the matter otherwise it may lead to more distress. The white minority is no more privileged and the subjugated natives have gone aggressive. “Both the father and the daughter have been disgraced irretrievably. And both accept their disgrace stoically” (Kaul 10). The public shame is not the only reason for Lucy’s passiveness. Her denial to register a police complaint is rationalized by the delicate condition of the whites in post-apartheid time.

After a few days when Petrus comes back to the farm with his wife, Lurie comments suspecting the disappearance of Petrus during the mishap. Lucy retorts that she cannot direct him because he is his own master. Lurie conjectures how an incident of violent attack and rape works on women’s confidence and infects their personality. Lurie is also doubtful about Petrus’s pretensions. He doubts that Petrus might have an association with the three men who attacked them “...to teach Lucy a lesson” (*Disgrace* 118). Lurie conveys Petrus, “I find it hard to believe the men who came here were strangers. I find it hard to believe they arrived out of nowhere, and did what they did, and disappeared afterwards like ghosts” (*Disgrace* 118). After his humiliation and disgrace at the University, he arrived at Lucy’s farmhouse for peace of mind, but surprisingly Lurie underwent a different kind of disgrace there.

In this novel “Apartheid” is indicated as “the old days”. Lurie dreams of those days when whites had the dominion and authority to employ and suppress the natives. But now everything has reversed. Natives have started to subjugate and oppress the whites. This represents that apartheid was on the verge of decline, but peaceful and harmonious co-existence among the races has not been accomplished yet. “The attack is the point at which Coetzee opens up the arena to the sledgehammer politics of modern South Africa. Lurie and his daughter find themselves ideologically opposed on the fault lines of the old and the new country” (Williams 23).

Petrus, the servant, organizes a party to celebrate the purchase of a land through the loan granted by the government. In the party Lurie and Lucy catch sight of the two savages who



assaulted them. Lurie decides to call the police, but Lucy thwarts by saying that it will spoil the joyful mood of Petrus. Lurie is not able to pull himself together after the brutal rape of his daughter. He is highly concerned about his daughter's safety. He counsels Lucy to leave that farm and come to Cape Town. Lurie says, "Lucy, it really is time for you to face up to your choices. Either you stay on in a house full of ugly memories and go on brooding on what happened to you, are you the whole episode behind you and start a new chapter elsewhere" (*Disgrace* 155). Lucy refuses to move to Cape Town. She believes that the sexual assault on her was an act of punishment against the white community, an act of racial discrimination. Her silence over the violence imposed on her can be identified as agreement over the long prevailed silence of the colonized, represented in other books such as *Foe* (1986) and *In the Heart of the Country* (1977).

The three rapists act as possible agents of revenge, reflecting Lurie's violence towards Melanie and bringing an ultimate end to his white supremacy. It is also probable that the attackers cannot see outside the physical limits of Lucy's colour. As Lucy recollects the aggression, she narrates how personal and racially motivated everything was. Lucy opines:

"It was so personal ... it was done with such personal hatred. That was what stunned me more than anything. The rest was . . . expected. But why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them. [...] The shock simply doesn't go away. The shock of being hated, I mean" (*Disgrace* 156).

The gang rape of Lucy, a white girl, by black men was an act carried out of vengeance for the apartheid rule and the exploitation of black people, and a reaction to the racial discrimination imposed by colonialism. The incident wears some historical implications also. Lucy points out: "It was history speaking through them, a history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps. It may have seemed personal, but it wasn't. It came down from the ancestors" (*Disgrace* 156). It's through such examples that redemption will be achieved for the "crimes of the past by suffering in the present" (*Disgrace* 112).

Lurie instructs Lucy and offers money to go to Holland where her mother lives, but Lucy is reluctant to leave the farm. Lurie then becomes fully aware of all the wrongs he has done to women. Lucy observes no difference between her father molesting his students and the rapists. Lucy discerns that her misfortune is the price which she has to pay for staying in a place that belongs to these natives. She is shaken up when Lurie informs her that Petrus and his friends want her as their slave. Hence, the subjugation and exploitation of the whites became the order of the day.

In the post-colonial era, a transition was taking place where the native people started to suppress and oppress the white people in South Africa. The white people were thrown on the



periphery and were made to bear the consequences of their past atrocities. They were now dependent on the natives for their safety. As it is said, “The new South Africa is not characterized by truth and reconciliation, but by revenge and violation” (Paranjape 29). The differences of their opinions lead to worsen the relationship between Lucy and her father. Lurie makes up his mind to return to Cape Town.

Lurie visits Melanie’s house to meet up with her father. Lurie expresses regret to Mr. Issacs for misusing his daughter and ruining her career. He says, “I apologize for the grief I have caused you and Mrs. Issacs I ask for your pardon” (*Disgrace* 171). Mr. Issacs feels relieved that David Lurie asked for forgiveness to him. Self-realization takes place in Lurie, a transformation has come-over him. His moral transformation is conspicuous from his apology, remorse and confession. He makes a strong impression on Melanie’s mother and sister by bowing down to them “With careful ceremony he gets to his knees and touches his forehead to the floor” (*Disgrace* 173). Lurie asks apology by kneeling down before Melanie’s father.

Lurie goes back to the farm and comes to know that Lucy is pregnant, on account of the rape. He counsels her to go for an abortion, but she disapproves the decision. Lucy now wants to take decisions on her own. She decides to assert her identity and she is courageous enough to dominate the traumatic experience. She also raises a question to her father: “Why? I am a woman, David. Do you think I hate children? Should I choose against the child because of who its father is?” (*Disgrace* 198). Lucy’s decision of being a mother may be a venture on her part to alleviate the disgrace heaped upon her and make herself deserving of grace. Her resolution for not aborting her baby is also motivated by her love for motherhood. Moreover, her determination to give birth to the child of a black man is a metaphor of new emerging South Africa.

Petrus desires to marry Lucy and give her legal protection. Both the father and daughter talk about on Petrus’s offer and Lurie disapproves his daughter’s option of marrying a man, who already has two wives. But Lucy considers the choice a convenient social and financial deal:

“I don’t believe you get the point, David. Petrus is not offering me a church wedding followed by a honeymoon on the wild coast. He is offering an alliance, a deal. I contribute the land, in return for which I am allowed to creep in under his wing. Otherwise, he wants to remind me, I am without protection, I am fair game” (*Disgrace* 203).

Through Lucy’s molestation, J.M. Coetzee highlights the repercussions of losing power. Lucy is well aware that Petrus is not powerful man, but he has the power to subjugate the white minority people like her. Lucy accepts humiliation to live a peaceful life ahead by

DR. KAVITA TYAGI

PREETI SINGH

8 Page



giving away her property to a native man. She asks her father to leave: “David, we can’t go on like this. Everything had settled down, everything was peaceful again, until you came back. I must have peace around me. I am prepared to do anything, make any sacrifice, for the sake of peace” (*Disgrace* 208). In fact Lucy indirectly conveys his father that his presence may disturb the peace of her life.

Lurie at times realizes that he was not a nice father to Lucy, so he determines to be a good grandfather to Lucy’s child. Hence, Lurie confronts all the adverse circumstances. He is degraded from a genuine human being to an ordinary man who was punished for his sexual weakness. The novel concludes with David Lurie taking a dog to intentionally ending its life to relieve from pain and suffering. Lurie discards his ideological stand and dedicates himself in the active service to the society.

The novel presents a nasty picture of South Africa during the transitional period - Colonial to Postcolonial era. Coetzee has realistically presented the racial discrimination prevalent in South Africa in the year 1999. Political system had been corrupt and safety of the people was not guaranteed. Even though apartheid system was on the verge of decline, the racial discrimination and atrocities were quite widespread. White people like Lucy and Lurie also turned out to be the sufferers. Assault on whites became frequent in post-apartheid South Africa, so they had to surrender their land to the natives and run off the country. Few people like Lucy resolved to stay among all the hardships prevalent with a hope to see a new dawn of racial harmony. Hence, J.M. Coetzee has genuinely portrayed the state of the white minority in post-apartheid South Africa.

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DR. KAVITA TYAGI

PREETI SINGH

10 Page

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