

Emerging Structural Dynamics in the Post-Apartheid South Africa in J M Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Abstract—‘*Disgrace*’ by J M Coetzee is a powerful portrayal of the emerging socio-political dynamics in the post-apartheid South Africa. It was the crucial time in South Africa when there was a huge white exodus from the predominantly black areas. The paper attempts to explore the structural shift in the social dynamics of the contemporary South Africa. The paper also throws light on how David Lurie, a University Professor was forced to accept the emerging power dynamics prevalent in the urban as well as in the rural landscape of South Africa.

Key Terms: portrayal, socio-political dynamics, post-apartheid, predominantly black areas, structural shift, power dynamics

“You do not see this, and I do not know what more I can do to make you see this. It is as if you have chosen deliberately to sit in a corner where the rays of sun do not shine. I think of you as one of the chimpanzees, the one with his paws over his eyes.” (*Disgrace*: 161)

1. INTRODUCTION

The year 1999, when J M Coetzee’s *Disgrace* was published, was an age of post-apartheid in South Africa. “Apartheid was established in South Africa in 1948, and it came to an end in 1994”. With the end of apartheid, power shifted to the hands of the natives. There was “a rampant crime, inefficient police service, and middle class barricaded into their fortresses” (Kedari: 2013). According to Nelson Mandela, “Whites knew that the days of white privilege were over.”

2. JM COETZEE’S DISGRACE

Published in 1999, J M Coetzee’s *magnum opus Disgrace* begins with the sentence “For a man of his age, 52, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well” (*Disgrace* : 01). The main protagonist, David Lurie, a Professor of Communication at Cape Technical University, South Africa, was in a comfortable sexual relationship with a paid escort, Soraya. However, once he attempted to invade her carefully protected private domain, the precarious arrangement collapsed. David lost the level of confidence he had attained in his relationship with Soraya. As a result, David Lurie became insecure, and started hopping from one woman to another.

In his desperate state of mind, David encountered the nubile Melanie Isaacs, ‘a coloured girl’ from his class of Romanticism. Melanie’s comeliness touched the live wire of the middle aged professor, and his passion was ignited. Melanie was reluctant, but David Lurie, his professor disgraced her. He never, once thought what Melanie might have felt. When a case of molestation and sexual assault was filed against David, he was expelled from the university, and ‘all his benefits were denied.’

Throughout the trial, David maintained ‘a defiant attitude.’ He did not accept the fact that he had violated the relationship between a teacher and his student. He said that he was ‘enriched by his experience’ with the girl. The truth was that David had transgressed by abusing his power as a teacher. David Lurie did not rape Melanie, but he had, certainly, acted in ‘an inappropriate manner’ which was socially and morally unacceptable. During the hearing of the case the casual attitude of David Lurie reveals his domineering colonial attitude towards the black people. “In the corridors of the communication building, he makes a point of walking with his head held high” (*Disgrace* :42). When he was asked if he has any objection to the presence of a student observer, David, the accused, simply replies, “I have no fear of the committee. I have no fear of the observer” (*Disgrace* :48), quite an unusual reply in such a critical question. The air of the past hasn’t left his ego, nor is he able to get a grasp of the present changes.

The Chair of the Department at the Cape Technical University where David Lurie worked as a professor, regards him as a hangover from the past, “the sooner cleared away, the better” (*Disgrace*: 40). Throughout the trial, the air of tension between Lurie and Farodia Rassool remains troublesome. It is very much reflected in Rassool’s statement when she says that if David wants to make an apology, “it should come from him, in his own words” (*Disgrace* :54). Being a black person herself, Rassool does not conceal her dislike for the white man and calls it a “subtle mockery” (*Disgrace* :51), and demands a sincere apology from David to show that he is really sorry for his deeds. However, David refused to surrender.

3. DAVID LURIE

The character of David Lurie is that of an arrogant white man who maintains an indifferent attitude, and does not explicitly show a racial prejudice. His actions reveal his subconscious way of trivializing the blacks by thinking that they are not equal to him. David is reluctant to consider counselling, and even not willing to make a statement or issue an apology. During the hearing, Rassool comments on David Lurie's conduct as 'quixotic' (Disgrace :49) as David pleaded guilty without even reading Melanie's statement, and refused to apologize. David's unwillingness to cooperate at the trial can be compared later on with Lucy's unwillingness to cooperate about filing the rape charge to the police.

After the Melanie episode, David Lurie, the disgraced white professor, moved to his daughter's farm house in the Eastern Cape. However, he found "himself adrift in variously hostile, inscrutable and unpredictable South Africa" (Kedari: 2013). David's deliberate attempt to move from the urban centre to the rural farm house is "a sombre hint that there is no place for white people in the new country".

4. MEETING WITH PETRUS

It was in the Lucy's farmhouse at Eastern Cape, David meets Petrus, the tall dark African who claims himself to be a 'dog man'. Petrus was the caretaker at Lucy's farmhouse. However, right from the first meeting, it was apparent that Petrus was not happy with his position as a caretaker on the farm. D'Souza says that "once upon a time in South Africa, Petrus, the black servant would have been a Lucy's 'gardener and dog man', but the South Africa that has changed so thoroughly in its rural trenches that even Petrus, Lucy's black neighbour, has become overly ambitious." He has started taking advantage of the new social order, and is "trying to lift himself from 'a dog man' to a substantial land holder." (D'Souza : 2008)

In the new social structure Petrus is a powerful man whereas David and Lucy are weak and vulnerable. The white people and their property are not safe in the contemporary regime. It is Petrus, who reminds David that "it is dangerous.... Everything is dangerous today (Disgrace :64)." Throughout the novel, Petrus remains 'inscrutable.' The polite response that he gives to David is mostly to avoid direct conversation and evade his real intention.

Petrus is believed to be the mastermind of Lucy's rape. The shift in the power dynamics has brought Petrus in a position to dictate his own terms to Lucy and David, the powerful rulers of the erstwhile regime. Petrus was supposed to protect Lucy, but instead, ended up protecting her rapists, his own people. Time has transformed Petrus. He has become much more diplomatic in his dealings. David, the white man, has yet to understand and accept this structural shift in the new power dynamics. David's real education has not begun yet.

5. RAPE OF LUCY

Lucy's rape is the central part of the novel. On the surface, it appears that it is the brutal rape of a poor white woman in the 'hinterland of South Africa'. Nevertheless, Lucy's assault is a threat to the presence of the white people and their property. Grabbing the property of the white people and raping their women was an attempt of the black people to hold their dominance. The blacks usurped the white people's property, and 'subjugated' the white women. Such assault was not uncommon in the post- apartheid days. The contemporary Africans believed that it was 'legitimate to resort to violent means.'

After the traumatic experience of the brutal assault, when Lucy recalls the aggression, she describes how personal it was. She was not able to 'comprehend the reason of the disgusting hatred of the rapists' :

"It was so personal It was done with such 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." (Disgrace: 156)

Lucy's rape can be seen as 'a social restructuring of South Africa'. 'The rapists might have acted as possible agents of revenge putting an end to white privilege.' Lucy's rape was an act carried out in vengeance, it was a response to the 'racial differences imposed by colonialism.'

Lucy is a lonely white woman living alone in the post apartheid South Africa. She has to live in constant fear, with submission as the only choice to protect herself from such dangers. As a result, Lucy has come to an agreement where she is ready to become one of Petrus's mistresses to receive his protection so that she can keep her land and dwell there. She asks her father "to whom can I turn for protection, for patronage?" (Disgrace :204)

"Lucy refused to report her rape to the police . She, even, decided to give birth to her child. Further, she has taken her decision to accept 'subjugation' of Petrus. Lucy wants 'protection in a hostile society', and she knows that it was only Petrus who could provide protection to her. She says: "Petrus may not be a big man, but he is big enough for someone small like me" (Disgrace : 204) .

Lucy knows that Petrus has his eyes on her stretch of land. Hence, she agrees to surrender her farm as her dowry to make an alliance with him. Moreover, she is determined to continue living at a place she has chosen rather than to run away from it. Perhaps, Lucy has 'resigned herself to her fate.' When her decision was questioned and challenged by her father, she vehemently claims, "I am not minor. I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours is to you; and in my life I am the one who makes the decisions" (Disgrace :198).

6. LUCY AND DAVID

David and Lucy, though being a family, have a completely different outlook. Lucy understands the current situation, the new changes and accepts it where as David seems to be holding on to the past which makes him unable to realize most of the things brought by the socio-political changes. As a symbol of the erstwhile power structure, he does not consider blacks as equal to the whites in their own country.

When David encountered a tough situation in Cape Town, he ran away, but Lucy, even though she was brutally assaulted did not leave her place. After the assault, David advised her to leave the place,

“Close down the kennel. Do it at once. Lock up the house, pay Petrus to guard it. Take a break for six months or a year until things have improved in this country.” (*Disgrace*: 157)

David advised Lucy to abort her foetus, but she instinctively refused. By not following David's suggestion, Lucy reveals the strong and independent state of her mind. Lucy is firm in staying back, and does not entertain any suggestion of leaving South Africa. She wanted to maintain the identity and integrity of being a white as well as a South African.

Lucy knows that in the new power structure, nobody will give justice to a poor white woman. This is something that her father fails to understand. She rebukes her father by saying “I think of you as one of the three chimpanzees, the one with his paws over his eyes” (*Disgrace* : 161). On the other hand “Lucy gives up justice in favour of peace” (Kim Middleton and Julie Townsend : 2009).

7. JUSTIFICATION OF ASSAULT

After the rape, when David wants to report the case to the police, Lucy stops him, and says, “Don't shout at me, David. This is my life. I am the one who has to live here”(Disgrace :133). What has happened to Lucy is a purely private matter for her. She justifies the assault and says that they have not done anything wrong. She says:

“that is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is what I should look at it too. They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying?” (*Disgrace*: 158)

Lucy teaches a tough lesson to David. She is not interested in the justice she knows she would never get. She decides to forego justice in favour of peace and harmony. Here, Lucy is like a Sabine woman, who, by being willing to sacrifice herself, wants to bring peace between the different racial groups in South Africa. The Sabine women managed to ensure that peace was established between the Romans and the Sabine and that their children became Roman citizens (Barnard :2013).

Lucy is determined to continue her life in the new South Africa, howsoever, harsh the condition might be, especially for a white woman. When David tells her how humiliating it would be for her to continue living in South Africa, she replies: “Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start again. Perhaps this is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity. Like a dog. Yes, like a dog (*Disgrace* : 205). Lucy knows that if she had any honour, she has lost. Now she has nothing to lose. She knows that justice and honour does not hold any meaning in this new land.

8. DAVID AND PETRUS

Over the years white people had lost their masculinity, and were not able to maintain their vitality. They stalked and seduced women, but were not able to control them. David Lurie was twice divorced, and a confirmed womanizer. However, he was not able to manage even one single woman at home. Even he was not able to protect his daughter from the rapists. He was always in search of a woman to have ‘sexual gratification.’ However, a comfortable sexual relationship kept eluding him throughout his life.

Unlike David, Petrus is a strong man. He is powerful and ambitious. He is twice married, and is even ready to include Lucy in his household as his third wife or a new mistress. He knows how to keep his women under control. Even a person like Lucy, who is ‘a strong, solid country woman,’ is ready to accept his patronage. The contemporary South Africa is much more ‘promiscuous and masculine’.

9. A DEEP POLITICAL UNDERTONE

Disgrace is a novel set in the post-colonial and post-apartheid era. The colonial rulers have lost their strategic position of power and authority. Petrus represents the new South Africa: violent and ambitious. For a long period of time, the black people were forced to work as slaves in their own land. The feeling of being exploited was deep-seated into their psyche. They considered white people as usurpers of their land. The ‘racial tension’ and ‘intense animosity’ had resulted in the “frequent outburst of violence.” Attack on Lucy was a result of that deep-seated ‘socio-political xenophobia against their long exploitation’.

The narrative has a deeper socio-political undertone. After the Melanie episode, ‘Melanie goes slack, but not silent’, but when it comes to Lucy in the Eastern Cape, the poor white woman, decides to muffle her voice, because she is aware of the harsh reality of the emerging situation in the South Africa. Lucy knows that time has changed, and the wind is not blowing in her favour. She is a lonely woman, weak and helpless. She cries, ‘I am without protection.’ She is sure that nobody will understand her inner turmoil and her insecurity, and she will have to live, forever, with the impending danger.

10. A HISTORICAL BLUNDER

The colonial history has been a story of suppression and usurpation. "What cannot be forgotten are all the ways in which the colonizers simply took from the colonized to the enrichment of themselves" (D'Souza 2013). The 'black domination,' at the moment, is nothing but 'a vengeance against the injustice' done in the past by the white people.

With the transition of power in the country, and because of the years of exploitation, the blacks had gone through, the white Africans have to suffer now in the contemporary South Africa. They have become victims in the new power structure. The blacks have a deep seated hatred against the white. Lucy, in the beginning, is not able to decipher, "But why did they hate me so ? I had never set eyes on them" (Disgrace : 156). To this David replies : "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 from the ancestors" (Disgrace: 156)

While stalking and seducing Melanie, David does not see any fault, and refuses to apologize. Nevertheless, Lucy thinks that by exploiting Melanie, David has committed a serious historical blunder, and in return, Lucy has to offer herself to the perpetrators. Lucy's silence and subjugation is the price she has to pay in order to stay in the country. Lucy's decision to give birth to the child makes David feel weak and powerless. This was the defining moment in the life of David Lurie. "Standing against the wall outside the kitchen, hiding his face in his hands, he heaves and heaves and finally cries" (Disgrace :199).

11. THE TRANSFORMATION OF DAVID

From the beginning of the narrative, David appears to be a confident predator. He represents the white people, 'the power-wielders of the yesteryears.' He refuses to accept the fact that by violating Melanie he has done any fault. Shifting to the Eastern Cape is again quite significant where he attempted to live a graceful life by working on the farm and assisting at an animal welfare shelter. By keeping himself busy he tried to forget his disgrace. The arrangement, however, did not last long.

Assault on Lucy shook David deeply. He felt weak and humiliated as he could not protect his own daughter. Moreover, Lucy's rape and her stubbornness about not to report to the police is a turning point in the novel. It is there the realization comes to David that he could not manipulate everything the way he had done in the past. First, his professional life went awry, and then his personal life was damaged to the point of no return. It was 'an act of reprisal.' David's lesson had begun. His transformation had started.

After living through the experience of being the father of a woman raped, David visits Melanie's father Mr Isaacs in George, although he is unsure what he wants to say to

him" (Bernard :2013). It was after the dinner in the house of Mr Isaac, Lurie says, " I apologize for the grief I have caused you and Mrs Isaacs. I ask for your pardon" (Disgrace : 171). A little later, the father tells him: "The question is not, are we sorry? The question is, what lesson have we learned? The question is, what are we going to do now that we are sorry?" (Disgrace : 172)

David Lurie replies: "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 out from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being" (Disgrace : 172). These are the confessions of Professor David Lurie that he has become much more accommodating, and has accepted his own disgrace, and is prepared to live with it.

12. CONCLUSION

In the beginning of the narrative, David Lurie's interest in sex brings the story forward. But as the story progresses, he leaves everything behind, and changes into someone who lets his daughter Lucy decide what she thinks best for her, although he does not approve of it. At the end of the narrative, David is a man without any possession. He has already left his profession of a teacher in the University. He has given up his dream of writing an opera on Byron; he has surrendered even the dying animal he had learned to love, without reservation, without thought for himself.

This is not what he came for--- to be stuck in the back of beyond, warding off demons, nursing his daughter, and attending to a dying enterprise. If he came for anything, it was to gather himself, gathering his forces. Here he is losing himself day to day." (Disgrace : 121)

Dog is a recurrent symbol in the novel *Disgrace*. Petrus has been introduced as a 'dog man', but it is David who has become a 'dog man'. On the job of taking charge of depositing the dead dogs, David introspects: "A dog man, Petrus, once called himself. Well, now he has become a dog man: a dog undertaker; a dog psychopomp; a *harijan*" (Disgrace : 146).

Disgrace is not a novel about 'celebration and optimism'; it is a difficult story that deals with the 'consequences of colonialism' in a post-colonial society. It asks how a white person, as 'inheritor of the advantages of colonialism,' should behave in a situation when power is no longer in the hands of the erstwhile colonial masters. *Disgrace* is a definitive work on South Africa's present state of affairs (D'souza :2008). It is a narrative that unravels itself on many levels. Most of the meanings are hidden rather than directly mentioned.

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