

**JOHN MAXWELL COETZEE'S DISGRACE: A POSTCOLONIAL
FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to examine John Maxwell Coetzee's *Disgrace* from a postcolonial feminist perspective. It pays a special focus on how he models different representations of women. It takes postcolonial feminism about subaltern and the representations of women from the so-called Third World in theory and literature as a background the discussions. The paper argues that Coetzee has contributed with diverse representations of subaltern women in the 'Third World' who despite their oppressed and marginalized status display agency and are portrayed as responsible for their own actions. Coetzee's *Disgrace* is greatly concerned with bringing about equality between man and woman. He condemns the use of violence against women. He draws parallel between South Africa and women, with both being colonized and oppressed. The African novelist Coetzee, depicts the situation of people in South Africa during both apartheid and post-apartheid regimes in which colonized people, particularly women, are colonized by colonizers. Coetzee's *Disgrace* shows injustice and marginality coming mainly from imperialism and corrupted system of South Africa. It studies and highlights the naturally close relationship between feminism and post-colonialism in novel which are classified as political, economic and social tools for fighting oppression, colonization, patriarchy and injustice. It studies the issues like how women are colonized, victimized and silenced.

Keywords: Feminism, Postcolonial, Disgrace, Apartheid, Oppression, Third World

Introduction

The term postcolonial refers to the condition of people and the country after the imperial rule. The semantic definition includes the national or even aboriginal culture after the departure of the imperial power. The term postcolonial continues to define the culture and literatures of the countries from the moment of colonization to this moment. As the underdogs, the people in colonized countries try to establish their difference from colonizers. There are efforts to look at the colonization and post colonialism which are defined as a domination of one subject over other by any means, either physical or linguistic or cultural, and to discuss the status of women as subjects of double colonization in colonized countries. The term refers to the observation that women are subjected to both the colonial domination of empire and the male-domination of patriarchy. In this respect, empire and patriarchy act similarly to each other and both of them have control over female colonial subjects, who are doubly colonized by imperial or patriarchal power. Feminist theory has suggested and proposed that women have been marginalized by patriarchal society and consequently the history and concerns of feminist theory have paralleled developments in postcolonial theory which gives particular importance to the marginalization of the colonial subject. Apart from raising controversies as well as acclaim, Coetzee's novel has also been analyzed by scholars from various theoretical angles: feminism, post colonialism, post-structuralism, Marxism, new historicism and so on.

The novel begins with a highly controversial protagonist who refuses to say sorry for his abuse of power. This changes as he loses authority after having sex with a student – his 'disgrace' - but also when he loses supremacy and control in a bodily sense. Later, upon being beaten and set alight by the three black men who gang rape his daughter, Lucy, David starts to view life in a different light and begins to humble himself through his relationship with his child. David's relationship with Lucy is far from simplistic from the offset; instead of making him understand the opposite sex, his childhood 'spent in a family of women made him a lover of women, a womanizer' (*Disgrace*, 7), which tainted his bond with Lucy as he fears he gave her 'too much love' and he fears she gave it 'a darker reading' (*Disgrace* 76) too. This is one of David's first repenting thoughts, relating back to his stream of consciousness when comforting a sobbing Melanie where he almost uttered 'Tell Daddy what is wrong' (*Disgrace* 26), crossing his sexual instincts with his fatherly intuition. David is unable to move on from his role as sole protector of Lucy, which is evident from the moment he arrives at her house in the Eastern Cape, as he struggles to stop old parenting habits 'creeping back in' (*Disgrace* 86). David's original concern and social block in his father-daughter relationship is his pondering of her sexuality, suggesting Helen and Lucy 'sleep together merely as children do sisters more than lovers', declaring 'Sapphic love, an excuse for putting on weight' (*Disgrace* 86). His inability to figure out the possibility of sexual connection and love being possible is also his inability to have an equal relationship with a woman - be it a prostitute, a student, or his own daughter.

A Postcolonial Feminist Perspective

The feminist perspective in this paper is taken from McLeod, who is informed by ideas articulated by Catherine Belsey's and Jane Moore's introduction in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism* (1989). When reading a text from a feminist point of view (regardless of what branch of feminism you belong to) they suggest that we should look at "how [it] represents women, what it says about gender relations, how it defines sexual

difference” (Belsey and Moore 1). As already mentioned the focus of this paper is how the women in Coetzee’s novel are represented but also, as will be demonstrated later on, how the expectations towards women are very much different from those on men. However, a common goal in both post colonialism and feminism is “challenging forms of oppression” whatever they look like, and each context has its own, unique structures of oppression (McLeod 174). In Coetzee’s description of South Africa in the novel, there are several layers of oppression stemming from colonialism, patriarchy and caste.

Native and subaltern people, and especially women, were doubly or triply marginalized in South Africa. Since they were introduced as underprivileged on the ground of gender, race, social class, cast sexuality and regional status. There are some examples of subaltern and marginalized women in *Disgrace*; Lucy who loses her land and freedom, Bev Shaw as dog keeper with low status in society, Melanie who is abused, and also Soraya who unwillingly works as prostitute. The novel contains many things that seem to use racist and sexist tropes without truly subverting them, such as the way in which Lucy’s rape is used mostly as a plot device for Lurie’s character development. There are apparent yet undeclared parallels that run between David’s rape of Melanie and the gang rape of Lucy. Even as unapologetic, David is aware that his actions towards Melanie were ‘debatable’ and admits his mistake to himself, yet he considers Lucy’s abuse of a higher severity and importance. It can’t be denied that in part, this will be because he is her father, and will naturally take her abuse personally, compared to a girl who was once a stranger to him. And true, that Lucy’s attack was one of ‘excessiveness and apparent gratuitousness to violence’ which also targeted David himself, but it cannot be ignored that part of his anger lies in his socio-political apartheid ideologies. Boehmer takes about *Disgrace*’s covering of both white dominance and the overcoming of white supremacy being subject around the female body, leaning further towards the idea that Melanie’s attack was more acceptable as the victim was black. David himself views his daughter’s attack as a post-colonial consequence, explaining that the attack was not personal but merely ‘history speaking through them’ (*Disgrace* 156). Ever the sexist, David appears to overlook ‘the long history of female exploitation’ (Boehmer 344) as well as the harshly close verbal parallels between the two women’s attacks. David does not dismiss race in the assault of his daughter, insisting if they had been ‘white thugs’ (*Disgrace* 159) she would be less inclined to silence, showing his belief that black rape was more violent than white rape (Attwell) and thus legitimizing his own behavior towards Melanie.

The novel *Disgrace* explores discrimination, both of a racial and sexual kind, as well as motifs of violence linked back to South Africa’s history. Coetzee’s controversial novel *Disgrace* (1999) explores many of the conventional themes one would expect from a novel set in post-apartheid South Africa, from racial discrimination to injustice. However, what sets *Disgrace* apart is the way in which Coetzee explores these themes through his white protagonist, David Lurie, and the suffering he inflicts *and* experiences first hand as a result of prejudiced socio-political agendas. Through the exploration of racial and sexual relationships juxtaposed alongside a constant reminder of South Africa’s dark history, David Lurie has a dramatic identity change. Coetzee shows the detrimental effect social and political changes can have on both the privileged and the underprivileged within a flawed society, specifically in areas of race and patriarchy. The destabilizing of David Lurie is the novel’s central motif and shows a dramatic turn in the status quo; the once powerful and respected David is left as ‘a mad old man

sitting among the dogs singing to himself' (*Disgrace* 212) even as Petrus, the black 'gardener and dog-man' (*Disgrace* 64) gains more and more control throughout the novel, finally marrying Lucy and becoming the primary landowner. This essay seeks to explore David's dramatic decline through the explanation of his disturbing sex life and relationships with women, the prejudice of his racial politics and apartheid ideologies and the significance of his relationship with dogs

From the opening of the novel, Coetzee's protagonist David Lurie displays a very questionable relationship with the women in his life. Having been married twice, and later divorced twice, David believes he has 'solved the problem of sex rather well' (*Disgrace* 1). Throughout *Disgrace* sex is shown as a symbol for power, namely with David Lurie himself, linking the idea of authority with the body, explaining his patriarchal views towards females and sex. The novel begins with David engaging in sex with a Muslim prostitute called Soraya whom he has been seeing weekly for over a year. From the offset of the novel the reader is very aware of David's conservative patriarchal and colonial prerogative towards women, as he oversteps the metaphorical line between an escort and one of her customers. He speculates about her life outside of Windsor Mansion; 'Soraya is not her real name' and has she 'borne a child' (*Disgrace* 3)? We learn that David has no concept of privacy as he tracks her down, suspecting prostitution is only her part-time occupation and that it is a result of a breakdown – a breakdown of which he is willing to take advantage. The patriarchal society that David grew up amongst in South Africa lies at the core of his social value that places men above women, especially in a post-apartheid era, where one could say women were seen as the new 'other'. It is almost presented as not David's fault. As Stratton asserts, men cannot conduct appropriate behaviour in a society where they cannot be wronged: 'David has occupied for most of his life a position of centrality, a world of white patriarchal distinctions, rules and logic' (83). Although the patriarchal society was arguably outdated by the time in which the novel is set (1999) the supposed post-feminist South Africa was undermined by men like David whose identities were ground by political and social agendas that gave men power just for being men. As such, the nature of David Lurie's upbringing can be argued as a large contributing factor to the discord he creates in the lives of the women he forces himself upon, as well as his own, leading to his disgrace.

The governing authority in the colonized society, once colonizes both men and women of color and then black colonized men colonize the black women once more. Double colonization occurs in South Africa for their different race and gender in female's community. Spivak depicts that "the constitution of the female subject in life is the place of the differed". The work of decolonization continues within the women's movement to understand the universal dominance that operates with the concept of hegemony. Postcolonial studies depict and show that women are double colonized by imperialism and patriarchy. The male-dominant voices are heard as the superior and emperor, while the colonized women's voice is never achieved for they are considered as inferior group under the control of white dominant colonizer and black male-dominant state. Women used to belong to inferior group and there is always the voice of male-dominated defined as the good order to reconstruct the black female's identity.

Spivak shows the margin as the "silenced center of the circuit marked out of this epistemic violence, men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribal, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariate" (Spivak, 1988). She, like Coetzee, concentrates on the marginalized person who is not presented, that is the result of western structure and imperial law. She fights

and protests against controlling system of the marginalized group and double colonized women. She denies the variety and heterogeneity of those controllers speaking from the margins, and investigates for the “roots applied in essentialist view of identity that avoids diversity and differences, and she is searching for a voice to marginalized women constructed as other”.

In *Disgrace* Coetzee presents two racial stories one of the white characters and the story of black characters. The comparison between Petrus, Lucy’s black assistant turned co-proprietor, and David Lurie is somewhat subtler than that of Melanie and Lucy’s sexual assaults. Petrus is first described as the ‘gardener and dog-man’ (*Disgrace* 64) in his first conversation with David, automatically signally an inferiority, especially considering the role of dogs as protectors of the whites. Throughout the novel, Petrus gains more and more power as David loses his; Petrus gains more property and declares himself a dog man no more (*Disgrace* 129) and Lucy accepts his proposal to become his third wife (203). Peter is generally known as one of Christ’s disciples in the Bible and was known as the rock upon which the church was built, signifying the beginning of post-apartheid South Africa and black power.

Conclusion

To sum up, Coetzee presents numerous different female characters in his novel *Disgrace*, all in different ways trapped in a system of oppression. From a postcolonial feminist perspective Coetzee has contributed to make the representation of the Third World subaltern woman more diverse, through giving us various portraits of women that, despite their oppressed and marginalized status. The entire women characters in the novel are marginalized once. Melanie was marginalized once by David Lurie and the system of university. Lucy as another woman in this novel once raped by the Petrus’ people and then again because of losing her lands and giving them to Petrus, became double colonized by both male-dominated society and imperial system.

The authority of white in *Disgrace* survives through romanticizing the elements of resistance which it fails to include in actual terms in the post apartheid South Africa. In the new scenario the former oppressed races affirm their voice to the scope of silencing the whites. By elaborating on the sexualities of the protagonist as well as her daughter, actually, what Coetzee is doing is to use them as a metaphor for the disempowerment of white South Africans. Lurie’s attempted conquest over women is compared as white South African’s “rape” of black South Africans, and Lurie’s disgrace is surely the symbol of disgrace of white disempowerment.

Coetzee has shown all the people’s and specially women’s condition in South Africa in *Disgrace*. South Africa is affected by patriarchal and imperial system. Coetzee tries to indicate not only these but also women who are considered as Other.

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