

Melanie as a Subaltern Woman: An Analysis of JM Coetzee's *Disgrace*

Surendra Prasad Ghimire

Lecturer, Hetauda School of Management

Email: surendra.ghimire7@gmail.com

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5006-5617

Abstract

*This article reports how Melanie was subaltern character in the novel *Disgrace* written by JM Coetzee. As a literary qualitative research, this paper utilized subaltern theory developed by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to analyze lived experiences of injustices and exploitation over her. The findings of this study revealed that Melanie as a subaltern woman; victimized and suppressed from racial, gender and other various layers of injustices. Likewise, she belonged to minority Muslim community and, due to which she had to face tremendous injustices. Although she was an educated university student, was many times raped by her own professor; consequently, she was tortured with psychological pain and very often faced family conflicts indeed. As a result of patriarchal ideology, she remained silence and further became submissive and docile character. However, the findings further exhibited that after being exploited for long; she developed consciousness about the injustices over her; thereby, she rejected such injustices by forwarding the case against her own professor to the university. The findings have overarching consequences which will contribute to explore further issues of subaltern in the novel.*

Keywords: consciousness, exploitation, injustices, marginalization, subaltern

Introduction

Although Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* exhibited post-apathetic South African society, there utterly prevailed disintegration, insecurity and exploitation almost everywhere. Political and social configuration was transformed; however, some of western previous colonizers failed to internalize such new system; consequently, they were still remained in illusion of earlier privileged position. On the one hand, they had essentialist world view; thereby believed Africa was as a dark continent forever. On the other hand, colonial power dynamic was already subverted; as a result, previously colonized, suppressed and repressed black and ethnic communities gradually empowered themselves. But, colonizers, existing in South Africa attempted to exploit them as they did previously; further, believed them as savage and subhuman beings. Thus, there was exploitation and internal conflict as they did not trust each other. For instance, David Lurie, a white and a college professor, who did not realize social power dynamic and upheaval, due to which;

he indeed manipulated, raped and tortured his own university student, Melanie. In addition, he divorced twice further he was over fifty in his age, was not hesitated to have physical relationship with his own student, who had the age less than his own daughter. Moreover, he sacrificed his professorship instead of realizing his mistake by assimilating with new social transformation. This further indicated that he utterly concurred women as means to satisfy desires of males; thereby he perpetuated such patriarchal colonial ideology. Although Melanie was university student, she was docile and submissive in the very beginning; consequently, was made voiceless and suppressed by colonial and patriarchal ideology. However, after being exploited for long, she developed her consciousness about injustices over her; as a result she pushed forward the case of rape in her university. Thus, this research paper attempted to explore how Melanie was depicted in the novel and developed her consciousness about layers of injustices over her with support of subaltern theoretical perspectives developed by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Literature Review

A number of researchers and critics have studied JM Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* from various perspectives since it has been published. For instance, by focusing on the issue of rape in the novel, Mardorossian claimed that rape has not been associated only with gender but also related with class, race and other various factors. Writing in the journal *Rape and the Violence of Representation in J. M. Coetzee's Disgrace*, he argued that:

Specifically, the novel demonstrates that rape is not primarily a gendered crime that is then complicated by considerations of race or class, but a deeply discursive phenomenon whose material consequences are constituted by the profoundly racialised and class-based discourses that give it meaning. (72)

He questioned the traditional understanding of rape by amalgamating diverse responsible factors and he concurred that it was complicated and contested sectors. Likewise, Bharti claimed that reason of rape was no single and fixed as generally understood; but related to inter-sectionalism. She argued as:

Coetzee demonstrates, through a rather compelling narrative, how at times rape may not be primarily a gender crime, and can be complicated by considerations of race, class, etc., especially in a highly radicalized society (52).

This extract clearly exhibited that how Coetzee unraveled the possible reasons of rape particularly, in the context of complicated society of South Africa. In contrast to above reviews, Sharma's study reflected that rape over Lucy was the revenge over white by

native people. As they were tremendously exploited and some of the women were raped in the time of colonization; consequently, after decolonization, some of them took revenge over them. He argued as, "Her rape as a black's way of taking revenge for what whites have treated the blacks in the past"(33). This extract clearly indicated how reversal of power dynamic became the cause of rape in South Africa.

Furthermore, Melkner Moser keeping the rape in South African context argued that Lucy intended to remain in South Africa; as a result, she remained silence after she being raped. He argued as, "Lucy chooses silence in an attempt to make her rape the starting point for negotiation about her place in the community; her silence opens up the possibility of forming social bonds with Petrus and the local population"(30). This extract overtly revealed that she would like to adjust in her place without confronting local people by following the legal procedure of her rape.

However, Kalkman in his thesis argued that J M Coetzee's *Disgrace* reflected the power reversal between black and white after decolonization in South Africa as a result once colonized group slowly and gradually empowered themselves. He argued as:

Although Lurie is part of the most privileged groups in society – white, male, heterosexual – he loses almost everything and finds himself without any power. He is gradually demoted from society's protagonist to nothing but a minor character without any influence. (33)

This extract indicated that due to lack of understanding about the changing situation of South Africa he was degraded and dehumanized. He had illusion that he was in the privilege position in South Africa; consequently he did not transform himself.

However, this paper aims to explore the depiction of Melanie in J M Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* and further analyzes how she ultimately developed her consciousness about the layers of injustices over her with the support of subaltern theoretical insight developed by Ranajit Guha and Gyatri Chakravorty Spivak. This paper has selected her as a subject of research because her suffering was utterly distinct from other female characters in the novel.

Research Design

This article is based on qualitative interpretative research design. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* has purposively been selected as the primary text of this study. Additionally, the secondary data for this study have been gathered together from theoretical books, theses, journal articles, and reading various related secondary materials. More importantly, this study utilized the subaltern theories developed by Ranajit Guha and

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to analyze the depiction of Melanie in the novel and to investigate how she developed her consciousness about the injustices and exploitation over her.

Although in the first time, the term subaltern was narrowly used by Antonio Gramsci indicating to lower rank of the army, later on, it became popular in South Asia, and further almost all over the world, reflecting the lower level, subordinated and voiceless people whose history was ignored by those who had power. Likewise, under the leadership of Ranajit Guha, the subaltern study group was formed to study the history of India from the perspectives of margin. Then after, twelve volumes of subaltern studies were published capturing the issues of culture, history, race, class, gender etcetera. In the same way, involvement of Spivak in the subaltern study group made issues of women more vivid by exploring the condition of subaltern women by focusing the issue of gender. Likewise, Spivak, in the Morris's edited book named *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, stated that, "Spivak's particular intervention within the theorization of subalternity revolves around the question of gender"(23). Thereby, she provided new direction to subaltern study by incorporating the issue of gender, particularly focused on the status of women. Although her study emphasized more about the Indian women, it was widely implemented almost all over the world. Thus, subaltern theories developed by both Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak support to analyze the depiction of Melanie in the novel and further contribute to explore her consciousness about the layers injustices over her its contemporary time frame work.

Melanie as Subaltern Woman

Although Melanie was educated, she was victimized by her own professor who harassed and raped her time and again; consequently she had to face devastating situation in her personal and social life. As Riach, in his book entitled *An Analysis of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak Can Subaltern Speak?*, argued, "People who are kept in an inferior position in society due to their class, caste, age, gender, or other reasons"(16). Melanie was Asian originated, and the student of David Lurie. Furthermore, as a professor, he was twice divorced, belonged to upper-class, white, male and his age was fifty two; as a result he had power over her. He was lonely and would pass his time in the library of his university reading extensively and preparing notes particularly about romantic course. Once, while he was coming back from his university, he encountered on the way with his romantic course student, Melanie. She was average student of his course but was physically attractive having small and slim body, large dark eyes and black hair. She was from out of Cape Town. He invited her for drink in his room and she agreed. He brought her in his room and with the support of drink, soft music and romantic literature, he

impressed her. She could not reject him because he was her professor. He misused his power and manipulated her. Coetzee wrote as:

Wine, music: a ritual that men and women play out with each other. [...] But the girl he has brought home is not just thirty years his junior: she is a student, his student, under his tutelage. No matter what passes between them now, they will have to meet again as teacher and pupil. (12)

This extract reflected that how Melanie was victimized and suppressed by her own professor. He was colonial white man living in post-apartheid period in South Africa. He did not realize social transformation; consequently he had same colonial habit of exploiting women. However, Melanie was like his daughter's age. He exploited her in such a way that even she would not realize he was getting benefit over her as he used the power of music and romantic rituals. She was easily impressed; consequently she was subjugated at the hand of her professor. She did not realize that her professor was womanizer. She remained silent over her injustices. As a result, he had physical relationship with her time and again. As Riach, in his book entitled *An Analysis of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak Can Subaltern Speak?*, concluded, "Global structures of power, whether academic, economic, or political, do not at present allow the subaltern to speak" (38). This reflected she became the victim of social norms and values due to which she was manipulated and could not speak about her problem rather supported to normalize such male activities. It was narrated as:

She does not want a liqueur, but does accept a shot of whisky in her coffee. As she sips, he leans over and touches her cheek. [...] 'He touches her again. 'Stay. Spend the night with me.' Across the rim of the cup she regards him steadily. 'Why?' 'Because you ought to.' 'Why ought I to?' 'Why? Because a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it.'(16)

Above extract clearly showed the perspective of David Lurie towards the women. He understood women as commodity and property of males so they had to serve the males. This was the product of patriarchal ideology. As Spivak claimed in her book entitled *Can the Subaltern Speak?* edited by Morris, that women were subjugated and exploited with the support of ideology; as a result they were made invisible and voiceless. She stated as, "Ideology can be said to produce the need for a masculine-imperialist rescue mission"(16). Similarly, here, her professor David Lurie imposed his activities over her, despite her unwillingness. He slowly and gradually benefited over her innocence. She could not speak and reject because she was subjugated by using patriarchal ideology. She

was made voiceless and docile. Furthermore, David Lurie as her professor misused her college personal records. It was narrated as:

On Sunday morning he drives to the empty campus and lets himself into the department office. From the filing cabinet he extracts Melanie Isaacs's enrolment card and copies down her personal details: home address, Cape Town address, telephone number. (18)

This extract clearly exhibited how selfish was David Lurie in the sense that he did not realize his own ethic and responsibility, further became blind about the consequences of his activities in the personal and public life of his own student. He harassed her calling time and again and her personal and academic life was completely disturbed. He exploited her because she was not intellectual. As he said, "With the best will in the world he could not find wit in Melanie. But plenty of beauty" (78). Thus, he decided to get benefit over her innocence manner. He thought that that as she was his student, he would be safer. Her exploitation was connected with long developed social, cultural and historical realities. As Ranajit Guha in his book (*The Small Voice of History*) claimed that, "Historical scholarship has developed through recursive practice, a tradition that tends to ignore the small drama and fine detail of social existence, especially at its lower depth"(274). This indicated that traditional recursive practices of historiography neglected the small stories of suffering and exploitation of common people. Here, Melanie was not allowed to speak and if she spoke was not heard. As a result she had many unexplored histories of her life. In the beginning she did not have critical power to speculate the reasons behind her suppression; consequently her professor continued to harass her. Moreover, he went up to her flat and raped her time and again. It was narrated as:

At four o'clock the next afternoon he is at her flat. [...] He has given her no warning; she is too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself upon her. When he takes her in his arms, her limbs crumple like a marionette's. [...]

'No, not now!' she says, struggling. 'My cousin will be back!' But nothing will stop him. He carries her to the bedroom, brushes off the absurd slippers, kisses her feet, astonished by the feeling she evokes. (24-25)

Above remarks reflected her subalternity that she could not speak and even if she spoke she could not be heard. She did not have courage to report against him. She realized that being a female, she was inferior to him. As Spivak; in the book edited by Guha *Subaltern Studies Vol 5, Writing on South Asian History and Society* claimed that "the subaltern as gendered subject"(139). In the same way, Melanie's voice was deliberately

ignored and considered as insignificance by her professor because she was simply a female. He did not care what would happen to her and made her means to fulfill his desire. He was deaf enough to listen her. She narrated as:

She stares back at him in puzzlement, even shock. You have cut me off from everyone; she seems to want to say. You have made me bear your secret. I am no longer just a student. How can you speak to me like this? (34).

Her remarks depicted painful condition of her life. She was being harassed and isolated from all her friends, family and relatives. Her whole academic journey was distracted. Her family was worried about her changed behavior. She lost her interest over her study. Her father would like to share her situation with her professor David Lurie. It was narrated as, "Professor Lurie? Have you a moment to talk? My name is Isaacs [...]. My daughter is in your class, you know, Melanie. [...] Melanie has been such a good student, and now she says she is going to give it all up"(36). Her father's remarks clearly exhibited that her personal life as well as her study was completely distracted by her professor's behavior towards her. She became so weak character who could not tell properly about problem to other. She was immature and innocent black girl. She could not share her problem with her family as well. She was suppressed and sexually exploited by white masculinity; as a result she became subaltern character in the novel.

However, slowly and gradually she realized that she was suppressed and being raped by her own professor. She knew her professor was not going to marry her. Furthermore, she had quarrel with her boyfriend. She developed her consciousness about the injustices over her. As Spivak wrote in the book entitled *Selected Subaltern Studies* edited by Ranajit and Spivak that subaltern consciousness as, "For consciousness here is not consciousness-in-general, but a historicized political species thereof, subaltern consciousness"(30). This reflected that subaltern consciousness indicated complete awareness about the layers of injustices and exploitation over them. In the same way, Melanie realized that she was suppressed and sexually exploited by white masculinity. As a result she registered her case file against Professor Lurie in the office of the rector. It was narrated as:

Next morning, with surprising dispatch, a memorandum arrives from the office of the Vice-Rector (Student Affairs) notifying him that a complaint has been lodged against him under article 3.1 of the university's Code of Conduct. He is requested to contact the Vice-Rector's office at his earliest convenience. (38-39)

Above extract exhibited the development of her consciousness about the injustices over her as a result she proceeded her case file in the office of the rector. She realized that how she was victimized by her professor. Ultimately, it was decided that he was wrong and as a result he left his job. He faced disgrace and went to live with his daughter Lucy. He could not realize the changing situation in the period of post-apartheid society of South Africa; consequently treated once colonized people as inferior and as subhuman. He supposed Africa as Dark Continent. However, there was subversion in colonial power dynamic after decolonization due to which earlier suppressed and repressed ethnic people gradually empowered. Colonizers, who were living in South Africa, attempted to perpetuate colonial legacy to exploit native and ethnic communities. As a result, Melanie was suppressed and exploited from the hands of colonizer, David Lurie.

Conclusion

Melanie was depicted in the novel as subaltern character in the sense that she was suppressed and oppressed by established patriarchal ideology which made her subordinated, voiceless, and marginal character. Traditional male dominated society underpinned to perpetuate such social practices which ultimately suppressed women. In the beginning, Melanie did not realize that she was being raped by her professor because he manipulated her with the support of literature, music and even wine. She normalized the events those were going on between them. Slowly and gradually, she realized that she was being raped. Her extreme suppression and social and her personal challenges that she faced made aware about her existence. She realized that she was being raped. She developed her consciousness about the injustice over her. Changing situation of post-apartheid society also support her to develop consciousness. Finally, she rejected such exploitation over her by breaking her silence and reported against her professor in the office of the rector. However, David Lurie did not realize the changing situation of South Africa especially after the decolonization as a result common women like Melanie were victimized from their hands. The findings of this study have overarching significances which will support to explore further issues of subaltern in the novel.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study explored J M Coetzee's *Digress* to analyze how Melanie was depicted in the novel and developed her consciousness about the layers of injustices over her with the support of subaltern theories developed by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Thus, this study ignored the role of other characters in the novel. Moreover, the finding of this study was based on the limited information about the related characters particularly David Lurie and his student Melanie so that it cannot be generalized to

understand other female characters in the novel. However, this study clearly exposed the direction for further analysis of subalternity about other characters in the novel.

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