

Contradiction and Paradoxes in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Abstract

J.M Coetzee's *Disgrace* is a portrayal of characters in a social context of South Africa where the writer himself was brought up. It throws light on the new social milieu of post apartheid society where Lucy, a white is raped by a black African. She seems to accept this heinous deed with an ease by giving it a historical blend. She understands her rape as a black's way of taking revenge for what whites have treated the blacks in the past. She considers it different from the universal concept of rape as a forceful sex. By making the blacks raping the white woman, Coetzee seems to be rewriting the African history and in this he dismantles the black/white dichotomy. So, I contend to carry out that *Disgrace* being a highly paradoxical and contradictory novel presents a world dying without hope and fear. It exposes the intellectual insecurity in South Africa which proves to be a threat to white man's stability and culture.

Being set in particular historical context and time period the characters of the novel *Disgrace* are intricately involved in the larger social context that they inhabit. How far this history succeeds in shaping the way the characters behave concerns us least than the question of its authenticity regarding the portrayal of the characters in that social context which Coetzee forwards in his *Disgrace*. If Coetzee is really defying the grim picture of African society by portraying rape in succession then one should not regard with least importance the fact that he himself is the product of that society. Taking this thread of reasoning we can say with certainty that the picture of Africa he gives in his novel is not real and complete. One of the foundations of deconstruction, as mentioned in Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies, is its inability to abstain away from "the very conceptual language it seeks to undo" (Barker 47). Since deconstruction delights in interpreting even the social milieu in which the text is produced, the very foundation of which lies in language then Lucy's reference to the men who violate her sanctity as "they" refers equally to Coetzee himself. In one way or other her desire to remain chaste has been shattered when she suffered a gang rape. But she seems to accept that heinous deed with an ease simply giving it a historical blend, in an instance, when she says, referring the incident to the dog, "I don't want to come back in another existence as a dog or a pig and have to live as dogs or pigs live under us" (*Disgrace* 74). What she has remarked just making this proclamation is that that "is the only life there is" (*Disgrace* 74). How can she not believe in the life afterwards and announce her unwillingness to be born again and have the life she is now living. What is even more ironical is that she said she does not want to be among the dogs but there are instances where we find her in some sort of intimacy with some of the dogs that Bev cares for in her kennel, like the bulldog by the name Katty.

This allusion to dog which occurs in the text quite a number of times bear even more significance when Petrus, the instance we meet him, introduces himself to David as the "dog-man" (*Disgrace* 64). This continual referring to dog, which comes to us as a matter of laughter, at times fails to give any clear meaning since we

could not decide with any certainty for what they stand. While at times it becomes apparent that Coetzee deliberately uses them to emphasize the personal disgrace that the characters undergo in the course of their existence along with the forceful thrust of doggish characteristics to the human. Later on at the party, Petrus remarks that he is "not any more the dog-man" (*Disgrace* 129). The statement he made earlier by associating the qualities of dog to himself, and the words he later uses to describe himself seems contradictory. The situation becomes even more paradoxical when, after Lurie's house is plundered, he lefts no effort constantly trying to persuade his daughter to leave the place and live elsewhere. But to the reader's utter surprise Lucy, growing cold towards him, charges him of his inability to conceive her situation finally giving up any idea to bring the rapists under book. She even acquiesces when one of the assailants sets up his residence in her neighborhood. On the one hand, Lurie's inability to justify his daughter's action after the assault, shows failure of patriarchy, on the other it reflects the powerlessness of the white man in the town of the blacks.

In Post-apartheid South African Capetown the whiteness seems to be alienated and the native white man seems, like dog, neglected and exile. This happens, for instance, when Lurie brought his favorite Driepoot for lethal injection to Bev, an unattractive middle-aged who not only destroys animals but also prepares Lurie for his rendezvous with death, hands contraceptive to Lurie to prevent white reproduction, is what Lurie has never sought. He knows well that when one's end is Bev, there is virtually no return.

Has she really been raped in the traditional sense of the term then she would not have hesitated to file the culprits under justice but she accepts her rape as a revenge of the blacks for the kind of injustice the blacks have received from the whites in the past. What the readers from cultures, other than African, would understand of Lucy's rape is not the different one from what rape would mean to the Africans. So what Lucy has understood of her own rape as a blacks way of taking revenge for what whites have treated the blacks in the past, is different from the universal concept of rape as a forceful sex. And rape too, like other things, is a "thoroughly human construction" (Hart 4), the understanding of which does not determine the particular characteristics of a person but a person can determine its meaning being completely free to interpret it the one likes. Lucy, along with the acceptance of rapists' conduct as a revenge seems to be contented that the rapists obeyed their libido because "The first requirement of mental health was to have an uninhibited sex life. If you would be well and happy, you must obey your libido" (Allen 69), which the blacks rapists did hence they committed no rape at all. In turning the history of the South Africans what we may stumble upon is the whites who committed such violence upon the blacks. Blacks are the one to suffer the atrocities of the whites. By making the blacks raping the white woman Coetzee seems to be rewriting the African history and in this attempts he seems to be dismantling the black/ white dichotomy, reaching to a point where "the two domains," that of black and white, "begin to touch" (McHoul 394) one another. The white man as a dominant figure, who takes the rein of command in his hand and manipulate blacks as per his favour is dismantled when Coetzee has some blacks rape the white woman Lucy thereby announcing "the absence of a centre or origin" (Ruthven 51). What it means to rape and to be raped is thus blurred thereby surfacing "an alternative logic that contradicts the perceived and

suggested one” (Nayar 53-54). His divorce and his continual pursuit of female company, when viewed as his quest of consistency in life then affairs with women, including the one with his student Melanie, turns into a kind of hostility which Pamela Cooper rightly points out: “Disgracing himself through an affair with a female student, Melanie Issacs, Lurie loses his job and finds himself . . . adrift in a society variously hostile inscrutable, and unpredictable” (22).

Lurie, who used to believe that no woman whom he approaches is capable of escaping him suddenly “finds his assumptions about sex-as controllable and governed basically by the principles of the hunt-challenged” (Cooper 23). In a life oriented erotically, Lurie is left only with the shreds of his former possibilities because “Deep inside him the smell of her is stored, the smell of a mate” (*Disgrace* 190). Real eros is desire for the beautiful, which is to say the young and beautiful, not the consolation of sex with middle-aged and ugly Bev: “After the sweet young flesh of Melanie Isaacs this is what I have come to. This is what I will have to get used to, this and even less than this” (150). Lurie is, he knows, no longer capable of pleasing the young and beautiful, as his second ex-wife Rosalind rather brutally reminds him that he is “fifty-two” and he will not find a girl who will derive “any pleasure in going to bed with a man of that age” (44). Lurie quotes Byron: “I have always looked to thirty as the barrier to any real or fierce delight in the passions” (87). Melanie, Lurie tells Mr. Isaacs, was, in a way, his last real spark for she alone succeeded in kindling “fire within” Lurie (166). She is his last effort to get something beyond the managed business of sex with whores or with squat like Bev Shaw. His assumption of sex, a “problem,” upon which he thinks he has the capacity to have it “solved,” suddenly proves to be inscrutable (*Disgrace* 1). The meaning of sex he assumes to be, and its meaning in reality, nowhere complies.

At times we are not even sure whether Lurie’s amorous feelings are truly his or simply a literary construct. He reads so much of Byron and Shakespeare that the lines from them, at times, seem to shape his emotions and feelings pushing his original thoughts at the rear. Giving his opinion of beauty, in his attempt to seduce Melanie he did not hesitate to quote Shakespeare who had said that “beauty’s rose might never die” (*Disgrace* 16). This not only furthers a doubt that Lurie might not have individual and original notion of beauty of his own but the ideas of beauty he harbors is unworldly, shallow and bookish—a borrowed one as a means to lure girls for sex. He desires a stable world, constructs it and acts by its norms and makes others to act accordingly. As Brian May observes, focusing Lurie’s appreciation of beauty in relation to his want for sex, that sexuality in Coetzee’s domain “seems to be an *arrogant* that remains permanently ambiguous, testing the boundaries between ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ enrichment and impoverishment” (118). And in terms of Lurie there is no definite resolution as whether this desire is a mystery or channeled thoughts through which hidden Lurie’s “the other within” surfaces out as “the essence of the living” (Derrida 141). So Lurie falsely claims himself to be “a servant of Eros” (*Disgrace* 52). After having slept nearly with half a dozen of women he rather seems to be a master of Eros whose seduction seldom fails if the woman is approached and whose tongue never got tired when the beauty of women is to be praised. And in his intense appraisal of female beauty the Derridian difference comes into the fore. For instance upon spotting Melanie sitting like Europa astride the bull, at the back of the halted motorbike driven by her boyfriend Ryan, evokes an unfamiliar coitus of a worldly and divine to Lurie, “Melanie, on the pillion, sits with knees wide apart, pelvis

arched [. . .]. Then the motorcycle surges forward bearing her away” (*Disgrace* 35).

Similarly, looking the incidents through conflicts constructed by binary opposition, the concept of rape would not have been there if marriage, in the absence of which rape would not have got its significance, has not been introduced to us. This dualism of having been raped and its denial to confront simply postpones any definite conclusion of the event. Like in Kafka’s *Before the Law*, where a man is denied an access to the law till his end similarly incident of rape in *Disgrace* “does not say no” to any definite conclusion but simply echoes, as pointed by Derrida “not yet, indefinitely” (141) leaving us in difficulty to identify if it really was a rape.

Not only this event of rape but even the character of Lurie, the central figure, seems not less paradoxical. Though, a well versed teacher of Romanticism, a reckless consumer of life, he is finally reduced to someone who learns to live from moment to moment and to appreciate what it is to just be rather than live. As far as the moral concern of the readers are concerned we do not expect man engaged in the professorship to lure and sleep with a woman like Soraya, who feels “offended by tourists who bare their breasts” but delights in laying herself bare before a man “old enough to be her father” (*Disgrace* 1). The contradiction mounts even further regarding Soraya when we learned “of her life outside Windsor Mansions,” of which Soraya “reveals nothing” to anyone (*Disgrace* 3). But we also learned that after working for once or twice a week “she can live a respectable life in the suburbs” (*Disgrace* 3). The writer does not give us a clear picture of Soraya. She is living a very paradoxical life, wife at home and mistress outside. Ironies too surfaces out when we start discovering facts related with her. Even the name by which she is known to us “is not her real name” (*Disgrace* 3). David, a divorcee and who enjoys Sorya’s company, can only read the “signs she has borne a child, or children” perhaps. And he is confused if “she is professional” (*Disgrace* 3). The illusion here arises out of the oppositional role played by the world real. After going such details about the characters, where their real identity lies hidden with those they come into contact with, the characters simply took delight in the illusory world their words have created. Coetzee leaves this covert paradox of reality versus illusion almost throughout the text with plurality of meanings, yet never resolved.

If we look at the narrative technique of the novel then the narrator of *Disgrace* isn't a character in the novel at all. As a third person limited narrator, we heard the voice of the narrator alone without his participation of any sort in any event in the story. But paradoxically the narrator seems to exist entirely inside the skull of David’s head with the knowledge of his entire background. This voice even narrates, most of the time, the thoughts and feelings, desires and worries of David. However, the irony is that the perspective we have is that of David's perspective, even if he's not the one actually telling the story. The flaw in the narrative of *Disgrace* is obvious when the relation between the narrator and the protagonist is not obvious which makes any definite interpretation of the work implausible. The perspective, through which events are narrated in *Disgrace*, is disturbingly limited to a white middle-aged man with all the representations. So the events and pictures that we got of South Africa are seen through the lenses provided to us by Lurie. What is even stranger in the work is not the whites manipulating their power in order to exploit the blacks but it is the blacks who have been presented stereotypically as barbaric and uncivilized as much in parallel to the white Lurie

who shows barbarism in his enjoyment of the sex with too many.

Similarly the use of symbols and allegories like that of Byron, Teresa, and Allegra are significant in a sense that they somehow reflect the Byronic kind of guy David wanted to be but none of them reflects David's inability to connect with the world around him. Byron's Teresa, in her stout middle age, keening for her lost lover, "may be the last one left who can save him," he thinks (209). *Disgrace* is therefore a highly paradoxical and contradictory novel because it seems to present a world dying without hope at the centre. The academy is portrayed as deprived of grace by its failure to reproduce the cultural heritage of any sort which would smoothly function for the construction of the ideal society. In the novel the Eurocentric intellectuals in South Africa are pictured devoid of purpose, security and success. The intellectual insecurities portrayed in the novel also suggest the emblematic of the threats to white man's stability and culture amid the South African ferocious hostility.

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