

## REDEMPTIVE SOUTH AFRICA: READING J. M. COETZEE'S *DISGRACE*

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### Abstract

*Predicting future on the basis of the immediate present has been a matter of discussion amongst the intellectuals, all across the globe. Going through the recent texts of postcolonial studies also gives this idea a strong base. Writers like V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and J.M. Coetzee are the strong bearers of this tradition in contemporary writings. J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace, a novel written after the first all race elections in 1994 in Africa, fetches the readers' attraction often while thinking of contemporary situation of South Africa. The binary oppositions like powerful- powerless, black- white have been the burning issues in African society and Coetzee's Disgrace deals in the same. One of the best outputs of this prize winning book is it discusses not only about the present problems of the African society but its protagonist also makes an attempt to foresee the future that dose not seem bright. Along with realizing his hamartia he also makes us feel about the future that does not give us bright clue of catharsis ahead. This present paper is an attempt to explore Coetzee's Disgrace as an honest intention to bring out the loopholes of contemporary African system and society.*

**Keywords:** South Africa, Contemporary Times, Exploitations, Race, Power

J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* portrays the assertion and rejection of race and power in contemporary South Africa. This novel is written after the country's first all-race elections, in 1994. It has, therefore, most often been analyzed as a representative for the new waves of writing of the new South Africa, where the issues relating binary oppositions such as "black-white, native- immigrant, powerless- powerful" (Dalama) are stressed.

Colleen M Sheils' article "Opera, Byron, and the South African Psyche in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*," discusses, namely what Coetzee's opera in *Disgrace* has to say about white natives in post-colonial South Africa. The shared sphere of interest is shown by Sheils when she makes the connection between fantasy and political identity, focusing on "David's opera and its role in communicating reflections on identity, exile, and political meaning within the mind of a newly disenfranchised member of South Africa's nation" (38) Sheills makes the conclusion that Lurie's unfinished opera shows that he is giving up adapting to new South African citizenship: "In giving up before the opera is complete, David condemns himself to

the comforts of ignorance” thus “he is never able to progress on his meditations on... identity and belonging in the nation” (49). The white native population has to share the power and their possessions in total humility, which is something that Lurie finally comes to understand through the course of events and through his work on the opera *Byron of Italy*.

The fact that the whole population of South Africa gained full citizenship after the 1994 elections is fundamental for the creation of new South African culture, as Frantz Fanon states:

The nation is not only a precondition for culture, its ebullition, its perpetual renewal and maturation. It is a necessity. First of all it is the struggle for nationhood that unlocks culture and opens the doors of creation. (Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* 177)

The focus is on the peculiarity of Lurie’s situation; he being a representative of the white population in South Africa. This population as a whole find itself lost due to the new political winds blowing.

*Disgrace*’s white South African narrator, Professor David Lurie, is at the first in a position where he can benefit from all the sovereignty that his skin colour and profession entitle him within the inner structure of the society. The story is set in present time so the decline in his power, due to the political changes, has already begun at the beginning of the book. He sees the university transformed into an emasculated institution of learning where he along with many of his colleagues are like clerks in post religious age (4). Instead of being a modern language professor he becomes an adjunct professor of communication and when he seduces a student he loses his job and has to live in disgrace. He flees the city and stays with his daughter Lucy, who resides in the country. There, a black worker Petrus, gains power on the social scale from helping hand to land owner, thanks to the socio political changes in South Africa. He can be seen as a barometer regarding political power in the story.

Lurie’s feeling of alienation is also understood in a specific socio political context. The political changes in South Africa make him alienated in his own country, so he returns to the culture of the imperialism;

a culture in which he was indoctrinated as an honorary member, as colonial. Undeniably, his unconscious dream of nationhood is tied deeply to growing up English, but African. (Sheills 40)

Lurie who fights his dubious feelings towards English as medium for the telling of the stories of the new South Africa, clearly is affected by his own hybridity. Representing white natives in South Africa means that he is in an ambiguous position where he though “still colonized by Europe and European ideas... is himself the continuing colonizer of the original inhabitants” (Sheills).

Facing his perpetrators, Lurie acknowledges his own helplessness while Coetzee plays with colonial labeling: “He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa. (Coetzee 95)

Along with this, the power shift in Contemporary South African Society has an all pervading impact on Lurie. In this case of Lurie the obvious detachment with what has been comes with the attack on Lurie is tortured and set on fire, while Lucy, his daughter, is being gang raped

by three black representatives of masculinity. Everything that he has believed in concerning himself and the world around him up till that day, changes. He already felt that his power and authority had been decimated when he had to depart from his life in Cape Town, even though his own rapport was intact and he left, holding his head high. But the pointless violence he and Lucy experience results in the insight that whatever power he had is now completely wiped out. He could not even act on instinct to protect his own child. For the first time in his own life he has suffered entirely on behalf of the fact that he represented the apartheid regime. This fact can be seen in the only information about her experience of the violation that Lucy unwillingly reveals to her father, the significant detail that the men who raped her did so in a frighteningly familiar and personal manner:

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 the hate me so? I had never set eyes on them.” (Coetzee 156)

Mike Marais seems authentic when he puts his argument that:

The implication, here, is that the men know her through the generic categories of race in South African Society. Indeed the rape her because they believe they know her. (Marais)

After the attack, Lurie is in shock and finds that “his pleasure in living has been sniffed out” (Coetzee 107). Not only does he suffer in his own chaotic darkness, but he is also tormented by guilt since he failed protecting Lucy during the assault. The worst is that he is unable to help her afterwards since she retreats into quiet apathy. Their disagreement regarding the information giving to the police after the assault makes Lurie move back to his house in Cape Town, only to find it theft. It is there, in the destroyed place that echoes his inner trauma, that he finally appetites writing opera. He explores this in words below:

Again the feeling washes over him: listlessness, indifference but also weightlessness, as if he has eaten away from the inside and only the eroded shell of his heart remains. How, he thinks to himself, can a man in this state find words, find music that will bring back the dead? (Coetzee 156)

Tracing the future forward, Coetzee through Lurie realizes that the sacrifices and changes he has made are not enough. He feels that time is running out on him and his generation:

Between Lucy’s generation and mine a curtain seems to have fallen. I did not even notice when it fell. (210)

It has all to do with forgiving and being able to await the future in humbleness. Lurie and Lucy’s armed Boer neighbor belong to a past where these two features go with loss of their honour, which up till now took its strength from the colonial soil.

The future lies in the next generation of South Africans:

I suspect it is too late for me. I am just an old lag serving out my sentence. But you go ahead. You are well on the way. (216)

Lucy’s capability to adapt to the changes is shown by the fact that she decides to give birth to the mulatto baby that was conceived in such hatred. She is also determined that she will be able to be a good mother: “A good mother and a good person. You should try to be a good person too... A good person. Not a bad resolution to make, in dark times. (216)

### Conclusion:

In *Disgrace*, Coetzee does not give any clear answer to the future of the new South African nation, nor can Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* or *The Wretched of the Earth*. Coetzee and Fanon both dream of some thing de-novo, something bring together by pieces never used before. Fanon's persuasion in his concluding remark of *The Wretched of the Earth* gives mouth to his high hopes: "for ourselves and for humanity... we must make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, an endeavor to create a new man" (269). Coetzee, in *Disgrace*, is imagining at a future where kindness and humility are the cultural bearers. At the end of the book, Lurie gives up the whole idea of his opera once he comes to understand that it, despite radical changes, is a worthless piece for the citizens of future South Africa. He realizes that the relations among all citizens have to start from scratch. On his own part, as a representative of the former colonizers, it has to initiate from somewhere lower than the white man has ever been in the history of South Africa. Perhaps, even lower than the pigs and dogs in his discussion with Lucy on "a higher life"(74). "The binary oppositions" (Derrida) that are highlighted on behalf of colonialism can all be discussed from the point of view of a higher life. A future without these oppositions is what both Lucy and Lurie, both in their own way, predicts:

How humiliating, he says finally. 'Such high hopes, and to end like this.'

'Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at a ground level. Without nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights no dignity.'

'Like a dog'

'Yes, like a dog' (205)

J.M. Coetzee, in making this prediction through his white narrator, a professor; representative of the fortune setters, Lurie, makes us sense the future chaos, which is really immediate and seems mandatory to the coming generations if the situation and society continues with the same.

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