

VIOLENCE IN J. M. COETZEE'S *DISGRACE*

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Abstract

Apartheid is a system of racial segregation enforced by National Party Governments of South Africa between 1948 and 1994. It brings internal resistance and violence. The policy of apartheid gave rise to various types of violence e.g. political violence, institutional violence, family violence, school violence, urban violence, and sexual violence. In apartheid, the invaders were responsible for the violence. In this paper an attempt has been made to investigate how Coetzee deals with the theme of violence through a dreadful and private encounter of David Lurie and Lucy in the context of Apartheid.

Keywords: Apartheid, violence, National Party, invaders, etc.

As a winner of the Booker Prize, J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* is one of the important novels in post apartheid literature. In it the effects of the apartheid system have been brought out to global attention. In this paper an attempt has been made to investigate how Coetzee deals with the intense theme of violence through a disastrous and private encounter of David Lurie and Lucy in the context of Apartheid. The bodies are very strongly connected to power in *Disgrace*. It deals with the sexual violence and reveals it from multiple perspectives through a tragic personal encounter of David Lurie and Lucy. David Lurie is a University professor in Cape Town. He is dismissed from his position because of sexual misconduct with his student. After being dismissed by the university he goes to live with his daughter Lucy. She is living the life of a farmer in Salem, South Africa. While Lurie is living with his daughter, the country life comes to an end when three young men forcefully attack Lucy's farm. They kill the dogs, put David on fire and violate the woman by gang rape. Lucy becomes pregnant and refuses to do abortion. She is also not willing to file a complaint to the police though Lurie tries to convince her to do so. Ultimately, David distances himself from his daughter Lucy and dedicates more time to work in the dog clinic.

The use of physical force has multiple functions in the service of the oppressive ethnic marginal in an apartheid society. In apartheid system, the invaders are responsible for the violence. So before discussing violence in detail let us understand, first, the apartheid system.

Apartheid is a system of racial separation imposed by National Party Government of South Africa between 1948 and 1994. Apartheid system brought separation in residential areas, education, medical care, beaches and public services. The policy of segregation extended to all aspect of society with separate section in public transport, public seats, beaches, and many other amenities. It deprived black (native) people citizenship and political representation. People were exploited on account of their race, their economic class and their sex. It gave birth to internal unrest and violence that further led to increasing oppression and state-sponsored violence. Since the 1950s a series of popular uprisings and protests were organized under the leadership of all the oppositional forces to the system. As a result, anti-apartheid leaders and the opposition forces were banned and punished. When unrest spread became more effective and militarized, state institutions responded with more oppression and violence. Black i.e. non-white political representation was completely stopped in 1970 and they were deprived of their citizenship. Afterwards the government brought a series of acts and laws and segregated education, medical care, beaches, public services, and provided lower services to black people, as compared to the white people. This is how Apartheid system is to be blamed for internal resistance and violence.

Apartheid System divided inhabitants into four racial groups- native, white, colored and Asian. During the 1980s Apartheid ban on interracial marriage, sex, and intimacy were slowly abolished. At the same time, the Apartheid-induced wars intensified and the cold war ended in 1989. In 1990, Nelson Mandela was released from prison and in 1994 president Nelson Mandela's democratic election declared the end of political apartheid in South Africa. The end of Apartheid opened the door for equal opportunity for all South Africans irrespective of race. By 1994, all Apartheid laws were destroyed. In the Response to this era, 'Truth and Reconciliation commission' was established in order to deliver justice to the sufferers of the apartheid system in the country like South Africa.

The policy of apartheid gave rise to various kinds of violence e.g. political violence, institutional violence, family violence, school violence, urban violence and sexual violence. The end of apartheid system in South Africa produced many shocking things. One of them is dramatic and unexpected politicization of sexuality. Violence can be defined as the use of physical force to hurt someone, to damage property by using power and instruments. World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal development, or deprivation". South Africa has a long history of violence in its different forms. Violence in South Africa is visible in different ways. However, post-apartheid South Africa experienced extraordinarily intense public controversy, activism and disagreement in respect of sexual issues. Sexual violence is a public and political issue in South Africa. It is impossible to deny that the authority has used the body for reasons of politics and power.

The novel *Disgrace* is centered on the sexual violence of a white woman Lucy. It is unusual in respect with the historical victimization of black or colored woman by white men. However, violence is visible at the beginning of the novel when David Lurie ignores the feeling of his student 'Melanie Isaacs'. Every Thursday David Lurie travels to Green Point at Windsor Mansions to meet Soraya, a black woman, to make love. Lurie is an old person but his fondness towards her has grown up. It's surprising that ninety minutes of a woman's company at every week is enough to make Lurie happy. He used to visit Soraya's home to sleep with her. When he tries to make a force for continuing this relationship Soraya strongly denies it. She says,

'You are harassing me in my own house. I demand (command), you will never phone me here again, never'. (Coetzee, 10)

When Soraya refuses to accept him and ends their Thursday meetings, Lurie turns his attention on his student Melanie Isaacs. She is a student of Romantic Course. One day when he is coming back home, he sees her walking alone. He starts conversation with her and even invites her for a drink at his house. When she comes at his house both take wine, dinner, enjoy music. She also sees his books and comes to know that a lot of books on Byron are there. Later, she is told that he is working on Byron. After the first meeting, he is quite obsessed with her. When he does not have her phone number to make a call, he takes her bio data from the college and calls her on phone. He invites her to lunch and later on takes her home and seduces her. David does not stop here and continues to follow her. Lurie takes complete advantage of her confusion and has sex with her against her will. Though, Melanie is passive throughout the act when he seduces her for first time, David draws a lot of pleasure without bothering about the violence that he causes for her. When he reaches to her home next morning without any information, "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" (24). David wants to make a strange love with Melanie. Melanie is not ready, but she does not resist. Even when he undresses her completely, she burrows "like a mole" (25). After the act is over, Coetzee writes,

Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go to slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So everything might be done to her might be done as it far away (25).

The comparison of Lucy with 'rabbit' and David's with 'fox' clearly shows the brutality and violence of the act. His behavior and the way he makes love with her are totally wrong and inhuman. All his acts are forceful and he has not taken consent of Melanie and even he ignores her desires. After this, Melanie registers a complaint against David to the university authority and as a result of that he is dismissed from his job. So he decides to go to her daughter, Lucy, who lives in Eastern Cape.

The beginning of the chapter 11 is important. When both David Lurie and his daughter wake up in the early hours on Wednesday morning and walk the dogs together, they come across three men whom they've never seen before. When they go back from their walk with the dogs, the men are waiting for them at the house and ask to use the phone. Lucy lets a young boy in to utilize the phone, but the other two men tried to advance towards Lucy. Lurie comes to know about the attack and calls Lucy, but there is silence. He sets one dog on the attackers, but the dog cannot control them. However, the dog is shot with Lucy's rifle and Lurie is put on fire. At the end, Lurie is badly ruined by the fire, only one dog remains alive. Lurie attempts to sooth Lucy but she does not listen to him, instead she locks herself in the bathroom. Finally, she comes out and becomes ready to get help from a neighbor. Now Lurie comes to know the she has been raped. This incident of violence is very terrific in terms of Lurie because he is unable to help himself or his daughter. The attackers draw his attention towards his disgrace and set him on fire. The dogs too cannot save their keepers.

Since the robbery, David has not convinced her daughter to speak about the rape she has undergone. Lucy thinks that being a man Lurie will not understand her experience of the rape. However, Lucy finally speaks about the rape to her father. She says:

It was so personal. It was done with such personal disgust. That was what astonished me more than anything. The rest was...expected. But why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them (156).

Lurie 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 down from the ancestors (156).

Though Lurie is able to contextualize the act in terms of the historical mistreatment of black South Africans, his daughter continues to exhibit distance toward him. The fact that he is a man stands between them; she realizes, knowing his history with Soraya and Melanie, that Lurie too is a predatory sexual creature, a rapist. Her experience has completely eradicated any sympathy she once felt for Lurie's exile.

Lucy's silence over the forced violence can be understood and compared in terms of the silence of the colonized people. *Disgrace* talks about how the violence is originated from racial discriminations. The gang rape of Lucy by Black Men has symbolic meanings. It is revenge against the apartheid system and the oppression of black people. It is also a response to the segregation of different institutions and the process of colonialism too.

After the incident both the father and the daughter get separated. Lucy tells her father, "You tell what happened to you, I tell what happened to me" (99). It shows that both have undergone different experiences and committed different crimes. They have to face its consequences separately. The rape of Lucy is violent and filled with hate against the White people. It also shows that those who have power (three robbers); they use it in any way. Though Lucy's decision about not registering the complaint is personal one, she clearly

knows that in the context of Modern South Africa, it is impossible to get true justice. Another change has brought out in the personality of Lucy after the incidence. In her mind there is explicit separation between men and women and her father falls in the category of men. David just watches the suffering of her daughter after the event and cannot comfort her.

Thus Coetzee has explicitly presented the lives of the people of South Africa through the characters in the novel and how they faced the apartheid system and the change in the racial hierarchy. As the novel *Disgrace* is set in post apartheid South Africa, the ghost of apartheid still haunts the county. Robbery, Racism, and Rape are common things in South Africa. The history of colonialism, oppression, apartheid and suffering cannot be forgotten. Finally it can be said that the consequences of the violence, of any kind, are so violent that a normal person's life becomes abnormal that we see in connection with the father and the daughter in *Disgrace*.

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