

PORTRAYAL OF RACIAL ISOLATION IN J.M. COETZEE'S '*DISGRACE*'

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyze the issues of Racial Isolation in post-apartheid South-Africa in 'Disgrace' (1999) an outstanding novel of J.M. Coetzee. The role of J.M. Coetzee was very instrumental in portrayal of racial isolation to global attention alongwith Nadine Gordimer, Alan Paton etc. The literary career of J.M. Coetzee has grown up under the shadow of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. This paper examines the historical background of South-Africa and disputes between European Colonizers and the native inhabitants of the Cape Town. However, Coetzee did remarkably good in showing the realistic picture of South-Africa and its brutal system of racial segregation. The thoughts of Coetzee about post-apartheid violence in South-Africa not only as a result of political shortcomings but of historical, economic and social since centuries of racial isolation. The study concludes that J.M. Coetzee clearly shows Racial Isolation in post-apartheid South-Africa. And how people later reacted against the brutal policies of colonizers.

Keywords: Apartheid, Post-Apartheid, Isolation, Violence, Post-Colonialism, Segregation.

'Disgrace' (1999) is the most outstanding novel of J.M. Coetzee who is two-time winner of booker prize-one for *The Life & Time of Michael K.* and the second one for '*Disgrace*' J.M. Coetzee is considered to be the most-effective and prolific African writer of his generation. He is one of those who played a major role in bringing racial isolation in post-apartheid South-Africa to global attention. His literary career has grown up under the shadow of apartheid and post-apartheid South-Africa. Coetzee in '*Disgrace*' interprets violence in post-apartheid South-Africa that was a logical expansion of the pressures of long years of racial isolation.

In the beginning a discussion on the life in post-apartheid South-Africa, where Martin Luther King believed to live "*The World's Worst Racism*",¹ that's why I selected '*Disgrace*', the choice of my work. The novel is full of various elements focusing on rape, religion, sexuality, animal cruelty and several. In this paper, however, I will focus on how the subject of racial isolation in post-apartheid South Africa is portrayed in '*Disgrace*'. I hope this paper can be a small contribution the discussion of one of the most celebrated novels of the decades as well as add a slight diversity of our mostly Eurocentric course. Racial domination, isolation and oppression in South-Africa began with the advent of the colonialism during the mid-seventeenth

¹ The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, "Apartheid."

century. Colonization was the paramount factor that paved the way to apartheid. Apartheid as a practice in South-Africa was a discussion which isolated the blacks from the whites. The whites were treated as superior to the blacks on the basis of race and colour. A number of post-apartheid writers such as Andre Brink, Breyten Breytenbach J.M. Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer have focused on current issues of violence, crime, race and power in South-Africa.

'Disgrace' a post-apartheid novel was written by J.M. Coetzee in 1999. The theme of the novel is focused on the way the white South-Africans respond to the new conditions brought about by the end of white Hegemony known as Apartheid. In a review of this novel for the New York Times (November 11, 1999), Christopher Lehman Hampt noted that–

The book reflects the uncertainty of post-apartheid South-Africa, where, “all values are shifting.”

J.M. Coetzee deals with the theme of race and power in post-apartheid South-Africa in his most celebrated novel 'Disgrace'. It represents new South-Africa, where the social troubles relating binary oppositions such as black-white and powerless-powerful are stressed out. The novel focuses on the issue of racial isolation and dilemma of the white writer writing in post-apartheid South-Africa. In the beginning of the novel David Lurie was sexually engaged with a Muslim whore called Soraya whom he has been going to week by week for over a year. The opening sentence of the novel claims that: “*For a man of his age, fifty-two, separate, he has, to his mind, tackled the issue of sex rather well.*” In 'Disgrace' Coetzee involves us in the struggle of a discredited 52 years old university professor David Lurie falls in disgrace and disrepute after a sexual carelessness with one of his students. Subsequently he loses everything; his reputation, his job, his peace of mind, his dream of artistic success, and finally even his ability to protect his own daughter. Basically, David Lurie, a university professor was a white South-African. He was not able to protect his daughter's honour in the new situation of South-Africa after the fall down of white supremacy. Coetzee was witness of reversal of power between the whites and the blacks in post-apartheid South-Africa. David Lurie is the central character in the novel and he forced to teach communications at Cape Town Technical University. After an illegitimate affair with his non-white student, Melaine, he has resigned from his job. Subsequently the girl secured a complaint against him and he has to speak to a committee of inquiry who wants him to repent publicly. He rejects to confess in public and decides to leave Cape Town to see his daughter Lucy in the countryside.

Lucy was well in farming. She was occasionally helped in her farm by the black farmer, Petrus whose property adjoins her own. Coetzee comes to know in the reversed racial relationships to the surface when he arrives in Salem to see Lucy. She lives in the neighbour of Petrus, a black man. Earlier he works for Lucy and takes care of her dogs and garden. But the racial changes become affected when Lurie is attacked by intruders and Lucy is raped by three black men and this incident represents the interracial rape. According to Foucault, “*power corrupts and circulates.*” This event indicates the reversal of racial power in the new South-African point of view. David Lurie wants Lucy to report to the police about the crime and bring the culprits to justice. But Lucy decides that it would be impractical for her to go to live in such

lawless area if she reports to the police and would invite to future attacks. Around the same period, the balance of power in the country is shifting. David deduces that eventually Lucy will be compelled to wed Petrus and give him her property and it gives the idea that Lucy is surrendered to this possibility. Lucy's rejection in denouncing the crime is explained the condition of post-apartheid movement they are living:

“in another time, another place (what happened to me) might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not” (p. 112)²

Coetzee observes the theme of racial oppression and powerlessness through the rape incidents of Lucy. In the novel, it is symbolised through the events that the rape was a way to subjugate women since antiquated circumstances when assault was led as a standard intends to bring a lady into a man's tribe or country. However, in the present novel the character, Lucy is assaulted, yet she is not just about the enslavement of ladies. Because of assault, she becomes impressive and agoraphobic. David pushes her to report the full condition to the police, but she proved herself unable. It is on account of that she was impregnated by one of the attackers. Later, she disregards the counsel to end the pregnancy.

With the abolishment of apartheid and its results the inversion of power play, Lucy realizes the helplessness of the whites in this post-apartheid South-Africa knowing well that she would not get justice. The silence of Lucy is a sign of her powerlessness in the new South-Africa. Lucy wants to live with Petrus, but she has to pay fine for it as Petrus offers her protection in exchange for her land. She sanctions to Marry Petrus and becomes his third wife. The political motif of Lucy to Marry Petrus to secure her life in this new South-Africa. As a result of reversal of power, Petrus becomes to prime example of a black man. Who develops power and property, J.M. Coetzee has reflected that the policy of land transfer has changed both the whites as well as the blacks in post-apartheid South-Africa.

As for the three rapists, it was an act of revenge, that was a crucial objective, not relating to addressing a sexual desire only. Lucy determines to give birth, that was a result of rape and her child can be represented as the symbolic heir of post-apartheid South-Africa. The novel presents resembling between Melanie's rape and Lucy's gang rape by three black man. That fact is, however, that in the novel, black man rape white Lucy, which Lurie believes was an act carried out of reprisal. For the apartheid and the oppression of black people, a reaction to the racial isolation imposed by colonialism. Sexual violence is the major problem in this transition period. David Lurie's sexual life is clearly depicted in '*Disgrace*'. His sexual life is more or less cloudy and precarious. We are informed that he is twice divorced and lives a passionless life. He had sexual and passionless life with a number of women like- With the black prostitute Soraya, his student Melanie and later with Bev Shaw. If this is enough justification for David Lurie's sexual behaviour then his own daughter, Lucy also becomes a victim of rape in the end of the novel when father and daughter are assaulted by a gang of criminals.

² *Disgrace* (first ed.) (1999). Great Britain : Martin Secker & Warburg.

The position of J.M. Coetzee as a writer is insuperable by the condition of his being a white write belonging to South Africa, a country where apartheid had been the official government and racist policy of segregation. His themes placed in the South African framework make clear a conflict arising from his ironic awareness of having to write with a subjectivity fashioned by the discourse of white hegemony. His fiction clearly shows the racial situation in view against the historical atmosphere with an unbiased sympathy for common people. In the post-apartheid situation, as depicted in *Disgrace*, this resistance comes from the new power structure. White domination 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. The country is passing through an immense restoring of social relations. In the consequential chaos all citizens officially enjoy freedom and the authority to create meaning.

This novel is about a developing society, where it has been very minutely observed that the morality has been 'erased and reborn'. In the novel we can find two episodes of sexual manhandle. One episode is about a white characterless professor at the time of apartheid condition, however alternate with a brutal assault that at that point shapes the core of substantial more remarkable wrongdoing. This story depicts a violent blend of blame and shock, racial disharmony and sexual disharmony and it makes provocative associations in a few uncertain ways. J.M. Coetzee's novel '*Disgrace*' depicts an examination of racial chain of command which was changed in new South-Africa. To close, this rational depiction of rape of Melanie Isaacs, a black girl by a white man, David Lurie, results of his sexual records the brutal side of post-politically racial isolation life in South-Africa. The relationship between David and Lucy, David and the family of the woman he has wronged. There all realities South-Africa are powerfully depicted. In its intensely vision at post-apartheid South-Africa, '*Disgrace*' is a dystopia novel, which depicts a dark vision of the post-apartheid South-African society. Coetzee investigates a significant number of his ordinary subjects from racial separation to foul play through his white hero, David Lurie, and the agony he causes and encounters first hand because of preferential socio-political plans. Through the investigation of racial and sexual connections compared nearby a consistent indication of South Africa's dim history, he experiences a significantly exceptional personality change.

The history of colonial and apartheid South-Africa have a strong impact on the writers and the acid test of white liberal sensibility in South-Africa. Realistic picture of South-Africa has been chosen by writers to merge fiction and history with the help of metafictional technique, metonymy and colonial silence, Coetzee depicted the dilemma of the white writers. Sex has been depicted as a metonymy for the exploitation of the blacks by Coetzee in the novel. Melanie, a non-white girl is seduced by a white man, Lurie. Though she remains silent throughout the act yet she does not oppose. Lurie is not given any punishment for seducing Melanie. As the same action occurred with Lucy. She suppresses her voice against the crime committed on her and

decides to give birth to the child she is carrying as a result of rape. Coetzee is silent in the matter while Lucy being a white woman remains voiceless.

In this light of the discussion it may be concluded that Coetzee has been considered as genuine writer who portrays racial isolation and political conflicts in South-Africa. This novel depicts political issues as main focus which are concerned with South-African apartheid system of racial isolation. Through the portrayal of the evils of apartheid or racial isolation in his work, Coetzee recollects the past and articulating fears and tensions.

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