

THE COLLAPSE OF THE WHITE AUTHORITY OVER THE BLACK IN J. M. COETZEE'S *DISGRACE* IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

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He continues to teach because it provides him with a livelihood; also because it teaches him humility, brings it home to him who he is in the world. The irony does not escape him: that the one who comes to teach learns the keenest of lessons, while those who come to learn learn nothing.

(Coetzee, *Disgrace*)

ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt to investigate and throw some light on J. M. Coetzee's celebrated novel *Disgrace* (1999) in South Africa's post-apartheid in order to indicate the ramifications in the aftermath of apartheid in which with the subversion of the white authority, and the change in power structures of the society, the once dominant ideology presupposing the white superiority over the black fades away. Through identity crisis, mimicry and violence, the white hegemony shatters and a new power structure comes into being. Hence, David Lurie, the protagonist along with his daughter Lucy are taken as representatives of the whites that suffer both physically and psychologically and go through an identity crisis which leads them to a kind of awareness regarding their current situation in the post-apartheid period. Having endured and suffered some pains that are going to be presented in the subsequent sections of the current study, David and Lucy draw a conclusion that there is apparently no way but co-existence and compromise between the two races. Apartheid, indeed, leaves a wound for both the black and the white through conflicts and collisions between them.

Therefore, Lucy can be regarded as the symbol of redemption and

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reconciliation between the two races. In what follows, the word apartheid will be first defined and elaborated on, then applied to Coetzee's selected novel in order to examine and demonstrate its overarching effects on both the white and the black.

Keywords: *Coetzee, Disgrace, apartheid, post-apartheid, identity crisis*

INTRODUCTION

Apartheid

It might be helpful, to begin with, to provide a concise introduction to apartheid. Coined in the mid-1930s, the word apartheid was first utilized as a way of “expressing the importance of Afrikaners maintaining a cultural identity separate from that of English-speaking Europeans in South Africa” (Clark & Worger 2013, p. 4). It today, however, has become associated with a political and social system of segregating the non-white from the white in South Africa. This policy was introduced in South Africa in 1948 by the ‘National Party government’ and it remained official practice until the fall from power of the party in 1994. People of different races were forced to live in separated areas and forbidden to amalgamate or interact with each other. The objective was to deny such seemingly inviolable rights as marriage, education or occupation of the non-white particularly the black. Interracial marriage and the black's owning land were as well prohibited and deemed illegal. Furthermore, a large number of apartheid laws “merely elaborated on previous colonial policies and segregation legislation.” It is argued that it made an enormous difference in the South Africans' lives. The mere “brutality of its implementation” in addition to its “overarching impact” signified a ‘dramatic’ change. The change is believed to be due to “shift in race relations” (Clark & Worger 2013, p. 37).

However, during the 1970s, which was a time of strikes by black workers and boycotts against their “oppressive working conditions, a new line of interpretation emerged and rapidly became dominant.” This literature heavily influenced by a reading of Karl Marx, “remarked on the benefits of apartheid to business and focused on the historical origins of many of apartheid's most notorious features” including “racially discrimination legislation, urban segregation, migrant labor, rural poverty” promoted

and reinforced by British capitalists (p. 8). In this system people were categorized based on “their socio-economic status and cultural life style,” into three main groups: the white, the black, and the colored, with the white being the dominant and empowered class despite being the minority group compared with the black. In this horrible situation finding and pursuing a suitable career was quite difficult, and the black were coerced into doing such arduous jobs of working in mines for a pittance. Moreover, due to lack of basic amenities and the apathy of the preponderantly white class, children were inflicted with a variety of diseases as a result of malnutrition and having to live in deplorable situations. Consequently, the rates of mortality were on the rise.

Apartheid, however, provoked and sparked both internal resistance and universal condemnation through a series of clashes and violent actions with the police aiming at bringing it to an end. In addition, the situation led to coming into being of a number of campaigns and organizations advocating the black cause. In 1989, Clerk’s presidency and the release from prison of Nelson Mandela helped apartheid reach its end. “The creation of National Peace Accord and democratic election in 1994 brought an end to apartheid.” The objectives of the new government as announced by Clerk are as follows:

first...to preserve security, safety and identity of every people and grouping South Africa...second...to create- on the foundation of the safeguarding of group identity, on the preservation of the right of every group to self-determination, to retain its identity and to cherish what is precious to it- a spirit of co-operation between the various peoples and population groups, because we perceive that there is a multitude of common interests. (Clark & Worger 2013, p. 95)

The most remarkable achievement of the government of national unity was the “passage of a new constitution” in December 1996. Unlike those preceding it which had been mainly based on “principles of racial separation and inequality,” this new one endeavored to “heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights.” It also suggested that the government be “based on the will of” its citizens, and every individual be “equally protected by law.” Foremost in significance in the new constitution was “a bill of rights” which “recognized the equality of every person before the

law” and forswore discrimination of any kind on any grounds like “race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, color, sexual orientation” (p. 123).

It does not mean, however, that the demise of apartheid equaled the end of black inferiority and suppression. Some features persist in its aftermath. “Material inequalities” and “unequal distribution of income” as well as poverty continue to shape everyday life. Apartheid is also echoed in the continual relationship between “race, neighborhood and class.” The white continue to be domiciled in “well-resources areas” and even have managed to reproduce more privileges in post-apartheid. On the other hand, the black and more specifically Africans who make up a large portion of population are coerced into residing in places with “compromised infrastructure and services.” It might be true that there were some changes in society engendered by the end of apartheid such as ‘dignity’ for Africans, but it has not generated “real opportunity” since deprived African children tend to attend “compromised and struggling schools” entailing no ‘skills’ or ‘qualifications’ and then “enter a labor market that offers no prospects for unskilled workers” and struggle to have access to ‘healthcare’ when they are inflicted with a disease. To put it simply, South Africa “remains a highly segregated society” as racial integration is sought for but hard to attain (Bray, et al 2010, p. 23).

Discussion

Disgrace concerns David Lurie, “fifty-two, divorced” who has “solved the problem of sex rather well” (Coetzee 1999, p. 2), and who earns a living by teaching at the Cape Technical university in post-apartheid South Africa. Once a professor of Modern Languages, “he has been since Classics and Modern Languages were closed down as part of the great rationalism, adjunct professor of communication” (p. 3). Due to “lack of respect for the material he teaches”, David “makes no impression on his students. They look through him, forget his name” (p. 3). The company of women, furthermore, made him “a lover of women, to an extent, a womanizer” existing in “an anxious flurry of promiscuity” (p. 4). Dismissed from his position on the charge of sexual harassment, David then takes refuge in his daughter’s Lucy’s farmhouse. Shortly after settling on the farm, he has to come to terms with the aftermath of an attack by three black men. As a

result, Lucy is violently raped and David badly wounded. The novel ends with Lucy being pregnant as a result of rape and being forced into marrying the black African man Petrus as his third wife.

One of the issues that are patently obvious in *Disgrace* is that of identity crisis. According to Homi Bhabha (1994), one's identity is constructed through interactions with others in a given community. It is not a pre-given entity which can be referred to. "The question of identification," he says, "is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, a self-fulfilling prophecy- it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that object." Therefore, "the demand of identification," he claims, requires the "representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness." It is the return of an "image of identity that bears the mark of splitting in the other place from which it comes" (p. 59). We often tend to think of our identities as "pre-given and stable facts of our lives." For Bhabha, as Smith (2006) puts it, however, "this comfortable feeling of the self-sufficiency of traditions, or of national or personal identity," masks the much more "tangled and ambiguous processes by which these constructions come to have cultural compulsion." Culture is represented by "virtue of processes of iteration and translation through which their meanings are vicariously addressed to-through - an Other. This erases any essentialist claims for the inherent authenticity or purity of cultures" (p. 248).

David's identity depends upon the white power. Once the white authority and domineering control over the black fade away, so does David's identity. He finds it extremely difficult to accept the new power structures being unable to forget the once white dominance imposing their ideas on the black with no possibility of resistance and contradiction. Furthermore, having to teach communication, and being unable to reach young students, as well as his diminishing appeal to women, make David feel displaced and helpless. David is unable to accept the new power structures, finding it hard to cope with a changing world in post-apartheid Africa. He cannot thus abandon his idea of white superiority and continues his promiscuity. As soon as the white lose their power, David loses his identity. His identity, in other words, depends on colonialists' power. He cannot repel the shadow of the dominant colonialists and separate it from his life. Therefore, the forced acceptance of the realities of his existence breaks David to almost nothing. He is unwilling to accept South Africa with the black as rulers. The

powerful and respected David is left an old man sitting among dogs, while Petrus, the black gardener gains more control in the end. David reduces himself to animal existence:

without hopes, without desires, indifferent to the future. Slumped on a plastic chair amid the stench of chicken feathers and rotting apples, he feels his interest in the world draining from him drop by drop. It may take weeks, it may take months before he is held dry, but he is bleeding. When that is finished, he will be like a fly-casing in a spider web, brittle to the touch, lighter than rice-chaff, ready to float away. (Coetzee 1999, p.46).

A second matter to be discussed is mimicry. Regarded as a theme of great significance in postcolonial studies, mimicry is employed to “describe a structural ambivalence in colonial discourse” being associated with Homi Bhabha. Bhabha demonstrates how the colonizer “encourages the colonized to copy, internalize or mimic aspects of the colonizing culture, its behaviors, manners and values” in order to make the colonized roughly the same, but it also “opens up a disturbing rupture in the civilizing mission of colonial dominance” for the colonizer is not certain if the colonized “mimics or mocks.” Mimicry, says Bhabha, is both “resemblance and menace” since the “not-quite sameness” of the colonized “distorts and fractures the identity of the colonizer as he sees traces of himself in the colonized” (Cuddon 2013, p. 437). Mimicry is often thought of as a negative thing for when one mimics and imitates the colonizer, s/he makes an effort to appear to be like them. However, it could be positive as well for imitation is not complete. It is not one hundred percent according to what the colonizer does. One can assert their own ideas and affect some changes. It thus could be subversive.

The black in *Disgrace* try to do exactly the same that was done on the part of the white in the apartheid era. The rape of Lucy can be thought of as the black revenge. They intend to retaliate against the white by making them suffer both mentally and physically. This is easily noticeable in the case of David and especially that of Lucy. Hence the black considers themselves as victims of apartheid who have been deprived of their inviolable rights and who have been regarded as inferiors and objects, in post-apartheid. They, by imitating the white, endeavor to make them suffer the kinds of pain that were imposed on the black by the white. The attack on the farm can, therefore, be regarded as an effort on the part of the black community to

take revenge on the white. Beaten by David, Pollux, one of the rapists, cries out: “we will kill you all” (Coetzee 1999, p. 88). The reader can clearly notice the violence in the novel be it sexual, theft or assault. According to Loomba (2005):

Racial and sexual violence are yoked together by images of rape, which in different forms, becomes an abiding and recurrent metaphor for colonial relations. If colonial power is expressed as a white man’s possession of black women and men, colonial fears center around the rape of white women by black men. Certain ant-colonial or ant-racist activities have also problematically appropriated such a possession as an act of insurgency. (pp. 138-9)

This is precisely what occurs in the novel. If during apartheid, black women used to be exploited by white men, in post-apartheid the situation is, however, reversed, with white women being raped and used by black men. The violence as depicted in *Disgrace* is, as David concludes, the consequence of the past, apparently the white past or even humanity’s past in which those in power used to sexually abuse their subjects: “It was history speaking through them. A history of wrong. It may have seemed personal, but it wasn’t. It came down from the ancestors” (Coetzee 1999, p. 66). Therefore, one of the main problems in post-apartheid is sexual violence. The novel depicts a disturbing picture of sexual life through David’s intercourses and Lucy’s rape. Throughout the novel sex remains a problem for David and he tries to solve it by using immoral practices. He takes sex to be an act of exercising his power. Other forms of violence are assault and theft. David and Lucy are assaulted, the dogs which Lucy boards are killed, and David’s car is stolen. Lucy, however, asserts that it was “so personal” (having) being done “with such personal hatred” (p. 66) and is not willing to lay the charge of her rape to the police saying that the event was “a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone” (p. 48). The violent actions and racial discriminations in post-apartheid South Africa are omnipresent happening “every day, every hour, every minute...in every quarter of the country” (p. 42). David and Lucy feel insecure in the country where the white have lost their privileges and are no longer in a position of power, but racial discrimination and violence are ubiquitous:

It happens every day, every hour, every minute, he tells himself, in every quarter of the country. Count yourself lucky to have escaped with your life. Count yourself lucky not to be a prisoner in the car at this moment, speeding away, or at the bottom of a donga with a bullet in your head. Count Lucy lucky, too. Above all Lucy. (p. 42)

Lucy is fully conscious of the fact that the white have been left devoid of their previous power. Hence she is, despite her father's incessant insistence to think things over in order to lay charges against Petrus to the police, and to decline his offer of marriage so that he could send her to Holland, inclined to compromise and keep living and working on the farm with Petrus in order to begin her life from scratch:

Objectively I am a woman alone. I have no brothers. I have a father, but he is far away and anyhow powerless in the terms that matter here. To whom can I turn for protection, for patronage? To Ettinger? It is just a matter of time before Ettinger is found with a bullet in his back. Practically speaking, there is only Petrus left. Petrus may not be a big man but he is big enough for someone small like me. And at least I know Petrus. I have no illusions about him. I know what I would be letting myself in for. (p. 86)

Lucy then, as Head (2009) claims, becomes the "victim of blackmail and extortion." A parallel might be drawn by readers between Lurie and his daughters' rapists. This, says Head, suggests a "depressing lesson in the legacy of colonialism, as power shifts and Petrus' expansionist designs on Lucy's land mirror the careless acquisitive habits of the colonizer" (p. 77). So, Lucy's refusal to report her rape to the police and her unwillingness to rationalize her decision reflect the fact that she cannot represent herself as a rape victim:

'I can't talk any more, David, I just can't,' she says, speaking softly, rapidly, as though afraid the words will dry up. 'I know I am not being clear. I wish I could explain but I can't. Because of who you are and who I am. I can't. I'm sorry. And I'm sorry about your car. I'm sorry about the disappointment.' She rests her head on her arms; her shoulders heave as she gives in. (Coetzee 1999, p.66).

She, therefore, becomes a symbol of redemption and reconciliation to the

black and the white seeking a new accommodation and identity and does not value old conflicts as does her father. She aims to compromise and become the third wife of Petrus atoning for the colonizers' sin and starts on a long journey to her expiation for the past guilt as a scapegoat of the previous colonialists. Lucy admits her marriage is humiliating, but believes it is done out of desperation: "Petrus is not offering a church wedding. He is offering an alliance, a deal. I contribute the land, in return for which I am allowed to creep in under his wing. I am without protection. I am fair game." Lucy is aware that the white have been stripped of their privileges, and she is incapable of producing any effect:

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 ground level. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity, like a dog. (p. 87)

With the fall of apartheid, the world of the white South Africans altered enormously, and political and social constructions were reversed. Three incidents demonstrate shifting power in post-apartheid South Africa. The first one is David's downgrading from professor of English studies to teaching communication studies. As time elapses, he becomes conscious of the fact that English is an "unfit medium" for the prevailing conditions in South Africa. English studies have lost their value and appreciation in South Africa due to the fact that the white authority and dominance has come to an end. The second one is posing a sexual harassment case against David by one of his students which leads to David's dismissal from university. Since David is Melanie's professor and more importantly a white man he thinks he has the right to use his student without being charged with any crime. He is even disinclined to confess to his wrongdoings and believes he was "a servant of Eros" (p. 38). And the third incident is Lucy's rape and her marriage to Petrus. A white woman's rape by three black men and her refusal to take any legal actions, as well as her pregnancy and marriage to a man who already has two wives indicate how ineffectual and effete the white are left in post-apartheid South Africa.

It seems that both during and after apartheid women are looked down on. It is evident in the way Lurie and Petrus treat women, though with different intensions. In the case of Petrus, he "gains economic and material winning." When it comes to David, however, it is not obvious what he obtains from

mistreating women. The motive behind David's behavior towards women might be a "consequence of his troubled life since he lost his wife. David at least gains sexual pleasure and takes advantage" of his position both as a university professor and a white man when he uses the prostitute and his student (Pettersen 2014, p. 13). Malenie's inferiority to David is evident especially in their sexual intercourse. David is taken as the 'subject' and Melanie functions as the 'object', and how she feels concerning their relationship does not matter. "David's objectification of women" in general and Melanie in particular is clearly noticeable throughout the novel. Melanie "carries no meaning to David." As Stepien argues, "the female voice is constantly silenced" in *Disgrace*. This is a "tool of power" for when women's voice is not heard nothing prevents men from using women (qtd. In Pettersen 2014 p. 8). David does not even seek Melanie's approval and just cares for his own satisfaction:

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. Words heavy as clubs thud into the delicate whorl of her ear. 'No not now,' she says struggling. 'My cousin will be back.' But nothing will stop him...She does not resist. All she does is avert herself avert her lips...She decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck... (Coetzee 1999, p. 11)

Disgrace indicates that "old patriarchal structures have remained intact; the roles within it have only been reassigned along racial lines." As Crang argues, "the colonial mindset" considers black men's "sexuality and desire as deviant, uncontrolled and threatening" particularly when it is "directed at white women." The rape of Lucy, therefore, is "representative of subconscious fear that possibly informed many of the ideologies of colonialism and apartheid" (Marais & Wenzel 2006, pp. 35-6). She is the only character throughout the novel who is bound to evoke sympathy to a great degree since she is innocently and unwillingly entangled in a situation out of which there is no way out, and ends up marrying ostensibly willingly but indeed out of desperation for there is no alternative. Lucy is, to put it in another way, made a scapegoat for the white's past violence.

The novels written during the 'apartheid era' aimed at promoting a "special kind of resistance to the pressures of politics," but it now seems that "that

pressure issued in an intensity- and complexity of meaning- has become less apparent in Coetzee's work in the post-apartheid era. He "has been freed up to treat literary and ethical concerns, without viewing these through the prism of colonial violence, with the particular inflection of personal complicity that lent to the earlier novels" (Head 2009, p. 81).

Conclusion

As observed and discussed above, during the apartheid people were categorized according to their socio-economic status and cultural life style into the white, the black, and the colored, while the white were regarded as the dominant and empowered class despite constituting the minority group. The black, however endured extreme poverty and were deprived of their inviolable rights, and as a result were mistreated. Coetzee's *Disgrace* presents a harsh portrait of South Africa after the coming to an end of the apartheid system where the white have lost their identity and power and have to accept the truth and begin their life from scratch. David's identity depends highly on the white power. Once the white authority and domineering control over the black fade away, so does David's identity. He finds it extremely difficult to accept the new power structures and is unable to forget the dominance of the white over the black without any kind of resistance and contradiction. As a result, with the collapse of the white authority and its dominant ideology, David and Lucy suffer both physically and psychologically and come to an awareness regarding their current situation in the post-apartheid period and the kind of life they need to lead in South Africa. Furthermore, they have to come to terms with the fact that the white authority has come to an end. Apartheid, indeed, leaves a wound not only for the black but also for the white themselves through conflicts and collisions between the two races. Lucy is generally thought to symbolize redemption and reconciliation between the two races. Therefore, it seems the only way is cooperation and co-existence.

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