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Analyzing gender roles in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Abstract

J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* appropriately represents multiple voices in order to explore the socio-political scenario of post-apartheid South Africa. He presents white, as well as native marginalized men and women in the novel distinctly. Throughout the story, the male figures have been portrayed as predators who show no remorse towards the women who become their prey. The issue of sex is also very complicated which includes crossing of boundaries in the form of rape, prostitution and forcing one to curb one's natural sexual desire. This paper is written from the perspective of gender which centres on how men use women to gain and possess her power. It deals with the changing power dynamics between men and women and sexual abuse as portrayed in the novel.

Keywords: Rape, prostitution, feminism, power, abuse

Introduction

J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* is a novel planted in post-apartheid discourse which examines the issues of ownership of land and the female body through patriarchy and racial hierarchy, the conflicting nature of the colonizer and the colonized and where the female characters are dominated by the patriarchal subjects, who seek to reduce them, the colonized, to the object position of the 'other', in the process eliminating their individual existences and narratives. By showing the complications in sexual relations primarily from the perspective of the male characters the author makes it possible for the readers to comprehend the way male desire justifies itself. Rape is one of the recurrent motifs in Coetzee's novels and in this novel too the tension between rape as violence and rape as lack of consent, has been shown brilliantly in David's thoughts after intercourse with Melanie. Lucy's rape is violent too, her consequent surrender to Petrus' threats and her thoughts on sex and men hating women is a reminder of the radical feminist idea that all heterosexual sex is rape. Sexuality and gender is an important part of this novel and it has been perfectly summarized by Miloslawa Stepien: "It seems that one of the most important subjects touched upon in the novel is sexuality, in its different varieties: those of older and younger men, rapists and men who impose themselves on women in some way dependent on them or else manipulate them into having sex; and also blurred images of the sexuality of women, those sharing their bodies in return for money or favors, willingly and unwillingly, those raped or violated" (Stepien 203).

"For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well." (1) The opening line of the novel indicates that sex is a problem and during the course of the novel the readers become aware of the crossing of ethical boundaries in terms of sex. David Lurie, a 52 year old, twice divorced, disciple of sorts of the Romantic poet, William Wordsworth, is also a womanizer who feels he has lost touch with women. To deal with the issue of high libido, for the past year he has been visiting a prostitute named Soraya on a weekly basis. His is a self-centred pursuit of sexuality, "he would like to spend an evening with her, perhaps even a whole night. But not the morning after. He knows too much about himself to subject her to a morning after, when he will be cold, surly, impatient to be alone." (2) Because David takes pleasure in her, he therefore has grown affection for her, however, he does not take into account Soraya's feelings for him, neither what she would permit in their escort-client relationship. He believes what he feels for her is reciprocated and that they have the same temperament because she gives him the exact kind of physical pleasure that he wants. He believes that with him she is her real self, "No doubt with other men she becomes another woman: *la donna è mobile*. Yet at the level of temperament her affinity with him can surely not be feigned." (3)

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At this stage, David Lurie is a man who wants a woman to do not only exactly what he desires, but also to want what he wants. The view of prostitution presented in *Disgrace* is radical in that the woman is not only subordinated as object, but also as subject. Interestingly, much has been said about the roles of Lucy and Melanie in *Disgrace*, Soraya has not really been looked into, which perhaps is a sign of the normalization of prostitution. Soraya's sexual exploitation needs as much consideration as Melanie and Lucy's.

Melanie and Soraya are somewhat alike in the sense that they are both women of colour who are very young in comparison to Lurie and in a position where he has some form of power over them, one his student, another a prostitute. Although Melanie's racial background is never clearly mentioned, but becomes evident through how Lurie describes her. She is described as having "close-cropped black hair, wide almost Chinese cheekbones, large dark eyes" (11). This, along with the fact that Lurie renames her "Meláni: the dark one" (18) leads the reader to the conclusion that Melanie is not white; therefore it becomes easier for David to use his power and eventually have coercive sex with her. To unravel and comprehend the complex discussion of rape in the novel, it is crucial to pay careful attention to what assumptions David makes about Melanie, and realize that Melanie's voice and her reading of events is completely ignored and therefore recreated from David's point of view. Melanie Isaacs is a student in Lurie's Romantics course. Apart from the fact that she is his student, they have no connection. David doesn't think of him highly but decides to approach her for his sexual release. His opinion about women here is noteworthy, "He is mildly smitten with her. It is no great matter: barely a term passes when he does not fall for one or other of his charges. Cape Town: a city prodigal of beauty, of beauties" (11-12) There is an obvious awkwardness from David's end after he invites her to his flat for a drink. He is completely aware that this woman was not only his junior but his student. He reflects, "No matter what passes between them now, they will have to meet again as teacher and pupil. Is he prepared for that?" Notwithstanding the initial awkwardness, he attempts to seduce her and wants her to spend the night with him because, "a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it." (16) It is evident here that David's values do not line up with a moral compass but instead with a recklessness that his pursuit of some romantic ideal permits him, "Less hemmed in by convention, more passionate." (15)

Against his wisdom, the following Sunday, David Lurie drives himself to his department office and extracts her personal details from her enrolment card. From his actions it is evident that he uses his power and takes advantage of his position in the university to seduce a student. Melanie is passive the first time they have sex, and David too sees her as someone inferior: "On the living-room floor, to the sound of rain pattering against the windows, he makes love to her. Her body is clear, simple, in its way perfect; though she is passive throughout, he finds the act pleasurable, so pleasurable that from its climax he tumbles into oblivion." (19) This explains how he loses himself in his desire, in spite of his knowledge of her age and her uncertainty; David Lurie, here, comes across as a true misogynist.

Their next meeting is when David makes a surprise visit to her flat, the intruder thrusts himself upon her, usurps her

while she insists that she does not want to. Their sexual encounter is described using the vocabulary of conquest and violent oppression. "But nothing will stop him. He carries her to the bedroom, brushes off the absurd slippers, kisses her feet, astonished by the feeling she evokes... She does not resist. All she does is avert herself: avert her lips, avert her eyes...she slips under the quilted counterpane like a mole burrowing, and turns her back on him." (25) David refuses to use the word "rape" for what happens between them, he knows "she has decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration". Later he is certain she feels dirty as she tries to cleanse herself of it and he too feels unclean, all evidence of what happened between them could be described as "rape". The fact that David knows the act was "undesired to the core" and Melanie was "like a rabbit when the jaws of a fox close on its neck" (25), suggests her submission to power. Her absence from class for the whole of the following week supports a reading that this was a traumatic experience.

In their next sexual encounter, Melanie's unwillingness is clear too, however, it is ambiguous though, as she herself comes to David's flat; once again he makes an assumption of the reason behind her lack of interest: "If he does not sense in her a fully sexual appetite, that is only because she is still young." (29) The line following shows an active participation in the sexual act, something which gives David joy: "One moment stands out in recollection, when she hooks a leg behind his buttocks to draw him in closer: as the tendon of her inner thigh tightens against him, he feels a surge of joy and desire." It is this moment of participation that makes the reading of David's relationship with Melanie confusing. Although it has been agreed on by many feminists that David raped Melanie, it is apparent that she did not report him for rape, but for sexual harassment. Melanie's charge of sexual harassment is a small act of resistance against him. David's understanding of his own behaviour is far from simple here, he also alters Melanie's marks because of his relationship with her and his awareness of being guilty of inappropriate behaviour. In one of his classes on Byron, David's comment on Lucifer can be read into as a justification of his own being: "Exactly. Good or bad, he does it. He doesn't act on principle but on impulse, and the source of his impulses is dark to him... 'His madness was not of the head, but heart.' A mad heart." (33) When Melanie charges him of sexual harassment, David imagines that she did so under the influence of her father and cousin. David denies reading Melanie's statement in which she states the charges she has brought against him, thus keeps her silent and passive. In this he not only denies defending himself but also rejects acknowledgement of his exact fault as would be pointed out by the laws of the institution, he simply pleads guilty in an effort to get the hearing over as soon as possible. David admits that he succumbed to the impulse of becoming "a servant of Eros". He risks losing his job and prefers his own view of the events excluding the perspective of everybody else. The ambivalence in David's character is revealed here as he chooses public disgrace over reputation.

Having lived through the experience of being the father of a woman raped, David visits Melanie's father, although he is unsure what he wants to say to him. David explains that Melanie lit a fire in him and later he says that when he burns, he does not sing, since he lacks the lyrical. He says all this as though seeking agreement from Melanie's father.

Lucy thinks that David blames Melanie for the fire she lit in him, and in this way the offering is blamed for inciting the sacrifice. This she finds outrageous as his father's behaviour is an indication of a common attitude in men of blaming women for their own lack of moralities. This could be compared to the oft-repeated claim that women who are responsible for being raped, that they invite men with their innocent smile or the clothes they wear.

After David quits his job and leaves Cape Town to be with his daughter, Lucy, on her homestead in the Eastern Cape near Grahams town, his understanding of his own reality shows that he is the victim of his own natural instincts. He reminds Lucy of another dog but the situation is related to him: "It was a male. Whenever there was a bitch in the vicinity it would get excited and unmanageable, and with Pavlovian regularity the owners would beat it. This went on until the poor dog didn't know what to do... There was something so ignoble in the spectacle that I despaired... no animal will accept the justice of being punished for following its instincts." During this conversation, three men, come down their path, walking briskly towards their house, and enter their house on the pretext that they want to use the telephone and rape Lucy. In spite of the incident, Lucy remains the strong woman that she is from the beginning. She is different from the women David has been with earlier, she does not fit into David's traditional understanding of gender roles. She takes care of herself, her farm and her big house. Not only Lucy, David also lacks interest in Bev Shaw who does not interest her much and whom he does not see himself controlling. His opinion about Bev is, "He does not like women who make no effort to be attractive." (72) It is interesting to note that David has a way of undermining women who he perceives as beyond his control.

Lucy's rape changes everything for David, Lucy and Petrus, as it turns out Petrus is the one who arranged the rape in order to terrorize the Luries and becomes the landowner, all part of the racial politics of the land. Like Melanie, Lucy also becomes the recipient of violent desire, an emotion which she understands as hatred. "It was so personal," she says. It was done with such personal hatred. That was what stunned me more than anything. The rest was... expected. But why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them." (156) She takes upon herself the consequences of the violence and when David urges her to report the incident she simply calls it her freedom to remain silent, a price they have to pay for staying on in this land. Petrus and David both mentally and physically damage their prey without showing any concern about the consequence of their activities. Also, in both cases the voices of the women are curbed and the men win. One of the most interesting comments by Lucy is about men and sexuality: "When it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me anymore. Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange-when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her-isn't it a bit like killing?" (158) this is a generalization that Lucy makes which implies that all men know this. David feels slighted by the implication and wonders if it is right for a daughter to speak to a father like this.

Lucy decides to keep her baby from the rape and believes firmly that she needs a man to protect her and her child and Petrus being completely aware that Lucy won't turn down

his marriage proposal, goes ahead. Lucy believes having Petrus as their guardian will make her more powerful in this land, what she fails to comprehend is that she is merely a rung in the ladder for Petrus who dreams of becoming the landowner of the farm he works on. Her decisions not to report the rape, to keep the baby and to surrender to being Petrus' third wife, are against her character. At one point after the rape, Lucy expresses her thoughts on unknowability of the self: "I am not the person you know. I am a dead person and I do not know yet what will bring me back to life." (161) Gayatri Spivak makes a reference to Lucy's agreeing to marry Petrus when she says that she "makes visible the rational kernel of the institution of marriage-rape, social security, property, human continuity". This protection that Petrus offers is imagined. It is not difficult to read Petrus's true intention in doing all this. Petrus' absence on the day of the attack is timely and afterwards he protects the boy, one of the attackers because he is a member of his wife's family. Lucy says: "I am not sure that Petrus would want to sleep with me, except to drive home his message" (203). In spite of knowing her sexual orientation, Petrus, it seems, will engage with her in sex to convey some 'message' and Lucy seems to understand all of it and accept sex as part of that bargain. Lucy's choice here is like Soraya she will submit to unwanted sex because she needs protection from hatred of strangers whereas Soraya probably does it for the money. Once again female inferiority is established.

One of the most significant intertextual pointers while throwing light on the word 'rape' in chapter Eighteen in *Disgrace* is the reference to the rape of the Sabine women. As a child, David recalls he would constantly to figure the presence of the letter p in a word like this which meant violence. He wondered what the painting in an art-book by that name has to do with rape, since the painting shows men on horseback and women in gauze veils flinging their arms in the air and wailing. The painting, *The Abduction of the Sabine Women* (1633/34), probably of Nicolas Poussin, was meant only to show the abduction of the women, not the sexual attack. The *History of Rome* tells how the Romans invited the Sabine people to a feast and then, upon a signal, abducted the women. The Sabine fathers had denied the Roman men who had asked for their wives. Romulus, the warrior founder of Rome, asked the women to give their hearts to the men who had already taken their bodies. They would have the status of wives and the civil rights of citizenship. Lucy, who surrenders to the violence, is here like one of those Sabine women, who agree to sacrifice themselves, to bring peace between the different racial groups in South Africa. Rape has always been used as a metaphor for colonization and Lucy's body here bears the burden of history. Although Bev Shaw tells David he can never fathom her pain because he was not present, but he does understand what his daughter goes through. "Lucy was frightened, frightened near to death. Her voice was choked, she could not breathe, her limbs went numb. *This is not happening*, she said to herself as the men forced her down; *it is just a dream, a nightmare*. While the men, for their part, drank up her fear, reveled in it, did all they could to hurt her, to menace her, to heighten her terror. *Call your dogs* they said to her. *Go on, call your dogs! No dogs? Then let us show you dogs!*"

As a novel, *Disgrace*, invites more readings and never gives easy answers, and it is impossible to comprehend the issues

raised in a simplified manner. The novel ends, but there is no stopping for the reader. To understand use of power in relationships, understanding influence and control is crucial: “the ability or right to control people or events” (Longman, 1356) and “the ability to influence people or give them strong feelings” (Longman, 1356). These two words are central throughout Coetzee’s story. Both David and Petrus use this kind of power when they gain control over women and scare or put them in unwanted situations to get what they want. What is to be kept in mind is that *Disgrace* deals with two different kinds of power, the visible power, brutal physical force which the men use to collect women and the inner power of self-confidence to seduce them and present themselves as protectors. It is evident that justice is never served to the female characters in this novel, which also says a lot about the lives of women in South Africa.

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