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Naseer Ahmad Sheikh
Ph.D., Research Scholar,
Department of English,
J. S. University, Shikohabad-
Utter Pradesh, India

A study of racial tension in John Maxwell Coetzee's Novel *Disgrace*

Naseer Ahmad Sheikh

Abstract

This study was intended to explore an analysis of how race is depicted on John Maxwell Coetzee's most controversial Novel, *Disgrace* (1999). Indeed, this Novel is actual representation of racial tension in post-apartheid Climate of South Africa. In context to same, this work examines the historical background of South Africa, with its early land disputes between white European colonizers and the native inhabitants of the Cape, and how such events may have influenced contemporary racial discourse in Coetzee's book, and the reaction it garnered, even from the African National Congress. Despite its bleak views on racial relations in post-apartheid South Africa, evidences show that *Disgrace* does not carry a racist tone, given the time and place of the novel.

Keywords: Racial tension, apartheid system, disgrace

Introduction

Disgrace, most famous novel of two-time winner of the Booker Prize –one for *The Life and Times of Michael K.* and the second one for *Disgrace*, which also won the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1999. J. M. Coetzee has his story "*coloured by South African politics*" and deals with issues such as truth and reconciliation. Published in 1999, only five years after the end of a 46-year apartheid regime, and set in 1997 or 1998, it refers to public sentiments regarding the shift in racial discourse, which people were probably still not ready to discuss. Contrary to his international popularity, Coetzee was never unanimity in South Africa; *Disgrace*, however, had an even stronger response. Due to its explosive plot, the book has been received with mixed reviews. In addition to this, the fact that it was published so shortly after the end of the apartheid made it harder for readers to distinguish between fiction and reality. Keeping the above mentioned consideration the aim of the study was to explore the below mentioned purpose:

Purpose of the study: The reflect of *Disgrace* (1999) was racial in its thematic analysis. So in pursuance to same, the study was intended to explore the racial tensions operated under the shade of post-apartheid system.

Rationale of the study: Apartheid was established in 1948, and with it, blacks lost all rights and freedom in the country. The regimen, which put Mandela in jail for 27 years, came to an end in 1994, and South Africa entered a new phase, however, it is all recent. The spectrum of racial tension and intense animosity, not to mention frequent outburst of violence, still lurks the young country. As to the critics that *Disgrace* demonizes black men, further studies report that rape in South Africa is more of a gender dispute than a matter of race. Rape is a grim reality of the country that cannot be denied, to the point of one study claiming that 1 in 3 women in South Africa are to be raped. Therefore, the attack on Lucy, to be further discussed, if confronted with "*real life*", is not implausible. President Thabo Mbeki, Mandela's successor with two terms, has a history of unwillingness to accept the reality of rape in the country. After journalist Charlene Smith was raped, she became an anti-rape activist, and was harshly criticized by Mbeki, who accused her of being racist against black men. Moffett (2006) argued that the racial agenda unfortunately conceals the discussion of the real roots of the problem, which is male domination towards women. She makes it clear that this is not a matter of race, or of South African men, but it is what some individuals do.

Corresponding Author:
Naseer Ahmad Sheikh
Ph.D., Research Scholar,
Department of English,
J. S. University, Shikohabad-
Utter Pradesh, India

Such reports were taken with criticism by President Mbeki. In fact, there was a period of time packed with “*black peril*” narratives. Again, *Disgrace* is intricate and polemic because of its elements, chosen not so as to project a pacific, harmonious new country, but to make the most of racial tension:

“yet, Lurie’s case is in many ways precisely that of white South Africans in the new dispensation – still guilty in the eyes of the world, still relatively privileged, partly redundant, partly clinging to old habits, in need of reformation and transformation, yet resistant to official definitions of how to feel or be. Glenn, 2009, p.91

Disgrace is too a novel about the place of whites in the Rainbow Nation. Glenn (2009) believes that, had the novel been written or published some years later, it would have garnered a more comprehensive reception. After the publication of *Disgrace*, more white writers followed on the pessimistic tone about the place of whites in the new South Africa (Glenn 2009), echoing the reality of emigration figures:

“Some 800,000 out of a total white population of 4 million have left since 1995, by one count. But they’re hardly alone. Blacks, coloreds (as people of mixed race are known in South Africa) and Indians are also expressing the desire to leave. In the last 12 years, the number of blacks graduating in South Africa with advanced degrees has grown from 361,000 to 1.4 million a year. But in that time the number of those expressing high hopes to emigrate has doubled.”¹⁰

In *Disgrace* (1999), we found the sexual engagements of Professor David Lurie were racial and disrepute after a sexual indiscretion with one of his students does not end well and generates a scandal that ultimately makes it impossible for him to keep teaching, disrupting a life he regarded as tranquil and satisfactory in cosmopolitan Cape Town. When Lucy’s father, trying to make a historical reading of her intentions, asks her “Is it some form of private salvation you are trying to work out? Do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?” She denies it, claiming Lurie misinterprets her. Marais (2006) believes that Lurie’s radicalized reading of the predicament prevents him from seeing the situation clearly, and what is more, prevents him from his desire to help his daughter. Just like the rapists made Lucy a target of racial justice, her father too is reading her reaction by her race. As for the three rapists, they might have acted as possible agents of revenge, perpetrating Lurie’s violence towards Melanie and putting an end to his white privilege. It is possible, too, that the attackers cannot see beyond Lucy’s colour. As Lucy recalls the aggression, she describes how personal it was and how race really mattered at that point:

“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 they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them. [...] The shock simply doesn’t go away. The shock of being hated, I mean.” (*Disgrace*: Pp.156).

To accept Lucy’s rape as some sort of racial atonement, though, can border female masochism. Lucy’s silence over

the violence imposed on her may be understood as solidarity over the long lived silence of the colonized, depicted in other books such as Foe (1986) and in the heart of the country (1977). The concretization of violence, and how it is a product of racial tensions, is present in *Disgrace*, as well as the challenge on how to deal with it. The difficulty in seeing what Coetzee’s view is on the “new South Africa” lies too in the question of whether *Disgrace* may be taken as a celebration of violence. Lurie’s ultimate act of love towards the dog of whom he had grown fond at the animal clinic, by euthanizing it, can be perceived as a possible state of grace for David Lurie. The fact is, however, that in *Disgrace*, black men gang rape white Lucy, which Lurie believes was an act carried out of vengeance (Pp.112) for the apartheid and the oppression of black people, a response to the racial differences imposed by colonialism. About the fact and its historical implications, Lurie says: ‘*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*’ (Pp.156). David, on the other hand, thinks she wants expiation for the “crimes of the past by suffering in the present” (p.112). It is possible that in Lucy’s mind, the one crime she was a victim of is an effect to the crime of apartheid, a white guilt expressed in another of Coetzee’s character, in *Age of Iron* (1990). And if history is an acceptable justification for the attack, it could be a justification, too, for what Lurie does to Pollux, in the establishment of a white and black opposition. At Petrus’s party celebrating the land transfer, Lurie and Lucy have an uncomfortable sighting of Pollux, and Lurie is outraged at the fact that Petrus welcomes him at his home, a gesture symbol of his connivance with what happened to Lucy. Later in the story, after his departure, Lurie sees himself forced to return to the Cape after he learns of Lucy’s pregnancy. Even worse, one of the possible fathers, Pollux, is Petrus’s brother-in-law, and is now under his care and protection, under the premise that Pollux is “his people” (p.201). Lurie deems the situation ridiculous and unsuccessfully pleads for an obstinate Lucy to leave the farm. Petrus’s “solution” for the predicament affronts Lurie, thus establishing even greater racial tension:

‘You say it is bad, what happened,’ Petrus continues. ‘I also say it is bad. It is bad. But it is finish.’ He takes the pipe from his mouth, stabs the air vehemently with the stem. ‘It is finish.’ ‘It is not finished. Don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean. It is not finished. On the contrary, it is just beginning. It will go on long after I am dead and you are dead.’ Petrus stares reflectively, not pretending he does not understand. ‘He will marry her,’ he says at last. ‘He will marry Lucy, only he is too young, too young to be marry. He is a child still.’ ‘A dangerous child. A young thug. A jackal boy.’ Petrus brushes aside the insults. ‘Yes, he is too young, too young. Maybe one day he can marry, but not now. I will marry.’ ‘You will marry whom?’ ‘I will marry Lucy.’ He cannot believe his ears. So this is it, that is what all the shadow-boxing was for: this bid, this blow! And here stands Petrus foursquare, puffing on the empty pipe, waiting for a response. ‘You will marry Lucy,’ he says carefully. ‘Explain to me what you mean. No, wait, rather don’t explain. This is not something I want to hear. This is not how we do things.’ We: he is on the point of saying, We Westerners. (*Disgrace* p.202)

Lurie then, at a chance encounter with Pollux, finds the boy peeping at Lucy, and in an act of “elemental rage” (p. 206), commands the bulldog Katy to attack him, while calling the boy a filthy swine. So much for “Western” civilization”. Racial tension is strong in the dialogues Lucy and her father have following the attack. When Lucy says: ‘They think I am in their territory’ – it is her first, tentative reading of the three black rapists, which goes some way towards explaining why she refuses to follow her father’s advice to leave the country, a common trend amongst whites in the country, (as seen in the first chapter of this paper). The most striking inter-racial discourse in *Disgrace* is not about Lucy’s rape, but rather about Lucy and Petrus. Lucy and Petrus’s agreement and work ethics symbolize the hopes of the nation, in which harmony is found and land is reintegrated to the colonized, in an attempt to make history (FANON, 1963, p. 69). Lucy’s utter willingness to adapt to the new social paradigm is unsettling and moving. Theoretically, under this new regime, race should not matter anymore, neither for Petrus, nor for Lucy and her father; the passing of power which cannot be so easily ignored. *Disgrace* is then a novel about shame, truth and attempts of reconciliation, both for the characters and for South Africa. Lucy echoes the motivation behind the government’s initiative to found, for example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu), an organ created to help deal with the apartheid heritage and the transitional period the country has had to go through. A minor, but interesting character is Lucy’s well-protected neighbour, Ettinger, who is conveniently described in (“rooted in”), signalling that he definitely does not fit in the new order, he is too much of an European, and a symbol of the old days. After the assault, the old man expresses his colonial racism: “Not one of them can you trust” (p.109) Unsurprisingly, Lucy thinks he is living on borrowed time (p.204) The novel is full of phallic symbols and its characters are crude in their desires, as Barnard (2003) notes: “*Hunger and denial are displaced by desire, and desire is figured (appropriately, since the plot concerns prostitution, sexual harassment, and rape) by way of phallic tropes-arrows, snakes, and the like*”.

Conclusion

Thus, to conclude the investigator can argue that *Disgrace* explores the post-apartheid climate in South Africa. Lucy comprehends the post-apartheid violence very visibly. The decision of Lucy to live on the farm emphasizes her bond with the land of South Africa. Lucy’s child will be the child of new South Africa. The whites and the blacks have to live together in South Africa. The novel gives a call to allow the natives to be love with their land so that they do not demonstrate antagonism towards the whites and the whites also accept their share on the land of Africa. Despite its bleak views on racial relations in post-apartheid South Africa, evidences show that *Disgrace* does not carry a racist tone, given the time and place of the novel.

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