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A Realistic Socio – Political Predicament in *Disgrace* By J.M. Coetzee

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Abstract

This article evaluates the role of J.M. Coetzee's novels in addressing the social political and economic concerns of his society. It also establishes Coetzee's opinion as the social, political and economic drama of post apartheid South Africa unfolds. In order to analyze the themes and features of styles in the selected text, the experience of South Africa society which for a very long time has been experimenting dissonance that seem to occur from the knowledge various individuals and communities which hold over each other, as a result different attitudes about each other has emerged which in turn inform their social political and economic relationships. Sociological theory is important for this study for it helps us to analyze the language of the text. Hence we have used this theory to explore how the selected text utilizes symbolism, allusion, irony we employ two theoretical frameworks. Foucault's perception of power, authority, knowledge and truth within the wider postmodernism theory. In his analysis, Foucault demonstrate how power and authority are exercised in our societies, he also questions the concept of a singular objective truth that is transcendental instead he advocates for multiple and situated knowledge. The theory is appropriate in analyzing and paradox to enhance the communication about post apartheid South Africa social, political and economic realities. The study is divided into four main chapters. Chapter one form the introduction, while chapter two evaluate thematic concerns, chapter three analyses the features of style whereas chapter four conclude the study. The study uses purposive method based on Coetzee's concerns and opinions about post apartheid South Africa.

Keywords: Oppression, Hegemony, Upshot, Predominance, Marginalization, Embroilment

Introduction

John Maxwell Coetzee was born on 9th February in 1940 at Cape Town South Africa. He is a South African novelist, essayist, linguist, translator and recipient of the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature. He became an Australian citizen in 2006. Coetzee has been the recipient of numerous awards throughout his career. He was the first writer to be awarded the Booker Prize twice: first for ***Life & Times of Michael K* in 1983** and again for ***Disgrace* in 1999.** In

November 2014, Coetzee was honored with a three-day academic conference entitled "**JM Coetzee in the world",** held in his adopted city of Adelaide. It was described as "the culmination of an enormous collaborative effort and the first event of its kind in Australia" and "a reflection of the deep esteem in which John Coetzee is held by Australian academia".

In the novel Disgrace Coetzee explores this theme through his white protagonist, David Lurie, and the tribulation he experiences first hand is a result of prejudiced socio-political agenda. Through the exploration of racial and sexual relationships juxtaposed alongside a invariable reminder of South Africa's gloomy history, David Lurie has a striking identity change. Coetzee shows the unfavorable effect of social and political change can have on both the restricted and the underprivileged within a inconsistent society, specifically in the areas of race and patriarchy. The destabilization of David Lurie is the novel's central ornamentation that shows a thespian turn in the status quo; the once powerful and respected David is left as 'a mad old man sitting among the dogs singing to himself' (Disgrace 212) whilst Petrus, the black 'gardener and dog-man' (Disgrace 64) gains more and more control throughout the novel, eventually marrying Lucy and becoming the primary landowner. This paper seeks to explore David's notable decline through the explanation of his disturbing lustful feelings and relationships with women, the prejudice of his racial politics and apartheid ideologies and the significance of his relationship even with dogs.

From the beginning of the novel, Coetzee's protagonist David Lurie exhibits a very questionable relationship with the women in his life. Having been married twice, and later divorced twice (*Disgrace 1)*, David believes he has 'solved the problem of sex rather well' (*Disgrace* 1). Throughout *Disgrace* sex is shown as a symbol for power, namely with David Lurie himself, linking the idea of authority with the body, explaining his patriarchal views towards females and sex. The novel begins with David indulging in sex with a Muslim prostitute called Soraya whom he has been seeing weekly for over a year. From the offset of the novel the reader is very aware of David's 'conservative patriarchal and colonial prerogative' (Boehmer 344) towards women, as he oversteps the figurative line between an escort and one of her customers. He speculates about her life outside of Windsor Mansion; 'Soraya is not her real name' and has she 'borne a child' (*Disgrace* 3)? We learn that David has no concept of privacy as he tracks her down, suspecting prostitution is only her part-time occupation and that it is a result of a breakdown – a breakdown of which he is willing to take advantage. The patriarchal society that David grew up amongst in South Africa lies at the core of his social value that places men above women, especially in a post-apartheid epoch, where one could say women were seen as the new 'other'. It is almost presented as not David's fault. As Stratton asserts, men cannot conduct suitable behavior in a society where they cannot be persecuted: 'David has occupied for most of his lift a position of centrality, ["¦] a world of white patriarchal distinctions, rules and logic' (83). Although the patriarchal society was debatably outdated by the time in which the novel is set (1999) the supposed post-feminist South Africa was dented by men like David whose identities were ground by political and social agendas that gave men power just for being men. As such, the nature of David Lurie's upbringing can be argued as a large

contributing factor to the dissension he creates in the lives of the women he forces himself upon, as well as his own, leading to his own disgrace.

David's political and social values towards women are best adorned through his relationship with his student, Melanie Isaacs. David translates her name as 'the dark one' (Disgrace 18), immediately adding a layer of prejudiced politics and discriminatory social values to his 'affair'. As mentioned above, David has grown up under the influence of the apartheid, which offers him with both an 'excuse' for every motive, for the crime that he commits against Melanie. David views himself as 'a servant of Eros' (Disgrace 52), equating himself to romantic poet, Byron, with both men believing they had women throwing themselves at them in their 'irresistible' prime (PÁ'lling-Vocke 5). David's continued enthrallment and fixation with Melanie draws parallels with the only woman Byron claims to have felt real love for, with whom he also shared a scandal: his sister Augusta (PÁ'lling-Vocke 5). Rosalind, David's ex-wife speaks through the voice of the third-person narrator, describing their marriage as 'passionate recrimination', highlighting his history of misconduct, inappropriate conduct and inability to defy temptation. It is his nature of unlawful activity and his wish to be a Byronic hero juxtaposed with the 'political impairment' (Stratton 87) of growing up with an ideology influenced by apartheid that leads him towards Melanie. The influences of apartheid would have played a crucial role in David's view of black South Africans, whether he was aware or not, which can be used to explain why he was so trivializing of being interested in Amanda, another of his students. Amanda is described as having 'wispy blonde' hair (Disgrace 29), leading to the assumption she is white. David has 'no interest' (Disgrace 29) in Amanda as it would almost be 'acceptable' to have sex with her, whereas pursuing a black student is an exercise of 'power and authority' (Kossew 156). Stratton claims that this section of the narrative is a 'trivialization' of questions concerning both racism and sexism in South Africa' (87), however the novel explores both white dominance and the overcoming of white dominance (Boehmer 344). Coetzee emphasizes more than just sexism and racism through David's pursuit of Melanie, he exposes power operating at institutional level, with Rassool suggesting the penalizing hearing could represent more than the history of white men exploiting black women and instead points to the abuses of power in academia being as old as the profession of teaching itself (quoted in Graham 438).

David's acceptance of change in South Africa is what finally kick-starts his own identity change, as 'the self that has inflicted suffering is broken down by ["¦] unintended participation in suffering' (Boehmer 343). He asks himself 'Do I have to change? Do I have to become ["¦] Bev Shaw?' (Disgrace 126). His story conforms perfectly into Tvetan Torodov's narrative theory, where a narrative begins with a sense of equilibrium, before an event occurs that disrupts the harmony, leading to an attempt to repair the damage before successfully instilling a new equilibrium. The above events examine the various features in David's 'disgrace', or in other terms, his disequilibrium. He begins as a character with his identity grounded in past apartheid political ideology and a chauvinistic view of women, but begins to humble himself and find his new equilibrium through his relationship with Bev Shaw, and more specifically, the dogs he cares for and euthanizes. The dogs in Disgrace serve as a metaphorical device that exemplifies the development of several characters, including David. In South Africa, dogs

were most commonly associated with white privilege, after being introduced by Europeans who brought them into the country allegedly for protection against blacks (PÁ¶lling-Vocke 5). David's journey towards a man with no dignity or status, self-proclaimed as no better than a dog (Disgrace 205) begins by handling dog meat (77) and agreeing to help Bev Shaw in the animal refuge. Through his changing perception on dogs and animals more generally, David gains a renewed appreciation of his life and learns to love with his heart, not through power (Giles 5). The motif and significance of the dogs in David's life mirror the significance of the countryside in his changing identity as he moves away from the place which cemented his ideologies and baited him with temptation. Giles points out that it is not at all obvious until David moves to his daughter's smallholding that the novel is set in South Africa, other than the mention of Cape Town and Melanie's play, set in Hills brow (11). David's move to the countryside to run from his disgrace is what Coetzee depicts as the 'problems confronting Europeans when they found themselves in terrain not lending itself to being picturesquely conceived' (White Writing 37). David is wildly oblivious to the social change South Africa is facing until it is forced onto him in the attack, resulting in his 'surrender of the self through empathy' (Boehmer 346).

Social discrimination prevailed in South Africa in various forms from the arrival of the first Dutch settlers in 1652. It was not until the 1930s, however, that a growing Afrikaner astuteness began articulating a system of austere social separation that would, in theory, allow for the self independence of logical political groups within their own political-cultural space while at the same time providing an assurance that Afrikaner identity would not be threatened by the assimilation tendencies of a modern capitalist economy. The institutionalization of South African distinctiveness began in intense after the 1948 elections in which the Afrikaner Nationalist Party won a majority of seats in parliament and thus seized control of the government under Prime Minister D.F Malan." Within two years of the Nationalist victory, the new government enacted the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, the Immorality Act, the Population Registration Act and the Group Areas Act, all of which sought to control interaction among races and in doing so ensured the honoured place of South Africa's minority white population for decades to come.[1]"

It is not at all astonishing, then, to witness the incredible anxiety of many whites in the aftermath of South Africa's transition to democracy. If apartheid as a system sought to separate races and distribute rights along the hierarchical model preserved in the South African Union, it also sought to do so along the lines of power, something from which all whites in South Africa benefited whether they agreed with apartheid or not. Thus the decline of apartheid is inevitably a challenge to the whiteness it helped to so clearly define. "South Africans, willingly or unwillingly, successfully or unsuccessfully, are engaged in one of the most insightful collective psychological modification happening in the contemporary world," writes Melissa Steyn in *"Whiteness Just Isn't What it Used To Be"* a study of whiteness in South Africa after transition.

Those cited in her study recurrently speak with anger at the fact that whiteness, formerly a sign of power, has become, in their eyes, a sign of susceptibility. "A few years ago," writes one rather short-sighted respondent, "being white did not have a serious affect on my life, but it is beginning to have an effect now.

In the light of the unfavorable way in which many white South Africans have reacted to black majority rule in contemporary South Africa, there has been a tendency to read JM. Coetzee's 1999 novel ***Disgrace*** as a condemnation of the social disruption that has characterized South African life since 1994**.** While the novel certainly expresses a degree of apprehension over the politically insecure situation of whites in the new South Africa, such readings tend to ignore the complexities of both the novel and the politics of life after apartheid rather than an attack that elucidates the white's life as now essentially impossible, I try to understand ***Disgrace*** as a consideration on the meaning of whiteness in the new South Africa, one that seeks to leave behind the social and political discourses which previously defined whiteness as a social identity.

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