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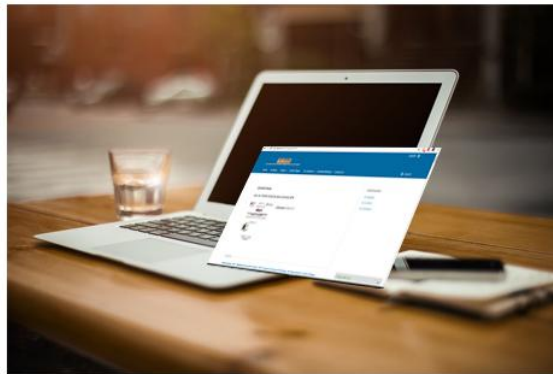
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Sima Nath
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Jhanji Hemnath Sarma College
Sivasagar (Assam)
India
nathsima692@gmail.com

Subjugation and Survival in JM Coetzee's *Disgrace*

Abstract:

JM Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* presents a bleak picture of post-apartheid South Africa. Through the character of David Lurie and his daughter Lucy, Coetzee shows how the once dominant group of apartheid Africa has to bear the pangs of subjugation and humiliation for survival in the transitional period. The novel traces David's transformation from a powerful white male to a powerless one. From the position of a professor of English at a technical university in Cape Town, David becomes a volunteer in an animal clinic. Both David and Lucy are compelled by circumstances to accept the reality of their living in a hostile environment without any scope of salvation. The post apartheid era presents a changed social reality where the whites can no longer enjoy the former privilege and the Blacks will no longer remain silent to any domination of the Whites. As a female white settler in rural South Africa, the only option left for Lucy is to live in subjugation and humiliation to safeguard her future. The paper examines the novel *Disgrace* from the perspective of predicament of the whites in post-apartheid South Africa who have no alternative but to live with humiliation for survival.

Key words: apartheid, subjugation, safety, survival

Apartheid is a system of widespread racial segregation which enforced separation of people of different races in South Africa. The period witnessed widespread inequalities and discrimination as the government was mainly committed to function for prosperity and welfare of white population of the country. The Black South Africans were the worst victims as they were discriminated and were denied all the privileges. It was a system of institutionalized racial segregation which mainly benefited the white minority and disadvantaged the majority of the population. The whites held almost all political power,

accumulated wealth and property and the other races, were completely marginalized. In the words of Ashcroft *et al.*: "...[S]ince the white minority retained for themselves the bulk of the land, and virtually all of the economically viable territory, including the agriculturally rich areas and the areas with mining potential, it was, in practice, a means of institutionalizing and preserving white supremacy." (17) But, in the post-apartheid era presents an opposite scenario where the whites can no longer enjoy the former privilege. Besides, the Blacks will no longer remain silent to any domination of the Whites.

JM Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* is set in the physical and socio-political landscape of post-apartheid South Africa. In the words of Pavithra Tantrigoda

Disgrace, which largely relies on a realist narrative, resorts to symbolism and allegory in its depiction of complex gendered, racialized, and sexualized interactions between white South Africans who are gradually losing power in a post apartheid setting and blacks, who are demanding retributive justice for the violence that was inflicted upon them during apartheid. (11)

In the story, David Lurie, a professor at the Cape Town Technical University, feels increasingly out of place in the changing scenario in post-Apartheid South Africa. David is accused of sexual misconduct with one of his students, Melanie Isaacs. Following this scandal, a disciplinary committee is formed to make enquiry on the matter where David is required to confess his guilt. Another charge against David is that he has given Ms Isaacs credit although she "did not attend all the classes or submit all the written work or sit all the examinations". (Coetzee 48) David appears to be indifferent to the charges and replies, "I am sure the members of this committee have better things to do with their time than rehash a story over which there will be no dispute. I plead guilty to both charges. Pass sentence, and let us get on with our lives." (Coetzee 48) David's refusal to make a public apology cost his teaching position. When the scandal becomes public, he accepts the consequences of the misdeed.

Objectification of woman is one of the major issues highlighted in the novel. In the relationship with Melanie, David uses his position as a professor to exploit her sexually. In the last sexual encounter, David even doesn't try to convince Melanie. He does not try to understand Melanie's mental state. He runs into her apartment and more or less compels her to engage in the act.

He has given her no warning; she is too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself upon her. [...] 'No not now!' she says, struggling. [...] But nothing will stop him. He carries her to the bedroom, brushes off the absurd slippers, [...] She does not

resist. All she does is avert herself: avert her lips, avert her eyes. [...] Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. (Coetzee 24-25)

Dismissed from his teaching position, David has to take refuge at his daughter Lucy's smallholding in the Eastern Cape. But the worst thing that happens there is that Lucy is gang raped and David himself is badly hurt. In the South African countryside, Lurie and Lucy are now victims of abusive black power. But Lucy refuses to press charges against the rapists or leave the farm seeking a secured place. Despite Lurie's insistence Lucy refuses to report the incident to the police and she offers the following explanation:

'...What if . . . what if that is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying? Perhaps that is what they tell themselves.'

(Coetzee 158)

Thus, the end of the apartheid signals the beginning of a new era for the South African region. During apartheid, the Black South Africans were the worst victims of racial segregation. But the changing power equations in post-apartheid South Africa creates a new situation which leads to the demise of white advantage and superiority. Now, the whites have become weaker and the white male (Lurie) may have to pay for his misdeeds. Blacks have regained their country and the whites can no longer claim the privilege and superiority which they enjoyed during apartheid. Both David and Lucy admit their descending to an animal level without any hope of living a life of honour and dignity. They express their despair and hopelessness in the following way:

'How humiliating,' he says finally. 'Such high hopes, and to end like this.'

'Yes, 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. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.'

'Like a dog.'

'Yes, like a dog.' (Coetzee 205)

When Lucy comes to know that she is pregnant as a result of the rape, she decides to keep the child and also agrees to Petrus' offer of marriage to guarantee her future safety. 'By nurturing the child of a black man in her own body, Lucy is more than attempting to expiate for the

crimes of the past—she is striving to create conditions of possibility to safeguard her own future in South Africa. Lurie not only fails to understand the politics of her choice, but also sees it as a self-effacement on her part.” (Tantrigoda 12) Petrus takes advantage of Lucy’s helpless condition. He offers his protection in order to possess her property. He concentrates only on his material gain and is unable to realize Lucy’s terrible experience of rape. Lucy has no other option left; but to accept Petrus’ offer to protect herself. She says:

‘...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? Practically speaking, there is only Petrus left. Petrus may not be a big man but he is big enough for someone small like me....’ (Coetzee 204)

The novel offers a realistic account of living conditions of individuals struggling for survival amidst powerful social forces. Lucy makes no attempt to fight against the hostile environment. Rather, she decides to remain subjugated for her protection and survival. While Lurie demands justice for Lucy, she remains silent and prepares herself to make compromises with destiny. David says: “Really, Lucy, from beginning to end I fail to understand. I fail to understand why you did not lay *real* charges against them, and now I fail to understand why you are protecting Petrus...” (Coetzee 133) To get rid of her vulnerable position as a White South African woman, Lucy decides to live as Petrus’ wife. She says to David:

‘...Petrus is not offering me a church wedding followed by a honeymoon on the Wild Coast. He is offering an alliance, a deal. I contribute the land, in return for which I am allowed to creep in under his wing. Otherwise, he wants to remind me, I am without protection, I am fair game.’ (Coetzee 203)

David keeps on insisting Lucy to leave the place. He says: “... ‘Lucy, I am in the process of selling the house in Cape Town. I am prepared to send you to Holland. Alternatively I am prepared to give you whatever you need to set yourself up again somewhere safer than here...’” (Coetzee 204) But Lucy comes to realize that David is not in a position to protect her or help her to lead a secured life in another place. So, despite David’s efforts to persuade Lucy to escape the inhospitable region, Lucy is not convinced to leave the place. She even “accepts her fate as a symbol of the redistribution of power in post apartheid South Africa and sees her rapists as gathering apartheid debts.” (Mardorossian, 74) For future safety, she decides to compromise with her circumstances and refuses to report the incident of her rape to the police. “While she may view her rape as a form of restoration, Lucy also regards it as a form of exchange—a price a female white settler has to pay for being able to

live in rural South Africa.” (Tantrigoda 12). Although David pleads her again and again that her passive submission will lower her status, she remains steady and firm in her decision.

[David says to Lucy]

‘...Lucy, your situation is becoming ridiculous, worse than ridiculous, sinister. I don't know how you can fail to see it. I plead with you, leave the farm before it is too late. It's the only sane thing left to do.’

‘Stop calling it *the farm*, David. This is not a farm, it's just a piece of land where I grow things - we both know that. But no, I'm not giving it up.’ (Coetzee 200)

David's failure to save Lucy from rape, his failure to persuade her to have an abortion and escape to a safer place and her humiliating adaptation to the South African countryside ultimately lead to David's alienation. “Lurie's story, from the attack onwards, is a story of resignation and withdrawal, and a growing recognition that no salvation is available to him, even in the form of the continuation of his biological existence through his progeny.” (Kucala 44) David is transformed from a powerful White male to a powerless one, and ultimately, he reaches the stage of total surrender. After the attack, utter despair has gripped him and he feels lonely and alienated without any hope and desire.

A grey mood is settling on him....The events of yesterday have shocked him to the depths....He has a sense that, inside him, a vital organ has been bruised, abused - perhaps even his heart. For the first time he has a taste of what it will be like to be an old man, tired to the bone, 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.

[...].His pleasure in living has been snuffed out. Like a leaf on a stream, like a puffball on a breeze, he has begun to float toward his end. He sees it quite clearly, and it fills him with (the word will not go away) despair. The blood of life is leaving his body and despair is taking its place, despair that is like a gas, odourless, tasteless, without nourishment. (Coetzee 107-108)

Thus, the novel *Disgrace* presents a bleak picture of post-Apartheid South Africa where the White victims have to sacrifice their honour and dignity for security and survival. David Lurie and Lucy are compelled by circumstances to accept the harsh reality of their living in a hostile environment. A new social reality is created as a result of the shift from the white to the black-dominated South Africa where the whites can no longer enjoy the former privilege and the Blacks will no longer tolerate any domination of the Whites. In such a situation, Lucy

clearly understands the necessity of change and prepares herself to accept defeat, subjugation and humiliation for safety and survival.

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