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Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the Representation of Sexual Violence in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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ABSTRACT

An academic analysis of Coetzee's *Disgrace* and how it represents rape and related violence against oppressed sections of the society reveals how it is almost impossible to separate different categories of society such as gender, race, status, etc, as they derive meaning from each other rather than empirically. Coetzee demonstrates, through a rather compelling narrative, how at times rape may not be primarily a gender crime, and can be complicated by considerations of race, class, etc, especially in a highly racialised society. This paper tries to show how the dissonance between the reactions to the two instances of sexual violence shown in this novel is natural due to the lopsided evolution of society in a highly racialised society with glaring and growing disparities between the rich and the poor and especially the historically empowered race and the oppressed ones.

KEYWORDS

Coetzee; Post-Apartheid; Body; Rape; Sexual Violence; Black Peril; (Dis)grace

Disgrace is the story of a professor David Lurie, who is in his early fifties and works in the Cape Town Technical University. He has been shown be an ordinary middle-class white man who is leading a rather despondent life, has been divorced twice and is quite confident of his sexual prowess and the ability to attract female attention in spite of his advancing years and the health troubles that come with age. He has a grownup daughter, Lucy, who does not stay with him and manages a farm in the countryside.

Lurie enters into a sexual relationship with a student from his University, thirty years younger to him. However, once the girl's parents discovered this affair, it brought him instant infamy and lead to a very public disciplinary hearing, which in turn led to him being thrown out of the University sans pension.

He gives his own version of these disciplinary proceedings, wherein he affirms his disdainful defiance of the terms set out by the disciplinary committee, based on his commitment to what he calls "the rights of desire" (Coetzee 47), and refuses to give a written confession as demanded by the committee.

He goes to Grahamstown to live with his daughter Lucy, on herfarm. Lucy is a liberal young woman, who is a lesbian and gets by selling fresh farm produce in the local market.

Lucy is brutally raped by a few black men who show up on the far one day. These same men also set Lurie on fire. They both survive the ordeal. Even though Lurie insists that she should press charges against her assailants, Lucy refuses to do so and says "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 89)

She accepts her destiny as an emblem of the price she had to pay to stay on in post apartheid South Africa. She sees her rapists as collectors of the apartheid debts that they thought were owed to black people. The irony is that while Lurie was the perpetrator of rape in the first instance (back in Cape Town University), he (and his own daughter) are victims in the second instance. So he holds very different opinions on the two instances even though they were somewhat similar crimes in the eye of the law.

Lucy gets pregnant due to the rape and decides to get married to a black man called Petrus, who was also her partner in the farm. What complicates the situation, however, is that the text indicates that Petrus was aware of these imminent attacks on Lucy and he was to get control of the entire farm through his marriage with her. Oftentimes, critical analysis falls short, especially when faced with violent crime or unimaginable suffering.

The logic of the victim gets a stamp of authority; owing to his/her experience and any further analysis or examination is then considered to be in bad taste.

Rather than believing that Coetzee wants us to accept Lucy's silence as an irresolvable internal contradiction, I argue that by means of skilful narrative and storytelling, Coetzee makes the reader view this scene of abominable violence as a chance to relook at the conventional approach to sexual violence, rule of law and interrelationships in a society. The reader is also made to rethink the presumptions and hypotheses through which rape is looked at and is also encouraged to see the violence perpetrated against Lucy not just as an example of racial violence, but as a context that normalizes other instances of gender violence and crime.

Lucy's refusal to report the sexual violence perpetrated against her hints that she is aware that one's representation of 'self' is inextricable from the representation of 'others' and any restitution accruing to her through legal recourse would eventually have ramifications in the way she would be projecting and representing 'others'.

Graham, in her critique of Coetzee's *Disgrace* (Reading the Unspeakable), ventures forth to suggest, that while it may not be possible to directly discern the motivation behind Lucy's refusal to seek legal restitution, one can imagine that it may be connected to the colonial fear of the black peril and the resultant colonial repression of black people, due to what was primarily sexual competition felt and feared by the white settlers from the native black males. In refusing to seek legal recourse and reparations for the misdeeds committed against her, Lucy is not "refusing to resist" (Farred 24). Rather, she is resisting becoming part of a legal system, which while posing as a neutral yet empowered arbiter between the accused and the wronged individuals in the context of gender and racial violence, has historically been instrumental in creating, propagating and justifying it.

Lucy identifies the historical subjugation of the black people and rabid discrimination against them (apartheid) as the chief instigator of the horrible crime that was committed against her, even though apartheid

itself was history when this crime was perpetrated against her.

She acknowledges the after-effects of apartheid, under which the society she lives in continues to reel. She is not compensating for the crimes committed by the Whites in the past by silently bearing pain and suffering, rather in her own mind, she is redeeming her present by not going to a broken legal system for seeking reparations, in the hope of having a cohesive peaceful future for herself and her country. In rejecting such legal restitution, she also casts away the notions of individual accountability her assailants or she herself might be subject to.

Her actions are a blistering criticism of the conventional logic. They inform the contemporary discussions of sexual violence, in terms of the degree of accountability attached to the victim, the degree of suppression of her own morals and the assumed quandary in the consent of the aggrieved and the rather stereotypical portrayal of African men as historically and naturally violent towards White women (and men).

She is instinctively aware that legal trials in courts of law are not always about the supremacy of the principles of law. In fact, they are often about how a person is able to project himself/herself before the judge and/or jury and that this projection has multiple silent connotations of race, sex, class, etc. of the accused and the aggrieved attached to it. It is this projection and these connotations that drive the legal system.

The violence perpetrated against Lucy was not just a racial crime in as much that Lurie's sexual misadventure with Melanie was just about their opposing sexes and the awareness of this for the reader is offered and withdrawn at the same time through the narrative magic weaved by Coetzee, even though the events and chronology in the novel are expressed primarily through Lurie's perspective.

The issue of the omission of other perspectives, particularly Lucy's, has been addressed by critics at length, who have described this omission as a moral limitation in the character of Lurie but also as something that encourages the active involvement of the reader in the narrative sequence of the novel and makes the principal's stance (in this case Lucy's), more relatable.

To advocate that Lurie's glorification of desire (what he calls "the rights of desire") (Coetzee 47), is selfish and strengthens the false parallel he tries to create between the rights of desire and rape. Efforts are then made to give legitimacy to this parallel by invoking the issue of human rights, by conveniently omitting that the law does not disregard passion or desire, but only the violating effects that such desire may have on an individual

Lurie gives a rather biased point of view in his depiction of his own trial before the disciplinary committee for his sexual misadventures with Melanie. There is a retrospective yet commendable check on this in the novel itself, in his response and subsequent description of the act of violence perpetrated against his own daughter, wherein, he exposes the racial and gender bias through which his own crime had been naturalized and acceptable in his own mind.

Indeed, with his own complicity in the abuse of Melanie, his hatred and vitriol against the black men who raped his daughter were but a double standard, because Lucy was making peace with the situation she was in, much as Melanie was. The fact that Lurie identifies and is able to feel the pain of his daughter's violation, but fails to see the folly in his own deeds reeks of chauvinism and racism. The glaring contradiction in his reactions to each of these acts of sexual violence epitomizes his racist and sexist worldview,

which prevented him from calling his own actions for what they were: rape, while crying hoarse about the crime committed against his own daughter. So he saw rape primarily from the colonial perspective of the black peril, as something a black man can subject a white woman to and not vice versa.

By juxtaposing these two cases of rape, Coetzee focuses our attention on the glaring disparity on the levels of attention and outrage accorded to instances of black on white violence in the racially charged post-apartheid environment in South Africa, while similar forms of white on white and white on black violence are mostly naturalized.

Disgrace brings this very discrepancy in the reaction and response to these two cases of gender violence to our notice. Not only does this book unearth the conditional nature of Justice, but it also exposes the highly racial and sexist nature of conditionality.

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