

## **None to Accompany Me: Tracing the Role of Isolation in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace***

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### **ABSTRACT**

J.M. Coetzee has once described himself as a writer, working in the medium of a novel. Coetzee's reputation as a serious and responsible writer is now largely uncontested, and there is enough room to evaluate his significance as a writer of extraordinary fiction in different ways. His Booker Prize creation *Disgrace* (1999) is a brilliant example of his literary supremacy. The present paper discusses isolation as a theme, with a focus on the characters of David Lurie and Lucy Lurie as well as explores the novel taking into consideration the position of its writer in the literary world. The discussion's theoretical framework is based on the theory of existential isolation by Irwin D. Yalom and the theory of self-alienation propounded by Karen Horney. This paper is a tight scrutiny of the economic, political, social, and cultural conditions prevalent in South Africa, that contribute to individual and social isolation, making brokenness and helplessness the everyday state of being in the post-apartheid period.

### **KEYWORDS**

Isolation; Post-Apartheid; Migration; Post-Colonial; Alienation; Existentialism.

### **Introduction**

Distinguished as one of the most cerebral authors of the twenty-first century, Coetzee is much celebrated, analyzed, critiqued, and researched. His literary output includes fourteen novels, three autobiographical fictions, and several volumes of translations, critical essays, correspondence, and short stories. Coetzee was born in South Africa, therefore for much of his career, he lived and worked in South Africa, witnessing the political difficulties under the apartheid regime until he emigrated to Australia in 2002. Although the South African context and the oppression of apartheid pervaded his works, it is considered to be oblique and

poses a question of whether he is associated with Afrikaner history and culture or not. (Head 23) One of his foremost critics, David Attwell is of the opinion that "South Africa, with its history, language, landscape and conflicts, is much more present in the novels of Coetzee than we have realized". And Coetzee himself has acknowledged the contribution his native country has made in his writing of such great literature. Coetzee has numerous literary awards and prizes to his credit which strengthens his reputation as a cerebral writer. He was the first living author to win the prestigious Booker Prize twice, the first time for *Life and Times of Michael K* in 1983 and the second for

*Disgrace*, in 1999. Thrice winner of the CNA Prize and became the second South African writer after Nadine Gordimer to receive the Nobel Prize in 2003. He is the recipient of several other literary honours such as the Jerusalem Prize in 1987, the Common Wealth Prize and the French Prix Femina Estranger Prize, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize along with the Order of Mapungubwe (gold class) the country's highest civilian honour to an author given by the South African government for his exceptional contribution in the field of literature. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for exploring what the Swedish Academy explains: "the surprising involvement of the outsider, both physically and metaphysically, in a stunningly broad variety of situations" (Press Release). He is also the recipient of the Irish Times International Fiction Prize, the Lannon Award for Fiction and the Catalan Booksellers Prize.

Coetzee got these awards and prizes due to his incredible contribution to contemporary literature despite the fact that he has always been critical of South Africa, saying that the literature in South Africa is a 'literature of bondage'. He says, "It is precisely this kind of literature, you would expect people to write from a prison, unnaturally preoccupied with power and torsions of power". (Coetzee 98) Laura Wright speaks of him as a:

South African writer who does not even live in South Africa; hence an outsider in the realm of white South Africa both as an English speaker with an Afrikaans surname and by virtue of his own self placements. (1)

With a reputation as a secluded and introverted, Coetzee didn't collect any of his Booker prizes in person. Rian Malan, an author met him in the early 1990 and his experience of meeting Coetzee was beyond explanation. He told 'The New Statesman' that:

Coetzee is a man of almost monkish discipline and dedication. He does not drink, smoke or eat meat. He cycles vast distance to keep fit and spends at least an hour at his writing desk each morning, seven days a week. A colleague who has worked with him for more than a decade claims to have seen him laugh just once. An acquaintance has attended several dinner parties where Coetzee has uttered not a single word

In recent years, he has shunned publicity and avoided giving interviews.

The idea of isolation and social exile runs throughout Coetzee's work. It is portrayed through characterization and shallowness of the society; sometimes it is shown through the use of symbolism and imagery and sometimes it is also conveyed through the structure of the novel. The paper principally aims to explore the theme of isolation which is an integral aspect of human existence. It aims at finding out and analyzing the actual reasons responsible for this numbed human state. And in order to validate the argument and take the discussion further, the present paper makes use of some key literary theories that depict the facticity and inevitable nature of isolation among which the isolation related to setting, age, gender, displacement and disability are prominent forms.

Though regarded as the most controversial work in South Africa till date, *Disgrace* is the greatest novel in the last twenty-five years and among the top hundred books one must read in his life. Andre Brink, a contemporary of Coetzee, has called *Disgrace* the last South African novel by him whereas Clive Barnett feels it conveys a more human and more universal appeal which is the prominent feature of Coetzee's writing. (291) *Disgrace* is significant because it is the last South African novel by Coetzee and a strong comment on apartheid. Before reading the

disputed work in the light of isolation, it is as essential to introduce the novel appropriately as to understand the context in which Coetzee writes it. A post-apartheid work by J.M. Coetzee published in the year 1999 not only won the prestigious Booker Prize but also received "The Best Book Award in the African round of the Commonwealth Writers Prize and the Pan-Commonwealth Prize in 2000". (Attridge 315-16)

With *Disgrace*, a shift can be seen in the selection of the subject and the conventional construction of the novel. The prime focus of this paper is to analyze the novel in the purview of isolation. Right from the context, setting, and narrative structure to the characters, all convey a sense of isolation and loneliness. *Disgrace* is among those novels that sparked the idea that if a person is lonely and secluded, he either gets frustrated or makes an effort to know his true self.

South Africa's TRC provided the groundwork for the novel because somewhere around 1994, TRC was signing new acts and laws especially the laws for amnesty. During this time Coetzee conceived the idea of a novel about a distinguished writer who faces a truth commission for sexual harassment but he 'hesitates because of the terror of exposure'. (Attwell) Coetzee thought about a man's public humiliation in the initial stages of the novel. Attwell confirms in the critical biography of Coetzee titled '*J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time*' that in writing *Disgrace* initially the character who became David Lurie was going to commit suicide. (197) The idea of the novel at this time was still amorphous especially the idea of the disciplinary hearing of Lurie. The preparatory work for *Disgrace* reveals that Coetzee was unimpressed as well as dissatisfied with the condition in post-apartheid South Africa. The novel in a way addresses the issue of responsibility of a white post-colonial writer in the context of South

Africa. It gave a different dimension to Coetzee's authorial identity, brought him international acclaim, earned him the second Booker of his career and somehow contributed immensely to his winning of the Nobel Prize in 2003. The reviews which are available clearly indicate that it was widely criticized because of its explosive theme and sensitive nature. It became the first novel to be discussed in the Parliament of South Africa where the President Thabo Mbeki, Mandela's successor, is stated to have said that South Africa is not a place of rape.

Nadine Gordimer, his fellow South African writer comments, "In the novel *Disgrace* there is not one black person who is a real human being". She also asserts that her life experiences have never shown her that only blacks are doing all the wrong. But in spite of all the criticism, it became so popular that even a film was made on the novel in 2008 though the criticisms and the repercussions of the novel had an adverse effect on the making of the film because, in the beginning, all the local black actors refused to play the part of Petrus, the role was regarded problematic since he was the man behind Lucy's rape and only wanted power in the novel. (Glenn 81)

The characters in the novel are an embodiment of the decaying morals depicting a culture in decline. Discord (marital, familial, and social), low self-esteem, denial of responsibility, and various other seemingly "individual" predicaments, largely contribute to their social and national vacuum. Sue Kossew in her article '*The Politics of Shame in J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace*' asks that "Is isolation a natural state or a willed decision to make life horrible? Does life become bleak or exempted because of isolation?"

The answer to these questions may be that the isolation of Coetzee's characters in *Disgrace* is because of their inability to express themselves in terms of their thoughts and feelings. Another argument seems to be their incompetence to

understand people and situations around them. One of the biggest problems about the characters of David and Lucy is their trying to define, delineate and defend their isolation but failing to do so. David in his failed attempt is disgraced and Lucy has to marry Petrus. Thus isolation is at the core of every conflict and situation in this novel.

### **David Lurie**

Coetzee's sombre masterpiece *Disgrace*, like Kafka's *The Trial* and Camus's *The Stranger*, is rich, alluring and gripping. Like the protagonists of Kafka and Camus, David Lurie is described as estranged from his society. The novel commences with an impressive economy of words and introduces several themes of the novel, thereby indicating the problematic and isolated nature of the protagonist. The opening depicts Lurie as a man who has been isolated from the world around him; he finds some solace in sex with a prostitute named Soraya. "For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well." (1) These lines clearly reflect Lurie's emotional involvement in the relationship with the prostitute and his attempts to hide his loneliness.

As the novel progresses, the sense of loneliness and alienation of Lurie intensifies. His character embodies change on multiple levels. In the beginning, when we first encounter Lurie, he is profoundly isolated psychologically which turns into his physical isolation when he has to leave the university. This is inarguably the most poignant example of isolation from Lurie's life. A womanizer, Lurie tries to use sex as a medium to escape the fall from his position and mostly his physical loneliness. We find him grappling with suffering, mental agony, loneliness and meaninglessness of life when he begins to live with Lucy. Yalom explains:

Intrapersonal isolation results whenever one stifles one's own feelings or desires and accepts

"ought's" or "should" as one's own wishes, distributes one's own judgment or buries one's own potential (354)

Lurie is seen as a person with a troubled social life. Coetzee describes him as "a lone wolf, with no apparent friends who has turned into a moral dinosaur". (89) Regarding Lurie's behaviour Maliheh Hushidari in his research article says:

Many of Lurie's symptoms can be explained by his midlife crisis, and concludes that fear of loneliness, fear of aging, and the fear of death are the most important reasons for Lurie's desperate and irrational behavior (8)

The psychological separation (he is a two-time divorcee and a man of lost interests) makes Lurie aware of his existential existence. David Lurie faces an existential crisis which makes his life purposeless as he faces existential lacuna at various stages in his life. But his existential crisis becomes a cause of his existential maturity as referred to by Eric Grayson as follows:

Despite the novel's concern with states of (dis)grace, the trajectory David Lurie's life takes during the course of the novel might be better understood as a process of existential maturation (177-178).

It is only after Lurie discovers his internal maturity that actually helps him to come out of the state of disgrace.

The novel may then be read as a journey of Lurie from detachment to isolation, from sexual estrangement to existential self-actualization. The novel projects David Lurie as a typical existential being with an insistence on his being true to himself. Eric Grayson implies:

The majority of the critical literature written about Coetzee's novel attempts to identify and delineate a process by which David Lurie lifts himself out of a state of

disgrace, often claiming that a condition of grace is the former professor's ultimate destination (161).

### Lucy Lurie

The present paper aims to investigate the life of Lucy Lurie also as the lonely female protagonist of the novel. Introduced as a lonely spinster, a lesbian, she is seen through David's eyes as the story is written from a male point of view by Coetzee. She is indeed, undeveloped as a character and after her rape becomes more defensive. Attwell argues that "It is deliberate on Coetzee's part, as if he was emphasizing that the novel's perspectives are limited, that the subjectivity at the center is strictly David's" (204). She is a lonely woman in the literal sense, who manages everything on her own.

Wendi Gardner, Cynthia Pickett and Megan Knowles introduced a concept of "social smacking" (232-236) which means when interaction with close relations is not available, it becomes a cause of psychological isolation. Lucy's isolation is both physical and psychological. Karen Prager opines that, "Loneliness is specific to intimacy or companionship deprivation". Much of Lucy's failure in social interaction can be traced back to her early life experiences due to which her development is stunted and she is therefore seen struggling with her isolation.

After her rape, she is very much aware of the fact that she is a changed

personality now, someone who is being silenced by force and circumstances. In 'Inner Conflicts' Horney explains self-alienation as that in which "a person simply becomes oblivious to what he really feels, likes, rejects, believes in short to what he really is" (12). Lucy's self-imposed isolation can be therefore seen as a kind of alienation which is termed as self-alienation but the way she overcomes it put her in the category of a stoic which according to Karen Horney is "a composite of self-contained serenity, freedom from desires and passions, stoicism and fairness" (277).

Lucy's character on the one hand poses the questions of gender, racism and ethnicity, on the other hand, her isolation and new political condition help her to emerge as a person who accepts her situation as her destiny. Lucy after her rape accepts her destiny and is ready to make adjustments and compromises by marrying Petrus and giving birth to the child, but it is not easy for her father. Lurie at this stage leaves everything, gives up the idea of opera, leaves it unfinished, spends his time thinking about the future and decides to make sincere efforts to come out of his identity crisis.

*Disgrace* therefore very powerfully suggests Coetzee's feeling of estrangement from the mode of living in post-apartheid South Africa (through David and Lucy Lurie) and at the same time, this very estrangement and alienation is seen as an opportunity and space to live and start afresh in the disturbing era.

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