

Survival in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Defending Lurie in Coetzee's "Disgrace"

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Abstract

Coetzee's "Disgrace" unerringly a work of magnificence, ventures into the life of David Lurie, a white South African professor, in a world where men such as him have been castrated of the powers they once possessed and is induced to re-evaluate his entire being, at an age when he believes change is improbable. Set in Post-Apartheid South Africa, it narrates the journey of Lurie, the trials and tribulations he undergoes and eventually an unwilling acceptance of self, putting up a facade of life. This study endeavours to defend Lurie's mindset against the charges brought by Melanie at Cape Town and the charges brought by Lucy against his desensitization towards her resolution owing to his own pride. It also endeavours to disentrall the theme of survival through Lurie's as well as Lucy's pursuit of the fine art of living in a culture that lies ravished and the struggles they faced stepping into a new journey. With Lurie's redemption and Lucy's resurrection, commence the consummation of each struggle bringing forth a reconciliation with the self.

Keywords: Struggles, Acceptance, Redemption, Resurrection

Introduction

John Maxwell Coetzee, a literary magnum, born in Cape Town, South Africa, has bestowed upon the literary canon a number of remarkable works that earned him a number of accolades. He began writing in 1969, and in 1974 published his first ever work of fiction “Ducklands” that earned him the CNA prize. It was with the publication of “Life and Times of Michael K(1983)” that his reputation as a writer was well established and with “Disgrace(1999)” he won a historic second Booker Prize. His other works include “Waiting for the Barbarians(1980)”, “Foe (1986)”, “Age of Iron(1990)”, “The Master of Petersburg(1994)”, two memoirs, essays and more. It is his literary splendour that earned him the Nobel Prize in the year 2003. The brilliance exuded by “Disgrace”, is echoed by other reviews. For the *Times*, Disgrace was “a great novel by one of the finest authors writing in the English Language today.” For the *Independent*, “Coetzee’s prose is chaste and lyrical- it is a relief to encounter writing as quietly stylish as this.” If there is one emotion that pervades the post-modern era it is sadness and “Disgrace” is no exception to it. The protagonist, David Lurie, a fifty- two year old Professor of Communications, leading a life of solitude and on a quest to quench the thirst of his romantic desperation, which every man or woman is born with, finds delectation in a twenty year old student, Melanie. Engrossed in her mesmerizing beauty, Lurie pursues her and eventually ends up having coitus, violating the societal and academic rules and regulations. Unhindered David furthers his relationship with Melanie who slyly takes advantage of him, resulting in a harassment charge brought against him and ultimately his dismissal, making him a victim of societal expectations. In order to escape the tremors of his past life, Lurie turns to his daughter Lucy for comfort and seeks refuge at her pastoral small holding, in the rural east. This topic illustrates the brutalities of a post - Apartheid South Africa they endure, undergoing profound changes, in the process of self preservation, explicating, Lurie’s standpoint at each phase.

Replete with blunt irony and rich in themes and symbols, Coetzee's "Disgrace" is all pain and few consolations. From the very beginning of the novel, the readers are introduced to the protagonist, David Lurie, a Professor of Communications at Cape Town University, leads the life of a loner assuaging his mild sexual desires in liaisons with prostitutes.

One evening, he has a chance encounter with one of his students, a twenty year old Melanie, whose beauty that reeked of youthful tenderness and freshness lures him in and fills him with lust. Overshadowed by his carnal desires, that lay within every individual, he pursues her by inviting her over for dinner, which she accepts though hesitatingly. "She smiles back, bobbing her head, her smile sly rather than shy." (Disgrace, Pg. 11). Embracing the ideals of romanticism, Lurie pursues her ardently, with what he perceives as heroic ardour. Melanie, though repulsed at the idea of getting involved with a man twice her age, does not protest to David's seduction and sexual advances towards her rather furthers it without expressing her dissent physically or verbally. She even accepts each time he invites her over. At one instance Lurie visits Melanie's apartment and forces himself upon which she doesn't protest against rather asks him to leave saying her cousin might come. Melanie's behaviour, when David forces himself upon her does show hesitation but not remonstrance, which is evident in the line; "She does not resist. All she does averts herself; avert her lips, avert her eyes." (Disgrace, Pg. 25). The following day, Melanie remains absent from his class, missing her examination, but Lurie to save her from failing, falsifies the record by marking her present and allotting her marks. On the same night, a distressed Melanie knocks on Lurie's door, looking for a place to spend the night. Though reluctant at first but later overjoyed at the thought of having Melanie with him, lures him into accommodating her in his daughter's bedroom, where they make love that night. Such behaviours on her part throw light on her sly nature beguiling Lurie into falsifying her academic record, safeguarding her interest, making an excuse of her drama taking up all her

time. As she was well aware of the control she exercised over him and the longer he stays enchanted by her youthful splendour, the longer she could take advantage of him. Her guilefulness is prominently explicated in these lines; “She is behaving badly, getting away with too much; she is learning to exploit him and will probably exploit him further.”(Disgrace, Pg.28).

She could have eluded Lurie, the way she remained absent from class, rather she walked willingly into his arms. David who defies social ethics and norms, following the code of conduct of his honest self and his pursuit of happiness and upon not getting any signs of objection from Melanie, certainly realizes that by engaging in coitus with a student he is breaking the university’s regulations, but it matters the least to him. He takes Melanie’s silence to be her consent and finds no wrong in his relationship with her, which makes the charges of harassment against him all the more surprising to him. Even after Melanie’s goateed boyfriend threatened him in his office and vandalized his car, he still denies believing that Melanie willingly brought a charge against him. Lurie’s unacceptance of it, depicts that it was his natural longing for female companionship and not any brutish conspiracy with which he pursued her and also depicts Melanie’s reciprocation of the same. An obstinate Lurie, unyielding to the demands of the committee setup for investigation, ends up getting fired. Seeking refuge from the waves of his tumultuous past, Lurie reaches at his daughter, Lucy’s farm in the rural east. In order to escape the harsh reality of urban life, Lurie reaches the pastoral small holding in a quest to find solace, but is repulsed at the thought of adhering to the country life. The very feature that characterizes the rural, disgusts him and he worries as well as fears for Lucy’s happiness, future and safety.

Unfortunately, the delectation Lucy derived from the pastoral life shatters when a group of three men, rape Lucy and locks David in a room, setting him on fire. Even though they survive, the incident leaves them both mentally scarred. As they attempt to set their life

back on track and struggle to accept the bitter reality, Lucy's disallowance to lodge a complaint against her culprits leaves David feeling mentally impotent. Each time he tries to talk to Lucy about the incident she averts. Lucy shuns all contact with people, seclude herself appalled by the heinous crime committed to her and by the sheer hatred she experienced in that moment, the hatred with which the three men raped her. Upon constant persuasion Lucy ardently denies. Lurie's hounding perhaps appear as his insensitivity towards Lucy's wishes or may be viewed as a patriarchal sentiment owing to which he detests subjugation. But the incidents narrated prove to be contradictory. It is his parental instinct and drive to bring justice to his daughter and not let her subsume under the racial politics that would turn her into a scapegoat. Hence he perseveres to unravel the sorrows etched deep into Lucy's , now stone-cold heart. After the barbarousness they are exposed to David asks her to not succumb to the atrociousness but at the end the obstinate Lurie

yields to his daughter's resolution of not leaving her farm, marrying Petreus and bearing the child born out of a crime , transcending his own ideals and beliefs, supports the aforementioned statement which stands as a testament of Lurie,s unfathomable love for his daughter. David , a devastated father, on a perpetual search for the culprits, doubts on Petreus the reason being his absence during the whole occurrence of the fatal event, which later turns out to be true as one of Lucy's attackers turn out to be related to Petreus whom he even defends from an enraged David , nullifying the charges brought against him by Lucy.

"Disgrace" ventures into the deep rooted seedlings of antagonism for the long oppressive whites which unfortunately leads David and Lucy into the dense forest of unending pain and suffering. It draws the picture of a society that has developed an unsparing attitude towards the whites. The long suppressed hatred was an after effect of Apartheid, a legally sanctioned racial segregation that established the dominance of the white minority, exalting it over all other races. With the emergence of democratic rule in the year 1994, the

scarifying events in South Africa changed its course, collapsing the Apartheid state. It rekindled a spark of hope for the beginning of a new Africa and expected the dawn of a new era, ending the perpetuated exploitation of the people of colour. Even after its abolition, the minds of the long oppressed race was enshrouded with a cover of social, political and racial insecurity. In “Disgrace” Man desired to become the master of his own will with a motive to exercise dominance over land, its possession and sought revenge for the years of exploitation they were exposed to on their own land. Lucy, an inhabitant of a pastoral small holding, who remains detached from all after that incident, is left aghast by the hatred they show towards her even though they didn’t know her. Describing the experience as “personal”, Lucy averts herself from speaking further on the topic and vehemently denies to inform the police about it. She adheres to her decision accepting the way of life and the harsh realities of survival being inclined towards her attachment to her farm., in spite of Lurie’s protests, she remains firm in her decision. One day after a false news of their car having been found, Lurie confronts Lucy and persuades her to speak out the truth just to him, which she does. When Lurie asks her to move far away from the farm she declines and asks him to leave.” I know you mean well, but you are not the guide I need, not at this time.”(Disgrace, Pg.161).

Having confronted the brutality the land had to offer and having suffered through the worst, Lucy has an epiphany and takes it upon herself to be the harbinger of a New Africa, putting herself at stake to abridge the gap between the races. With this new perspective of life, she has a resurrection, and is glorified at the end as a Godlike figure, who sacrifices herself to save others from an impending doom.

A disheartened Lurie returns to Cape Town, and on his way back visits Mr. Isaacs, Melanie’s father, and after a brief rather awkward conversation, Mr. Isaacs gets an apology, that was long overdue. Lurie who was once an obstinate person, shows himself to be capable of compassion. Upon reaching at his home in Cape Town, he finds it to have been vandalized.

When he reaches his office he finds his desk replaced, leaving him with nothing left for him there. Suddenly at a place he spent most of his life, he feels like an outcast. The place which was a sanctum of serenity for him, the thought of leaving which he detested, suddenly feels alienated. The things he once revelled in such as sexual indulges with prostitutes no longer appeal him. David, who did not succumb to the bars set by growing age now moves towards being an old man. Unsatisfied and distressed with hopelessness, not knowing what to expect, senses something fishy while talking to Lucy over phone. As he reaches her farm, he is perplexed at the news of Lucy's pregnancy and even more when she decides upon carrying the child and marrying Petreus which would ensure her security. She intends on marrying Petreus on a contractual basis, by selling her land in exchange of her security. Though furious at this proposal, he at last succumbs to his daughter's resolution. In order to help Lucy during these times and as he had nothing left for him at Cape Town to go back to, he decides to stay there taking a small room on rent. He rents a truck to carry the dead dogs to the incinerator, spends the rest of his time playing banjo for the dogs and on Sunday spends the day with Lucy at the market. David, disgraced at his fall from his post at the university, disgraced at the rape of his daughter, he metamorphoses his dark feelings into affection that he confers upon the dogs. He who once detested the idea of country life, ultimately becomes a part of it. Influenced by his daughter, and having been provided a refuge, while unraveling the mysteries of the mysterious land even though treated unjustifiably. Lurie accepts the cause of building a New Africa as his own. At the end a profound change overcomes him as he is seen moving from an intractably obstinate man, defying all barriers of age, to a passive old man, finding solace in the company of dogs and indulging in writing Opera.

Conclusion

Coetzee's "Disgrace" is a testament to the ever growing life, where change is the only constant. Though not completely guilty of the charges imposed on him, Lurie is disgraced

first at the Cape Town University, then at the farm in rural Africa. It is his fall from grace and redemption resulting with self preservation that centres the whole novel. With its depiction of the minority of the whites being subjected to suffering, it was highly criticized. Nevertheless , the author not only shows a horrifying image of the post Apartheid African that ravages the lives of Lurie and Lucy but also envisions it as a crucible, accommodating a number of variegated races as well as making them amend their ways in order to co-exist. At the end, it is the land of South Africa that extends a refuge to the lost souls such as Lucy and Lurie, giving them a purpose in life, a larger than life cause; to be the pioneers of a new era and identify themselves with the cause of South Africa and with it begins the cessation of each conflict in the novel between man and man, man and nature, man and self.

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