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Cross-cultural Negotiations in J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*

Abstract

The literature produced in South Africa has highlighted socio-economic, political, cultural, intellectual and philosophical concerns since its inception. The literature has also been involved with the issues of racial segregation and discrimination based on race. Set against the backdrop of Post-Apartheid South Africa, J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* would be the subject of discussion. The present study, thus, would delve into the critical analysis of *Disgrace*. The research paper would highlight the hierarchical changes taking place between the two races within the context of power inversion. The paper would perceive the psychological impact of colonization as understood by Frantz Fanon coupled with the understanding and implementation of Michel Foucault's concepts of power and discourse. The paper would investigate the cross-cultural fertilization of the European culture with that of African tradition, thus, establishing the themes of power shift and racial complexity.

Keywords

Post-Apartheid, racial discrimination, cross-cultural, interracial miscegenation, colonization, post-colonialism, power and discourse.

Introduction

South African writing celebrates an extraordinary position among the literatures of Black Africa, both in vernacular and English languages. South Africa highly values the tradition that the fully established European traditions lack. Despite this fact, South African literature is

established only independently and is hardly considered as part of the mainstream literature. Europeans who show keen interest in the overseas literature rely on some scattered and fragmentary works which lack consistency and coherence. Post-Apartheid writers like Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee and Andre Brink are considered to be the leading literary figures focusing upon South Africa's political issues of violence, race, crime and power thirst. Their authoritative writing has brought world's attention to the legacy of British colonialism and what it has left behind, the unfair post-apartheid regime. This is corroborated by Isidore Diala in his work which rightly points out

Three of South Africa's most distinguished white writer's, all with definite anti-apartheid commitment. (Diala 52)

As a white South African writer, J. M. Coetzee sees himself in a position where he becomes an indomitable writer given to the condition of his being part of the society where the whites ruled with the racist policy of segregation in post-apartheid African regime. His writings place the racial situation against the past colonial legacy in south Africa. Coetzee shows a universal concern for the humanitarian values and a disregard for the historical subjugation of black race by the whites.

About the Author

A 2003 Nobel laureate in literature, J. M. Coetzee is undoubtedly considered to be the distinguished novelist, an essayist and an academician. Earning his name as a renowned linguist and translator, he has many awards and accolades to his name. Coetzee is an agile writer, a pitiless and an errorfree writer who fills the ages of novels with action and reaction. With uniquely fascinating voice, he deals with politically charges issues like race and class. His hard-hitting prose is experimental in approach. According to the oxford companion to English literature, "his self-reflexive, allusive and disorienting fiction problematizes power relations and language itself." His works include *Boyhood*, *Dusklands*, *In the heart of the country*,

waiting for the barbarians, life and times of Michael k., Foe, disgrace. Disgrace revolves around David Lurie, a professor charged with allegations of harassment against a black teenage student, Melanie Isaacs, in post-apartheid south African settings. The novel is a matter of concern in the present study as it undergoes the anatomy of racial hierarchical change in contemporary times. The book highlights the condemnable conditions of human experience at the end of the 20th century. The title itself censures the basic state of modern humanity and takes the cue from the characters and symbols that demonstrate the theme of the novel. The effect of the ruptured society reflects in the portrayal of the psychology of his characters. He is the one rising his voice against the apartheid regime in 1970s and 1980s. his distinctive, elusive, eloquent and politically urgent prose has often been compared to Vladimir Nabokov, Frantz Kafka and Joseph Conrad. His writing reflects directly as well as indirectly on the contemporary events unleashing within south African society.

Symbolic Portrayal Epitomizing Power Relations

As a reader, one would undoubtedly discern the fact that the novel *Disgrace* demonstrates veracity and it is this verisimilitude which the author seeks to problematize rather than produce with its metaphysical elements. Symbolically, this novel conveys a lot in relation to the country that faces the problems dealt within this coherent piece of work. Dogs, as a symbol, play a major role in the book. They go beyond their physical anatomy and become characters. These characters act like humans. They have names and recognizable personalities. Author premeditatively repeats the image, it almost becomes a motif. These images confirm the text's fascination for social status and personal shame. They represent personal statuses the characters hold in the society. For instance, in Lucy's words

I don't want to come back in another existence as a dog or a pig and have to live as dogs or pigs live under us. (Coetzee 74)

As can be reckoned from the above statement substantiated by Lucy, dogs image

exemplifies lower rung of the society's ladder. In the initial pages of the book, the reader gets to know the status of the black character by the name, Petrus. He closely resembles dogs. He is a 'dogman' working on the farm as an assistant to Lucy. As the novel proceeds, it becomes quite obvious that Petrus' social status changes as he ascends to the ladder of the society shunning all stereotypes assigned to his personality and his race in general. It becomes evident that he can't be a 'dogman' anymore because all the dogs have now been butchered and he no longer can be entertained on the level of dogs. These dogs also reflect the trials and tribulations of David Lurie. David suffers on the personal level once he is dismissed from the university on the charge of sexual harassment. As things get worse for him, he dives deeper and deeper into shame and disgrace. His character becomes more closely aligned to a dog. At one point of time in the novel, he lets himself compare with a dog following the outburst of the emotions when his relationship with Melanie Isaacs is discovered. After being dismissed from the university, he takes refuge in a place where his daughter, Lucy, lives. In the beginning of his stay at her house, he seemed to dislike the place and people. His situation worsens following the rape of his daughter and the mental torture she undergoes post the incident. David starts working at an animal clinic where he helps to put dogs to sleep. Symbolic connection between the dogs and the people experiencing shame is further highlighted through the conversation that strikes between David and Lucy

'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)

To be a dog, means to be at base level, to be noting, but a low and helpless creature with nothing to give or share with the world around. It is to be without rights or pride David once enjoyed at the university campus, now bereft of this baggage.

David becomes quite close to one of the dogs in the clinic. In the miserable condition, David can be seen relating himself with the dog. The dog suffers, so does David, and the only solution to end the dogs suffering is to end its life with a lethal injection to which David agrees. Symbolically, David saves the dog from the life of utter disgrace and humiliation worse than death. He relieves his own sense of disgrace by letting Bew Shaw kill the dog. Therefore, dogs become a metaphorical device to show the development of various characters. The question arises, what purpose do the dogs fulfil in the South African context? Dogs have always been described as friends to the white community. They are mostly owned by whites. Lucy, while talking to her father states

The more dogs, the more deterrence.” (Coetzee 60)

She further refers to dogs as

Working dogs on short contracts. (Coetzee 61)

She’s even seen describing dogs as

Part of the furniture, part of the alarm system. (Coetzee 78)

This suggests the significance of dogs not only in terms of protection they give to their white masters but also a source of livelihood. In the context of the novel, these animals by a large margin are seen close to their masters. The humiliation these animals suffer at the hands of the three strangers reflect the humiliation that the whites suffer under the ascendancy of black supremacy. It shows the “violence” that Frantz Fanon referred to in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* while addressing the necessary role that violence plays in decolonizing struggles (Fanon 1). The book provides a psychiatric and psychologic scrutiny of the dehumanizing impact of colonization upon the individual and the nation. like Fanon’s work,

the novel also discusses the broader social, political and cultural implications inherent to establishing a social movement for decolonization. The prominent characters and the foremost events characterizing them establish the personal and the societal health conditions. Lucy stops discussing the cruel incident under which she suffers making the readers aware of the fact that she has accepted her plight and that she has come to terms with the psychological changes she undergoes. She accepts Petrus' roof insinuating the dawn of the new era with new found power in the hands of the black folk and powerlessness of the Apartheid regime.

After discussing the major characters of the novel, one must not forget to throw some light on the black character, Petrus. His contribution in the development of the theme is equally essential as he portrays what can be seen the changed face of South African society, the change in power relations as well as the upliftment of once tormented race. Like the early era of colonialism, he would have been the impoverished and disenfranchised dogman, the hired man who shoveled shit and fed offal to Lucy's dogs. With the advent of the post-apartheid regime, the situation has gone topsy turvy. The kind of South Africa David refused to bow to (in the university) has changed dramatically when it comes to the areas far away from the central South Africa. Petrus does tend to Lucy's dogs for a wage but at the same time he gained more wealth, built a house, gets hold of a huge chunk of Lucy's farm and in the end marries the white girl for whom he once worked as an assistant. Therefore, his hard work, toil and sweat juxtaposes with the world of opera that Lurie aspires to create. Power inversion can be seen when Petrus, (Black Africa) ascendance coincides with his sweat and toil on the field, whereas, David Lurie's downfall has to do with an opera that most likely will never be completed.

Michel Foucault: Power And Discourse in *Disgrace*

Bill Ashcroft et. al. in *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, he states that Discourse is important because it joins power and knowledge together. Those who have the power have control of what is known and the way it is known, and those who have

such knowledge have the power over those who do not. This link between power and knowledge is particularly important in the relationships between colonizers and the colonized. (Ashcroft et. al. 63)

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that power is not only imposed from above rather is internalized by individuals who experience it

Discipline makes individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise. (Foucault 170)

When the power inversion happens, it results in destabilization of power structures generating the feelings of disorientation and even resentment. The newly emerged group that has been under prolonged suppression acquires power with a desire for redressal of past wrongs. Discourse influences one's ideas and how ideas are put into action. Power becomes the central aspect of Foucauldian view of discourse. Power becomes the core element of all the discourses brought to surface. It has an important aspect, that is, it raises the question of inclusion and exclusion principle. Discourse becomes a site at which both power and resistance find its expression. Resistance holds a position with scope of subverting the strategies of power. Foucault insists that

Power is everything; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. (The History of Sexuality 93)

He further adds that where "there is power, there is resistance" (The History of Sexuality 95). The present novel is a post-apartheid novel set in South Africa where the relationship between power and resistance is quite obvious. But the difference in this relationship is scrutinized when we detect the world of white rulers having turned inside out because the political and social relations have inverted. Hence, the theme that runs throughout *Disgrace* focuses on this inverted relationship and how it affects the psychology of the characters in question; how the whites respond to the new circumstances brought about by the

end of the white hegemony known as Apartheid; and how the newly formed Black rulers are using the power into their hands.

In the present context, the novel explores the circumstances where black race in South Africa is empowered as a result of the change in power structure. In a review in the New York Times, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt notes the uncertainty of post-apartheid south Africa in the text. According to him, “all values are shifting” (Lehmann-Haupt, “Books of the Times”) in the novel. The novel negotiates with racial segregation and power structures in post-apartheid Africa. the novel becomes the representation of a new era with black power taking its roots. It stresses out the important binary oppositions between power and powerlessness, black and white, domination and suppression. The novel exhibits the struggle of a father and his daughter who try to secure some position and honor in the social hierarchy that has emerged in South Africa after the fall of white supremacy. The novel is concerned with the power inversion between the whites and the blacks in post-apartheid south Africa. This inverted power relationship is brought to surface once David Lurie arrives at his daughter’s house, the time when the incidence of rape on Lucy takes place. The rape represents interracial rape. The text captures the emotional and psychological dimensions of power inversion. It highlights the author’s understanding of the shifts in power relations and the corruption which follow as a consequence. However, Foucault does not see power as something which is owned but believes in the circulation of power throughout society. Hence, the question that could be asked is whether the new found power by the black in south Africa is a concentrated one or a single source that corrupts the holder of the power? However, for a certain period of time, the power seems contained and as a result, Lucy refuses to lodge a complaint against the perpetrators because she realized the helplessness of the whites. The choice of Lucy to keep quiet becomes a symbol of her powerlessness and of the African whites in general. Rape manifests power. Petrus manifests this power through land transfer policy, thus, becoming the symbol of new

power and exerting its force by slowly taking away Lucy's land and by taking her in marriage. The celebration of his success is exemplified through the party he throws, inviting all his compatriots and his subordinates. His power and status are further accentuated when David becomes helpless even after catching a glimpse of the culprit responsible for Lucy's deterioration. the celebration symbolizes the celebration of black power in post-apartheid south Africa and the incompetence of the whites in the face of changing social and political regime. However, the perception so developed by the text does not remain uncontested or unchallenged when the researchers look at it through the contemporary lens where the reality about changing power relation, especially in race situations, seems far-fetched and unreal.

Interracial Discussions in *Disgrace*

White hegemony could be seen as a part of the global ideological discourse. The universe has undoubtedly seen the worldwide domination of west over coloured people due to the universal acceptance of the ideology that the west propounded through their biased discourses. *Disgrace*, as a matter of fact, is a different novel that contrasts with this domination of whites over colored. There are some interesting schemes in the novel that keeps it away from the stereotypical demonstration of the subjugation of colored in the post-apartheid south Africa. the novel takes a different tangent by befitting itself in the changed scenario. Edward Said has rightly pointed out that before the west control the east in physical, political and military, the west firstly controls the east in culture (Said 1978).

Culture plays an important role as far as ideology of a particular nation is concerned. For whites, I was something that helped them define their existence in contrast to their black subjects. Culture is connected to literature, undeniably, of course. In the literature of the west, the concept of 'otherness' paved a way for them to construct the east. Hence, most of the literature arising from the east focused on their indigenous culture and tradition that would help them redefine the lost culture in the mainstream discourses that saw the impermanence of

oppressed culture. In contrast to this, the themes and the plot running throughout the novel *Disgrace* makes it necessary for the reader to perceive the book differently as it stresses on the themes and characters taken from post-apartheid south Africa, place with a changed relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The reader would swim into the world where the power possessions have swapped, black Africans running the plot, inversion of power and guilt-ridden faces of white Africans. Though, J. M. Coetzee belongs to the African nation, he being a white writer would have been challenging for him to keep up the nerves while writing anything against the dominated discourse of the white society. This dilemma of writing in the Post Apartheid South Africa and taking up the themes that contrast with the previous ones, makes him one of the most universally celebrated novelists. The history of South Africa speaks a lot about the era before and after independence. What is important is the contact between the two noticeably distinct cultures, their intermixing together and eventually, giving rise to a mixed race what Homi K. Bhabha calls 'hybridity'. It is a term used in postcolonial theories and cultural studies. It is a characteristic of a particular cultural form produced by the interaction of two or more disparate cultures. In *Arts of the Contact Zone*, Mary Louis Pratt introduced the concept of "the contact zone". She articulates

I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they lived out in many parts of the world today. (Pratt 34)

She further highlights the concept of "transculturalism, like autoethnography, as a phenomenon of the contact zone" (Pratt 36). She refers to the term to address the process of intercultural negotiations that tends to become the second meaning of 'hybridity'. Although, all colonial regimes tried to maintain a segregation between the two cultures but unwittingly, felt prey to the mixing of the races. Most of the events surrounding the major characters of the

novel revolve around this intermixing of the two culturally and ethically different races. For instance, the affair that grows between David (white) and Melanie Isaacs (black) becomes a much talk in the university campus resulting in the dismissal of the professor from the campus against the sexual harassment charges laid down by the black girl and her family. David developed the relationship out of his sexual desires and so does the girl. There was seen no passion or commitment in their relationship. This infringement or transgression could be seen in terms of the interaction between the colonizer and the colonized. A French writer and critic, Aime Cesaire in her 1955 text *Discourse on Colonialism*, talks about the interaction between the colonizer and the colonized and maintains that there is no human contact between the two. On the contrary, the relationship is one of domination and submission, the kind of relationship that we find in the book between the professor and his black student. Similarly, the rape conducted by the gang of three black guys communicate the message analogous to the above but with a difference. Here, in the country, white race becomes the subjugated lot dominated by the then subjugated race, that is, the black race. This inside out of the world of whites is the result of the inverted political, cultural and social scenario. Thus, J. M. Coetzee, in *Disgrace*, prepares the readers for the two contradictory worlds with different external agents working differently on their prey. The country location in the novel has seen the 'white flight' with the exception of Lucy who avoids joining this flight when insisted by her father after the horrendous incident from which she is yet to come out of. Coetzee perhaps suggests the white acceptance of the colonial guilt through the character of Lucy who prepares herself to become the third wife of Petrus with his newly acquired power and land. She becomes a scapegoat shouldering all the responsibility of white brutality against their black counterparts by accepting Petrus' shelter he offers in exchange with the land she owns. Thus, resulting in the creation of a miscegenational consociation. Gayatri Spivak in her work *Can the Subaltern Speak*, she uses the term 'subaltern' (originally given by Antonio Gramsci) to refer to the social

group in a society who were subject to the hegemony of the ruling class. She focuses on the female subaltern who she thinks are doubly marginalized, the largest and the most differentiated category among the colonized. Lucy, in the context of the novel, becomes marginalized in society ruled by the Blacks. When she faces the horrific incident, instead of reacting against the brutality shown to her and to her father, she chooses to keep quiet. Here, she becomes a white subaltern, as against Spivak's brown subaltern, refusing to act in the society seemingly dominated by the "other" race. Thus, confirming the novels comprehensive different take on the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, or rather an inverted take on their kinship once it's placed in the stratagem of the Post Apartheid South Africa.

This intercultural negotiation is also evident in the creation of a mixed-race panel which is supposed to see into the matter of the complaint lodged against the English professor. The creation of this panel could be traced back to the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Diana 57) which the Europeans could not avoid. The novel reads

Confessions, apologies: why this thirst for abasement? A hush falls. They circle around him like hunters who have cornered a strange beast and do not know how to finish it off. (Coetzee 54)

David Lurie cannot do away with the panel but to face the inquiries and judgements passed by the panel. What this panel wants from David is an apology and an acknowledgement of his wrongdoing. Like a strong and courageous middle-aged man, David Lurie refuses to admit anything but his actions. Here, David represents the old order of white hegemony which he enjoys till he remains in the city. Once he takes refuge on his daughter's farm, he encounters something that he had never thought of before; the changed order and subverted power.

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