Kavya Rajeev
Assistant Professor of English,
National Defence Academy,
Pune, India.
e-mail: kavsezz@gmail.com

# Expiation and the Reconciliation Process: J M Coetzee's *Disgrace* as a National Allegory

**Abstract:**

Fredric Jameson's essay, "Third-World Literature in an Era of Multinational Capitalism," declares that unlike the literatures of the First World, Third World literatures are necessarily national allegories. A dark depiction of transitional tremors in post-apartheid South Africa and the idea of the nation and the national consciousness that seeps into the lives of private individuals is the crux of J.M Coetzee's *Disgrace.* The paper attempts an analysis of *Disgrace* and the inextricability of the categories of race, gender and class in the ruins of a colonial apartheid state. The novel explores the life of a 52 year old adjunct professor David Lurie who loses his job because of his sexual predatory nature. He sets off to live with his Lesbian daughter Lucy and the rest of the novel traces the aftermath of the sexual violation of Lucy and its implications. The paper will explore along the lines of the national allegory and what David Attwell and Barbara Harlow had called the "the refashioning of identities caught between the stasis and the change" and also how the feminine body becomes the site of contention of power in the novel. The novel demonstrates that rape, be it Melanie's or Lucy's, is not basically a gendered crime, it is also complicated by considerations of race or class and "a deeply discursive phenomenon whose material consequences are constituted by the profoundly racialized and class-based discourses that give it meaning"(Mardorossian).

**Keywords**: allegory, apartheid, Coetzee, nation, violence.

## Introduction

Written after the 1994 elections in South Africa, J.M Coetzee's *Disgrace* offers a dark depiction of post-apartheid South Africa in all its ambiguity. It can be read as a political text, a post apartheid work that deals with the difficulties confronting the white community in South Africa. It deals with the shift of power between the oppressed and the oppressor and how the transfer of power from oppressor to oppressed, is usually characterized for the former by the shock, sorrow and anger at the chaos of the upheaval. In my paper I will be

analyzing *Disgrace* as a national allegory applying Frederic Jameson's theory of reading third-world literatures as a national allegory, from his essay *Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.*

Before proceeding any further, an observation on the term "third-world" is necessary and whether South-Africa fits under the category of third-world countries. The term third-world arose during the Cold war to define countries that remained non-aligned or not moving at all with either capitalism and NATO (which along with its allies represented the First World) or communism and the Soviet Union (which along with its allies represented the Second World)("Third World", n.d). The countries that came under the label included Africa among many others. Since this definition no longer holds after the fall of the Soviet Union, a new definition for third-world country is necessary. Taking statistical indexes such as income per capita (per person), GDP, Life expectancy, the rate of literacy, South Africa falls under the category of third-world countries along with India and many others.("First, Second and Third World", n.d.) The distinction as to where South Africa can be classified under is still a debating point as the country shows a coexistence of first and third world situations . Taking Frederic Jameson's definition of third-world from the essay, *Regarding Postmodernism--A Conversation with Fredric Jameson* as the 'development of under-development'(17), for the purpose of my paper I take South Africa as a third-world nation.

Jameson in his essay, *Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism* states that,

> Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society(5).

In *Disgrace*, through the life of David Lurie, Coetzee draws a picture of the post-apartheid national scenario. David Lurie – white, male and middle-class – a professor in the Communications department at a Cape Town university, loses the precarious balance he has maintained in his life, under the new regime. After having an affair with one of his female students, Melanie Isaacs, Lurie loses his employment and finds himself dislocated from a position of centrality that he had occupied most of his life – a world of white, patriarchal distinctions, rules and logic. Applying Jameson's theory of allegory, David Lurie, at fifty-two

can be seen as representing a defunct older social order, statutory racial oppression and the uneasy pleasures of white privilege. All through the novel the diminishing white authority, both sexual and racial, manifests itself in the repeated re-drawing and igniting of the line between personal conduct and public implication.

At the time of his dismissal hearing, however he attributes the affair to a romanticized Eros and refuses a 'spirit of repentance'. This romantic outlook reveals Lurie's fantasies that relationships are governed solely by an erotic spirit, not mutual response and responsibility. Although Lurie acknowledges that his sexual violation of Melanie was 'undesired' by her, he maintains it was "not rape, not quite that". Immersed in a falsifying Romantic tradition, Lurie speculates that "beauty does not belong to itself" and thus justifies his underlying assumption, as Melanie's educator that she is somehow his property. This sense of belonging comes out when he watches her in a play,

"When they laugh at Melanie's lines he cannot resist a flush of pride. Mine! He would like to say to them... as if she were his daughter"(15).

Lurie's relationship with Melanie comes into better focus when it is contrasted to his reaction to Lucy's rape. Lurie wants Lucy to take HIV and pregnancy tests after her rape, while he barely shows any regard to Melanie Isaacs, the girl he forces himself on after his stint with the prostitute Soraya comes to an end.

I would like to argue in my paper that the female body, first Melanie's then Lucy's becomes a site for contention of power in the novel recalling what Jameson has stated in his essay that in third-world literature, "libidinal investment, is to be read in primarily political and social terms"(Jameson, 8.). Hence sexual domination becomes a sort of metaphor for the changing power equations in the political scenario. The rape of Lucy signifies in the narrative —a shift from white to black power and authority in South Africa. Lurie is upset about Lucy's refusal to speak about her rape. And at some level he comes to face the realization that there is a parallel between what happened to Lucy and what he did to Melanie. His inability to do anything about the situation Lurie feels rebuked as a parent and as a man.

Lucy's rape is a case, however, of paying for the sins, not only of the fathers, but also of her own father, whose seduction of Melanie had a degree of coercion about it. When David's efforts to counsel Lucy are rejected, with Lucy using silence to recover a sense of her

own agency and identity, we are made acutely aware that his position is deeply compromised, as a near-rapist himself, despite the aestheticisation of his passions (Attwell, 1). After Lucy is raped by unnamed intruders, she is made a proposal of marriage by Petrus, the farm worker who claims kinship with one of her rapists, and offers to look after her in return for her land. Thanks to the socio-political upheaval in South Africa, the black worker Petrus moves upwards the social ladder from helping hand to land-owner. *Disgrace* is in a way implying that the female of the species are not fit enough in the new social order, as after her rape, she becomes pregnant, gives up her land and retreats into the house. The novel suggests a social order where women are something to be owned and are given security only as long as they are possessed by the males. Because Lucy is a lesbian, there is a suggestion that her rape acts as a device of bringing her under the control of the patriarchal order. Lucy argues that in South Africa, 'in this place, at this time', the assault she has undergone could not be a big issue, and her denial to lodge an official complaint may represent a rather extreme refusal to play a part in a history of oppression.

Still intensely situated in the colonial notions of ‘the dark continent’ and steadfast in his illusions of his racial superiority, Lurie contemplates black political ascendancy in South Africa in terms of the rebirth of chaos. He, nevertheless, is not only haunted, but indeed repelled by an instinctive awareness of the need for purgation, of sacrifice as a basic condition of life in the new South Africa. Repeatedly, Lurie despairs that Lucy's response to history is self-mortification,

> "Is it some form of private salvation you are trying to work out? Do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present? [...]You want to make up for the wrongs of the past, but this is not the way to do it. If you fail to stand up for yourself at this moment, you will never be able to hold your head up again”.(Coetzee 112)

Lucy represents another form of engagement with history that is at variance with Lurie's. A woman, she is victimized both by her domineering white father and by black men. A white lesbian, she is raped by three black men, a condition, the novel indicates, worse than the violation of a virgin. Although she is the one who is raped and victimized, Lucy is mystified that her attackers treat her as an object of revenge. In spite of being liberal in her attitude towards Blacks, Lucy is consumed up with racist abhorrence and with no love, at least not yet, for the baby in her womb and aware of the real possibility of congenital imbecility (given

that one of the rapists is rather soft in the head), Lucy nonetheless saves the baby in spite of her father and even looks forward to a responsible motherhood. The objective, of course, is that Lucy envisages her attempts at self-crucifixion as a form of restitution,

> "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?" (*Disgrace* 158)

The rape scenes in *Disgrace* is disquieting even if we are to read them as allegory of dynamic historical change , its movement from White domination to Black domination. The novel illustrates the way in which White South Africans still believe in a certain stereotype of the African. Coetzee shows as starkly as he can the white people's idea of the post-apartheid black man. Perhaps Coetzee hoped he could get away with his portrayal of black men as rapists by pairing it with a scene of white rape. But the two acts of rape are far from being identical. Most obviously, perhaps, there is a marked difference in the type and level of violence. After all, unlike Melanie, Lucy is gang-raped by unidentified men who also sabotage her house, douse her father with methylated spirits before setting him on fire, and shoot in their cages all the dogs under Lucy's care. What is to be inferred from the excessiveness and apparent gratuitousness of the violence here? That African majority governance in South Africa will be more brutal and terroristic than colonial power? That the dismantling of the apartheid state's security apparatus can only result in a return to African anarchy, savagery, and darkness? Nor are the two images of rape identical in their ideological determinations. The construction of black men as rapists is a recurring feature of colonial discourse—a discourse in which, as Frantz Fanon has observed in *Black Skins White Masks,*

> the Negro represents the sexual instinct (in its raw state). The Negro is the incarnation of a genital potency beyond all moralities and prohibitions [...] The Negro is taken as a terrifying penis(Fanon 177).

Reminding Jameson's allusion to cannibalism in third-world literature, in the course of the novel, Coetzee inevitably makes reference to cannibalism, colonialism's pre-eminent signifier of African primitiveness, savagery, and otherness. The notion that Africans are backward and savage is actively promoted in the narrative by the context in which the reference to cannibalism occurs that is, during the time of the attack on Lucy's house, while David is

locked in the lavatory and Lucy is being raped by the three men. Not knowing the language of their assailants, David likens his situation to that of,

> a missionary in cassock and topi waiting with clasped hands and upcast eyes while the savages jaw away in their own lingo preparatory to plunging him into their boiling cauldron (Disgrace 95).

As Bill Ashcroft and his colleagues observe in *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* ,

> to this day, cannibalism has remained the West's key representation of primitivism, even though its first recording, and indeed most subsequent examples, have been evidence of a rhetorical strategy of imperialism rather than evidence of an objective 'fact' ( Ashcroft 87) .

What is more morally uncertain is Lucy's resolve to be "a good mother and a good person" even "in dark times". The picture of an expecting Lucy waiting for the birth of a child conceived during a violent rape, a child who will be of "mixed race," the symbol of a change in "tenancy" of the land, is at the very least, an ambivalent message of hope and defeat. Similarly, Lucy's decision not to lay charges against her rapists is a complex moral one, tied to the disgrace that was the "crime" of apartheid. Whereas David sees her action as passive acceptance of victimization, Lucy herself prefers to see it as "a purely private matter". In questioning her motives, David suggests that she may be trying to find "some form of private salvation" and expiating "the crimes of the past by suffering in the present". Lucy's denial of such abstractions is an assertion, instead, of her pragmatic approach to living in the new South Africa and of the price of sharing the land.

In *Disgrace*, Coetzee does not give any clear answers as to what will happen in the future. He dreams of something new, something put together by pieces never used before. Coetzee in *Disgrace*, is pointing at a future where forgiveness and humility are the cultural bearers. Lurie realizes that the relations among all citizens have to start from scratch. On his own part, as a representative of the former colonizers, it has to start from somewhere lower than the white man has ever been in the history of South Africa. As Lucy and Lurie, both in their own way foresee:

> '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 a ground level. Without nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.’
>
> ‘Like a dog’.
>
> ‘Yes, like a dog.’ (*Disgrace* 205)

And thus, as Frederic Jameson points out the individual story and individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself.

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