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Merging the Shattered Selves: The Question of Self Realization in *Disgrace* By
J. M Coetzee

Abstract

According to Lenore Terr, “psychic trauma occurs when a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming intense emotional blow or a series of blows assaults the person from outside. Traumatic events are external, but they quickly become incorporated into the mind” (*Too Scared to Cry: Psychic Trauma in Childhood*, 8). Here, in this study I attempt to analyze J M Coetzee’s *Disgrace* as rape trauma narrative and how this external act of rape (which also inflicts physical injury) becomes incorporated into the mind of the victim and how this event forms itself as a background for trauma. This story focuses not on the attack so much, but rather on its responses and also the trauma associated with rape. In this novel, *Disgrace*, there is a female protagonist who fall victim to the brutal act of rape and she, even though chooses to remain silent and to cope with the situation by enduring the pain that rape had inflicted upon her, fought back and analyzed the reasons behind the act (which is not justifiable however much they try) and decided to move on with her life.. Lucy restructure the traditional concept which portrays the victims as guilty and expected them to live their lives with a bowed head. Instead, she represent the strength of women who are capable of facing and fighting any atrocities forced on them. Thus, Lucy and Melanie encapsulate the idea of a strong and determined woman within them. In this study I am focussing on the psychological impacts of rape, society’s attitude towards rape victims, the trauma associated with rape both in the premarital and marital contexts and also how women are capable of handling any situations bravely. Issues such as gender inequality, colonialism, patriarchy and apartheid, and the manner in which these issues form themselves as a background

and justification for that brutal act will also be analyzed in this project, though the main focus will be on the trauma of rape and its aftermath.

Key words : Trauma, Rape, Disgrace, Coetzee, Violence

She doesn't reply. She would rather hide her face, and he knows why. Because of the disgrace. Because of the shame. That is what their visitors have achieved; that is what they have done to this confident, modern young woman. Like a stain the story is spreading across the district. Not her story to spread but theirs: they are its owners. How they put her in her place, how they showed her what a woman was for.

— J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*

Disgrace is a Booker Prize winning novel published in the year 1999, making JM Coetzee the first writer to win the award twice (first with *Life & Times of Michael K*). In 2003, he was also awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. But beyond the awards, Coetzee is notable as a great South African writer who, together with Breyten Breytenbach and the late Andre Brink, grappled with the savage complexity of the apartheid and post-apartheid years. Coetzee also took the novel in English into new imaginative and moral territory. From his many outstanding works of fiction, *Disgrace* is his masterpiece.

Set in post-apartheid South Africa, J. M. Coetzee's searing novel tells the story of David Lurie, a twice divorced, 52-year-old professor of communications and Romantic Poetry at Cape Technical University. Lurie believes that he has created a comfortable, if somewhat passionless, life for himself. He lives within his financial and emotional means. His "disgrace" comes when he seduces one of his students, a girl named Melanie Isaacs, plying her with alcohol and other actions that arguably amount to rape. This affair is thereafter revealed to the school and amidst a climate of condemnation for his allegedly predatory acts, a committee is convened to pass judgement on his actions. David refuses to read Melanie's statement, defend himself, or apologize in any sincere form and so is forced to resign from his post.

Dismissed from his teaching position, he takes refuge in his daughter Lucy's farm in the Eastern Cape. Shortly after his arrival, David is forced to come to terms with the aftermath of an

attack on the farm. Three men, who claim to need Lucy's phone to call for aid for a sick sister, force their way into the farmhouse. The men, armed with firearms, rape Lucy, and attempt to kill David by setting him on fire. In addition to these actions, they also shoot all the caged dogs which Lucy is boarding, since black people in South Africa consider dogs as symbols of white power and oppression. The men drive off in David's car. The car is never recovered and they are never caught.

Lucy becomes apathetic and agoraphobic after the attack. David presses her to report the full circumstances to the police, but she does not. She had become pregnant by one of the rapists, but ignores the advice to terminate the pregnancy. She does not want to, and in fact did not, discuss the attack with David until much later. Meanwhile, David suspects Petrus being complicit in the attack. This suspicion is strengthened when one of the attackers, a young man named Pollux, attends one of Petrus's parties and is claimed by Petrus as a kinsman. Pollux ultimately comes to live with Petrus, and spies on Lucy bathing. When David catches Pollux doing this, Lucy forces David to desist from any retribution. David surmises that ultimately, Lucy will be forced into marrying Petrus and giving him her land, and it appears that Lucy is resigned to this contingency.

Returning home to his house in Cape Town, David finds that his house has been broken into in his long absence, either by looters or by students protesting his affair with Melanie. Either way, his house is in shambles. He attempts to attend a theatre performance starring Melanie, but was compelled to leave by her boyfriend who had earlier threatened him. He also attempts to apologize to Melanie's father, leading to an awkward meeting with Melanie's little sister. Melanie's father insists that his forgiveness is irrelevant: David must follow his own path to redemption.

At the end of the novel, David returns to Lucy's farm. He works with Bev Shaw, a friend of Lucy's, who keeps an animal shelter and frequently euthanizes animals, which David then disposes of. David has been keeping a resilient stray from being euthanized, but at the end of the novel, he himself "gives him up" to Bev Shaw's euthanasia.

Violence and varied reactions to it take very unpredictable forms in J.M Coetzee's novels, demanding a new theoretical paradigm to conceptualize it comprehensively. This is well illustrated in this novel *Disgrace*, which portrays two rape victims, Melanie and Lucy, and their perpetual silence to that brutal act committed upon them as a means of registering their protest.

But the kind of silence that follows an act of violence or brutality, or that which the victim prefers to maintain cannot always be characterized as being employed by the victim in protest against the cruel act. Very often the silence that the victim maintains is a direct result of the horror caused by violence and injustice. The victim is traumatized by the gruesome act of violence, rendering his or her mind and senses disabled beyond any point of repair. The incomprehensibility of the cruel treatment at the hands of the tormentor is mainly responsible for the psychological trauma suffered by the victim. This silence is often followed by an urge to sever every form of communication with the world. This turning away from the existential reality, either out of sheer disgust or of horror, by the victim is the central theme in many of Coetzee's novels, especially *Disgrace*. In *Disgrace*, silence itself is impregnated with an immense degree of suggestiveness.

Disgrace is partly based upon Coetzee's deep conviction that it is the absence of love on the part of the whites in South Africa which is responsible for that nation's misery. The novel revolves around the life of its protagonist, David Lurie, who has, from time to time, made necessary arrangements to gratify his lust. David, in his attempt to quench his insatiable sexual desire, seduces one of his students, Melanie, into sleeping with him, and this act, nothing short of rape, brings about his undoing. The story involves one more rape: the rape of David's daughter Lucy, living in a farm house, allegedly by a group of black men. The victims of both the rapes, Melanie and Lucy, either out of utter helplessness or inexpressible trauma, refuses to talk about the crime committed upon them. The novel, while providing a political background of a post apartheid South Africa, also analyze the trauma of rape and the difficulties faced by the victims to cope with their anguish.

Rape, which is a worldwide problem, has always assumed many dimensions in a predominantly patriarchal society. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee addresses two female victims of sexual assault by two aspects of patriarchal power in a post apartheid setting. Through the portrayal of the brutal rapes of Lucy and Melanie, Coetzee makes a strong statement about a history of imposed silence and brutality on a gender that has undergone years of oppressions at the hands of patriarchy. Cathy Caruth claims that "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (23-24). This novel draws parallels between the aftermath of sexual assault of female victims in *Disgrace* and the effects of trauma suffered by the female victims in the apartheid and post apartheid settings.

It can be said that the increase in violence in South Africa, especially against women and children, is an aftermath of the traumatic experiences that the black male experienced during apartheid. After enduring years of racialized oppression and humiliation, many male victims of apartheid sought to regain the power they feel so important to their patriarchal identities, a power they lost under the regime of apartheid. Sadly, the ways they adopted to establish their power include certain cruel and brutal acts which inflict pain and suffering on those weaker than themselves, and rape, which is a worldwide problem, is also adopted as a common method of inflicting pain and asserting power by the male. "It was done with such personal hatred. That was what stunned me more than anything. The rest was ... expected. But why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them". "It was history speaking through them", her father replies, "A history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps. It may have seemed personal but it wasn't" (*Disgrace* 156). Very often rape springs from and thrives on the sexist ideologies and misogyny, rather than on a private problem of interpersonal hostility. Rape is defined as a heinous crime meant to violate the integrity of a woman's body and her identity as well. It cannot be conflated with other forms of crime; it is a personalised crime that destroys one's sense of humanhood. Rape as a means of subjecting women to intense humiliation has been used by patriarchal societies from times immemorial. Yet, there seems to be little understanding of the kind of trauma the victim of rape suffers. However, it ought to be remembered that *Disgrace* is more complex in its approach to the issues of truth, rape, race, and violence.

In short, it becomes clear that rapes in J.M Coetzee's *Disgrace* are representations of South Africa's inverted racial power structures and its traditional gender structures; structures that silence Melanie and Lucy. This becomes more clear in the words of Farodia Rassool, a member of the committee of enquiry and herself presumably a woman of colour, refers to, when she protests:

Yes, he says, he is guilty; but when we try to get specificity, all of a sudden it is not abuse of a young women he is confessing to, just an impulse he could not resist, with no mention of the pain he has caused, no mention of the long history of exploitation of which it was part (*Disgrace* 53).

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Coetzee's choice of the rural Eastern Cape as a setting for the rape of Lurie's daughter by three black men emphasises complex historical relationships between issues of race, gender and land:

In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone. This place being what? This place being South Africa. (*Disgrace*, 212)

Lucy accepts her fate as a symbol of the redistribution of power in post apartheid South Africa and sees her rapists as gathering apartheid debts: "What if . . . 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" (*Disgrace* 158). Lucy's comparison of her rapists to "debt collectors, tax collectors" calling in apartheid's outstanding dues, or her question to her father-"What if. ..what if that is the price one has to pay for staying on?" (142) - must in this reading be seen as the deluded attempt of a traumatized woman to make logical sense of what has happened to her, to make her experience meaningful by construing it in some sense as necessary or deserved. To infer that Coetzee is insisting that the price whites must pay for "staying on" in South Africa is "Subjection". Subjugation to blacks, with humiliation commensurate to the disgrace, seems unlikely. When Lucy and her father finally get to talking about the rape and its aftermath, she insists that he does not understand "what happened to her that day," does not because he cannot (*Disgrace* 157). The rape has broken her life and will be a part of her consciousness wherever she goes. Leaving Salem will change nothing and indeed amounts to running away, accepting defeat. In a note to her father she writes: "I am a dead person and I do not know yet what will bring me back to life. All I know is that I cannot go away" (*Disgrace* 161). She must face the situation and deal with it, integrate the awful memory into her experience to render it manageable so that she can begin to live again. In a comparable stroke of psychological verisimilitude, Lucy refuses to have an abortion, revealing that she has had one before and

knows in her heart, her body “this has nothing to do with belief” (*Disgrace* 198-99) that it would be wrong for her to have another. Above all, as she insists time and time again, it is her life, and any decision about it must be made by her, not by her father or by anyone else. She seems to be insisting on the uniqueness, on the non-generalizability of her situation. *Disgrace* points to a context where women are regarded as property, and are liable for protection only insofar as they belong to men. As a lesbian, Lucy would be regarded as 'unowned' and therefore 'hunnable', and there is even a suggestion that her sexuality may have provoked her attackers. Lucy insists that in South Africa, 'in this place, at this time', the violation she has suffered cannot be a public matter, and her refusal to report the crime may represent a rather extreme refusal to play a part in a history of oppression.

A comparison between the victims of rape and the rapists reveal the fact that a clear discrimination on the grounds of race is highly emphasized in this novel. When we consider the first rape described in this novel, that of Melanie's, the victim involved is a coloured girl and her perpetrator is a highly educated white man, David Lurie. In the case of Lucy, the rapists are coloured people. Even though both the cases are explicitly described in the novel, much attention and emphasis were given to the case of Lucy, mostly because the culprits are those marginalized people belonging to the 'Other' category. The tormentor of Melanie, the well educated and highly qualified David Lurie, is not even ready to acknowledge his brutal act as rape and instead he describes their sexual encounter as “not rape, not quite that”. David never acknowledges having raped Melanie, but he does have some awareness of that he has crossed a line. Even if he accepts that he is guilty, it is not the abuse of a young woman he is confessing to, just an impulse he could not resist, with no mention of the pain he has caused. David pleads guilty:

‘I have stated my position. I am guilty.’

‘Guilty of what?’

‘Of all that I am charged with.’

‘You are taking us in circles, Professor Lurie.’

‘Of everything Ms Isaacs avers, and of keeping false records.’

Now Farodia Rassool intervenes. ‘You say you accept Ms Isaacs's statement, Professor Lurie, but have you actually read it?’

I do not wish to read Ms Isaacs's statement. I accept it. I know of no reason why Ms Isaacs should lie. (*Disgrace* 49)

Although it could certainly be argued that David is being gracious toward Melanie by not contradicting her statement, his refusal to even hear what she has said effectively silences her. David's choice not to accept the allegations is one of the reasons why he loses his job. However, what is also clear is that David actively chooses not to meet Melanie's allegations; it is his line of defense. By reporting David to the university, Melanie tries to speak up, but her voice is silenced as David refuses to read her statement.

Further adding to the silence that Coetzee constructs around Melanie is the fact that David apologizes to Melanie's father instead of Melanie. In analyzing David, the incident where he seeks out Melanie's father to apologize is sometimes viewed as one of the first signs of atonement from him. However, David's thoughts do not exactly reflect regret as he, during the same visit, encounters Melanie's sister Desiree: "he thinks, fruit of the same tree, down probably to the most intimate detail. Yet with differences: different pulsings of the blood, different urgencies of passion. The two of them in the same bed: an experience fit for a king" (*Disgrace* 164). David is not apologizing for hurting Melanie, raping her, and silencing her. He regrets that what he has done has made a relationship with Melanie impossible. He is not sorry for Melanie's sake; he is feeling sorry for himself. Meanwhile, Melanie is once again left out of the equation.

Furthermore, focusing on Melanie instead of David, it is clear that this episode echoes the days when raping a woman was viewed as a crime committed by one man against another. David's apology thus further silences Melanie because by turning to her father instead of her, she is excluded from the exchange. Thus, he does not acknowledge Melanie's sovereignty, but views her instead in relation to her father, revealing his staunchly patriarchal view of women.

While considering the silence of Lucy, the rape of Lucy is found by many to be provocative. Her silence negates Western cultural norms for rape-victim behavior, and we find her silence disturbing. In the novel, Lucy's silence makes David concerned. He realizes that because of Lucy's absence of voice, her rapists own the narrative, and it bothers him. When Lucy does not want to go to the market on the first Saturday after the rape, David thinks, "like a stain the story is spreading across the district. Not her story to spread but theirs: they are its owners. How they put her in her place, how they showed her what a woman was for" (*Disgrace* 115). While David realizes that Lucy is silenced by her rapists, he does not seem to recognize how male voices relate to female silence in general, and how his own voice relates to the women in his life; to Melanie, and to Lucy, who is his daughter. Lucy attempts to make him understand

when he returns to the Eastern Cape that she is pregnant. He admonishes Lucy for not telling him about her pregnancy. Lucy's response, while directed to David, also mirrors Lucy's frustration of living in a society that privileges the male experience. She says:

You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn't make an appearance until halfway through. Well, contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor. I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours is to you, and in my life I am the one who makes the decisions. (*Disgrace* 198)

Lucy cannot make this assertion in society anymore; she has to settle for making it to her father. Nonetheless, this is Lucy's voice. Lucy is aware that she is being silenced.

By establishing a parallel between these two instances of sexual violence in the novel, Coetzee highlights how the critical attention paid to black on white sexual violence in the context of post apartheid South Africa masks its link to the similar forms of violence perpetuated in white liberal contexts. The novel throws light not only on the discrepancy between the response to these two instances of sexual violence that *Disgrace* helps bring into relief, but also depicts the plight and aftermath of the attack on the lives of the victims. It shows how the women are treated in the hands of patriarchy and also how they are forced to keep silence. The 'Silence' in fact is portrayed in this novel as the aftermath of trauma which the victims have undergone during the brutal act of rape. It also accounts for their helplessness and protest at once. The victims of sexual assault depicted in this novel belong to different racial groups and the novel exposes not just the contingency of justice but also the consistently racialized nature of this contingency, whether the response to sexual violence occurs in black South Africa or in the white liberal context of the university.

At the end of the novel, we see that both the victims had decided to move on with their disgrace. Melanie continues her studies while Lucy decides to stay at her farm, neglecting her father's advice to leave that place. This strength to sustain, even though it is achieved at the cost of certain compromises made by them, presents Melanie and Lucy as the embodiment of feminine power. This strength comes from their realization that they are the victims and whatever happened had happened without their consent and there was nothing that they could do to prevent the violence. They assimilated that they should not be ashamed of being victims, that

they are not guilty. Thus, Melanie and Lucy integrated their shattered self and moved on, paving a new way of reaction against gendered violence.

Hence, both Lucy and Melane restructure the traditional concept that women should silently endure and suffer the assaults inflicted upon them. Now, the perspectives of the society are changing. They are trying to be more humane with the victims and treating them with compassion and sympathy. Such a change in the perspectives of the society is rooted in the realization that rape is a hideous crime inflicted upon the women by men in which the victims are innocent and helpless whereas their perpetrators are guilty and should be punished accordingly. Now the society is accepting and acknowledging the fact that women need not be ashamed of being victims, instead they should stand up and fight.

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