

Power Dynamics In Post-Apartheid South Africa: A Study of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Abstract

In Post-Apartheid South Africa, power has shifted from Whites to Blacks. Hence, many writers through their writings, depict the working of power dynamics and the class struggle in this situation. J.M. Coetzee in *Disgrace* explores the socio-economic scenario of post-apartheid South Africa where he presents both black and white women, exploited irrespective of the change in power structure. This paper analyses Coetzee's portrayal of the power dynamics and class struggle through his novel.

Keywords: *Post-Apartheid South Africa, Power dynamics, Violence.*

Introduction

Significant traces of power dynamics and class struggle in post-apartheid South Africa are violence, exploitation, injustice, oppression, etc. Antony Giddens in his *Sociology* says that, "power can be defined as the ability of individuals to assert their interests or intentions despite the opposition of other part" (889). It is exercised in all social relationships, in this case it is the power of Whites over Blacks, men over women, strong over weak and superiors over subordinates. It is also defined as a skill to impose one's will, which can be enforced by oppression or manipulation while the other parties do not know that they fulfil someone else's will.

John Maxwell Coetzee, widely known as J M Coetzee, is a South African born Australian writer. A polyglot, Coetzee writes in English, Afrikaans, Dutch and Spanish. Coetzee's first novel is *Dusklands* (1974), and he has published one novel about every three years since then. His other important novels include *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life & times of Michael K* (1983), *Foe* (1986), *Age of Iron* (1990), *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), *Disgrace* (1999), *The Lives of Animals* (1999) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). He has also written autobiographical novels, short fiction, translations from Dutch and Afrikaans, and numerous essays and works of criticism. He has received many awards including Booker Prize and others, for his writings. The most remarkable among them was the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003.

J. M. Coetzee's characters are allegorical expressions of both power and powerlessness. In many of his novels, he portrays the vulnerable condition of women during the post-apartheid situation with silence and internal struggles. In *Disgrace*, much after the apartheid situation is lifted in the nation, but both white and colored women fall into prey for violence and torment. In the novel sexual power is representative of broader systems of power. Patriarchal society empower the protagonist's sexual power over women who are treated by the society and the government as 'other' or secondary individuals.

Anne Reef in her article "Representations of Rape in Apartheid And Post-Apartheid South African Literature" rightly described the condition of women as "Women and children, especially those who were politically and economically disempowered and thus marginalized and silenced by the patriarchy, suffered violence within and without the home, devoid of meaningful recourse to restitution. Although the country's post-apartheid constitution purported to guarantee gender equality and protection for all, as well as access to a vote and a voice that would end victimhood, the situation has not improved for most women after apartheid" (246). Lack of voice the predominance of silence leads to two distinct inferences – one is the existence of reality or the current situation and the other is the existence of different perspectives on a problem. In *Disgrace* women are restricted from revealing stories of their exploitation to the authority Coetzee's allegorical expressions elucidate the brutality of men, irrespective of the color and ethnicity towards powerless women.

Disgrace centres round a story of oppression which begins with the protagonist, David Lurie a white professor of Communications at the Cape Technical University, an individual who under the apartheid government was placed at the top of a social and political hierarchy before his fall from power. Lurie's description of the past depicts his previous state of empowerment, largely resulting in from his sexual attractiveness, and also from the social position gifted to white men in South Africa during the apartheid. At the age of fifty-two, Lurie is broadly a represents an older social order the officially defunct South Africa of white dominance racial oppression and the uneasy pleasures of the white society. Lucy Valerie Graham, in *Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J.M. Coetzee's*

Disgrace comments, “If *Disgrace* is ‘half campus novel, half anti-pastoral novel, then the two rapes taking place in the novel reveal the power dynamics in each setting, and in the respective literary mode. Lurie’s misuse of Melanie exposes power operating at the level of gender and institutional level...” (437-8).

Coetzee focuses on Lurie’s position of power in his youth as above women who were treated by the government and society as secondary citizens, as mere tools to fulfil one’s desires. In this context, Coetzee’s narration about Lurie spending Thursday afternoons with a prostitute named Soraya could be scrutinized. “Soraya is tall and slim, with long black hair and dark, liquid eyes. Technically he is old enough to be her father, but then, technically, one can be a father at twelve” (1).

Men in the society are termed ‘potent’ at a very young age and the protagonist in this novel is described to be a capable personality. However, the woman who shares an affair with the professor is deemed to be a prostitute which is an example of power inequality and the fantasy that he creates of his relationship with Soraya is destroyed as he learns of her indifference when he views her in life outside of their secret meetings, walking with her sons. But later when she refuses him, Lurie’s loss of sexual power is intensified which represents the ultimate loss of power as a white man as the introduction of the new system in post-apartheid South Africa attempt equalize the position of all citizens, which places men next to women on the hierarchy, he is no longer positioned above women.

The character of David can thus be analyzed as a character who suffers from existential crisis, who turns into oppression in attempt to regain his position in the old social order where he had youth and purpose through positions of power. Sexual objectification becomes the means through which he seeks to regain purpose and vitality. David seduces his young student Melanie who belongs to the South African ethnicity and shares an intimate relationship with her. While Lurie entangles Melanie into his evil plan, his intentions were depicting a beastful act to manipulate and rape a young and helpless victim.

Manifestations of power intertwines in *Disgrace*. The power can be seen in various forms, functioning as the dominance of personality and faith as well as the physical form of violence. As for David Lurie, we can observe certain elements of his personality’s dominance in his behaviour. The women who voluntarily succumbed to Lurie were impressed by his charisma and the fact that he was socially high-ranking and educated man. “He earns his living at the Cape Technical University as a professor of modern languages” (3). Moreover, David was financially independent individual with sophisticated communication skills, he had rich life experiences and decent manners. He artfully used all the above aspects of his glamour to satisfy his sexual needs.

What he expected from the affairs with the women was not an emotional tie, but a pure satisfaction of his basic animal need. Establishing relationships between older men and women of much younger age is socially acceptable nowadays. “But the girl he has brought home is not just thirty years his junior: she is a student, his student, under his tutelage” (12). However, relationships with female students are classified as a violation of moral code at universities. “As teachers we occupy positions of power. Perhaps, there should be a ban on mixing power relations with sexual relations” (53).

David altered test results of a young student Melanie with whom he had a love affair. Melanie was not mature enough to bear the relationship with her professor and confided in her ex-boyfriend, who made the whole affair public. David’s inexcusable behavior and insatiable desire for sexual intercourse as well as his stubbornness to apologize led to his expulsion from the university and loss of job.

Disgrace does not depict as much cruelty and violence. The power in *Disgrace*, especially physical, is particularly evident in the situation when Lurie and his daughter Lucy were attacked by young black invaders on her farm. They assault Lucy “like dogs in a pack” (159), shot her dogs, which were regarded as a symbol of power of the Whites by the Blacks, and moreover they poured ethanol all over David and set him on fire. “A flame dances soundlessly on the back of his hand” (96). “He looks at himself in a mirror. Brown ash, all that is left of his hair, coats his scalp and forehead. Underneath it the scalp is an angry pink. He touches the skin: it is painful and beginning to ooze. One eyelid is swelling shut; his eyebrows are gone, his eyelashes too” (97). As a result of this unprecedented violence, Lucy got pregnant and her father suffered several burns.

As far as mental power is concerned, David Lurie is determined to fight for justice. David insists on reporting the whole story to the police. Unlike his daughter Lucy, who behaves rather conciliatory and self-destructively. She finds it hard to cope with the consequences of the violent assault by Pollux and his companions. Instead of addressing the problem and contributing to the appropriate punishment of the rapists, Lucy submits humbly and chose not to report this sexual act to the police. “Don’t shout at me, David. This is my life. I am the one who has to live here. What happened to me is my business, mine alone, not yours, and if there is one right I have it is the right not to be put on trial like this, not to have to justify myself – not to you, not to anyone else” (133). Moreover, despite David’s disapproval, she decides to keep a child whose father is one of the rapists.

Sexual politics and power dynamics are also the central themes in J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*. Through his portrayal of the main character, David Lurie, and his relationships with women, Coetzee highlights how gender, race, and power intersect in complex and often troubling ways. At its core, sexual politics refers to the ways in which gender norms and power dynamics shape the experiences of individuals in society, particularly in relation to sexual relationships and interactions. This can include issues such as gender-based violence, unequal pay and opportunities in the workplace, and the objectification and sexualisation of women in popular culture.

In *Disgrace*, Coetzee explores these themes through Lurie's relationships which are marked by a pervasive sense of entitlement and objection. Lurie's relationships with Soraya and Melanie both of whom are black women, are particularly fraught as they highlight the ways in which race and power intersect with gender in complex and often painful ways. Through Lurie's experiences, Coetzee offers a searing critique of how sexual politics and power dynamics can create deep divisions between individuals and communities. *Disgrace* serves as a powerful commentary on the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the complex ways in which issues of race, power, and sexuality intersect in contemporary society. Through its nuanced and thought-provoking portrayal of these themes, the novel invites readers to grapple with the difficult and often uncomfortable realities of sexual politics and power dynamics and to consider how we might work towards a more just and equitable future for all.

The novel also portrays post-apartheid South Africa and the legacy of colonialism that continues to shape the country, Coetzee offers a powerful commentary on the ongoing struggles for justice and reconciliation in the aftermath of colonial rule. At its core, colonialism refers to the practice of acquiring and maintaining political control over another country or people. Throughout history, colonialism has often been accompanied by economic exploitation, cultural assimilation, and the suppression of local traditions and values. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee explores the ongoing impact of colonialism in South Africa, particularly in relation to the experiences of black South Africans.

Disgrace offers a powerful commentary on the complexities of masculinity and vulnerability and how traditional gender norms can create barriers to emotional connection and growth. Through its nuanced and thought-provoking portrayal of these themes, the novel invites readers to reflect on their own experiences with masculinity and vulnerability and the ways in which we might work towards a more empathetic and emotionally open society.

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