

Woman as the Victim of Racial Violence: A Critical Reading of J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace

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Abstract

Women have passively accepted the terms and conditions imposed by men on them over the ages. They have often been silent and mute. They (women) have attempted to clinch equal rights along with men over the years. But that has not become a reality yet. Women have been subjugated by patriarchy and patriarchy has been responsible for the marginalization, oppression and even construction of women. The body of the woman has been a potential site for male violence. Traditionally the body of the woman has been a male destination but with the onslaught of feminism woman's body has been her own destination. Women have tried to articulate their needs, desires and angst and it has given them a tough rhetoric. Women cannot afford to be passive objects of male violence; rather women have to inculcate the habit of subverting the structure of patriarchal violence. Without women no society or nation can run and it must be noted that a world bereft of women would be anything but a world. Women should also realize their own potential

and try to be vocal about the torture, humiliation and oppression they have received over the years.

The aim of this paper is to provide a critical analysis of the character of Lucy, a woman, from the Nobel Prize Winning author J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*. Lucy has been a victim of sexual and racial violence and she articulates her protest against such violence through silence. In this context it is important to note that Lucy is a white woman who has been a victim of multiple rape by Black thugs who try to change the equations by challenging the existing reality. Lucy is not a coward but unlike her father David Lurie she is practical. *Disgrace* shows the limits of woman's tolerance, patience and even breakdown, but not extinction. That Lucy overcomes the post-trauma condition attests to her agility. Lucy is not a toy to play with but a lioness to be afraid of because of her stern attitude. She knows how to cope up with reality and it gives her strength. She remains alone in her fight even though she tries to take a protector. But the rhetoric of protest that Lucy shows in the novel is really astounding. The aim of this paper is to situate all those complex tropes in the context of the development (the response and attitude) of the character of Lucy and to show how she fights patriarchal oppression

Keywords: Social, Violence, Body, Black and white, Patriarchy, Rhetoric, protest.

J.M. Coetzee is an extremely important writer from the African continent who has penned many important novel and essays. He hails from South African but due to the extreme controversy after the publication of his bestselling and readable novel *Disgrace* Coetzee had to leave South Africa and settle down eventually in Australia. In fact Coetzee was compelled to hide behind the glare

and glamour of publicity and anyone familiar with Coetzee's life knows that he does not like to be visible in public domain much. South Africa has produced novelist like Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer and indeed J.M. Coetzee, all of whom have reached a certain goal-the goal of depicting racial segregation, racial violence, sexual oppression and political unrest.

J.M. Coetzee is often compared with his fellow white Nadine Gordimer whose writing is explicitly political. Coetzee has always depicted the plight of the helpless black people who have received bad treatment from their white oppressors. Coetzee's writing is not explicitly political but subversive indeed. There is an undercurrent of political overtone in his novel but he is not aggressive in such matter. True art lies in concealing art and Coetzee is a master of this. He does not waver from his own point of view and that is why his previous novel before *Disgrace* attempted to show the psychopathology between the colonizer and the colonized.

Having written *Disgrace* Coetzee found himself in a false position in South Africa because in this specific novel he had shown how the white people are oppressed by black people in post-apartheid South Africa whereas his earlier novel showed how the black people were oppressed by the white people, *Disgrace* showed how the black people started repressing the white people. We know that formal colonization haven't happened in South Africa but there was the policy of apartheid which meant a kind of racial segregation between the whites and the blacks. Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country* became a seminal text from South Africa and it had also made a huge impact in term of racial discrimination Coetzee's text *Disgrace* is important because here he shows revenge historiography works at a certain level but there will be many questions which would be addressed through this paper. *Disgrace* is a postcolonial novel both periodically and thematically and it would not be exaggeration to say that it is a novel with explicit political overtone. *Disgrace* is both Coetzee's swansong and masterpiece.

The plot of *Disgrace* revolves around the fate of a literature professor at a technical university at Cape Town named David Lurie who supposedly seduces a black girl Melanie and who is also a compulsive womanizer. When David Lurie's sexual relation or rather sexual deduction is brought to the light and Melanie and his boyfriend along with the family lodge a formal complaint against Lurie to the university committee Lurie is asked to seek forgiveness but to the utter surprise of everyone he refuses to do so. He says that women's beauty exist for the enjoyment and entertainment of all. Lurie's womanizing habit is brought to the fore in the following lines-

"He existed in an anxious flurry of promiscuity.

*He had affairs with the wives of the
colleagues;*

he picked up tourists in bars on the waterfront

or at the club Ilalia; he slept with whores."

(Disgrace, P.7)

Now we would critically analyze how David Lurie's daughter Lucy become a victim of racial and sexual violence. When Lurie loses his job by refusing to apologize formally he retreats to the farmhouse of his daughter Lucy. There one day Lucy is gang-raped and one of the perpetrators is Petrels who actually is a worker at Lucy's farm house. A woman should exist in the world with dignity and proper space should be given to her for the advancement of her life. Coetzee shows how Lucy becomes a victim of racial and sexual violence because she happens to be a minority but Lucy protests in a different way. Lucy articulates her protest through silence. She is even ready to marry to Petrels and give her a son. She would not mind even becoming the whore of Petrels. Such a rhetoric of protest is uncommon and it would not be out of place here to mention that

Lucy is a Lesbian. Lucy says at one point in the novel that she had to atone for the crime of her forefathers. Earlier the white males raped black women but now in a changed and charged political scenario black males are raping white women. Lucy is not aggressive but she is firm, she is not valuable but determined, she is not well-armed but resolute. That Lucy has negated her father's point of view itself is a sign of her feminist stand point. She is not an egotistical like her father but she strongly believes that a woman's identity can be established only when she decides to assert her independence.

Lucy would not mind undergoing a change of identity but it must be through the protection of a black person. That she agrees to marry Petrels is not a sign of cowardice but a strategic measure which is also pragmatic. One can also say that she is a radical feminist because she is a lesbian. One can think in this context Simon De Bourvur's comment –

"One is not born, but becomes a women"

(Simone de Beauvoir)

Lucy articulates her protest also by deciding to live alone if everyone abandons her. That is sign of great courage under such a changed political situation.

Lucy is adamant to give birth to the child that would arrive in this world because of the result of the gang rape. And this decision itself is a mark of protest against patriarchal hegemony. Patriarchy wants to subjugate women through cultural conditioning but Lucy retorts against such conditioning. Feminist critics like Helen Cixous talked about a different rhetoric for women and it would not be out of place to mention a remark by her –

"It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility which

*will remain, for this practice can never be
theorized, enclosed, coded.....it will always
surpass the discourse that regulate the
phalocentric (male dominated) system."*

(Cixous)

Thus we find that a woman's body is a site of potential male violence and it is through their bodies that women can resist racial / sexual oppression or assault.

Lucy is a brave character, she does not depend upon fate and she can manage her business alone. She becomes the victim of male and racial atrocity but it is none other than she who overcomes her problem without becoming a burden on anyone else. *Disgrace* is a powerful text that shows the limits of racial / sexual tolerance and the text also attests to the issue of women empowerment through well-calculated rhetoric of protest. Lucy becomes an emblem of that and that is her success.

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