
JOHN MAXWELL COETZEE'S *DISGRACE*: A WORK OF RACIAL COMPLEXITY

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Abstract

Since Literary work is a creative work which is not limited by time and place. In this regard, John Maxwell Coetzee's novel Disgrace (1999) is no exception. Written in South Africa during the postcolonial era but still it reflects racial segregation. The story in the novel from Prof. David Lurie's point of view. The events and its main characters are described and examined from the perspective of a white Settler in South Africa. David's partial vision towards the black makes us realize that there is a kind of racial complexity. The author of this article aims to examine the key issues related to racial and social injustice. Racism is a man-made phenomenon as Huton Calvin writes, ". . . learned behaviour and learned emotions on the part of people towards another group; whose physical characteristics are dissimilar to the former group . . . as if doesn't belong to the human race" (Calvin, 175). The characters in Disgrace are also in two category: White and non-white where David represents the first and Petrus, Melanie and many other fall under the second category. The gap between the two has got a problem, even after the colonial Africa. This problem should be addressed examining through the racial complexity that exists the post apartheid era in South Africa.

Keywords : *Disgrace, Racism, Colonialism, Segregation, Apartheid*

The novel *Disgrace* opens with its major character, David Lurie who is the Professor of English at a technical university in Cape Town. He is a white living in South Africa. As the text opens he is shown losing everything: reputation, success, family, job etc. Lucy is his daughter who lives near Cape Town. Prof. Lurie encounters a student, Melanie, non-white. He seduces her, and the affair reveals in the university committee and convened to pass judgment from the board committee. The problem is he doesn't admit wrong of what he has done neither he tries to defend nor he apologize for his deed. Why doesn't he answer? Why doesn't he apologize? Is it not his underestimation on the other group?

Coetzee's works are widely recognize by their richness for carrying the subtle social racial political, cultural and ethnical issues. The present novel *Disgrace* shows the South African situation before and after the apartheid. Such social, racial issues are dominant even after the apartheid. The encounter between the white and the black has brought the issues of racial complexity on the surface. On the one hand David's struggle against his own weaknesses and on the other hand social-cultural conflicts between the dominant and dominated have brought a new problem in the post colonial era of South Africa. The issues of race and struggle for supremacy are inextricably linked with the people of different origin in South Africa.

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Coetzee's fictionalized memoir *Boyhood Scenes from provincial life* (1997) where he writes, "About the law that divided himself and others into racial categories that seemed to create further alienation." The issues of racism, social discrimination and struggle for one's own space has created a gap which has made the next group the "other". Prof. David's seduction of Melanie and his belief towards other characters like Soraya, Petrus, three black boys in the novel compels the readers to question-does *Disgrace* disclose racist views which is still prevalent in post apartheid South Africa? Why does the author still present the discrimination in the post apartheid South Africa? There are many such occasions to raise questions regarding race related issues. When the three boys come towards Lucy's house seems to show the black people are the violators of social values. They are presented as savage, brutal etc, this scene can be described as; "those boys inflicted upon her to their endeavoring to compensate for long lasting racial injustice, a discrepancy between white and black their feeling of the need for vengeance for wrong done, especially by Europeans who trespassed on the property" (91).

David Lurie is a European scholar, intellectual man of letters and apparently gentleman who contributes to the straining relations between white and black South Africans e.g. his relation with Melanie is a burning example. David's relation with the people is not good. The words and the ideas he uses towards them sound racial. *Disgrace* has shown a complex racial facets of apartheid and post apartheid in South Africa.

Coetzee is certainly one of the most prominent writer. His works are widely recognized, interpreted and they are analytical brilliance. Since he was born in South Africa his novels bear the theme of African situation and exposes effects of apartheid and the post apartheid. His *Disgrace* (1999) is a past colonial novel so it has presented both colonial and post colonial experience. The characters like David Lurie, a retired Professor, his daughter Lucy, her by owner, Petrus, Melanie, and three black boys are the major actors for the shared experience in the post colonial South Africa.

Although it was composed in the postcolonial period but the white vs. black, dominant vs. dominated, distorted vision, dehumanization etc. create a complex relation between the people. A retired professor David Lurie who is divorced twice and 'for a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well' (Coetzee, 1). It suggests that he is misusing his power and it also suggests that he is a victimizer and the 'others' are victims of his presence. Soraya, Melasie etc. are his probable females who are exploited by him. David, a white, in Africa has exploited the non-white. Question raises does *Disgrace* disclose racist views which is still prevalent in the post apartheid South Africa? Why does the author still present the disruption in the post apartheid South Africa?

Does Coetzee reveals a bias against South Africa when he portrays the contemporary native South African as sexually prone, hooligans, and looters and when he places on the foreground white people forced to succumb to he policy reversal by which the black Diaspora was disrupted?

The present research article aims to inquire the problems regarding racial complexity in the novel *Disgrace*. Coetzee uses lots of derogatory words to dehumanize the black. The words like 'thugs' to talk about black boys is an example in this context. The present research aims to explore i. To find the reason why segregation is still prevailing. ii. Why the writer seems to the white community. iii. What kind of disparity has the writer/author created to differentiate the black and white? Certainly to answer the questions above the author of the present article takes help of the

novel *Disgrace* as the primary source for interpretation in relation to racism, and take help of past colonial theories. The author believes that this they helps to address the problems mentioned earlier.

Since the colonial period from the seventeenth century especially in Africa a new conflict started between the colonizer and colonized people. Colonizers were the whites and they were from Europe and the colonized were the blacks, native people. A very different type of discrimination started beside the class and culture. Being born in the communities of black, they were dominated, oppressed, segregated, discriminated, marginalized and denied all the privileges in their ancestral level. In this context J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, a famous novel was written in 1999 A.D. in South Africa that bears the theme of racial segregation. Any kind of literary creation doesn't present only for objective values. This should be judged from subjective values too. It reflects and propagates serious views and values. Coetzee's *Disgrace* also carries serious views and values. During the colonial period whites, the colonizers oppressed the black population in Africa. To strengthen their colony they paved the way to apartheid which was a policy of racial segregation. The whites were considered as superior to the black on the basis of their race and color. This practice did not stop even after the apartheid which is rigorously researched in the novel *Disgrace* for how even after apartheid, white protagonist David Lurie a retired Prof of a college presents himself acts while dealing with the non-whites. R. Miles and Malcolm Brown in their book *Racism* write:

The problem, then with conceiving for racism as ideology is the implication that racism distortedly represents human beings and the social relations between human beings, specially in terms of 'race' and this undermines attempts to create a 'race' consciousness among the victims of racism. (7).

In the novel *Disgrace* racial assumptions are found pervasively. David Lurie is a retired professor of a university. He is engaged with Windsor Mansions Soraya, a non white who is described as, "She is small and thin, with close-cropped black hair, wide, almost Chinese cheekbones, large, dark eyes" (Coetzee, 11). "Chinese Cheekbone" the phrase seems to use to present derogatorily over the black. Europeans want European standard so Soraya's comparison seems to explain having her less European standard in her physique.

The whites are considered superior and the black are considered inferior in the racially oppressed society. They focus on the black people's physical characteristics and judge in terms of their white centric assumptions. Since 'racism' is a man-made phenomenon which has created a huge in human gaps between the whites and the blacks. Henton Calvin writes,

Racism is a learned behaviour and learned emotions on the part of group of people towards another group, whose physical characteristics are dissimilar to the former group behaviour and emotions that compell one group to treat the other on the basis of physical characteristics alone, as if, it didn't belong to the human race. (Calvin, 175)

Disgrace of John Maxwell Coetzee is a novel where we find lots of examples related to the physical appearance characteristics, and their emotions. The word 'black' has been used all over the book. When David Lurie has an affair with Melesie, a student of his own at the university, conveys her boyfriend's result, who knocks David's office door and enters and sits without invitation. He is a non white so he is presented as,

“He is tall and wiry; he has a thin goatee and an earring, he wears a black leather jacket and black leather trousers. He looks older than most students; he looks like trouble” (Coetzee, 30). Whenever the whites see people with black skin, black clothes, black cap, and having different emotions are presented derogatorily.

The author of the book draws the attention of the readers by using the physical traces, their possessions and the time to associate their characteristics. In the origin of the Racism in the United States about the whites Joel Kovel writes, "First reduce the human self of his black slave to a body and then the body to a thing (Kovel, 18)".

The colonizers in South Africa made a lot of discrimination during the colonial period. Even after the colonial period their observation and their dealings with Africans are discriminatory. In this regard let us see some discriminatory experiences. Presenting Melasie's boy friend, ". . . hands in Pockets, with an air of cocky ease, is the boy in black, the boy friend" (Coetzee 31). Similarly, "Lucifer, the dark, angel, doesn't need to breathe" (32). Frequent use of 'black' either on skin, clothes, or time seem to have chosen in the derogatory sense; a racist tone. Colette Guillaumin in Racism, sexism and Ideology writes on race:

Some social scientists discover the relations producing social groups and fostering the construction of the ideology of 'race'. Signifiers, in this case skin color, are finally seen as chosen after the establishment of social category. (Colette, 12)

Making a clear category between David Lurie and Lucy on the one hand and Soraya, Melasie, and Petrus on the other hand carry distinct ideology. Despite the post apartheid the role and behaviour that David performs is seen completely bias, irrational, dominating, insulting and full of prejudices: "There are the dogs. Dogs still mean something the more dogs the more deference" (60). They keep dogs to keep the black away for their safety. When we find the conversation between David and Lurie on the topic of safety. David says to Lucy, "But you have a weapon." Lucy replies, "I have a rifle. I'll show you . . . I haven't ever used it but I have it." (60).

Chinua Achebe in his article "Colonialist Criticism" writes the assumption of the colonialist quoting Albert Schweitzer as, "The African is indeed my brother, but my junior brother" (1191). It is crystallized the attitude and assumption of the whites in "African during and after the colonial era.

Coetzee displays the western desire in the book *Disgrace*. Chinua Achebe in the content seems worth quoting. He writes in "The Image of Africa . . ."

Quite simply it is the desire . . . in the western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest. (Achebe, 1784)

There are several occasions in the novel where the black characters are presented as a source of instability. Coetzee's antipathy to black people can be seen when we read the lines about a black boy. "the boy saunters off and rejoins his companions. He has a flat expressionless face and piggish eyes; he wears . . . a high forehead, sculpted cheekbones, wide, flaring nostrils" (92). Time and time again the author becomes very personal to make comments on physical build to show that blacks have unusual shape. Dehumanization of the blacks in terms of their physical structure in nothing more than a racist idea.

European racist assumptions of Africans include: they are inferior, savage, subhuman, incapable of speech and on and on. One day Lucy is at her house with her father. There 'three men are coming towards them on the path, or two men and a boy to fulfill their evil desires. They tell lies for why they come for. They assault David, lock him, vandalize the possessions kill days at the house, rape Lucy loot the valuables and steal the car and disappear. All these black boys are presented as the promoters of violence. David Lurie, a professor by profession, knows many languages but he cannot save himself. The lines author writes about David, "he speaks Italian, he speaks French but Italian and French will not save him here in the darkest Africa" (95). This is how Coetzee shows the blacks as: Sexist, hooligans, loafers, thieves, criminals and arsenic. When those boys damage everything David wants to inform the police. "I must telephone the police" (98). In response to her father she replies. "You can't the telephone is smashed" (99). This also shows that blacks are violators of law, destructive by nature when petrus, by owner and neighbour of Lucy is conveyed the incident by David as, "You must have heard, we had a big robbery on Wednesday while you were away". "Yes he replies" I had heard" (114). Suggests that he doesn't seem serious on the robbery. So he seems to promote violence, this is what Coetzee seems to show in the novel *Disgrace* through petrus and his company.

In *Racism, Sexism, Power and Identity*, Colette Guillaumin puts "aggressively is often associated with racism" (30). Again he writes "aggressively often connotes racism" (30). When David Lurie finds the boy sometimes after Lucy's house was robbed he expresses his anger –

"You Swine !he shouts – strikes him a second time . . . you filthy swine !
 More startled than hurt . . . the boys tries to run.
 . . . At once the dog is upon him . . .
 It is another example of racial arrogation.
 Teach him lesson, show him his place.
 Means he is African, black, not taken a complete human being.
 This is what it is like to be a sauce!" (206)

When David Lurie comes over the black boy (Pollux) it is very pathetic scene of violence done by the white against the black. David kicks him not only that he says 'ugly' to Pollux and aggressively uses 'dark skin' (209) against him. These words chosen to talk about the boy who is from South Africa is nothing more than the racial segregation.

In another chapter of *Disgrace* we find Lucy Change in an another environment when she says to her father "Wake up, David. This is the country. This is Africa" (124). For her father it is hard to change the old mind set. For whites Africa is different, considered as the 'other'. When Lucy gradually begins to adjust in the African society but father is against it. He says, "Lucy, Lucy, I plead with you! You want to make up for the wrongs of the past, but this is not the way to do it" (133). David is against the idea of assimilation of the whites with the black. He clearly stands creating a line between the black and the white. He expresses his segregatory idea.

Disgrace in this context is filled with the words which are used against the black. The words like 'intruder', 'thug', 'dryman', 'water-man', 'cary-man', three-chimpanzee, etc. to describe the black folk of Africa. Comparing the black with Chimpanzee and Jackal like, "A young thig A Jackal boy" (202). All those nouns and adjectives mentioned above present the black people's existence in the postcolonial Africa. They are dehumanized because white people think themselves superior

and black people are inferior. "If they had been white" (159) also makes it clear that there is racial discrimination in *Disgrace*. David finally gives importance to European. When he says, ". . . we Europeans . . ." and when he says to Lucy, "Lucy . . . Europe is safer than here." (204). From the evidences presented above shows *Disgrace* has contributed for widening the gap between the whites and blacks in South Africa even after the apartheid - by creating Africa not a safe place for whites and it is also presented as racists take as the 'other', 'dark', and 'remote'.

During the colonial and post colonial era. South Africa experienced the European domination. Domination was felt by the people of Africa in the name of race, color, social discrimination. *Disgrace*, a novel written in the post colonial era, John Maxwell Coetzee presents the racial complexities. Racial segregation through colour and distorted physiques of the black people have been overtly expressed in the novel. David Lurie, the protagonist of the novel tells the story from his point of view. The events and its main actors are described and examines from the perspective of a white settler in South Africa. As Robert Miles and Malcolm Brown writes in *Racism*, "The problem, then, with concerning of racism as an ideology is the implication that racism distortedly represents human beings, and the social relations between the human beings . . ." (7). Foregrounding the non whites as 'ugly', 'looters', 'savage', 'dark', etc. Connote the black people and their characteristics. The distortion of the black shows that Africans fail to meet the European standard. Arrival of the trios towards Lucy's house has been presented from the white's point of view. "the boy . . . has a flat, expressionless face and piggies eyes . . . high forehead . . . sculpted Checkbones, wide flaring nostrils" (91). Comparing the blacks with animals show a clear dehumanization of the blacks in Africa. David Lurie, the white protagonist has an eye of white observation and finds black always inferior. They are taken as looters, rapists, robbers, dark, physically different than the whites, Europeans. Living in Africa, born in Africa, brought-up in Africa and following the African cultures are considered below the European standard as David says to his daughter Lucy, "we westerners" and talking about the black boy, "A dangerous child. A young thug. A Jackal boy" (*Disgrace*, 202). Thus white people like David Lurie's behavior towards the blacks in South Africa, the way they are presented, and dealt from the white man's perspective and the distortion of the reality has made the novel *Disgrace* a work of racial complexity.

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