



## ALIENATION AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN J.M. COETZEE'S 'DISGRACE'

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### ABSTRACT

Social system is strongly affected by the forces enacting within its realm. All changes owe to these forces. Polarity gives rise to a tension and the resultant force, its direction and magnitude are decided by the magnitude and direction of the forces enacting. Power and powerlessness have created polarity specially in post colonial period, bringing in frustration, alienation, identity crisis and at times even revolt. J.M. Coetzee's 'Disgrace' depicts the struggle of a white man and his daughter in quest for their lost identity being the victims of the racial revolt and sexual assault. The impact of post apartheid context is the main concern reflecting the social status of South Africans. The legacy of the apartheid still haunts the country despite it being ended legally. Robbery, rape, vandalism haunt the nation. The novel indicates that how pressing circumstances may lead to devastation and also that transformation within does not necessarily bring in the desired change in society. Physical abuse should not be used as the easiest way of revolt against suppression, for its consequences drastically change one's identity forever.

**Key Words-** Alienation, Identity Crisis, Post-Apartheid, Racism, Suppression

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### INTRODUCTION

The tension between the power and the powerless has always been an issue of significance, especially in the post-colonial period. The impact of colonial power can be traced out in varied ways. Subjugation of the victims often give rise to the greatest controversy, and lid opens immense possibilities of distortion in human conduct. J.M. Coetzee's award winning novel 'Disgrace' is no exception to this. This disturbing novel, handling a very bold subject reveals the falsehood of many established convictions and wide opens the avenues of self exploration and identification. It redefines the behavioural trends and breaks off the established myths. 'Disgrace' certainly holds varied themes all intertwined in the texture of it but an underlying theme of alienation and quest for identity, runs

throughout and registers its strong presence. Coetzee's vision made a sharp, original commentary on the South Africa of apartheid, but it also explored the human condition with a bleak, dispassionate sympathy that intensely affects all.

David Lurie, on whom Coetzee visits a contemporary catalogue of humiliations, is a fairly average, twice-married, fifty something lecturer at a Capetown university who, accused of sexual misconduct with one of his students, chooses not to defend himself but rather to suffer his fate with a noble, slightly grumpy, stoicism. In his mind, Lurie has committed no offence; he prefers to get fired and suffer disgrace than endure a politically correct process of rehabilitation. He will not give his bien pensant academic tormentors the satisfaction they

crave. "Pass sentence," he says, "and let us get on with our lives."

Unlike the heroes of the conventional novels, The protagonist here is no better than a common man with many human weaknesses. There can be seen a sharp contrast between his professional and personal life. A lecturer, a man of letters to whom no poetic work is unread, a great admirer of Byron and Wordsworth, to whom no poetic and aesthetic intricacy is beyond reach, lives a normal rather than an extra intense sexual life. Living amongst women since childhood he later becomes first fond of them and then a 'Womanizer' in true sense. A man of fifties, enriched with numerous pleasant and unpleasant experiences, sweet and bitter aspects of life. Despite this, Lurie holds some heroic qualities. He has self respect, an unflinching confidence on himself as well as the existing system. He is ready to face the consequences as he considers himself innocent. Brave indeed he is with the unceasing fighting spirit and a tendency to 'strive and never to yield

However the turn of events prick the bubble of complacency and Lurie finds himself on the bare ground of hard realities that crush his aspirations. Lurie after being convicted chooses to live in the country with his daughter. May be in quest of solace and peace he decides to settle in a rural set up. Migration here depicts a journey in quest of identity and individuality.

In the post colonial era, the impact of colonialism registers its strong presence. 'Disgrace' is no exception to this. Racism and colour discrimination have been the remarkable and dominating forces. In many ways, this is a story about the powerful and powerless. Initially, David Lurie is in a role of power which turns to powerlessness after a sad turn of events. David, a professor who is reciting a poem by Byron to his class, states that the poem is about a fallen angel "condemned to solitude" (34). This poem in some ways foreshadows what is to become of David's life. He is a failure at love who loses his job and reputation, moves in with his daughter (Lucy) in the country and is then beaten and trapped in the bathroom as his daughter is raped. Later his house is

vandalized and he eventually takes a job killing and incinerating unwanted dogs.

"Disgrace" is the definitive work on South Africa's present state. In an early dramatic scene, Lurie is confronted by Melanie Isaacs's father outside of his office at the university. Though the girl's father is white, as is Lurie, his words speak to the anger that is the inheritance of forcible white rule in South Africa

"'Professor,' he begins, laying heavy stress on the word, 'you may be very educated and all that, but what you have done is not right...We put our children in the hands of you people because we think we can trust you. If we can't trust the university, who can we trust?...No, Professor Lurie, you may be big and mighty and have all kinds of degrees, but if I was you I'd be very ashamed of myself, so help me God. If I've got hold of the wrong end of the stick, now is your chance to say, but I don't think so, I can see it from your face.'" And when Lurie finds the accusation beneath him and turns away, the girl's father shouts, "'You can't just run away like that! You have not heard the last of it, I tell you!'"

The years of suppression create a polarity of power distinctively visible in the novel. J.M. Coetzee opposes these kinds of suppressive forces but in a mild way. He presents the bleak reality and unveils it in the most striking manner. Lurie chooses to live with his daughter and safeguard her. Unfortunately the place is being attacked by the intruders and Lurie's daughter is being ravished. The physical and sexual assault bare opens the stark reality, and takes the family off the shackles of security. The novel shows that there is always a fine line between decency and obscenity, personal and public.

*Disgrace* is set in post-apartheid South Africa. Even though apartheid has legally ended, its legacy still haunts the country. Robbery and vandalism frequent the countryside. Rape is a common occurrence. The outrage from a history of oppression and violence cannot be suppressed. J.M. Coetzee brings racial tensions to the forefront of the novel when David Lurie arrives in Salem.

The novel is unique in the reflection of impact of racism on the whole human society. Years of racial suppression made the victims so desperate to show their strong reaction in the form of revolt affecting the powerful dominating clan of which Lurie and his daughter are the representatives. The victims of subjugation are often being denied of their rightful claims. Whatsoever was personal to them all at once becomes public. Lurie's daughter, brave as her father decides to fight against the injustice done but the pressing circumstances steal away from her even the right to protest against the wrong done. The humiliation of rape is experienced by her throughout.

Lucy makes the critical decision not to report the rape because to her it is a private matter. She also realizes that in the context of modern South Africa, no true justice will be served. However justice is not served even in the case of reporting against vandalism and robbery. This further demoralizes Lucy and Lurie.

Years of suppression create animal instincts and violence among the victims and its consequences are always fatal. Like Newton's third law of motion to every action there is always an equal and opposite reaction suppression results in violence and revolt. Physical abuse is the most brutal and severe retort against suppression. Lucy, a white woman and a lesbian is made pregnant at the end of the novel and thus is forced to be one of the category of or her rapists.

David, who has lost everything, ends the book with a vision of his daughter working stooped over in her fields. He sees her as a peasant; he understands that all the centuries of white rule and progress in the country have come to naught.

Like Coleridge's 'Rime Of The Ancient Mariner' a transformation of the protagonist from hater of the animals to a lover and protector of the animals can distinctively be seen in the novel. Lurie who despises a woman in the beginning for foul smell of animals, later finds ultimate peace and way to salvation in performing the rightful rituals of the dead bodies of the dogs. Disgrace further parallels the racial oppression of blacks in South Africa with the treatment and view of dogs in the country. This is illustrated in the discussion that Lucy has with

David about the animals when he states, "as for animals, by all means let us be kind to them. But let us not lose perspective. We are of a different order of creation from animals. Not higher necessarily, just different. So if we are going to be kind, let it be out of simple generosity, not because we feel guilty or fear retribution" (74). David here is not really talking about the dogs; he is talking about whites and their view of blacks.

The most depressing thing has been no evident transformation identified between colonial and post-colonial approaches. Despite dreaming of a 'human society' discrimination at different levels can not be ignored. 'Justice delayed is justice denied' but in case of Lucy justice is not even dreamt of. The rape is not reported by the victim considering it to be a private rather than a public matter, but even robbery and physical assault remain far away from the shackles of law. The existing situation of South Africa gets a reflection in the statement of Lucy. A hopeless and de-motivating environment can be felt. For the victims of racism in an uncongenial environment no scope is left for the finer human emotions or aesthetic feelings. - What kills a person most is neither an external assault nor any problem worth having existential value; it is the 'inner strife' a fight within that sucks the life out of him

#### **Conclusion**

Violence alone is never painful unless a substantial cause acts behind it. Vandalism and physical and sexual assaults are the most brutal and barest ways of revolting and proving one's identity and depriving other's.

Migration to alien land within the nation or outside the nation in itself is a sign of either escapism or a quest for identity and individuality. Unfortunately the quest ends up in a passive submission to the forcing circumstances one falls victim of. No social justice is obtained till the end.

As per inner transformation is concerned, novel is unique in that. Laurie an animal hater by the end is transformed into an empathetic soul. One who finds the ultimate peace in providing the respect to the dead bodies of the dogs. Through the sharp contrasts such as Laurie's previous

repute and later on his profession of killing the dogs, social security and fully insecured position, intense sexual life and the life of a helpless person, the severity of the wrong done can be felt. Coetzee is charged of showing the white anxieties in the post – apartheid context. He is alleged of the charges of ‘Racism’. The bold issue of inter racial rape and its consequences drag in much controversy. Racial discrimination is a deep rooted vice that is difficult to uproot fully. If an attempt is made the torque is felt in the whole of the social set up The novel does not consider rape as a gendered crime, related to race or crime, but a serious phenomenon which could disrupt the whole life of an individual

‘ So it has come, the day of testing. Without warning, without fanfare, it is here, and he is in the middle of it. In his chest his heart hammers so hard that it too, in its dumb way, must know. How will they stand up to the testing, he and his heart?’

The severity of the matter makes him recall his past and realize the other and unheard aspect of it.

It is said that individual transformation leads to social change. In this case however the protagonist grows as a person, develops and feels sympathy, love, care etc but still as a social being he is not able to revolt On the contrary even loses his previous status, repute and profession. In a retrospect he recalls all the images of his past in the sharp contrast with his present.

“In a sudden and soundless eruption, as if he has fallen into a waking dream, a stream of images pours down, images of women he has known on two continents, some from so far away in time that he barely recognizes them. Like leaves blown on the wind, pell-mell, they pass before him. A fair field full of folk: hundreds of lives all tangled with his. He holds his breath, willing the vision to continue..

Self realization eats away his soul yet self actualization remains a far cry for the victims of displacement. This implies that more awareness is required. The mishap makes him come close to his daughter who

else was leading an independent life with a profession far different from her father’s. However the rape draws a clear line of demarcation between the two where gender overpowers the tenderness of relationship. Whatsoever may be the causes but reality lies in the fact that the greatest loss has been the loss of identity and individuality soaked in the permanent shroud of alienation and rootlessness. When it comes to human psychology, all human react in the same way. Alienation and disintegration of personality remain at the core without a fail. The journey leads from nostalgia to an alien world where the victims feel alien and uprooted. The ‘seamy side’ of life devastates them fully and they are hardly left as humans

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