

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

WOMEN AND POWER IN J.M.COETZEE'S "DISGRACE" AND "WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS"

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ABSTRACT

The relation of power with special emphasis laid upon the role of women in the society is a never-ending debate. While some authors focussed on the strengths of women by vitalising their role with the protagonist in their novels, some covered the pain and agony faced by women at the hands of brutal men. J. M. Coetzee is definite in sharing the realities of post-war torment on women population through serious character depictions in his novels. Post-colonialism is the central theme in the works of J.M. Coetzee, and every work of the controversial author reveals some point of pain accepted by meek women. *'Disgrace'* and *'Waiting for the Barbarians'* are two famous novels of J. M. Coetzee which speaks about the hardships of the protagonists during the time of war. It is significant to note that the author has spoken so clearly the issues faced by women in both the novels with the sense of powerlessness that remains within the feminine population. Though many other renowned works of J. M. Coetzee explain the explicit and implicit effects of war and colonialism on women, the selected works in specific elucidate power inequality and women. J. M. Coetzee's allegorical stance of writing does have a deeply buried sense of mercilessness in both colonial and post-colonial period and power imbalances centralised in almost all of his works. In the context of analysing power relations within the so-called patriarchal society, Michael Foucault's theories on power will be further analysed to explore the destinies of women in the society, especially within the novels of J. M. Coetzee.

Keywords: Apartheid, Coetzee, discourse, Foucault, gender inequality, power relations

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INTRODUCTION

Born in South Africa in the year 1940, J. M. Coetzee emerged to be one among the greatest writers of war and post-war fictions in the world. The author studied at Cape Town and acquired a Ph. D degree in literature from the Texas University at Austin. Later, his attachment towards his birthplace made him return to South Africa wherein the author joined the University of Cape Town as a faculty in

1972. *'Dusklands,'* his first novel published in the year 1974 assessed in parallel the two war complications between the Dutch and the indigenous population of South Africa, and the Americans and Vietnam. In the year 1980, J. M. Coetzee released *'Waiting for the Barbarians'* which is the story of an unnamed magistrate who reasons the act of the empire on oppressed population. In 1980, the novel won the prestigious Central News

Agency (CNA) Literary Award, South Africa's highest literary award. Another novel, 'Life and times of Michael K' won him the Booker prize in the year 1983. He was appointed the Professor of General Literature of the University of Cape Town. Coetzee's yet another novel 'Disgrace' won the prestigious Booker Award which made the author achieve the award twice in his lifetime. Several works of the author include the memoirs *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* and *Youth: Scenes from a Provincial Life II* and several essays. The author has even won the Jerusalem Prize, the Irish Times International Fiction Prize, and the Lannan Award for fiction. **'Disgrace'**

In the novel '*Disgrace*', J. M. Coetzee reveals the dark side of the post-apartheid situation in South Africa. Sexual torments faced by two women in the novel is the depiction of the post-apartheid regime and the reversal of power in Africa: the rape of a young student named 'Melanie' by the protagonist 'David Lurie' and the gang rape of 'Lucy', the daughter of David Lurie.

David Lurie in the novel '*Disgrace*' works as an English professor and a communication expert in the Cape Town technical university. The protagonist considers himself to be more attractive though he is aged fifty-two. The professor 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. In this context, Coetzee's narration about Lurie spending Thursday afternoons with a prostitute named 'Soraya' could be scrutinised:

"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 (Coetzee 1)".

Men in the society are termed 'potent' at a very young age and the protagonist here in the 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 the beginning of power inequality. However, power is not a static entity and transfers within people in the society. In

this context, Michael Foucault defines the matrices of transformation discerns that the relations of power are transformational from time to time. According to Foucault, there is an association between power and time (Foucault, 27).

When the apartheid situation no longer supported the perceptions of the European power, the entire nature of living at Africa changed. With the power of the black rose up when the apartheid policies were lifted. Eventually, David Lurie was fired from the university on the sexual harassment charges.

The second incident of patriarchal dominance is evident from the rape of Lucy, the daughter of David Lurie. After relocating to his daughter's house in the rural region of South Africa, David Lurie expects to live life peacefully. However, Lucy was raped by a gang who are relatives to Petrus, a co-operator of the farm and got pregnant. Lucy considers the brutal act as 'debt collection.'

'What if what if that is the price one has to pay for staying on? They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors' (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 158).

In this context, Lucy describes herself as a debt since it was for a long time the Whites atrociously ruled the nation and decimating African indigenous population. Bonnici 87-92 discerns the strategic move of Lucy selling her land to Petrus since to stay in Africa even after the apartheid situation requires political support.

Lucy sacrificed her body along with the sacrifice of her property. Since she decided to have a baby she agreed to become one of the concubines of Petrus. Someone who gives in everything for shelter and protection can be called a dog woman. Lucy became one such woman. "To start at ground level...With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity...Like a dog" (Coetzee 205). She was interested in making sacrifices. To live on the land of South Africa, she paid the "tax". Lucy generously let people rape her; those who raped her were let to utilize her. People were allowed to use her for pleasure, for revenge and for profit (McInturff 16). Under the suppression of the black South Africans Lucy gave in her own self. She

offered herself as the sacrificial offering to the power of the ex-oppressed which was uprising for their rights. Her actions are regarded as a collective apology, or a means of reconciliation (Bonnici, 91). It is probable that, Lucy thought forgetting the colonial past is the only solution. Her living took a complex form in the sense that it preserves belated and dysfunctional practices, abilities for producing and reproducing a life that is contradictory to modernity (Lloyd 219).

The novel *Disgrace* (1999) is analysed in the context of a post-apartheid society in search of its identity. The story mainly has three characters- David, a fifty-two-year-old professor of the University of Cape Town, his daughter Lucy, who lives on the country side and Lucy's dog-keeper Petrus. It is the story of an uncommunicative university professor, the harassment cases he is involved in, the undesired events that occurred his daughter's farm, the consequences of it, the balance of power between the Whites and Negroes and the confusions in their identity. Meta-fictions of the characters are set in a colonial situation. The novel portrays the changing power relations, especially of the two male characters. One is a powerful character when the novel opens who loses all his power towards the end of the novel. The other is a meek powerless character in the beginning who turns out to be the most powerful man as the novel is about to close (Bonnici). The story is filled with personal and national problems. A gender perspective, specifically, a feminist perspective can be used to show how women are undermined socially and psychologically. Coetzee, in a way, shows how women are colonized by the colonizers in the apartheid and post-apartheid societies in South Africa.

In the post-apartheid society of South Africa, power relations were reversed, and the whites became the minorities. In the book titled 'Culture And Imperialism', Edward said

"A new...appalling tribalism is fracturing societies, separating peoples, promoting greed, bloody conflict, and uninteresting assertions of minor ethnic or group particularity" (Said 21).

The ex-colonialist white South Africans were the minor people who were to be protected. They realized the bitter consequences of their bad behaviour in the past. Therefore, a new methodology came in to existence according to which the whites cannot look at the world or measure things through the classics or Western paradigm.

'Waiting for the Barbarians'

'*Waiting for the Barbarians*' is the third novel of J. M. Coetzee published in the year 1980. The priceless publication received several awards such as the Geoffrey Faber Award, James Tait Black Memorial Prize, and CNA Literary Prize. The title is referred to the poem of Constantine P. Cavafy, *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The story of the never arriving barbarians is the central theme of the novel and J. M. Coetzee implicitly represents the situation of apartheid in any part of the world without accounting the novel with South Africa. J. M. Coetzee carefully addresses the situation of oppression without naming the protagonist or the geographical location where the entire story is set. Several issues of oppression with special emphasis on the two different poles: the coloniser and the colonised, the indigenous and the other, the tormentor and the tormented were addressed in the novel (Diler and Emir 2).

Waiting for the Barbarians deals with the issue of torture in different manifestations: physical, psychological, racial and sexual. Considered against the backdrop of South-African socio-political reality, *Waiting for the Barbarians* "investigates Coetzee's idiosyncratic presentation of an allegorical picture of the tortured contours of South African reality during the painful era of apartheid" (Jansen 6). The novel is a startling allegory of the war between the oppressor and the oppressed. Its main theme is the difference between Barbarism and Civilization which is the main theme in the Classic Greek drama and philosophy. As a supplementary theme, there is an intense description of man's cruelty to man (Amero 1)

The Magistrate is the protagonist of the novel who lives in a border town away from the other world. Though he is responsible for the maintenance of the outpost, he loses his power

when the Empire sends an army to protect the town from the clutches of the barbarians. He, then, protests the unfair treatment of the “barbarians” who are considered a dangerous tribe by the Empire. The leading female character of the novel is a Barbarian girl, who is left behind by her folk in the outpost. She is found begging, partially blinded and disfigured from torture which indicates how people can be transformed and considered as the other by ideology. What is considered normal can be turned into abnormal by the system. The novelist carries the otherness to her body. Her deformed body symbolizes the deformed status of the imperialistic ideology. She will always stay as the other, both as a barbarian in the eye of the Empire and as carrying the marks of the Empire in her uncanny body, in the eyes of her folk.

The first person narration is an interesting phenomenon in the novel where the narrator always thinks of a dream.

“From horizon to horizon the earth is white with snow. It falls from a sky in which the source of light is diffuse and everywhere present, as though the sun has dissolved into mist, become an aura. In the dream I pass the barracks gate, pass the bare flagpole. The square extends before me. Blending at its edges into the luminous sky. Walls, trees, houses have dwindled, lost their solidity, retired over the rim of the world (J M Coetzee 10)”

This is one instance of the Magistrate’s dream. He comes across a girl in one of his dreams where the girl is playing in the snow, and her face is blank. The girl may symbolically represent the fleeting, not-to-be-grasped pleasures in human life. The relationship between the Magistrate and the Barbarian girl is one of the familiar tropes in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. It runs for a few pages in the novel and then drops like an old coat. The description of this relationship appears to convince the readers that loving a barbarian girl does not solve anything³.

There is an extreme sense of unambiguousness in the relationship between the white magistrate and the black girl in the novel. The false arrests and the torments of the white Colonel led the Frontier devastated. While the torment of

the black girl is a part of racist attacks on the oppressed, J. M. Coetzee reveals through the narration of the protagonist the inequalities in power. The acts of both Colonel Joll and the magistrate are considered to showcase dominance and power inequalities in terms of gender and race. The interrogations of the white Colonel crippled the girl and partly blinded her. However, the Magistrate tried to take care of the poor lady, invited to his home, investigated the signs of torture, revealed her skin and shared an uncertain relationship with her.

The exploration of barbarism is another potential theme in the novel which relates to the inhuman treatment of the barbarians. The necessity of the “other” for the exercise of imperial power is clearly indicated in the novel. The Magistrate himself is an oppressor who, at the end of the story, realizes his role of oppression of the native people. The Barbarian girl is oppressed in the guise of the Magistrate tending to her wounds though their relationship was transient. The Empire compels people to live by historical time instead of the natural time which changes with the seasonal change. Hence, the Magistrate is an oppressor within the oppressive Empire. The underlying notion behind the term oppression is a reduction of a subject to a hurt body that can no longer be defensive or stand up for itself through reasoning or language. However weak the body is it repels in its own way. The Barbarian girl is left bruised and partially blind as a result of the torture in the Empire. The coercive power of the army and oppression in the Empire are the leading themes of the novel. But at the end the novel takes us to compassion, co-operation and individual responsibility from the unhealthy feelings of complacency, authority, and rote loyalty.

There are evidence of the relationship existing between power and discourse in the novels of J.M. Coetzee which further discerns the key relationship between the allegorical representation of power in Coetzee’s work and the theories of Foucault. Power and gender inequality has been a topic of hot debate for years and in such a case, Foucauldian power relations in the context of discussing power relations could not be neglected. Foucauldian Power and Gender Relations

Michel Foucault is remarkably popular among feminist thinkers because of his strong inputs on discipline, power, sexuality and subjectivity which are highly relevant to feministic thinking and analysis. Though he had a conditioned predilection towards power and the effects it has on the body his analysis was gender-neutral. To what extent gender determines the discipline that is put on the body is not explored or acknowledged. Though it can be termed a flaw in Foucault's work, it does not nullify his, otherwise, strong theoretical framework. King(29-39) further analyses on Foucault's failure to notice the significance of gender in power play though his materials were pertinent to it. She investigates why his gender blindness is very intriguing for which she studies the polarization of the sexes and the gender construct. In the process, she considers the female body as a target of disciplinary power.

Marome (117-126) discusses four major criticisms that were levelled against Foucault. Traditional feminists are theoretically against what Foucault propagated in his understanding of theory-justification, power relations, collective politics, and gender neutrality. For feministic analyses, his three volumes of the account of sexuality is a reliable asset. But his discussion of western sexuality sidelines female sexuality. The author argues that feminist thinkers should only consider those Foucauldian aspects of philosophy which are conducive to gender analysis and leave alone his androcentrism. They are required to find alternative theories of gender analysis for which Foucault's works can be a point of reference.

In the fields of research and critical psychology, discourse analysis represents a "growth industry." Hookopines there is no strict Foucauldian method of discourse. He further characterizes the concept of discourse from the perspective of Foucault afresh. The author contests Foucauldian conceptualization of discourse and makes a critical presentation with an analysis of psychology adding to the contributions of various psychologists. He further gives an image of what Foucauldian method of discursive analysis would have appeared like if it had existed. In other words, it is a declaration that such a concept never existed.

Foucault's theory of power and discourse aids in the analysis of power and racial complexity in J. M. Coetzee's works. Foucault states that with the inversion of power, the psychology of the characters which exercised it becomes highly affected. Additionally, the oppressed who are no longer of such a category replies back to the oppressors of the past costing their blood as a revenge (Ruman 12).According to Foucault, knowledge, and power are discerned from discourse from which the external agenda of the world is let known by such inferences. Foucault claims discourse to be the objects of knowledge and the influential in reflecting the ideas into practice. Additionally, Foucault recognises power to be the principal element of discourse which becomes the reason for people to participate in such discourses (Koul 179).

The existence of power is everywhere and Foucault states such omnipresence to be the occurrence of power from everywhere (Foucault 93). J. M. Coetzee focussed on power discrimination in the form of violence, race and power. His influential writings share the views of both apartheid and post-apartheid situations. Apartheid is the end of colonialism and the beginning of a new era of torment, the emergence of the violent oppressed. J. M. Coetzee is confronted by many feminist thinkers due to his ideologies to reflect the apartheid in an effective way reaching a broad class of readers. Rape in this context is related with the degree of oppression and power as stated by Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver in their book, '*Rape and Representation*'.

"[R]ape and the threats of rape are a major force in the subjugation of women. In 'rape cultures' such as the United States, the danger, the frequency, and the acceptance of sexual violence all contribute to shaping behavior and identity, in women and men alike. Within this culture, as in others, the nature and degree of oppression will vary with the historical moment and, within that, the permutations of racial, class, gender, and institutional relations of power(Higgins 1-2)."

The perceptions of different feministic thinkers on power and gender relations are diverse. Some consider rape as an act of neutrality which

does not share any relation with male dominance. The focus of rape is hence a motive on individual autonomy. However, others quote rape as a patriarchal act of dominance to establish power; the act of rape for some feministic thinkers is not just to individual but to inflict considerable harm to the entire women-kind (Moser 9).

Silence in Coetzee's female characters

J. M. Coetzee's depiction of characters in all his novels is strategic, meaning his allegorical expressions impart both power and powerlessness within the characters. Female characters form the essence of Coetzee's work. In many of his apartheid-themed novels, the author 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, both white and coloured women fall into prey for violence and torment (Alam 3). Coetzee in 'Disgrace' carefully handles the situation without inflicting racism in the context of the novel. However, the author's masterpiece, 'Waiting for the Barbarians' expresses the torment of white authorities on the oppressed community, and special emphasis is laid upon the black girl seriously affected by the acts of the oppressors. The blind barbarian girl intrigued the magistrate to think about the potential harm of colonialism on humankind. Though the kind-hearted magistrate tries to care the blind girl and make her happy, the encounter with the girl becomes the beginning of the master and slave relationship. The horrors of colonialism transferred from the black girl to the white magistrate when he eventually gets caught by the colonel army for helping the black girl and based on the charges of treachery (Fisher 3).

Coetzee's women in his novels have very little to convey of their experiences. This is an additional fact that relates women with the lack of power factor during the war and post-war situation. Analysing the female characters of Coetzee in both 'Disgrace' and 'Waiting for the Barbarians', the discourses of women are very meagre. The role of Lucy and Melanie in 'Disgrace' reveals the painful side of women 'after the war' while the blind girl in 'Waiting for the Barbarians' is the depiction of 'war torment and manipulation.' Little information could

be discerned from the life of Melanie in the novel. Melanie is one of the students of David Lurie from his Romantics course, neither the best student in the class nor the worst. There is little voice for Melanie in the novel while the expressions of the male protagonist are more evident in the novel. Though it is natural that the protagonist should be more focussed in the text, power relations are marked with such varying focus: David is in his fifties while Melanie is a young girl; David being the professor of Melanie while she is just one among his students; In relation with his position to Melanie, David possesses power which gives no room for Melanie to arise (Moser 12).

The lack of power to arise in a situation of sexual harassment is the reflection of the countless experiences women face all over the world. Warner (15) discerns the lack of female voices all over the world, especially in the Third world.

"Yet in recent years we do find important female voices in the Third World, voices of individuals and of organizations committed to alleviating the misery into which many women have been born. I have tried to recognize some of the most important of those voices (Warner 15)".

Developing countries in the South Africa also fall into the 'third world' category. The lack of voice of Melanie is a construction of the power inequality wherein rape is often considered just an act of crime by the society. There are emotions of human rights deprived, especially the rights of women being suppressed and immobilised by such torment. Coetzee addresses the lack of power with the silence of Melanie which is common in the society. This is similar in context with the portrayal of the blind girl in 'Waiting for the Barbarians'. Nirmala (1-4) relates the silence of the blind girl in the novel with power variations between the Empire and the barbaric clan, and to be more specific, of the Magistrate and the blind girl.

"The girl like most of Coetzee's silent figures is silent to the core. She remains a cipher and is not given a voice to tell her own story. The tortured body of the girl is as incomprehensible, as is her identity (Nirmala 3).

Rape during the situation of war is as common in the third world under the category, "women as a source of honour and mortality". Rape is thereby considered as "a powerful tool to demoralize an enemy, for here the very source of honour and morality is attacked (Warner 20)"

On the contrary, Coetzee laid special emphasis upon the character of Lucy, the daughter of David Lurie in '*Disgrace*'. Lucy's role in the novel is critical to evaluate the post-apartheid situation and the manipulation of white women by the black society as an act of revenge. Lucy Valerie in her article, "Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*" states not just the inversion of power in South Africa but the remains of patriarchal dominance in the country. She states that:

"Disgrace seems to suggest that female bodies may not fare better in the new order [post-apartheid], as after Lucy is raped she becomes pregnant, gives up her land and retreats into the house (Graham 439)"

Lucy's silence to remain calm after the rape and not to press charges against the rapists reasoned several researchers to explore the nature of such silence. Carine Mardorossian, however, relates the silence of Lucy as prevention to the consequences that may arise if she complains about the crime.

"[h]er [Lucy's] unwillingness to rationalize her decision [to be silent] also reflects the fact that she knows she is caught between a rock and a hard place when it comes to representing herself as a rape victim in postapartheid South Africa. If she presses charges, the gendered dimension of the rape will immediately be recuperated by a racially motivated reading and reify social hierarchies that have historically been produced precisely through the link between rape and the construction of race (Mardorossian 75)."

Mardorossian argues that even if Lucy could complain and press charges against the perpetrators, her statements could be interpreted in a different way due to the underlying hierarchical structure in South Africa after the apartheid. Despite David Lurie's insistence to complain and press

charges against the rapists, Lucy remained dormant, refuses to act upon her father's advice and states,

"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 (Coetzee 158)"

The racial charges would be taken as an acquisition charged by a white woman on black men which further inflicts racial tension. Lucy, therefore, remains silent without making a further move. In this context, Helen Moffett claims such black peril in South Africa to be mostly related to race rather than gender (Moffett 133). Authority and power are so closely coupled that in the event of any perilous occurrence, the statements of the powerful will outrun that of the meek. "Where this power exists, there is an unequal relation between the groups, an "above and below, a difference of potentials (Foucault 201)".

Conclusion

According to Foucault, the lack of voice and the predominance of silence are the ways to depict the existence of the reality which is being stated at all times (Foucault 119). When silence is maintained it 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. Coetzee in most of his novels restricts women from revealing war torments to the authority. His allegorical expressions elucidate the brutality of men, irrespective of the colour and ethnicity towards powerless women. Many feminist thinkers argue that such illustrations of women remaining silent even on situations of harassment relate the author's incapability to represent power in women. However, Coetzee in his writings does not specifically impart injustice to women. Wartime torments can never be discussed so appropriately without surrounding the hardships faced by women during these times. The coloured student, the daughter of the professor and the blind young lady are all symbols of silence in the novel; however,

their silence does inflict emotional patterns in readers to preserve women rights in the society. Power according to Foucault is not static; it transfers from one entity to another. The punishment for Lurie (*'Disgrace'*) and the imprisonment of the magistrate (*'waiting for the barbarians'*) are excellent examples of power inversion.

Silence in the context of gender biased attacks is a negative aspect. Coetzee discerns in most of his works that women remain dormant on sexual harassment issues; however, he implicitly states the presence of brutality that is lurking in the shadows of humanity focusing on the feminine population. Society, on the whole, restricts survivors of sexual violence not to reveal their bitter experiences (Enns et al. 181-279). While the cultural world of today does not absorb the stories of women being brutalised by men, J. M. Coetzee silently provoked the ideals of safe-guarding women rights irrespective of colour and race. Though it is argued the J. M. Coetzee is controversial in depicting female characters in his war-themed novels, he is one among the most celebrated authors to define power as a factor influencing colour, race, and especially gender.

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