

## **Racial Complexity: A Dilemma in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace***

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to analyze the issue of racial complexity and the dilemma afflicting a white writer writing in post-apartheid South Africa. Years of colonial and apartheid history in South Africa have exerted an immense strain on the writers and are the acid test of white liberal sensibility in South Africa. Realism has been preferentially selected by the writers to reunite fiction and history. The dilemma before the white writer is whether he can represent the reality through the use of metafictional techniques, metonymy and colonial violence.

**Keywords:** Apartheid, Post-Apartheid, Discourse, Power Shift.

Racial domination and oppression in South Africa began with the advent of the colonialism during the mid-seventeenth century. Colonization was an important factor that paved the way to apartheid. The word apartheid means “separateness” and it was a policy of racial segregation. Apartheid as a practice in South Africa was a discourse which segregated the blacks from the whites. The whites were considered as superior to the blacks on the basis of race and color. The discourse of apartheid led to the empowerment of the whites and disempowerment of the blacks. The blacks were excluded from the areas classified for the whites. The blacks were discriminated against by the whites and were denied all the privileges. Ashcroft, Bill, et al. in *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* states:

Discourse is important because it joins power and knowledge together. Those who have the power have control of what is known and the way it is known, and those who have such knowledge have power over those who do not. This link between knowledge and power is particularly important in the relationships between colonizers and colonized (72).

Drawing upon Foucault's theory of power and discourse, this paper will analyze the theme of power shift and racial complexity in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. According to Foucault, “When

power is inverted, it greatly affects the psychology of those who exercised or manipulated it before. On the other hand, those who achieve it newly at the cost of blood are willing to use it as a means of revenge for their life-long suppression” (Ruman 12).

For Michael Foucault, a discourse is a strongly bounded area of knowledge, a system of statements within which the world can be known. Discourse, Foucault argues defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others. A central aspect of Foucauldian discourse is power. According to Foucault, Power is recognized to be a core element of all discourses and one of the reasons why one participates in discourses. An important aspect of the power relationship in discourse is the question of inclusion and exclusion.

Foucault insists that, “power is everything; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (93). Foucault also concedes that, where “there is power, there is resistance, and yet ... this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (95). According to Foucault, Discourse can be a site of both power and resistance, with scope to evade, subvert or contest strategies of power. Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* states:

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it ... We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby a discourse can both be an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and exposes it, renders it fragile, and makes it possible to thwart (100-1).

Power is a significant element of discourse. Discourse is a site of both power and resistance with scope to subvert the strategies of power.

Post Apartheid writers such as Andre Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, Achmat Dangor, Damon Galgut, J.M. Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer have focused on current issues of violence, crime, race and power in South Africa. These writers have been influential in bringing world consideration to the legacy of colonialism and the unfair apartheid in their native country. The end of apartheid, ushered in a new intermediary stage for South African writers. Writers who were once at ease with addressing polemic themes in their works are now challenged to foresee a new future for South African culture. Such writers are also confronted with the intricate undertaking of neither ignoring nor dwelling in South Africa’s racially charged history.

J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) is a post apartheid novel. The theme of the novel is focused on the way the White South Africans respond to the new circumstances brought about by the end of White Hegemony known as Apartheid. With the fall of apartheid, the world of White South Africans has twisted inside out and political and social roles have inverted, while the Black South Africans are empowered by the alteration in the status quo, the White South Africans are correspondingly disempowered. In a review of this novel for the *New York Times* (November 11, 1999), Christopher Lehman Hampt noted that the book reflects the uncertainty of post apartheid South Africa, where, "all values are shifting." This novel deals with race and power in post apartheid South Africa. It is a representative of the new South Africa, where the social troubles relating binary oppositions such as black-white and powerless-powerful are stressed out.

The novel also focuses on the issue of racial complexity and dilemma of the white writer writing in post apartheid South Africa. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee involves us in the struggle of a discredited university professor David Lurie – a White South African to secure his own and his daughter's honor in the new situation that has arisen in South Africa after the fall down of white supremacy. Here Coetzee has been concerned with a noteworthy issue of the reversal of power between the whites and the blacks in post apartheid South Africa. David Lurie is the main character in the novel and he is forced to teach communications at Cape Town Technical University. After seduction of one of his non-white student, Melanie, he has to resign from his job. The girl lodges a complaint against him and he has to speak to a committee of inquiry who wants him to repent publically. He refuses to apologize in public and decides to leave Cape Town to see his daughter Lucy in the countryside.

In the meantime, Coetzee brings in the inverted racial relationships to the surface when Lurie arrives in Salem to see Lucy. Petrus, a black is a neighbor of Lucy. Earlier he is a helper in the house of Lucy and takes care of her dogs and garden. But the racial dynamics become strained when Lurie is attacked by intruders and Lucy is raped by three black men and this incident represents the interracial rape. As Foucault says that power corrupts and circulates, this incident implies the reversal of racial power play in the new South African perspective.

Lurie wants Lucy to report the crime to the police and bring the culprits to justice. But Lucy decides that it would be impracticable for her to go living in such a remote and lawless area if she reports the crime to the police, and would be open to future attacks. With the abolition of apartheid and its consequences the inversion of power play, Lucy realizes the

helplessness of the whites in this black world and accepts her quandary, knowing well that she would not get justice. Her choice to remain silent is a symbol of her powerlessness in the new South Africa.

Lucy wants to be sheltered by Petrus, but she has to pay a penalty for it as Petrus offers her protection in exchange for her land. She consents to marry Petrus and becomes his third wife. The political implication of Lucy's shameful marriage to Petrus is that she is a white woman feeling alone in a black world and needs security. As a result of inversion of power, Petrus becomes the prime example of a black man who acquires power and property, and becomes a landowner from the care-taker. Accordingly, Coetzee has reflected that the land transfer policy has the foremost implication in changed status both for the whites as well as the blacks in post apartheid South Africa.

The rape of Lucy by three black men is clearly related to revelation of one's power. In the novel it seems that the crucial objective of the rape is not related to addressing a sexual desire only but it is conducted in order to manifest power as well. Lucy decides to give birth to the child she is carrying as a result of rape and Lucy's child can be represented as the symbolic heir of post apartheid South Africa. The novel draws a parallel between Melanie's rape by Lucy, and Lucy's gang rape by three black men. What Coetzee depicts is not the concept of 'eye for eye' which the blacks avenged, for their humiliations suffered in the past but develops the trope of 'rape' to depict the manifestation of power.

Thus, the title of the novel carries within it the significance of the historical changes in South Africa. The situation for both races, the white and the blacks is a matter of disgrace. It's a situation that is unnerving, it paints the new order with bleak colors that the official apparatus cannot correct as easily as desired.

J.M. Coetzee's position as a writer is indomitable by the condition of his being a white writer belonging to South Africa, a country where apartheid had been the official governmental and racist policy of segregation. His themes placed in the South African framework make clear a conflict arising from his ironic awareness of having to write with a subjectivity fashioned by the discourse of white hegemony. His fiction seeks to put the racial situation in view against the historical milieu with an unbiased sympathy for common humanity. The subtly noticeable sense of guilt in the authorial voice about having been an associate of the dominant race atones for it by foregrounding the ruptures in the power-equation engendered by resistance from the subjugated. In the post apartheid situation, as depicted in *Disgrace*, this resistance comes from the new power structure. Coetzee transcends

this facet of subjectivity by depicting his hegemonic white protagonist intensely aware of his powerlessness to effect change in the authentic situation now under the influence of black supremacy. Coetzee presents him as overcoming this predicament by redefining the resisting factors in terms of comprehensible to the hegemonic attitude.

In *Disgrace*, white domination survives through romanticizing the elements of resistance which it fails to include in actual terms in the post apartheid South Africa. In the new scenario the former oppressed races affirm their voice to the scope of silencing the whites. The country is passing through an immense reshuffling of social relations. In the consequential chaos all citizens officially enjoy freedom and the authority to create meaning. The non-whites are yet to master the language of assertiveness, while the hegemonic discourse to which the whites have been used to for generations has lost the sanction of certainty. Coetzee is thus free of dilemma of being an associate of the hegemonic race, and of having to write about the subjugation of people with the cognizant burden of being influential in their suffering. Having cast away the fetters of dominion, his subjectivity is now free to present studies of South African reality.

For the whites who had lived the larger portions of their lives as belonging to the dominant race, throwing away the strategies of domination may have become extremely complicated. They are posed with the state of having to either modest themselves into accepting the blacks as masters, or continue in a fictional world of lost hegemony. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee presents with allegorical correspondence the continuation of the now illusory white hegemony in South Africa through the channels of romance. His foregrounding of the romantic facet of this process is an obvious testimonial of the redundancy of white hegemony in the post apartheid perspective.

Years of colonial and apartheid history in South Africa have exerted an immense strain on the writers and are the acid test of white liberal sensibility in South Africa. Realism has been preferentially chosen by writers to merge fiction and history. The dilemma before the white writer is whether he can represent the reality through the use of metafictional techniques, metonymy and colonial silence. Sex has been depicted as a metonymy for the exploitation of the blacks by Coetzee in the novel. Lurie, a white man seduces a non-white girl Melanie, though she remains passive throughout the act yet she does not resist. Coetzee remains silent about Melanie's passivity and non-resistance in the novel. Lurie is not given any punishment for seducing Melanie. Lucy suppresses her voice against the crime committed on her and decides to give birth to the child she is carrying as a result of rape.

Coetzee again is silent to the manner in which Lucy being a white woman remains voiceless. Thus the novel reveals a quiet and devious voice suited to express the dilemma afflicting a white writer in post apartheid South Africa.

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