



Power, Politics and Salvation: A Study of J M Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Abstract: In his critically acclaimed novel *Disgrace* (1999), J M Coetzee has created a fifty-two-year-old protagonist, David Lurie, a powerful colonial patriarch who ultimately sheds his inhibitions, evolves and attains salvation. The paper seeks to investigate the travails of being an arrogant white man in the post-apartheid South Africa, and what brings him down to his knees. The study affirms that the rape of David Lurie's daughter and its consequences forced David to mend his ways. The paper also delves into the psyche of the four important female characters depicted in the narrative: Soraya, Melanie, Lucy and Bev Shaw, and drives home the fact that, once they feel their feminine interest being offended, they violently react and protect their interests. The study also takes the reference of Kate Miller's theory of sexual politics to understand the ramifications of Lucy's rape in the narrative.

Key Words: protagonist, colonial patriarch, post-apartheid, salvation, feminine interest, ramifications.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Written against the backdrop of the post-apartheid South Africa, J M Coetzee has created the character of a fifty-two-year-old philanderer, David Lurie, as the protagonist in his celebrated novel *Disgrace*. Being a white man in the post-apartheid South Africa David Lurie was the remnant of the erstwhile colonial power as "Disgrace is reflected in the protagonist David Lurie's stereotypical ambivalence." (Min,50). Highly educated, arrogant and twice divorced, David works as a Professor of English in Cape Town Technical University where he is forced to teach communication which did not match to his temperament. As a Professor of English, David loved English poetry and wanted to write a book on the last days of Lord Byron, the English romantic poet. David claims that in the post-apartheid regime, the academicians have been converted into clerks: "inappropriate to the task they are set to perform, clerks in a post-religious era." (*Disgrace*, 11) The narrative is structured around David Lurie, who, for all his life, didn't have "an eye for anything, except pretty girls..." (*Disgrace*, 218). Coetzee's *Disgrace* unravels David's adventure with women and "where has that got him." (*Disgrace*, 218). Coetzee's *Disgrace* depicts the painful realization of white people being redundant in South Africa, and black people, being impatient to have a big pie in the cake. The conflict between the two is the crux of the narrative.

Coetzee's *Disgrace* also delves into the psyche of the four female characters in the novel: Soraya, a prostitute, Melanie, a young student, Lucy, David's daughter, and Bev Shaw, a middle-aged white woman who runs an animal shelter clinic in the Eastern part of South Africa. Like his colonial predecessors, David Lurie holds a belief that women can be manipulated and subjugated, but, ironically, women in *Disgrace* refused to accept the dictates of the patriarch. The study examines the power conflict prevalent in the existing socio-political structure, and investigates how the efforts of women negate the dictates of David Lurie, the erstwhile colonial patriarch. The study holds the argument that most often, women can forge their way ahead.

2. Soraya:

Soraya is a prostitute with whom David spends two hours every week in a secluded hotel room in Cape Town. Soraya knows that her relationship with David is only that of a prostitute and a customer. Soraya had a private life too, which



she had kept away from her professional activities. However, In his relationship with Soraya, David claims that “..... he has, to his mind, solved the problems of sex rather well.”(Disgrace, 1). In course of time, David started feeling a kind of emotional connect with Soraya which might not be even her real name. “Soraya is not her real name, that he is sure of.” (Disgrace, 3). David, even, wanted to meet her outside, but she didn’t pay heed to David’s proposal. However, one day, David saw Soraya in the downtown with two grown up boys. “For an instant, through the glass, Soraya’s eyes meet his” (Disgrace, 6) and things didn’t remain same thereafter.

After one or two visits in the hotel, Soraya declared that she would not be available from the next week. David felt desperate and started chasing her. With the help of a detective agency, David procured Soraya’s telephone number, and one fine morning, he gave her a call:

‘Soraya?’ he says. ‘This is David. How are you? When can I see you again?’
A long silence before she speaks. ‘I don’t know who you are,’ she says.
‘You are harassing me in my own house. I demand you will never phone me here again, never.’
(Disgrace, P.9-10)

David was shunned by the ‘shrillness’ of Soraya’s response. The relationship between the two ended abruptly. When Soraya found that David was trespassing into her private domain, she vehemently reacted against the predator’s overtures. Soraya’s curt response made David vulnerable. Soraya emerged triumphant against David’s crafty manipulation.

3. Isaac Melanie :

Isaac Melanie, a young female student in David Lurie’s ‘Romantics Course’ in Cape Technical University, is the second important female character in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. One day in the evening while coming back from the university, David noticed Melanie walking down the street, and felt ‘mildly smitten with her.’(Disgrace,11). David manipulated Melanie to have sex with him. From the beginning, there was something unusual in his relationship with Melanie. He was a fifty-two-year-old Professor in the University, and she was “thirty years his junior: a student,, under his tutelage.” (Disgrace, 12) David was fully aware of what he was doing, yet he took the plunge and succeeded in his venture. On the other hand, Melanie, being inexperienced, did not know how to react in such situations. Soraya was able to keep him at a distance, but Melanie was young and clueless, and couldn’t figure out how to react. “Too young. She will not know how to deal with him; he ought to let her go..... too confused, and the moment passes.” (Disgrace, 18) After the first encounter, Melanie started avoiding him, but David didn’t stop. It was obvious that he took advantage of an innocent female student using his position of a professor.

The situation took a dramatic turn when one rainy night Melanie, seemingly disturbed, came to David's house, and asked him for shelter in the night. She slept well that night in his apartment. The following morning David went to the University leaving Melanie alone in the house. David came back in the afternoon, and had sex with Melanie who, by that time, had become normal. Thereafter, the conversation began:

‘What happened to your first wife?’
‘It’s a long story I’ll tell you some other time.’
‘Do you have pictures?’
‘I don’t collect pictures. I don’t collect women.’
‘Aren’t you collecting me?’
‘No, of course not.’ (Disgrace, P.29)

The response was a shock to Melanie as she was expecting some commitment from David. The way Soraya's response had shunned David, David's response shunned Melanie. After this incidence, there was no conversation, and of course, no relationship between David and Melanie. Later, a case of rape and sexual harassment was filed against David by Melanie. David didn’t succumb to the pressure created by the Inquiry Commission looking after the case of Melanie’s sexual harassment. David, even, refused to accept the charges against him as he smelled, “They wanted a spectacle: breast-beating, remorse, tears if possible. A TV show, in fact, I wouldn’t oblige.” (Disgrace, 66) Throughout the proceedings David remained defiant, and refused to make a declaration. David was still spiritually powerful. His arrogance kept him in high spirits.



4. Lucy's Rape and its Ramifications

Apparently disgraced, David left Cape Town and moved to Salem where his daughter Lucy owned a small landholding. Lucy lived in Salem with her dogs and a black servant named Petrus. After spending a few days, David started feeling a little bit of comfort in the environment. "For a time, his daughter's influence and the natural rhythms of the farm promised to harmonise his discordant life. He helps with the dogs in the kennels, takes produce to market, and assists with treating injured animals at a nearby refuge." (web.cocc.edu/ cagatucci/hum211/CoursePack/coetzee.htm).

During the time, when David was living with Lucy in her farmhouse, Lucy was violently assaulted by three black natives. Though devastated, Lucy quickly gauged into the fact, and accepted the structural changes taking place in the society with which she was culturally assimilated. Lucy refuses to leave the place. "If I leave the farm now, I will leave defeated, and will taste that defeat for the rest of my life" (Disgrace, 161). After her brutal assault, Lucy accepted the fact that the erstwhile colonial patriarch has been substituted by the black natives. Lucy's rape indicates the downfall of the western civilization and identity. (Mostafee, 2016)

Lucy is a victim of sexual politics that the patriarch has been exercising against women since the beginning. Rape was conspicuously planned by Petrus, and he succeeded in his mission. The circumstances forced David to accept the fact that white people were no longer powerful in the post-apartheid South Africa. It forced Lucy to accept the proposal of Petrus, that by marrying her, she will have a male protection, and in return, Petrus will have the ownership of her land. In her famous treatise, *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millet mentions, "the term politics shall refer to power-structured relationship, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another" (Millet, 24).

5. Lucy's Relationship with David:

Lucy's relationship with her father had always been strained. David came to Lucy's farmhouse seeking refuge after being accused of sexually harassing a female student in the university. David had a deep-seated belief that Lucy will seek approval from him for everything she does in her life. He had not approved of Lucy's sexual orientation as a lesbian. He was, even, shocked to know the fact that Lucy had an abortion in the past.

"That is something I am not prepared to go through with again. (Disgrace, 198)

-----, and was he kept in the dark ?" (Disgrace, 199)

David always tried to keep Lucy within the traditional gender role, but he was sad to see that he could not exercise control over her. She reacts: "Don't shout at me, David. This is my life. I am the one who has to live here. What happened to me is my business, mine alone, not yours...."(Disgrace, 133). Lucy's stubborn attitude challenged David's colonial and patriarchal psyche. He was forced to accept the fact that women could not be intimidated. David was upset to see that he had no control over his own daughter. Earlier, he had lost control over Soraya and Melanie, and now he lost control over Lucy.

From the beginning of the novel, it appeared that Coetzee's *Disgrace* is David's narrative where he claimed that at the age of fifty-two, he had "solved the problem of sex rather well." (Disgrace, 1) The entire narrative is to negate this statement of David, and forces him to accept the fact that he knows very little about the psyche of women. Lucy claims "you think you understand, but finally you don't. Because you can't." (Disgrace, 157)

6. Lucy's Independence :

Lucy is a strong, powerful woman. She lives alone and efficiently runs a farmhouse. Lucy had never been part of David's idea of a submissive woman. She had broken all the traditional gender norms. Even after the brutal rape in her own farmhouse, she didn't report to the police. David is unable to decode her moves. He asked her, "why you did not lay real charges against them, and now I fail to understand why you are protecting Petrus. Petrus is not an innocent party. Petrus is *with* them." (Disgrace,133). Moreover, when David forced her to speak to the police, she claims: "The reason is that, as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter." (Disgrace, 112)

David is sad to acknowledge the fact that he was losing grip over his own daughter. He is shocked to see what Lucy says: "I have a life of my own, just as important as yours is to you, and in my life, I am the one who makes the decisions."(Disgrace, 198). David recalls the growth of Lucy from a child to a grown-up woman. "Now in her twenties, she has begun to separate the dogs, the gardening, the astrology books, the asexual clothes: in each he recognizes a



statement of independence, considered purposeful..... Making her own life. Coming out of his shadow. "Good! He approves." (Disgrace, 89). Though once violated, Lucy didn't give up and kept planning her life ahead.

7. **Bev Shaw :**

Bev Shaw, a middle-aged white woman living in Salem, was the in-charge of the local Animal Welfare League outpost. David was introduced to Bev Shaw in the market where Lucy had gone to sell her farm produce. David appreciated Bill Shaw's animal welfare work, but he didn't feel attracted to Bev as she didn't match his definition of feminine beauty. David volunteered to work for Bev Shaw in her veterinary clinic.

However, it was Bev who seduced David. On a Sunday afternoon, Bev invited David to the animal shelter clinic. It was there on the floor in the dark afternoon, Bev succeeded in her initiative. That afternoon, Bev was a happy woman as "all she intended has been accomplished"(Disgrace, 150). After the act was performed, David thought about "Emma Bovary strutting before the mirror after her first big afternoon."(Disgrace, 150)

In all his previous relationships David was the one who had chased women and had failed in making a steady relationship. David's rendezvous with Soraya and Melanie didn't last long, and eventually, he became a loser. But in this case, it was Bev Shaw who had taken the lead, and the relationship lasted. In the small town of Salem, Bev was the only person David could trust and share his feelings. Their relationship went beyond the sexual intercourse, and the two became friends and companions.

8. **David's Expiation :**

David had come to Lucy's farmhouse to regain his lost strength, but the way the course of events unfolded, he felt, this was not what he had come for. "If he came for anything, it was to gather himself, gather his forces. Here he is losing himself day by day." (Disgrace, 121). When David had left Cape Town he was defiant, and had kept his head high. However, while living with Lucy in her farmhouse, during the course of fierce arguments with her, he started losing his inner strength; and while working in the animal shelter clinic, he felt that "Well, now he has become a dogman: a dog undertaker, a dog psychopomp; a *harijan*." (Disgrace, 146) Very soon, David started losing his spirit of defiance, and forgot his rigid stance. Earlier, David's power lied in his adventure with women, but now the way Lucy mercilessly attacked on his pride, he felt very lonely. However, Bev was there like a solid rock standing at his back: 'You must not worry,' says Bev Shaw. Her head is against his chest: presumably she can hear his heart Bill and I will look after her. We'll go often to the farm She runs her fingers through the stubble of his hair, 'It will be alright,' she whispers. 'You will see.' (Disgrace, 162). Bev's words gave him strength to remain alive.

9. **Redemption :**

David became more introspective. His expiation had begun. The story about his adventure with Melanie was left unfinished. He wanted to bring it to a conclusive end. He went to George, a place, where Melanie's father Mr Isaacs lived with his wife and daughter. David went there to tender his apology. He told Mr Isaacs: "I am sorry for what I took your daughter through. You have a wonderful family. I apologize for the grief I have caused you and Mrs Isaacs. I ask for your pardon." (Disgrace, 171) This did not satisfy David, and he entered into the inner chamber where Mrs Isaacs and Melanie's younger sister, Desiree, were busy in some household work: "With careful ceremony, he gets to his knees and touches his forehead to the floor"(Disgrace, 173), and symbolically tendered his apology. The Isaacs remained stunned as they had not expected such gestures from a man who remained stubborn throughout the trial in the University. Later in the night Mr Isaacs gave him a call and said "the path you are on is one that God has ordained for you." (Disgrace, 175)

10. **Conclusion :**

Coetzee's female characters hold a significant part in the structure of the narrative. They remained defiant. In spite of David's hard persuasion, Soraya knew that she would never allow anybody to invade her privacy, and when she found that David was trying to trespass, she strongly reacted. The case of Melanie was different. It was not a rape in the traditional sense as force was never used. Very cleverly, David was able to manipulate Melanie to have sex with him. Nevertheless, after the initial hiccups, Melanie had started enjoying the experience. But somewhere deep in her heart, Melanie was not ready for this relationship. Hence, when she smelled that David was interested only in having sexual



relations with her, she snapped the tie, and the relationship ended. Coetzee's *Disgrace* suggests that power exerted without consideration of humanity carries fearsome, unknowable, and often directly retributive costs (Tolentino, The New Yorker, 2020).

Things took a different turn when Lucy was raped by three black men. David wanted Lucy to report the matter of rape to the police, but, Lucy strongly reacted and forced David to realize that she was a grown-up woman who could take her own decisions. Ironically, after Lucy's violent rape, David wanted justice for her, but when he was accused of harassing Melanie, he had refused to accept even the charges, and had not tendered his apology. Carcine Mardorossain "David, now ironically enough, is the victim of a rape attack, compared to the last time when he was the perpetrator." (Mardorossain, 74)

David, always, had the belief that he was a lady's man, a Casanova. Yet, his relationship with women never went beyond sexual intercourse. However, David's relationship with Bev Shaw was different. He had never persuaded Bev Shaw for sexual favour. Rather, it was Bev who had initiated the relationship, and had succeeded. More than any other relationship he had in the past, the relationship between David and Bev remained a fulfilling one. Bev became his companion, his confidante. At the end while working in the Animal Shelter Clinic, Bev asked: 'Are You giving him up.' 'Yes, I am giving him up.' (Disgrace, P.220) David Lurie, the erstwhile colonial patriarch gave up his predatory activities, and walked on the path of redemption and salvation.

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