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APARTHEID IN J. M. COETZEE'S *DISGRACE*

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ABSTRACT

The Noble Prize winning writer in literature John Maxwell Coetzee's writings reflects the conditions of the people living in the era of colonization when all men and women, young or old, strived for their identity. Coetzee's novels are impregnated with the experiences of discrimination and human weakness that ruined the life of people and left them in utter despair. Whenever there is exploitation of men by other men who consider themselves superior there is disruption of peace and social order in the society and this often results in anarchy, violence, murders, and crime. Feeling of animosity and resentment finds a place in the hearts of the subalterns and the exploited, the consequences of which are suffered by both the exploiters and the exploited. In the Booker Prize winning novel *Disgrace* by Coetzee we find that the so called "oppressor" becomes the oppressed. *Disgrace* is a novel in which Coetzee has portrayed the plight of whites who were being tormented by blacks.

Key words: Exploitation, discrimination, oppressor, animosity, consequences

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The Noble Prize winning writer in literature John Maxwell Coetzee was born in Cape Town, Cape Province, Union of South Africa, on 9 February 1940 to African Parents. He has the honour of winning the Booker prize twice. The first Booker Prize is for *Life & Times of Michael K* in 1983, and the second one is for *Disgrace* in 1999. In 2003 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. *Life And Times Of Michael K*, (1983) also won the Prix Etranger Femina Prize.

Duskland (1974) was his first published novel. *In the Heart of the Country* won the C N A prize which is South Africa's highest literary award. His book *Waiting For the Barbarians*, was awarded the C N A prize, the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. *Foe* and *Age of Iron* won the Sunday Express Book of the year Award; *The Master of Petersburg* won the Irish times International Fiction Prize.

The thing which fascinated me towards his work was that the novels were mainly inspired by the social discrimination in the form of apartheid, and disintegration of the human life by authoritarians and people who were powerful.

J. M. Coetzee's writings reflect the conditions of the people living in the era of colonization when all men and women, young or old, strived for their identity. Coetzee's novels are impregnated with the experiences of discrimination and human weakness that ruined the life of people and left them in utter despair. The sufferings of the marginalized were often beyond human imagination and foresight. Every book shows that J. M. Coetzee is a highly empathetic person who feels the pain of others and he has portrayed this through his writings in the form of novels.

Whenever there is exploitation of men by other men who consider themselves superior there is disruption of peace and social order in the society

and this often results in anarchy, violence, murders, and crime. Feeling of animosity and resentment finds a place in the hearts of the subalterns and the exploited, the consequences of which are suffered by both the exploiters and the exploited. In the Booker Prize winning novel *Disgrace* by Coetzee we find that the so called "oppressor" becomes the oppressed.

In *Disgrace* the twice divorced protagonist David Lurie, a professor by profession had a relationship with one of his students Melanie Isaacs, and he was charged with sexual harassment by the girl, Lurie accepted all the charges patiently, and did not say a single word.

But so many questions arise here such as:

Why did David Lurie accept all the charges patiently?

Why did David Lurie protect Melanie Isaacs, when his wife blamed the girl?

Was there any conspiracy hatched against the professor, if yes then why?

These questions throw light on the Melanie Isaacs' status. In most of the democratic countries of the world the minimum age for the universal adult franchise is fixed at eighteen, it means the people above eighteen years of age are mature enough to make the right choice. The girl was twenty years old and at this age everyone is mature enough to differentiate between right and wrong and can make right decisions efficiently.

'Twenty. Of age .Old enough to know her own mind.'

'The story is ,she took sleeping -pills. Is that true?'

'I know nothing about the sleeping -pills. It sounds like a fabrication to me. Who told you about the sleeping-pills.'

She ignores the question. 'Was she in love with you? Did you jilt her?'

'No. Neither.'

'Then why this complaint?' (45)

David Lurie belonged to a white community whereas the girl was from a black community. It seems that David Lurie was the victim of racial discrimination, this time the exploiters being the Black. She had relations with the Professor in full consciousness and with concurrence. Women are endowed with a

peculiar sense that makes them more sensitive to recognize the man's eye and intentions and this sense helps them to protect themselves from men's malicious intents if any. David Lurie neither raped nor deceived her, rather he was very clear in his demand that the girl accepted with a little hesitation. R.L.Sharma also has pointed out this in his paper.

She can feel that David has an eye on her, as "Woman are sensitive to it , to the weight of the desiring gaze"(p.12).He is straight in his demand "to do something reckless" as he asked her to stay with him. (Sharma,67)

If the girl had been forced to have relations by Lurie, she should have complained at the very first time when Lurie had invited her , moreover she should not had gone with him ,not only did she go with him but she also agreed to have a shot of whisky in a cup of coffee and later on had sexual relationship with him though with a little hesitation and carried on the relationship for long .David Lurie honestly revealed everything about himself to her. He even told her about his past relations with other women when they were in the room at the very first time. He did not assault her. Whatever happened between them, all that was very natural but David Lurie was declared a culprit whereas the girl was declared innocent . "She does not own herself; perhaps he does not own himself either." (*Disgrace*, 18)

He makes love to her one more time, on the bed of her daughter's room .It is good, as good as the first time; he is beginning to learn the way her body moves .She is quick ,and greedy for experience. (*Disgrace* , 29) .At this point,she tries to relate to him. Her physical responses show an inclination on her part to fill him with a "surge of joy" (Sharma ,71)

The above lines from the novel reveal a lot about Melanie Isaacs's character. First she had sexual relations and afterwards escaped from the relationship leaving David in confusion. This infringement of morality in Melanie Isaacs's character is also noticed by Basavaraj Naikar, as he mentioned in his paper:

David Lurie primarily a criminal ,who tempts his student to indulge in sex with him.She is also partly responsible for the crime in yielding to him rather uncritically and innocently . Although she is not an adapt in the sexual act,she is slowly learning the art under him. (Naikar,101)

It might be possible that the parents and boy friend of Melanie Isaacs had become aggressive as David Lurie was a white. If we look into the matter deeply we get to know that though David Lurie had a relationship with Melanie Isaacs , she enjoyed every moment with him and later on deceived him ,there was not any kind of sexual harassment and exploitation, but still the punishment was given to Lurie alone .

Who knows? She didn't confide in me .There was a battle of some kind going on behind the scenes that I wasn't privy to. There was a jealous boyfriend. There were indignant parents. She must have crumpled in the end .I was taken completely by surprise.' (45)

J.M.Coetzee has remarkably depicted through the various incidents in his writings and through the character of the Professor that discrimination does not make a person cruel but it depends on person to person's sensitiveness and their basic tendency .Though there was an agitation between the two groups ,the professor in spite of belonging to the white community did not have any feeling of social discrimination , he had some soft corner for the girl . According to the following sentence it seems he was in love with the girl and perhaps this might be the reason for accepting all the charges with tight lips. The following conversation with his ex- wife reveals the inner emotions of David Lurie that he had a soft corner in his heart for the girl and was not an immoral and crooked person who used the girl for his sexual pleasures.

'Very well .Are you in love with this young woman who is dragging your name through mud?'She isn't responsible. Don't blame her!' (45)

The women who entered his life were black but during his relationships he did not harm any of them, though he was a victim of his uncontrollable

longings which is very natural. On the other hand he was a man of courage as he had courage to accept his guilt. When he was forced to say something, he said the truth:

Very well,' he says, let me confess .The story begins one evening, I forgot the date, but not long past. I was walking through the old college gardens and so, it happened, was the young woman in question, Ms Isaacs. Our path crossed. Words passed between us, and at that moment something happened which, not being a poet, I will not try to describe. Suffice it to say that Eros entered. After that I was not the same.' (52)

If the professor had been immoral or cunning he would have never said the truth instead he could have spun a yarn to escape punishment. He never exploited anyone , though he was fond of having intimacy with so many women but if we observe the other side of the situation, we find that David was twice divorced and after that he had relations with many women but he had been faithful towards the woman he lived with. This is evident from the fact that he maintained relations only with one woman at a time. Also the fact that he revealed about all his past relationships with various women before Melanie Isaacs shows that he was a genuine person and never intended to exploit and deceive any woman. He had relations with a prostitute named Soraya but very much impressed by her behavior as he found her quite docile and liked her qualities and the way she behaved. "It surprises him that ninety minutes a week of a woman's company are enough to make him happy , who used to think he needed a wife a home ,a marriage." (5)

When he got to know that she is married he becomes very upset and in bewilderment hires a detective to keep a track on her movements because of which Soraya insulted him. Finally he left Soraya then after he met Dawn the department's new secretary who was also married. This relationship also failed because he could not stop his mind to compare Dawn with Soraya. Ultimately she left him as she had to go to New Zealand with her husband due to insurgency in the Cape Town. The

following lines also gives the post apartheid scenario that disturbed the lives of people .After Soraya's departure from David's life, David once sleeps with Dawn , the department's new secretary . She is also married and wishes to immigrate to New Zealand with her husband and wishes to due to anarchy and chaos all around in the Cape Town. she tell David: "Now people just pick and choose which laws they want to obey. It's anarchy. How can you bring up children when there is anarchy all around". (9)

Then he was attracted towards Melanie Isaacs and finally not only brought disgrace to himself but all his life was spoiled after his affair with her. If we explore the character and life of David we find that he wanted some peace of mind and emotional support which made him fond of women . It seems he was seeking love and wanted to fill the bleakness of his life ,consequently he was captured in the image of Casanova.

He and the student observer retire to Hakim's office. No word passes between them ;clearly the girl feels awkward . 'YOUR DAYS ARE OVER, CASANOVA. 'What does she think of Casanova now that she meets to him face to face. (50)

After an in depth study of the incidents in the novel, my view is in sharp contrast with the other thinkers who gave him this image of Casanova, predator , and exploiter. He was facing racial discrimination in the university as he was compelled to teach communication whereas he liked to teach literature, most of the students belonged to the black community and did not take interest in learning literature. He was doing his job indifferently and only for his livelihood.

Formerly, Lurie had been a professor of modern languages, but due to a deep in enrollment and the consequent "rationalization" exercise conducted by the university, the professor ,reticent and uncommunicative by nature ,is now compelled to teach communication. In his profession ,he is like Soraya in hers : fulfilling his obligation but without real involvement or enthusiasm .His job provides him with a livelihood ,but the student are bored ,indifferent both to what

he tries to teach and to him as well . There is nothing that he could "profess" to them with conviction and involvement,and the students find little of relevance and interest to them in what he teaches . Life itself ,if it has a structure, has become routine: he lives within his income, within his temperament ,within his emotional needs. (Sarvan,26)

J.M.Coetzee observed the consequences and effects of apartheid on life of people living in South Africa . He felt the mental anguish of the people in South Africa and represented it through the characters in his novels .Without being biased he writes for the truth and his writings leaves the reader with so many points to look into and compelled the mute spectator to think. Most of the thinkers regarded these incidents as oppression of blacks by a white but in contrast here my paper explains that this was not an exploitation on the basis of race instead David Lurie was punished by blacks for being sexually involved with a black girl. This was the result of feelings of hatred, animosity and envy which was in the hearts of black for whites because whites were the ones who had always exploited them. Also, for blacks the relationship of David Lurie with Melanie Isaacs was considered a means by which whites tried to show their supremacy over blacks and way to insult and offend them. But David Lurie never intended to offend or insult anyone which is evident from the fact that he always defended Melanie and confessed the truth. "Of course I blame her! I blame her . I blame you and I blame her." (45)

In history there are plenty examples that whenever a powerful group overrides another group it results in a severe eruption between two groups which enlarges the abyss between the two and from this point starts the strategy to let down others whether it be in any form racial or gender. We can say though to some extent his weakness for sex is responsible for his disgrace on the other hand it cannot be denied that he had become a prey of the girl's complex character . If we investigate the issue deeply step by step we find it very strange.

She stays away the whole of the next week. Time after time he telephones without

reply. Then at midnight on Sunday the doorbell rings. It is Melanie, dressed from top to toe in black, with a little black woolen cap. Her face is strained; he steels himself for angry words, for a scene.

The scene does not come. In fact, she is the one who is embarrassed. 'Can I sleep here tonight she whispers, avoiding his eye.

'Of course, of course. 'His heart is flooded with relief. He reaches out, embrace her, pressing her against him stiff and cold. Come, I'll make you some tea.'

'No, no tea, nothing, I'm exhausted, I just need to crash.'

He makes up a bed for her in his daughter's room, kisses her good night, leaves her to herself. When he returns half an hour later she is in dead sleep, fully clothed. He eases off her shoes, covers her. (26)

What game is she playing? He should be wary, no doubt about that. But he should have been wary from the start.(27)

She is behaving badly, getting away with too much; she is learning to exploit him and will probably exploit him further . (28)

Now she is in his house , trailing complications behind her. What game is she playing? He should be wary, no doubt about that. But he should have been wary from the start. (27)

Here my views are in contradiction with the other critics who consider David's dismissal and disgrace as the beginning of a new era where a black woman raised her voice against a white.

The complain that Melaine goes on to lodge with the university authorities, the hearing to which it leads ,and David Lurie's subsequent disgrace and dismissal from his job, are symptomatic the new era .In the old days it would have been unthinkable for a coloured woman to accuse a white man of sexual impropriety. (Gane, 101)

David Lurie did not harm any woman who came in his life. For example, Soraya who in spite of being a prostitute, was very docile and believed in morality which fascinated David very much. David paid her for every visit and gave her many presents and gifts.

She knew everything about his life but did not reveal anything about herself that she was married and had two children .When David got to know that Soraya was married, Soraya left him . Afterwards he met another woman Dawn ,but with her he found no pleasure as he compared her with Soraya still David Lurie did not leave her but Dawn discarded him and went away with her husband .

Though by occupation she is a loose woman he trust her, within limits .During their session he speaks to her with a certain freedom, even on occasion unburdens himself. She knows the fact of his life. She has heard the stories of his two daughter's ups and downs. She knows many of his opinions (3)

After scrutiny of the novel we find that J.M.Coetzee has beautifully revealed the plight of the whites through the incidents that occurred in David Lurie and his daughter's life. In the first part David Lurie is captured in the web of racial discrimination by the girl and her jealous boy friend. It is possible to a great extent that the girl complained under pressure of her boy friend who was also a black because the girl left David Lurie without any reason. Probably this is the writing style of J.M.Coetzee that he leaves his reader with the situation to think over.

David has , obviously ,violated the low – both moral and legal – by seducing his own student ,although she is not a virgin .His suspicion that the girl might exploite him and lend him n trouble comes true very soon. The same afternoon ,Melanie's boy friend knocks at his office door and asks him very angrily:

'So you are the professor,' he says, 'Professor David. Melanie has told me about you.'

'Indeed . And what has she told you?'

'That you fuck her.'

There is a long silence , So he thinks: the chickens come home to roost. I should have gushed it: a girl like that would not come uneumbered . (Naikar, 101)

The discrimination is also seen when David Lurie was coming out from the department and on the stairs he was surrounded by the media persons and was

brutally insulted by them. They threatened him with awkward questions and somebody grabbed the collar of his shirt. They attacked David as a hungry lion catches its prey. They wanted nothing but to destroy his image completely. If it had been possible for them to swallow him up, they would have definitely swallowed him. It seemed that they were waiting for such a chance to let down the whites completely. Confession, apologies: why this thirst for abasement? A hush falls. They circle around him like hunters who have cornered a strange beast and do not know how to finish it off. (56,)

In the second part of the novel Petrus and Pollex are the two important characters who represent the atrocities done by blacks on whites in the post-apartheid era. Pollex was one of the rapists and was the relative of Petrus. Petrus was the neighbor of Lucy and her business partner. Lucy had trusted him a lot but he deceived her. The day, when Lucy was assaulted by the blacks, Petrus was out of the farm. It can be inferred that Petrus hatched a conspiracy against Lucy as he wanted to capture her farm. Petrus succeeded in his plan and took advantage of Lucy's pregnancy which was result of her rape. In spite of having two wives and children he leaves a proposal before Lucy to marry her with a condition that Lucy had to give her property to him and defended Pollux by saying that he was an innocent boy. Lucy took a decision to marry Petrus and to give all her property to Petrus. In this novel two tricks were played upon the whites which spoiled the life of David and his daughter.

One night Lucy's house is raided by three intruders. They shoot the dogs dead, snatch the keys from Lucy and try to set fire to her father. They burn all his belongings and steal his car. Later it is revealed that they had raped Lucy. Petrus contrived to be absent that night. The explanation comes later: one of the rapist was Petrus's brother-in-law. In fact the design was to scare Lucy into deserting the farm so that Petrus could grab it. (Kaul,9)

Lucy had taken these decisions as she was a white and she wanted to repent on the cruelties done by whites on Blacks. She was quite aware about cruelties towards blacks by whites now she was

getting the punishment which she thinks as the repayment of their debts and an atonement of their sins. This is also mentioned by Malti Agarwal in her paper:

This traumatic experience of Lucy changes the father daughter relationship. Lucy refuses to call in the Police to arrest these rapist-the members of the newly liberated blacks. Lurie wants to call in the police and nab them but Lucy argues against it and finally declares that whatever happened to her is a purely private matter: "But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone." (122) this clash between father and daughter signifies conflict which exists between the blacks and the whites and the sufferings of Lucy refers to the sufferings borne by blacks in the past. Lurie humorously suggests, "It was history speaking through them. A history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps. It may have seemed personal, but it wasn't. It came down from the ancestors." (Agarwal,60)

Focusing on the incidents which happened to David Lurie's daughter, Lucy, a brave girl, leading her life alone in Eastern Cape Town, in the tough time of post-apartheid. The era was full of anarchism for she has dogs to keep her secure from the attack of 'dogs' in society, i.e. the blacks who venture out with an attitude of revenge, but her dogs could not get success in keeping her safe as they were killed by the blacks. One day some anti-social elements who belonged to black community tactfully and forcefully entered her house and killed her dogs and blew up her father's head and then raped her.

One dog, shot through the chest, dies at once; another, with a gapping throat wound, sits down heavily, flattens its ear, following with its gaze the movements of this being who does not even bother to administer a coup de grace. A hush falls. The remaining three dogs, with nowhere to hide, retreat to the back of the pen, milling about softly. Taking his time between shots, the man picks them off. (95)

Here one more quality of Coetzee's kindheartedness is reflected- that he not only cared for humanity but he was equally aware of the plight of animals because he points out that along with human beings the speechless creatures also suffered the pandemonium of insurgency.

The repercussions of the apartheid were that the blacks became so heartless that they even forgot that they were human beings and started behaving like animals. The entire environment was full of anarchy and chaos. After killing her dogs, those demons in the garb of humans set her father's head on fire by drenching him head to toe with inflammable liquid. This was one of the horrendous experiences faced by Lucy and David.

As he lies sprawled he is splashed from head to foot with liquid. His eyes burn, he tries to wipe them. He recognizes the smell: methylated spirits. Struggling to get up, he is pushed back into the lavatory. The scrape of match, and at once he is bathed in cool blue flame. (96),

It seemed that the oppressed are bound to take revenge for the sufferings of their progenitors. This conservative thought of taking revenge made them extremely cruel. First her father David Lurie became a martyr in the hands of the tenets of apartheid. This is also noticed by Saurabh Kumar Singh in his article:

A middle-aged, divorced scholar of Romantic poetry, formerly a professor of modern language in Cape Town, David Lurie would have undoubtedly been a pathetic figure under the old regime – one imagines an ineffectual white liberal teaching Wordsworth to bored Afrikaners while largely ignoring the atrocities perpetrated in his name. But in the Mandela era, David has become a victim of "the great rationalization." (Kumar Singh, 167)

When David tried to start a new life with his daughter, their life was again ruined by racial discrimination. After the calamity, David Lucy became a tough girl who had courage to take a strong decision to give birth to her baby which was in her womb as result of her rape. She told her

father that they cannot do anything but to adapt to the situation in which they were living. In the time of apartheid when whites were exploited by the blacks Lucy found no other means but to survive in any condition. She even decided to marry a black to have protection from blacks. This was also an irony of her life that she had to take shelter under a black to get protection from blacks, blacks who were her perpetrators, blacks who ruined her life..

This aspect was also noticed by M.Kamalakkannan in his paper:

After the dismissal, He visits rural South Africa where his daughter Lucy lives and owns a small piece of land. Though the novel seems to narrate the events pertaining to the life of Lurie, the main focus of novels is Lurie's daughter Lucy's rape by the blacks and decisions she makes following the terrible incidents.

- She decide to stay in the same locality of rape, in spite of her father's offer to send her to Holland where her mother resides. She, impregnated by one of the rapists, decides to have the child.
- She decides to become one of the additional wives to Petrus (her blacks neighbor) believing that he will offer protection from blacks. (Kamalakkannan, 127,128)

The effect of apartheid and plights of whites is transparently picturized by the writer in the following lines told by David Lurie to his daughter after the trauma of her rape. Life of whites was being crushed ruthlessly by the blacks and the condition was of such a nature that the sufferers thought themselves to be fortunate enough that they were left alive.

It happens every day, every hour, every minute, he tells himself, in every quarter of the country. Count yourself lucky to have escaped with your life. Count yourself lucky not to be a prisoner in the car at this moment, speeding away, or at the bottom of a donga with a bullet in your head. Count Lucky lucky too. Above all Lucky. (98)

One the whole in *Disgrace* J.M.Coetzee represented the monstrosity and revenge of subjugated blacks

on whites, the whites who were once tyrannical. This is also a perspective of R.L.Sharma:

Disgrace highlights the brutalities of the long –oppressed blacks against the once authoritative whites. Lucy and David Lurie represent the whites, who are helpless in the face of the cruelties and bestialities of black community.(Sharma,75)

The entire plot of *Disgrace* revolves around the theme that the repercussions of inhumanity and oppressions always give birth to the feelings of hatred, animosity, envy and revenge which ultimately culminates into a cataclysm of gory atmosphere. The ones who subjugate the others and oppress them fill the hearts of oppressed with hatred and then the oppressed try to leave no opportunity that comes in their way to take revenge from their oppressors. In *Disgrace* first the whites invaded South Africa and then not only did they make its people their slaves but also snatched away their right to live their life in their own way. They snatched their identity from them completely and gave them a new identity. They called them 'niggers', 'pigs' and 'dogs'. But now things had changed and this was the age of Mandela who became the voice of oppressed. This novel is written in 1999, in this way the situations displayed in the novel gives the pictures of the post apartheid period, the era of blacks. *Disgrace* is a novel in which Coetzee has portrayed the plight of whites who were being tormented by blacks. David Lurie had relations only with black women and his downfall started after his fascination towards the girl Melanie Isaacs, one of his students, who raised her voice against David Lurie though the reason behind her complaint is not given by the writer. So, two points arise, one, it may be that Coetzee wants to suggest that blacks were becoming powerful enough to raise their voice against the whites, another that the blacks had been waiting for the moment when they could take their revenge and this was clearly achieved by the incident when the black girl Melanie Isaacs had made a complaint against David Lurie without having any proper reason.

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