



Identity Shift and Power Struggle: Transition of Africa in *Disgrace*

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Abstract

J.M Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* delineates the socio-political aspects of South Africa. It deals with the situation of the time and focuses on the prevalent issues such as racial conflict, violence, crime, torture, role reversal and power struggle. The end of apartheid brought a massive change in the equilibrium of the society; turned the society upside down. The hegemonic group lost control over the suppressed and at the same time the subjugated became powerful. The exploited group used the power to take revenge against the white community who in the post apartheid era became powerless. David Lurie, the protagonist who once was of a high profiled became a dog man at the end and at the same time, Lucy being raped brutally. This paper will try to focus on the role of power and the power struggle by both community of people in Africa. It will try to analyse the text applying theory of Newton's second Law, Social Darwinism and through the critical lens of post colonialism.

Power and identity crisis are the burning issues compared to others in the novel *Disgrace*. The title of the novel itself act as an intrusion about the contents of the story. Coetzee brings forth the issues of apartheid and post apartheid Africa. The issues such as racial conflict, identity crisis, violence and power struggle becomes the central topics of the novel. The white, hegemonic group, exploited the inhabitants who were even considered as sub human because it was the apartheid period. They neither had any rights to speak

nor action but the end of apartheid brought made the oppressor's powerless. The government and administration began to change bringing all the rights for the oppressed. The black people suddenly achieving independence changed their role in the society. As a result, some people started to misuse power by showing their aggression over the white. Both the group faced the identity crisis; the dominant becomes subjugated and the subjugated turns to be the dominant. So, the questions that arises whether power evolves and is it continuous? The proverb of "tit for tat" is true? The paper seeks for the answer and at the same time exposes the human instincts related to power.

Racial domination and oppression began in South Africa after the British settled their colonies in Africa during the mid-seventeenth centuries. Colonization was the main factor which created a hierarchy in the society. The whites thought themselves as superior being and so differentiated the blacks. They enjoyed all the privileges in the society and initiated a system known as 'Apartheid' in order to rule the Blacks. "The word apartheid means 'separateness' and it was policy of racial segregation. Apartheid as a practice in South Africa was a discourse which segregated the blacks from the whites" (Indu Koul 1). 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).

President Nelson Mandela's democratic election in 1994 marked the end of political apartheid in South Africa. The period from 1994 onwards marked the post-apartheid era.

The storm of change that blew through South African society after the collapse of the apartheid system brought sudden transformations in the law and in attitudes to everyday life. The end of apartheid witnessed the emergence of new social problems that writers have attempted to expose in their works. Post-apartheid writing is marked by an abrupt shift away from a racial focus towards a wider concern in various dimensions of human existence.

The well-known South African critic Lewis Nkosi for example, acknowledges that the apartheid inheritance continues to influence the thematic choices of South African writers. Nkosi explains that while some black writers “remain somewhat stunned by the sudden change” another category of white writers “suddenly quite numerous see the end of apartheid as the occasion for inventing black villains whose function is to serve as pawns in a game in which roles are suddenly, conveniently, revised. (Ibinga).

J.M Coetzee uses the features of apartheid and post-apartheid time in his book *Disgrace*. He belonging from a white race remains unbiased in portraying all the features of post-apartheid era. Basically, at the beginning of the text it depicts the apartheid features. It is seen that David Lurie, the white man dominating the first half of the text. He enjoys a good social status; a professor of an university in Cape Town but impulsive. He is twice divorced and solved the matter of sex rather well by visiting a prostitute, Soraya every Thursday. When Soraya becomes unavailable, his motifs drives him to choose Melanie, a black student who is of his daughter’s age. He traps Melanie by his romantic words and satisfies his carnal desire with her. David does what he feels to do; he does not fear any system, law or society. The prejudice of white supremacy seems to govern his character and action. He considers black women as a tool for physical satisfaction and has no respect for them. As the novel proceeds further, things seems to take a new turn. J. M Coetzee brings the post-apartheid feature through his character. David seems to be unaware of the time that he was living. He may have forgotten that now a black can raise their voice against the whites. Melanie sued complain against David for the sexual assailment that he had done over her to the authority of the university. “.....a complain has been lodged against him under article 3.1 of the university’s code of conduct. Article 3.1 addresses victimization or harassment of students by teachers” (Coetzee 39). David is unaware of the power that Melanie has “she is too innocent for that, too ignorant of her power” (39). When an investigating committee was set up, he was asked to admit his fault but he does not do it rather provides explanation and reasons to defend his wrong. Because of his excessive vanity he doesn’t want to admit his mistake and apologise for his deed even after knowing that he may loose his job. The colleagues of David Lurie were very helpful, they wanted to rescue him from the trouble that he was undergoing. They wanted David to admit his wrong

“Swarts sighs. David, it doesn’t help to sneer at our efforts. At least accept an adjournment, so that you can think your position over” (54). David does not agree to their proposal. Instead of being submissive he is rather a hard to his decision which shows his egoistic attitude. “Very well. I took advantage of my position vis-à-vis Ms. Issacs. It was wrong, and I regret it’s that good enough for you?” (54). He does not pay any respect to Ms. Issac nor cares for her existence and says her that it was his duty to do so and he did as much as the law demands. David loses his job for not admitting his guilt. J.M Coetzee does not spare the white David for doing such wrong as it was the era of the black and they were the dominant figure of the time so David lost his position as a professor yet not succumb to the blacks. His life seems to take a new turn when he goes to stay with his daughter Lucy. He experiences life which he never experienced before. When he first sees the lifestyle of his daughter and others he gets surprised. Unfortunately, the poor white man David had to cope up with the lifestyle of his daughter and the blacks. J.M Coetzee makes him surrender to all the black characters whom he insulted. At first when he sees Bev he mocks her appearance, “He has not taken to Bev Shaw, a dumpy, bustling little woman with black freckles, close cropped, wiry hair, and no neck. He does not like women who make no effort to be attractive” (72) but it is the same person who at the end accompanies Bev; work with her in the clinic looking after dogs and moreover has physical relationship with her to whom he looked down once.

J.M Coetzee uses “dog” as a figure in order to show the role reversal of the characters David and Petrus. “In J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace* dogs are a common metaphorical device used to illustrate the developments of several characters, but at the same time the purpose of the dog itself is also quite symbolic” (Polling -Vockee). Usually during the Apartheid era, the dominant group owned dogs for security or for economic purpose. Lucy had dog house for the purpose of earning money. “The more dogs, the more deterrence” (60) Lucy states when she shows her father, David Lurie, her small farm. It is clear that Lucy earns most of her money with dogs that are predominantly used for the protection of whites and their property against the dangers the new South Africa delivers. In another instance, Lucy describes dogs as “part of the furniture, part of the alarm system” (78), which further manifests the main purpose of dogs in South Africa. But the lifestyle of Lucy doesnot make her father happy. David describes his daughter as a “sturdy young

settler” (61) with a rather simple life. In every society Dogs seems to have negative connotation, a socially degraded animal. The people who own it enjoy social status who are far different from the people who look after it. In *Disgrace* the phrase “dog man” is used to show the position of the white and the black. In order to illustrate the positive development, Petrus undergoes, Coetzee portrays him as “the gardener and the dogman” (64) during his first conversation with David, who had just arrived at his daughters farm after fleeing from his scandal in Cape Town. No doubt, the description of his purpose or role at this time signals inferiority as he is nothing more than an servant taking care of dogs and flowers. However, his role changes during the post apartheid time from a dog man to the master. He becomes rich and powerful that he owns the property of Lucy and offers to marry Lucy. On the other hand David who disliked the lifestyle of a dogman unfortunately becomes a dogman “a dog-man: dog undertaker; a dog psych pomp” (146).

At the beginning of the novel Petrus is introduced as a dog man and a worker, working as a farmer in Lucy’s land. But as time passes Petrus starts to prosper in life doing well, gathering money, and throwing party and finally becomes the master of Lucy. Now question arises, how did he become a rich man within a short period of time? How did a black man become the master of a white lady? It is obvious for all readers to ask question. Petrus becomes a rich man after Lucy’s rape by the three black men. Petrus suddenly disappears for some days and it is during that time the horror incident took place with Lucy. After returning he throws party where he invites Lucy and David. David’s suspicion turns to be real when he encounters one of the boys who was the one among the three men in the incident. “It is the third of them, the dull-faced apprentice, the running dog. ‘I know you,’ he says grimly” (131) “One way or the other, it was he who brought in those men in the first place. And now he has the effrontery to invite them back” (133). Petrus showed no sympathy neither he protested for Lucy rather he saved the boy from David. It is revealed that the boy was his son Pollux. Petrus was connected with the rape and the robbery. Petrus no longer remained the servant of Lucy rather he became the master of Lucy. Lucy took shelter under Petrus and agreed to be his wife so that Petrus would give her baby and her shelter in return she will give all her property to Petrus. Petrus no longer claims himself to be a dogman.

In the post-apartheid there is a shift of power from the minority to the majority. There is a breakdown in the political system. The political system that was based on the racial segregation collapsed. The blacks gained power and when they found themselves into higher position and independent they were shocked by the sudden change. In their psychology, hate and negative feelings was deeply rooted for the white group. 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)

The blacks thought it was the right time for them to show their power and dominancy towards the white people. In order to show their power they misused it. It is obvious because according to Newton’s theory, the third law states that “for every action (force) in nature there is an equal and opposite reaction” (Hall). If we apply this theory to analyze the social condition of South Africa we could observe that the native Africans were now reacting oppositely to the whites. Before the minority suppressed the majority but now the majority were suppressing the minority by showing their power. Earlier the whites exploited the black; later the black started exploiting the white. The traumatic situation that Lucy faced, the gang rape by three blacks was the opposite reaction by the native people. They did so in order to show their newly gained power and wanted to give a self-realization to the whites that South Africa is not their place. “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” (Indu Koul 3). Lucy after facing the horror situation self-realized that this is South Africa and they no more have the power to raise their voice. That is why she does not inform anything about the rape to the police and knew that the political system has changed. She would not get the justice rather she will be humiliated in the society. When David ask her to state to the police about the rape, she denies to do it rather she warns him that this place is South Africa “This place being South Africa” (112). On realizing her position and state she felt that if she wants to reside in South Africa she must take shelter under a black man and therefore she chooses Petrus as her husband, master and protector “To whom can I turn for protection, for patronage? To Ettinger?” (204) “Practically speaking, there is only Petrus left” (204).

Newton's third law can also be applicable for David Lurie's condition. In Cape Town, he being a Professor had sex with one of his student of his daughter's age, Melanie. He somehow used his position in trapping Melanie into his trap. Although Melanie had physical relationship with him but it was not out of her willingness. Professor lost all his ethical and moral values and has sex with her in his daughter's bed. This plot of the novel is a foil to the incident of Lucy's rape. David could feel what those boys were doing with Lucy but he couldn't save Lucy. In Cape Town, parents of Melanie could take action against him but here he couldnot take any action. Lucy stops him from taking any action. David is helpless to the present situation and could do nothing except observe his daughter's situation. Before he could do anything but then he could do nothing; earlier what he had done to Melanie later he had to suffer through his daughter's pain.

Role Reversal is common in every aspect of life. According to the system of the society no one can enjoy the same position and state throughout his life. Power changes and shifts to others according to the time. There is a continuous evolution of power. According to Darwin's theory, species derive from other species by a gradual evolutionary process and that the average level of each species is heightened by the "survival of the fittest" (Darwin). Many sociologists have used Darwin's theory to analyze the social affairs of society and therefore came up with a theory known as Social Darwinism.

Social Darwinism, the theory that persons, groups, and races are subject to the same laws of natural selection as Charles Darwin had perceived in plants and animals in nature. According to the theory, which was popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the weak were diminished and their cultures delimited, while the strong grew in power and in cultural influence over the weak. Social Darwinists held that the life of humans in society was a struggle for existence ruled by "survival of the fittest," a phrase proposed by the British philosopher and scientist Herbert Spencer. At the societal level, social Darwinism was used as a philosophical rationalization for imperialist, colonialist, and racist policies, sustaining belief in Anglo-Saxon or Aryan cultural and biological superiority. (Duigan)

In politics there is constant evolution of power. A power can only survive if it has undergone the process of natural selection that is “survival of the fittest” (Social Darwinism). The British were considered as one the highly genetic race. They with their civilization and power settled their territories across their borders. They almost conquered and colonized half of the world. They could do so because among all the existing power they were the most powerful. They were the then naturally selected species based on power. At the time of colonizing South Africa, the nation was lacking behind in power and civilization. So, it was easy for the whites to rule over the land. Gradually when time passed, other powers started coming into existence. The blacks started revolting against the whites but they failed to achieve their goals because they were still not capable and stronger then the whites. After a long struggle when they became powerful than the preexisting one, they achieved their goal. Thus evolution of another power took place in the land of South Africa. Therefore, evolution of power is a continuous process. So when the majority group in South Africa came into power there was a change in all aspects in the society. David Lurie, a white man had been enjoying a good status and a high rank in the land of Cape Town. His status has been snatched away from him for the scandal that he had committed with his student. Within no time he loses his reputation and dignity in the society. He loses his job as a professor in the university of Cape Town and turns to live with his daughter Lucy. When he goes there he finds no other reputed job rather a job in the dog’s clinic working with Bev. Thus David turns from a professor to a dogman. “Sunday has come again. He and Bev Shaw are engaged in one of their session of *Losung*. One by one he brings in the cats, then the dogs: the old, the blind, the halt, the crippled, the maimed, but also the young, the sound- all those whose term has come” (218). Lucy who was the owner of a farm loses her control over the land and surrenders before a black man Petrus. On the other hand Petrus who was the sufferer of the apartheid system gains power over the whites and turns from a dogman and farmer of Lucy’s land to the master of Lucy. David does accept his degradation and he believes that the power has shifted from the whites to the blacks but this power will not continue, that is why he says to Petrus “On the contrary, it is just beginning. It will go on long after I am dead and you are dead” (202). Thus the words reveal the idea of Social Darwinism.

As a whole, the novel *Disgrace* promulgate on the new political system in South Africa. It views the reshuffling of power from the whites to the blacks. He shows the racial complexity that was undergoing during the post-apartheid era in South Africa. The title of the novel *Disgrace* itself provides the essence to the reader on what the novel will deal. The disgrace that he talked about is the disgrace of his own fellow man, the white people, David and Lucy. He successfully displayed the role reversal of his major characters David Lurie, Lucy and Petrus. David Lurie, white man turning from a professor to a dogman. He arrayed how the colonizers were badly treated by the colonized. The colonizers were astonished by sudden changes in South Africa and were having problem in coping up with the new situation. Coetzee showed that the innovator of apartheid system was the ultimate sufferer. He exposed how the powers were misused by the inhabitants of South Africa. The innocent people like Lucy had to suffer because of bearing the white's genes. The thoughts of revenge were deeply aggravated in the Blacks mind that they lost all the power of thinking rationally. That is why Lucy received a horrific action by three black men. The blacks were paying back what they had received from the white people during the apartheid system. However, this change of position and power will continue in the society as this is the system of a society. Throughout the history if we observe no one could hold the power forever. Through David Lurie's line Coetzee affirms us the same thought "On the contrary, it is just beginning. It will go on long after I am dead and you are dead" (202).

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