A Critical and Literary Analysis

Of

J. M. Coetzee’s Disgrace

A Tale of Transition and Violence

By

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Introduction

“One of the greatest diseases is to be nobody to anybody.” (Mother Teresa)

Disgrace is the first novel by J.M. Coetzee to be set in post-Apartheid Africa. Ever since this seemingly political and Booker prize winning South African novel was published in 1999, it has stirred up a lot of controversy and drawn out a response both emotional and political from many readers and critics throughout the world. Many people have out rightly condemned this deceivingly small novel as a racial text whereas some have also appreciated the author for drawing an anxious, comfortless picture of the post-apartheid South Africa.

Coetzee has very brilliantly incorporated many themes within this 220 pages long book, but the most important one is how the people in South Africa are dealing with change in the racial hierarchy now that the apartheid is over. Coetzee also explores the issue of sexuality, violence and the inhumane treatment of animals at the hands of the human beings.

Summary

Disgrace revolves around its main ‘white’ protagonist David Lurie, a divorced fifty-two year old Professor of Communications at a university in Cape Town. Quite an interesting set of contradictions, Lurie’s own personal life is devoid of any kind of passion even though he teaches romantic poetry. This professor of communications also ironically isn’t quite the best in communicating with the people that are the closest to him especially his daughter. As an idolizer of the famous poet Lord Byron, Lurie sees himself as an old-fashioned Casanova who he thinks has “solved the problem of sex rather well” for his age.
Initially in the novel, David is dependent on a prostitute named Soraya for the fulfillment of his sexual desires but this arrangement comes to an end the moment he tries to pry into her private life. Now left wanting and driven by his own egoistical image of a seducer, David forces himself upon an undergraduate student of his, Melanie Isaacs, despite knowing that for her it is ‘undesirable to the core’ but this time he is not able to get away with it as he might have been able in the past. This affair soon becomes the main reason for his disgrace and ends his career as a professor when it becomes public and charges of sexual harassment are filed against him. The main reason behind it being his stubbornness to show repentance of any kind and he even term the experience as “enriching” before the hearing committee.

After being ostracized from Cape Town in disgrace, Lurie seeks refuge in his daughter Lucy’s countryside haven in Salem. Here’s in comes the character of Petrus, a black neighbor of Lucy’s, who introduces himself as the ‘dog-man’ to Lurie. Petrus who used to work for Lucy early on is now steadily climbing up the rungs of the social ladder since the apartheid has ended. Taking advantage of the reversal in the social order, Petrus is no longer a ‘dog-man’ but instead owns a substantial amount of land. During his stay with his lesbian daughter, she is attacked and raped by three black Africans at her home while David is locked up in the bathroom, his head set on fire and the dogs in Lucy’s kennel are killed. Despite all this Lucy refuses to leave Salem and doesn’t report the rape to the police. She even goes ahead and decides to have the child after she gets pregnant as an outcome of the attack. The tension between father and daughter reaches an all-time high as David tries to confront her to report the rape to the police. Meanwhile David also starts an affair with Bev Shaw at the animal shelter as he now starts taking care of Lucy by working there but the tension between him and Lucy finally forces him to go back to Cape Town. On his way back, Lurie goes and apologizes to Melanie’s father Mr. Isaac but also finds
himself attracted to Melanie’s younger daughter Desiree. He comes back to Salem after finding that his home at Cape Town has been vandalized and a new replacement has been chosen for him at the university. The novel ends with Lurie, now back in Salem, as he watches over his daughter while she is working stooped over in the fields. He sees her as a peasant; he understands that all the centuries of white rule and progress in the country have come to naught.

**Transition and Racism**

The novel tries to show how the people are dealing with the shift in social order in a post-apartheid South Africa. The whites no longer hold any significant power but the status of the blacks is rising day by day as evident in the character of Petrus. He initially refers to himself as the “dog-man” and he indeed used to be that once upon a time – A disenfranchised black man who did nothing but work in Lucy’s garden and fed Lucy’s dogs. But now in the ‘new’ South Africa he is the one who is in power – the one with majority of the lands and influence over the area.

Despite this transition from the old to the new, The black people in South Africa seem not to have forgotten what they were victims of in the past as such remarks keep popping up in the novel. Once such instance is when one of the commission members claims Lurie’s sexual harassment of Melanie to be racially motivated.

‘We are again going round in circles, Mr Chair. Yes, he says, he is guilty; but when we try to get specificity, all of a sudden it is not abuse of a young woman he is confessing to, just an impulse he could not resist, with no mention of the pain he has caused, no mention of the long history of exploitation of which this is part.’
Even Lurie seems to think that Lucy’s not reporting the rape to the police is due to her “wish to humble” herself “before history”. He believes that she thinks she has to compensate for the past atrocities on the blacks all by herself and they are even allowed to take revenge from them. She just sees the rapists as ‘debt-collectors’. This is indeed a very bleak picture of the ‘new’ South Africa where although the apartheid has ended the oppressed has become the oppressor. This is one of the main reasons that this novel has been claimed to be racially skewed.

Despite all such claims Coetzee just refers to race only once in his whole novel. This happens in Petrus’ party where Lurie notices that they are the only “whites” in there. This I believe is very significant as it makes us the readers to make our judgment for the whole mankind itself and not just the whites or the blacks.

**Violence and Animals**

Violence especially sexual violence can be seen throughout the book. Disgrace holds out little hope for the ‘new’ South Africa as it first displays the rape (presumably) of non-white woman (Melanie) by a white man (Lurie) and then later on the gang rape of a white woman (Lucy) by the three black men one of whom is Petrus’ kin. This does highlight the fact that even though the apartheid may be over, the racial problems still aren’t. The scene when Lucy is raped is perhaps the most violent in the whole novel.

“A blow catches [Lurie] on the crown of the head… He is aware of being dragged across the kitchen floor…He is in the lavatory, the lavatory of Lucy’s house….The door opens; knocking him off balance…‘The keys,’ says the man…The man raises the bottle…[Lurie] speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa….Mission work: what has it left behind…Nothing that he can see…Now the tall man appears from around the front, carrying the rifle. With practiced ease he
brings a cartridge up into the breech, thrusts the muzzle into the dogs’ cage…There is a heavy report; blood and brains splatter the cage.”

Animal suffering at the hand of the men no matter what color they are has also been shown in the book - May it be the goats that are slaughtered for Petrus’s party or the common dog. The most growth in Lurie’s character takes place while working at the animal shelter. At the shelter his job is to get rid of the bodies of the dogs after they have been put to sleep and this is where he finds his penance. Now “[h]e has learned…to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer has difficulty calling by its proper name: love.”

**Conclusion**

Disgrace is a novel about a person’s humiliation, his punishment and the human nature and finally the redemption that he seeks in a country that has been riddled with problems of racism from a very long time. The picture which Coetzee offers seems to be very bleak. As Lucy tells Lurie near the end ‘Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity … like a dog.’ This indeed is quite disturbing. But I think the real solution would be the one that Coetzee presents much earlier in this brilliantly written novel when a white (Lurie) person and a non-white (Petrus) person are working together in a drained storage dam in the fields. There they are together shoveling out the shit as one even though they may not want to. This picture isn’t in the least hopeless. At the end Disgrace is indeed a pitiless and straight to the point novel which I think quite efficiently exposes the basic state of humanity at the end of twentieth century though most of it might be applicable even today.