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The Themes of Existentialism in John Maxwell Coetzee's *Disgrace*: A Philosophical Approach in Literary Analysis

Nakeeb Ahmad Khanday

Research Scholar,

Department of Comparative Languages
and Culture, Barkatullah University, Bhopal (M.P.)

&

A.K. Paliwal

Professor,

Department of English,
Govt. Hamidia Arts & Commerce College
Bhopal (M.P.)

Abstract:

This research paper examines philosophical themes found in literary works and aims at identifying the themes of existentialism in the novel *Disgrace* with reference to Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism. *Disgrace* is interesting to analyse from the perspective of the philosophy of existentialism, particularly ideas of Sartre, for several reasons. First, this novel portrays a central character named David Lurie, a fifty-two-year-old professor of communications at the Cape Technical University. He is dissatisfied in his present relocation as an adjunct-professor of communications in the university. His alienation and despair appear when he is dismissed from his job at the university after having sexual relation with one of his students, Melanie Isaacs. Second, the problems faced by David deal with the problems of losing - winning, life- death and the problem of responsibility which are the basic ideas of Sartre's existentialism. Thirdly, based on the critical reviews, the studies on this novel have focused more on themes such as the legacy of colonialism and racism, the exploitation and subjugation of women and compassion and empathy for animals. The problems of existential ideas of Sartre such as anxiety and alienation have not been the subject of attention. In short, there is a gap here about what has been done and what needs to be done.

Keywords: Existentialism, *Disgrace*, John Maxwell Coetzee, Anxiety, Alienation, Philosophy in Literature.

Introduction:

John Maxwell Coetzee (1940) is a South African novelist who has been described as inarguably the most celebrated and decorated living writer in the Anglosphere. *Disgrace*, his best-known work, got him his second Man Booker Prize when it was published in 1999, his first Booker having been for his *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983). He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003. *Disgrace* deals with the situation in post-apartheid South Africa where violence is unleashed in new ways, and David Lurie and his daughter become victims. The novel takes inspiration from South Africa's contemporary social and political conflict, and offers a bleak look at a country in transition. The novel tells the story of David Lurie, a twice divorced, 52-year-old professor of communications and Romantic Poetry at Cape Technical University. David believes he has created a comfortable, if somewhat passionless, life for himself. He lives within his financial and emotional means. Though his position at the university has been reduced, he teaches his classes dutifully; and while age has diminished his attractiveness, weekly visits to a prostitute satisfy his sexual needs. He considers himself happy. But when David seduces one of his students, he sets in motion a chain of events that will shatter his complacency and leave him utterly disgraced.

To understand the relationship between philosophy and literature, we had better refer to what is stated by Martin Skilleas in *Philosophy and Literature* (1-12). There are two technical terms which can lead to confusion and should be treated differently: literature in philosophy and philosophy in literature. Literature in philosophy refers to the notion that there is a philosophical work written with the format, techniques and style of literature. In short, it is about “the way the philosophical work is written” (Skilleas105). Plato wrote some of his works in the form of dialogue. Soren Kierkegaard, a prominent existentialist, wrote *The Diary of the Seducer* which was known as a literary work but it is a text of philosophy. In addition, there are other philosophers like Sartre with his work *Being and Nothingness* and St. Agustinus who wrote *Confessions*. These works were written in literary style or genre but with philosophical pretension. Therefore, they are classified as works of philosophy although it is sometimes debatable (Skilleas 6). On the other hand, philosophy in literature, according to Skilleas (129), is used to refer to the idea that some literary texts contain philosophical ideas, mainly issues and questions which are considered to be philosophical (129). These philosophical thoughts in literature are usually conveyed through fictional characters in literary works as stated by Hogan (6-7). However, these texts are classified as literary texts. Wellek and Warren (138) mention a few examples. The works of poem by Wordsworth and Albert Camus with his *Myth of Sisyphus* are classified as literary texts but contain ideas of atheistic existentialism.

Basic Concepts of Existentialism:

Existentialism is a philosophical school or philosophical movement of the 20th century with the main figures Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus. The first two, Kierkegaard and Jaspers, are known as the theist existentialists whereas Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus belong to prominent left-wing existentialists (atheists). Basically existentialism is related to human existence. To express it in a simple way, existentialism refers to the idea that man has the complete freedom to choose what he/she wants to be and is responsible for what he/she has chosen; not others. Man, through his consciousness, creates his own values and defines a meaning to his life. Sartre pays close attentions to the relationship between consciousness and being which can be summarized as his basic ideas of existentialism as seen below.

The principle of existence precedes essence. This is used to refer to the idea that man is a conscious subject, not a thing to be predicted or manipulated. He has the complete freedom and free will. He has the freedom to choose what he wants to be. But once he makes a choice, he has to be responsible for what he has chosen; not others and not God. Through his consciousness, he creates values for himself.

The feeling of being anxious (anxiety). This concept refers to the idea that sometimes man feels anxious without any direction to specific objects. He feels he is sinful and guilty for not doing the best in life. He has to accept this condition as an existence. In addition, he cannot ask God for help because there is no God. If there is God, he is not free anymore. Therefore, it is often said that man's freedom is seen in his anxiety when he realizes that he has to be responsible for himself.

The feeling of despair. This term in existentialism refers to the hopeless state, a situation where someone feels that he has lost everything in life and there is no hope. In existential point of view, man is free to define for himself about what he wants to be and it will be his identity. But if he fails to be what he wants to be, he cannot blame others. He cannot pray for help because there is no God.

The feeling of alienation. This term refers to the idea that sometimes man feels lonely and isolated when he fights to pursue his dream and identity which has been set by himself but finally fails. He cannot ask for the help of others because in Sartre's point of view, there is no true human relationship. Once you are the subject and control other people but on the other occasion you are the object of others.

The concepts of absurdity. This term is used to refer to the idea that there is no meaning in life. There is no reason which can explain why human beings should be here. So, man is in a situation of being and nothing. If he does not define a meaning for himself, he becomes nothing or no one and suffers a lot in life. On other hand, if he is successful, he becomes someone. Unfortunately, in life, it is not true that bad things do not happen to good people; what happens, happens. So, everything we do is useless as portrayed accurately by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

The concept of authenticity. This concept refers to the idea that one should create oneself and live accordingly. Or to make it more specific, in acting, one should act as oneself, not based on what others think he/she should. An authentic act is the one that is in line with one's freedom. Accordingly, one cannot blame others when he/she fails; he has to be responsible for it.

Findings and Discussions:

Based on the close reading, it has been found that *Disgrace* contains philosophical ideas, particularly the ideas of Sartre's existentialism. These philosophical ideas are expressed implicitly by the writer through the main character David Lurie. These include the ideas of anxiety, alienation, and despair. These ideas will be discussed one by one below.

The Idea of Anxiety:

In addition to the portrayal of David Lurie as a protagonist who is brave, and never gives up fighting against nature, this novel clearly portrays David as the man who experiences anxiety in his life. In many critical reviews, this point is quite neglected. Therefore, it will be analyzed in detail below.

There are three important events that make David anxious. First, David's anxiety emerges from his failure as an adjunct-professor of communications in the university. David earns his living at the Cape Technical University, formerly Cape Town University College. He was earlier a professor of modern languages but after Classics and Modern Languages were discontinued as "part of the great rationalization" (D 2), he has been working as adjunct professor of communications, where he is allowed to offer one "special- field course a year, irrespective of enrolment, because that is good for morale" (D 2). This condition of David shows the crisis that he goes through regarding the functions of language. David has been struggling with the language from the very beginning of the novel. Although he devotes hours of each day to his new disciple, he finds its first premise, as enunciated in the Communications 101 handbook, preposterous:

Human society has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other. His own opinion which he does not air, is that the origin of speech lie in song, and the origin of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul. (D 3, 4)

In the course of a career stretching back a quarter of a century David has published three books, none of which has caused a stir or even a ripple: the first on opera, the second on vision as eros and the third on Wordsworth and history. As he desultorily teaches his communications classes, David's mind dwells on this unwritten work. Since David is not interested in what he is supposed to teach, he is an indifferent teacher, "Because he has no respect for the material he teaches, he makes no impression on his students. They look through him, forget his name. Their indifference galls him more than he will admit. Nevertheless he fulfils to the letter his obligations toward them, their parents, and the state" (D 3). He continues to teach because it provides him with a livelihood; also because it teaches him humility, brings it home to him who he is in the world.

In Jean Paul Sartre's point of view, this condition cannot be avoided in life because once one decides what he wants to be, he has to be consistent and responsible for it. When he is not sure whether he will be successful or not and does not get what he pursues, he feels anxious and doubtful but there is no point of return. As a man of existentialism, he was free to live his life and responsible for what he had chosen; not other people and not God.

The second incident that makes David anxious is the reaction of Soraya toward him. David Lurie is fifty-two. Divorced twice, he is convinced that at this age, he has "solved the problem of sex rather well" (D 1). He is in good health, his mind is clear. By profession he is, or has been, a scholar, and scholarship still engages, intermittently, the core of him. He lives within his income, within his temperament, within his emotional means. Every Thursday afternoon at two, he visits Soraya, a prostitute who is "tall and thin, with long black hair and dark, liquid eyes" (D 1). Technically he could be her father, but he has been visiting her for the last one year and he finds her entirely satisfactory. Soraya is quiet and docile; she does not talk much and David finds her surprisingly moralistic even though she is a prostitute. Since her company pleases David, he has developed affection for her over time. "Affection may not be love, but it is at least his cousin" (D 1). Both of them appear to be lucky in having found each other. He pays Soraya 400 rands for a ninety-minute session of sex and half of this amount goes to the agency she works for; David finds it unfair.

According Sartre, one is anxious when he/she realizes that his life is meaningless and he has to be responsible for his/her existence, His freedom makes him anxious. David is devastated when his year-long, mutually –satisfying arrangement with Soraya ends. David's life becomes "as featureless as a desert" (D 4) without his Thursday interludes with Soraya as he has become attached to her till he sees her one evening with her two sons in a restaurant. There are days when he does not know what to do with himself. He spends more time in the university library, reading all he can find on the wider Byron circle, adding to notes that already fill two fat files. Sartre believes that interrelationship between one person and another person is artificial, not true. For Sartre, "hell is the other" as stated in his drama *Closed Door* (Bertens 100). There are only two options in human relationship: either you become the subject for other people and control them or you are the

object of other people and they control you. Sartre stressed that the root of the relationship is the conflict which ends in a compromise.

The third incident that makes David anxious is when he is dismissed from his job at the university after having sexual relation with one of his female students, Melanie Isaacs. After losing Soraya, David has to replace her with a new object to satisfy his sexual urges. One Friday evening when David is returning home, he notices one of his students, Melanie Isaacs from his Romantics course, on the path ahead of him. "Not the best student but not the worst either: clever enough, but unengaged" (D 5). She smiles back when David accosts her, "bobbing her head, her smile sly rather than shy. She is small and thin, with close-cropped black hair, wide, almost Chinese cheekbones, large, dark eyes. Her outfits are always striking. Today she wears a maroon miniskirt with a mustard-coloured sweater and black tights; the gold baubles on her belt match the gold balls of her earrings" (D 5). David is mildly smitten with her. He, however, falls for one of his students every term because Cape Town, he finds, is "a city prodigal of beauty, of beauties" (D 5).

David seduces Melanie. When Melanie and her father lodge a complaint against him, he is brought before an academic committee. Even though David is aware of the fact that his affair with Melanie could result as scandal from the beginning, but he behaves indifferently of this risk and says if the scandal would happened, "what will that matter?" (D 27) When the scandal is opened up, he charges of sexual harassment. There is a university's committee to investigate the whole scandal. The committee sincerely wants to help David and wants him to accept counseling sessions, a minimal demand of the committee; he refuses and sees that he does not need counseling and nothing wrong in his desire towards his student. He says that as a grown man he is not receptive to being counseled. He is beyond the reach of counseling. The committee wants him to apologize in public but he is reluctant to understand of his wrong doing. In front of the university's committee, David is also unwilling to cooperate in order to save his professional career. His stance intrigues the committee and he is dismissed, forfeiting all benefits and privileges that accrue to him.

The Feeling of Being Alienated and Despair:

Besides anxiety, David Lurie also has the feeling of being alienated due to some events that has happened in his life. These will be analyzed in detail below.

First, David begins to feel alienated when he has dinner with his ex-wife Rosalind. He tells her that he is soon going to see their daughter Lucy at her farmhouse in the Eastern Cape as the term at the university is nearly over. Rosalind asks him whether that has anything to do with the problems he is having at the university. People have been talking of his latest affair with one of his students "in the juiciest detail" (D 18) and that it looks stupid. Rosalind says, "I will anyway. Stupid and ugly too. I don't know what you do about sex and I don't want to know, but this is not the way to go about it. You're what-fifty-two? Do you think a young girl finds pleasure in going to bed with a man of that age?" (D 18). David should not expect any sympathy from Rosalind. Nor should he expect sympathy from anyone else either. "No sympathy, no mercy, not in this day and age. Everyone's hand will be against you, and why not? Really, how could you?" (D 18). David recalls Rosalind's tone of passionate recrimination during the last years of their married life. He realises that she may be right. Yet perhaps she has a point. Perhaps it is the right of the young to be protected from the sight of their elders in the throes of passion. That is what the whores are for, after all: to put up with the ecstasies of the unlovely.

When David mentions the setting up of an inquiry committee at the university against him, Rosalind comments that it would be an inglorious end to his career. But he is hopeful of arriving at some compromise because Melanie is twenty and "old enough to know her own mind" (D 19). But the story of her taking sleeping-pills, he tells Rosalind, is a fabrication because they were not in love with each other. Rosalind says that David should have known the consequences of sleeping with one of his students because the whole thing is "disgraceful and vulgar as well as very demeaning" (D 19). The next day Rosalind informs him of a newspaper report of the scandal headlined, "Professor on sex charge" (D 19) and the lurid details of his affair with Melanie Isaacs. According Sartre, the feeling being of being alienated cannot be avoided in life since it is the part of man's freedom and free will. One cannot expect the other people when he is in trouble. The human relationship is basically artificial. Or, to say it in another way, there is no true relation. When he/she is in good luck and has a lot of money, many people come to him/her. In contrast, when he is unlucky and fails, those close to him will leave as what happened to David. In the furore of the scandal, jeered at by students, threatened by Melanie's boyfriend, ridiculed by his ex-wife Rosalind, David is forced to resign and flees Cape Town for his daughter Lucy's smallholding in the country.

The second event that makes David alienated is when he leaves for Salem on the Grahams town-Kent road in the Eastern Cape to be with his daughter Lucy, after his dismissal from the university. At the time of David's arrival everything is fine, and then everything change, when David and Lucy attacked by three strangers. He changes from powerful person into a powerless. He is unable to save himself when the three of strangers blow him on the head, fainted, and lock in the lavatory. He tries to recover but his legs are somehow blocked from moving:

The man gives him a push. He stumbles back, sits down heavily. The man raises the bottle. His face is placid, without trace of anger. It is merely a job he is doing: getting someone to hand over an article. If it entails hitting him with a bottle, he will hit him; hit him as many times as is necessary, if necessary break the bottle too. (D 39)

They try to burn David, luckily he still alive although his hair and his right ear are burned; his eyelid is swelled and his scalp blistered. David powerless condition also appears when he could not save his daughter. He must do something to help his daughter but he is locked by the lavatory. He batters the door, yelling his daughter's name and suddenly the door opened by one of the strangers. David says to the stranger to take everything what they want and asks to leave his daughter alone but the strangers seem do not care of it and locked him in the lavatory again. All he can do is just asking to himself "is it possible that what the house has to offer will be enough for them? Is it possible they will leave Lucy unharmed too?" (D 39). But the worst crime committed of the three strangers is raping Lucy while David locked in the lavatory. The three of strangers also killed Lucy's dogs and take David's car.

David is helpless, powerless to protect his daughter and himself. David is shocked by the incident and he feels like no power to anything. "For the first time he has a taste of what it will be like to be an old man, tired to the bone, without hopes, without desires and indifferent to the future" (D 45). According Sartre, this is the consequence of freedom and free will. David has decided to escape the scandal and move to the Eastern Cape to be with his daughter Lucy's farm. When he faces problems there, he may not escape but face it. He feels alienated and hopeless because he has to be responsible for himself; not others.

Moreover David sees himself as a "fly-casing in spider web, brittle to the touch, lighter than rice chaff, ready to float away" (D 45). Things become worst for David when his daughter confesses that she become pregnant by the rapist and plan to have the baby. But the truth, he knows, is otherwise. His pleasure in living has been snuffed out. Like a leaf on a stream, like a puffball on a breeze, he has begun to float toward his end. He sees it quite clearly, and it fills him with despair. The blood of life is leaving his body and despair is taking its place, despair that is like a gas, odourless, tasteless, without nourishment.

Lucy's rape is something 'private' to her. She does not report it to the police, nor does she want her father to talk about it. She is determined to live on the farm and carry on with her life as before in spite of the issue of her safety after the harrowing incident. Father and daughter end up bitterly, apart as Lucy does not want to continue any discussion on the matter. This shakes up David. First his own disgrace by getting involved with one of his native students and now his daughter's violation by natives at her own farm. To overcome his alienation, David, however, resolves to live there and help Lucy get on with life.

Conclusion:

From the analysis above, it is clear that the novel *Disgrace* contains some ideas of existentialism, mainly those proposed by Sartre. These are ideas or thoughts are the anxiety, alienation and despair which can be seen through David Lurie, the protagonist in the novel. There are three situations or events which make David anxious. The first one is the time when he is appointed as an adjunct-professor of communications in the university. Since David is not interested in what he is supposed to teach, he is an indifferent teacher. He makes no impression on his students because he has no respect for the material he teaches. This is an existential theme or idea since he has defined himself to be a teacher but he fails to accomplish it. He could not blame others because it is his choice. The second incident is when David is abandoned by Soraya. He is anxious because his year-long, mutually pleasant relationship with Soraya ends. David's life becomes as featureless as a desert without his Thursday interludes with Soraya. The third incident that makes David anxious is when he is dismissed from his job at the university after having sexual relation with one of his female students, Melanie Isaacs. The feeling of alienation and despair comes to David when he has dinner with his ex-wife Rosalind. When David mentions the setting up of an inquiry committee at the university against him, Rosalind comments that it would be an inglorious end to his career. But he is hopeful of arriving at some compromise because Melanie is twenty and old enough to know her own mind. His despair and alienation can be seen when David leaves for Salem on the Grahams town-Kent road in the Eastern Cape to be with his daughter Lucy, after his dismissal from the university. At the time of David's arrival everything is fine, and then everything change, when David and Lucy attacked by three strangers. He changes from powerful person into a powerless.

He is unable to save himself when the three of strangers blow him on the head, fainted, and lock in the lavatory. According Sartre, a person feels alienated and hopeless when he realizes that it is he who has to be responsible for what he has chosen in the world; not others and not God. In short, in this novel *Disgrace* David Lurie is depicted as an existential man - from Sartre's perspectives - who has experienced anxiety, alienation and despair.

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