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## POWER INEQUALITY AND REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN CHANGING SOCIO-POLITICAL ORDER : A STUDY OF THE RAPE STORIES IN DISGRACE

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### ABSTRACT

Coetzee in *Disgrace* explores the socio-economic scenario of post-apartheid South Africa where he presents both black and white women, exploited irrespective of the change in power structure. Representation of the women in the novel seemingly reflects the feministic stance wherein all female characters are struggling in the patriarchal society. Coetzee shows how women are colonized in the apartheid and post-apartheid societies in South Africa. The oppression of women represented in the character of Melanie and Lucy in the form of rapes and the kind of language used by the women as well as their male counterparts are all suggestive of the vulnerable condition of women in spite of the changing socio-political order in the country.

**Keywords :** apartheid, patriarchal power, rape, oppression, feminist

J. M. Coetzee's characters are allegorical expressions of both power and powerlessness. In many of his novels, he portrays the vulnerable condition of women during the post-apartheid situation with silence and internal struggles. In *Disgrace*, much after the apartheid situation is lifted in the nation, but both white and coloured women fall into prey for violence and torment. In the novel sexual power is representative of broader systems of power. Patriarchal society empowers the protagonists sexual power over women who are treated by the society and the government as 'other' or secondary individuals. Lack of voice and the predominance of silence leads to two distinct inferences: one is the existence of reality or the current situation and the other is the existence of different perspectives on a problem. In *Disgrace* women are restricted from revealing stories of their exploitation to the authority. Coetzee's allegorical expressions elucidate the brutality of men, irrespective of the colour and ethnicity towards powerless women. In the novel almost all the major female characters -----Melanie, Lucy, Bev Shaw, Soraya, and Petrus's wife undergo too much pain and brutality and exposed to humiliation, rape and degradation. The women subject themselves to their passivity and silence which encourage others to exploit and treat them as mere sex objects.

*Disgrace* centres round a story of oppression which begins with the protagonist, David Lurie –a white professor of Communications at the Cape Technical University, an individual, who under the apartheid government was placed at the top of a social and political hierarchy before his fall from power. Lurie's description of the past depicts his previous state of empowerment, largely resulting in from his sexual attractiveness, and also from the social position gifted to white men in South Africa during the apartheid. At the age of fifty-two, Lurie is broadly a represents an older social order: the officially defunct South Africa of white dominance, racial oppression and the uneasy pleasures of the white society. Coetzee focuses on Lurie's position of power in his youth as above women who were treated by the government and society as secondary citizens, as mere tools to fulfil one's desires. In this context, Coetzee's narration about Lurie spending Thursday afternoons with a prostitute named Soraya could be scrutinised: "Soraya is tall and slim, with long black hair and dark, liquid eyes. Technically he is old enough to be her father; but then, technically, one can be a father at twelve".(p.1) Men in the society are termed 'potent' at a very young age and the protagonist here in the novel is described to be a capable personality. However, the woman who shares an affair with the professor is deemed to be a prostitute which is an example of power inequality and the fantasy that he creates of his relationship with Soraya is destroyed as he learns of her indifference when he views her in life outside of their secret meetings, walking with her sons. But later when she refuses him, Lurie's loss of sexual power is intensified which

represents the ultimate loss of power as a white man as the introduction of the new system in post-apartheid South Africa attempts to equalize the position of all citizens, which places men next to women on the hierarchy, he is no longer positioned above women.

The character of David can thus be analysed as a character who suffers from existential crisis, who turns into oppression in attempt to regain his position in the old social order where he had youth and purpose through positions of power. Sexual objectification becomes the means through which he seeks to regain purpose and vitality. David seduces his young student Melanie who belongs to the South African ethnicity and shares an intimate relationship with her. While Lurie entangles Melanie into his evil plan, his intentions were depicting a beastful act to manipulate and rape a young and helpless victim.

Coetzee's women in his novels have very little to convey of their experiences. This is an additional fact that relates women with the lack of power factor during the apartheid and post-apartheid situation. Melanie is one of the students of David Lurie from his Romantic course, neither the best student in the class nor the worst. There is little voice for Melanie in the novel while the expressions of the male protagonist are more evident in the novel. Though it is natural that the protagonist should be more focussed in the text, power relations are marked with varying focus: David is in his fifties while Melanie is a young girl; David being the professor of Melanie while she is just one among his students. In relation with his position to Melanie, David possesses power which gives no room for Melanie to arise. The lack of voice of Melanie is a construction of the power inequality wherein rape is often considered just an act of crime by the society. The emotions of human rights seem to be deprived, especially the rights of women being suppressed and immobilised by such torment. Coetzee addresses the lack of power with the silence of Melanie which is common in the society.

Another incident of rape being considered just as an indifferent incident is evident from the rape of Lucy, the daughter of David Lurie. After relocating to his daughter's house in the rural region of South Africa, David Lurie expects to live a peaceful life. However, Lucy was raped by a gang of three criminals who invade her home and attack her and one of them, the youngest one, Pollux happened to be a relative to Petrus, a co-operator of the farm that Lucy had been running. Lucy considers the brutal act as an act of revenge, she accepts being raped as a penance for what was done in the past as indigenous population. Lucy sacrificed her body along with the sacrifice of her property. Since she decided to have the baby she agreed to become one of the concubines of Petrus. Someone who gives in everything for shelter and protection can be called a dog woman. Lucy became one such woman, "To start at ground level...With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity."(p 205). She was interested in making sacrifices. To live on the land of South Africa, she paid the "tax".. Coetzee, in a way, shows how women are colonized by the colonizers in the apartheid and post-apartheid societies in South Africa. The institution of marriage was treated as a mere "alliance, a deal" where Lucy had to contribute her land so as to be allowed to creep under his wing. In the post-apartheid society of South Africa, power relations were reversed, and the whites became the minorities but women again are undermined both socially and psychologically. Yet there are only a few cases where women discuss their own rapes-Lucy refuses to do so, given only a few lines to describe what has happened to her and what she feels. Melanie's testimony is also silenced, due to Lurie's decision not to read her statement. Her role in the sexual affair is projected through David's voice only. Melanie's voice is never heard, her words are never given the same respect as David's or Lucy's. The rape of Lucy becomes more of a political metaphor for post-apartheid politics "a history of wrong." In this context, Lucy describes herself as a debt since it was for a long time the Whites atrociously ruled the nation and decimating African indigenous population. Lucy sacrificed her body along with the sacrifice of her property. Lucy ultimately becomes isolated, within the domestic sphere, thus declaring the presence of the remains of patriarchal dominance and oppression of women in the country "to start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity."(p .205)

Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver in their book, 'Rape and Representation' states: "Rape and the threats of rape are a major force in the subjugation of women. In 'rape cultures' such as the United States, the danger, the frequency, and the acceptance of sexual violence all contribute to shaping behavior and identity, in women and men alike. Within this culture, as in others, the nature and degree of oppression will vary with the historical moment and, within that, the permutations of racial, class, gender, and institutional relations of power. In *Disgrace*, the whole story centres round the rapes of two women: Lurie's rape of Melanie, and Lucie's rape at the hands of three black intruders who ransacks her home and attack her. Yet the women victims are silent about their rapes.

Many feministic thinkers consider rape as an act of neutrality which does not share any relation with male dominance. The focus of rape is hence a motive on individual autonomy. However, many other thinkers quote rape as a patriarchal act of dominance to establish power. Like many women in South Africa, Melanie and Lucy have no individual credibility because they are women in a world dominated by a powerful patriarchy, even with the change South Africa promises to make for its entire people. Coetzee is using a rape narrative not only to show the effects of trauma on a supposed race, but also about how the rape narrative has the ability to show gender oppression in both apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa.

Many feminist thinkers argue that illustrations of women remaining silent even on situations of harassment relate the author's incapability to represent power in women. However, Coetzee in his writings does not specifically impart injustice to women. The coloured student, the daughter of the professor and the blind young lady are all symbols of silence in the novel; but their silence does arouse emotional patterns in readers to preserve women rights in the society. Power according to Foucault is not static; it transfers from one entity to another. The punishment for Lurie is one of the excellent examples of power inversion. Coetzee is not just talking of the price whites must pay as the reversal of wrong but he is also making an indirect statement about the price that many female victims of patriarchal politics have to pay with their silence. Both Melanie's and Lucy's silence provides a statement on sexual violence in black South Africa and in the white liberal context of the university. In her essay, "Rape and the Violence of Representation in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*", Carine M. Mardorossian claims that through his "skillful use of narration and juxtaposition, Coetzee takes a horrific scene of violence and urges the readers to view it not as the black hole of analysis, but as an opportunity to overhaul normative approaches to rape, justice, and human relationships".

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