



## Portrayal of Humiliation in J M Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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### Abstract:

The novel *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee has attracted wide readership and analysis since its first publication. Set in the post-apartheid South Africa, the plot revolves around the main character David Lurie, a divorced 52-year-old professor who earns a living by teaching communication courses at the Cape Technical University. The resounding conflict in the novel is introduced right from the first paragraph where readers learn of Lurie's insatiable sexual appetite. He "had affairs with the wives of colleagues; he picked up tourists in bars on the waterfront or at the Club Italia; he slept with whores" (7). Lurie's relationships thus surround women, many who end up in engaging in sexual activities with him. In this paper, the themes of arrogance, disgrace, and reconciliation are explored by reviewing Lurie's interactions with the women in the novel. Despite the portrayal of the female gender as objects of sexual gratification, the characters Soraya, Desiree Isaacs, and Rosalind signify, to a reasonable extent, the rejection of male hegemony on sexual matters. MLA 8<sup>th</sup> edition has been used to cite references.

**Keywords:** arrogance, disgrace, reconciliation, male hegemony, gendered sexuality etc.

A critical analysis into the life of David Lurie reveals a character whose greatest flaw rests in the inability to control sexual drive. Readers get an idea of the flaw in the first paragraph when Lurie is introduced as a divorced, 52-year-old man who, to his mind "has solved the problem of sex rather well" (1). We also learn that the problem that Lurie alludes to above has been solved through his sexual relationship with Soraya, an exotic Muslim prostitute working for Discreet Escorts. Whereas the two are committed to a ninety-minute sexual session every Thursday Afternoon, their engagement is clearly devoid of love and enjoyment, especially from the side of Soraya. Elizabeth Lowry, an editor at London Review of Books, finds the relationship of Lurie and women as exploitative. She submits that, "both the prostitute Soraya and Melanie-Meláni are 'used' women and, significantly, they are both dark" (Lowry 15). Money is what drives Soraya to honor this appointment. In fact, the objectification and commoditization of Soraya body is revealed from the knowledge that a single sexual session takes a duration of ninety minutes and costs a total of R400 (Coetzee 2).

The relationship between Lurie and Soraya however ends in a state of disgrace for both characters. Disgrace being a theme which underpins much of the story, Lurie first instance of disgrace happens when he catches the sight of Soraya walking with her two sons along a street that he frequently walks. The glance of Soraya and her two sons live a lasting impression in Lurie's mind that, in as much as he would like to forget, "the two little boys become presences between them" (6). Evidently, the reality of Soraya double life leaves Lurie at a state of shame when he tries to imagine what the two sons and their father would do if they discover what he does with Soraya. The feeling is even made worse by the fact that he himself has no son and is divorced. Shame, regret, and dishonor cloud the minds of both these characters. Lurie speaks of "she [Soraya] transforms herself into just another woman and him into just another client" (Coetzee 7). It is also in this reality that Lurie comes to terms that he might just be a subject in the prostitutes' gossip. McDonald (2007) puts this new reality into perspective by submitting that "the illusion shattered [that is when Soraya eyes met that of Lurie] is not of her objectivity, but of his own subjectivity, as he becomes aware of how she sees him (McDonald, 20). For the first time, he appears embarrassed of his age body as prostitute tend to "shudder" over older clients (Coetzee 8).

Another theme that Coetzee reveals through the relationship of Lurie and women is that of arrogance. Arrogance entails an overbearing attitude directed to people who are perceived as inferior. This arrogance brings to light the hegemonic gender relations between men and women. For instance, after Soraya rejected Lurie's tendency to regain dominance over her, Lurie re-asserts his dominance when he asks rhetorical questions: "what should a predator expect when he intrudes into the vixen's nest, into the home of her cubs?" (Coetzee 10). McDonald (2009) suggests that objectifying Soraya through the use of animal metaphors was a strategy used by Lurie to reclaim dominance and authority (21). Even though the details surrounding their Lurie's marriage to Rosalind are scarce, we can gain a wind of Lurie's arrogance in the marriage set-up through the thoughts that run through his mind. For instance, in an attempt to justify his sexual escapades with Soraya, he appears to suggest that; who needs a wife, home or marriage when "ninety minutes a week with a woman's company are enough to make him happy?" This is arrogance of the highest order especially to women who, in marriage setup, tend to be very loyal and submissive. Arrogance is further revealed through Lurie's encounter with Desiree Isaacs. Despite the fact that he has visited their home to make apology for sleeping with Melanie (a student from his class), one cannot help but wonder how again Lurie still views Desiree through lustful lenses. He for instance describes her as "the beauty" and the "desired one". He even imagines "the two of them [Melanie and Desiree] in the same bed: an experience fit for a King" (164).

However, still through Lurie's relationship to Soraya, Desiree Isaacs, and Rosalind, the theme of reconciliation is explored as even male hegemony in gender relations is rejected. For instance, Lurie's makes an attempt to reconcile with Soraya by tracking her to her home. Soraya rejects this and in turn demands [commands] Lurie to never phone her home again. Desiree on the other hand finds it very hard to reconcile with an old man who had messed up with her sister. In as much as the family had discussed about Lurie and his planned visit, Desiree still thinks that he is unwanted visitor. She simply cannot come into terms with the reality that her sister, Melanie, had slept with "this old man". The process of reconciliation between Isaacs, particularly women, is complicated by the gender sexuality that comes into play. We for

instance read of Lurie's apology when he, "with careful ceremony he gets to his knees and touches his forehead to the floor" (Coetzee 173). This gesture however leaves the mother and Desiree unmoved. It can be argued that the rejection of the apology has more to do with the elements of insincerity. According to J.M. Austerities (2016), it is argued that the "gesture neither transcends not negates the predicament of gendered sexuality" because, a few lines later, we see Lurie experiencing "again the current leaps, the current of desire" as he looks into the eyes of mother and daughter (J.M. Austerities 160).

Nonetheless, Rosalind depicts a woman who has gained control over her life and is willing to reconcile with her husband but not necessarily emotionally. She openly expresses distaste for Lurie's sexual escapades with Melanie. She says, "The whole thing is disgraceful from beginning to end. Disgraceful and vulgar too; and I'm not sorry for saying so." (45) Through Rosalind, we see a woman who is not afraid to stand up against a man who had divorced her. However, we can also sense an aspect of Rosalind that is determined to reconcile their differences and be on civil terms. For example, she expresses concern over an article in the Argus news article discussing Lurie. By telephoning and urging Lurie "to steel himself", there is a sense of a woman who is on a reconciliation mission.

In conclusion, the themes of arrogance, disgrace, and reconciliation are explored in light of gendered-sexual relations between Lurie and characters Soraya, Desiree Isaacs, and Rosalind. Objectification and commoditization of women as sexual tools are the source of Lurie's arrogance. His character eventually disgraces him when he becomes the objects of self-shame and public ridicule. Because of Lurie's hegemonic views when he comes to gender relations, the process of reconciliation is complicated to those who cannot explain or accept his behavior.

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