

Power and Powerlessness in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Abstract. This research paper delves into J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* within the context of post-apartheid South Africa, focusing on power dynamics and powerlessness. Through the lens of Michel Foucault's theories, it analyses the misuse of power by individuals and institutions, particularly examining protagonist David Lurie's exploitation of his position as a professor and the fictional portrayal of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in the novel. Lurie's exploitation of his position as a white male professor exemplifies the entanglement of power and knowledge, leading to the sexual exploitation of a black student. This research paper also analyses Lurie's resistance to repentance and the TRC's demand for confession, drawing parallels to Foucault's exploration of confession and punishment. The research paper further explores the role reversal of racial violence and critiques the novel's controversial portrayals, considering accusations of racial bias. The novel challenges readers to confront uncomfortable truths about race, privilege, raising questions about the feasibility of true reconciliation in the face of entrenched power structures and societal inequalities. Ultimately, *Disgrace* unveils complexities surrounding power, race relations, and the lingering trauma of apartheid, offering insights into the ongoing struggle for reconciliation and societal healing in post-apartheid South Africa.

Keywords : Trauma; post-apartheid; racial violence; power dynamics; truth and reconciliation commission.

The post-apartheid period in South Africa is a time for healing and recuperation. It is an age of transition, end to racial oppression and exploitation. The literature written during this period divulges in the trauma of the past and present; against the racial stigma still existing in this transforming society. Though it was liberation from confinement and discrimination, but the impact of the apartheid is largely prevalent. To mitigate the violence and trauma inflicted, organisational bodies were setup by the government to combat and provide justice to victims of racial violence. These bodies were power institutes having the capacity to impart judgment and restitution through justice to the victim and grant amnesty

to the perpetrators. It was supposedly a process of catharsis through forgiveness and reconciliation. The “apartness” that existed between the races during the apartheid was now a phase of adjustment, acceptance, and tolerance. The literature written during the post-apartheid period made a thorough examination of these power structures and their inherent political motivations. *Disgrace* as a post-apartheid text unmasks and unveils the machinations of these power structures whether it is through an organisation or an individual.

Disgrace is a post-apartheid novel written by the South African writer J.M. Coetzee. The novel was published and awarded the Booker Prize in 1999. *Disgrace* revolves around the protagonist, David Lurie, a fifty-two-year-old Professor of English, who teaches at the Cape Technical University at Cape Town, South Africa. He is later relegated to teach a communications course much to his chagrin. Lurie has been divorced twice and extremely morose, he is the epitome of the average white man, unhappy and struggling to adjust in a post-apartheid age. His only adult child, Lucy lives and works at her farm in the countryside. Lurie is a man of many vices and moral misgivings; he is extremely sexually active, having regular rendezvous with prostitutes. His downfall occurs when he has an affair with Melanie Isaacs, a black student under his tutelage. The affair is discovered, though Lurie is adamant that his relationship with Melanie is consensual, but the university considers it as an act of rape. The title of the novel refers to subsequent public disclosure of the affair and the ousting of Lurie from his job. After the scandal, Lurie visits his daughter at her farm, who later becomes a victim of brutal rape by several black perpetrators. The novel posits the problematic opposing viewpoint of violence occurring at both sides, whether it is performed by the white or black male. It questions whether there is hope for a better relationship through reconciliation and acceptance or there is a strain of generational racial violence still existing in the post-apartheid era.

This paper will try to uncover and dissect the issue of the use and misuse of power through the power structures and consequently the problems of justice and amnesty propagated by them. It will examine the role of disciplinary bodies, their impact and mode of operation. These issues will be examined through the concepts and theories of the French philosopher, Michel Foucault. Foucault’s concept of “power-knowledge” will be analysed through the protagonist, David Lurie. His role as a white man asserting his dominance not only through his race but also as a well-

educated Professor who has the agency to influence the impressionable young minds of his students. Foucault's concept of power structures or power institutions is a vast area of research that will be investigated through the fictional representation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in the novel. The Foucauldian idea of the "disciplinary power" has its depiction in the TRC, a regulatory power body that has the capacity to impart justice. The paper will further highlight the powerlessness of the characters in the later half of the novel, wherein Lurie and his daughter Lucy are seen as hapless victims subjected to racial violence and rape. Their sheer helplessness in healing from the trauma wherein there is a role reversal, rather than the age old generational white- on- black violence it now the opposite.

Foucault's concept of power- knowledge as mentioned in his book *The History of Sexuality* posits power and knowledge isn't disconnected from each other rather they function together. Foucault discusses :

Indeed, it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together...To be more precise, we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one.

(Foucault, 94)

The power- knowledge relationship is not mutually exclusive to institutions, but an individual can exercise it as efficiently. While discussing *Disgrace*, Professor Lurie misuses this concept to hide the affair. He is a vainglorious man, displaying his abundance of knowledge of Romantic Literature to entrap students for sexual favours. As a white man he exercises control over Melanie who he calls "the dark one" (Coetzee, 8). He is dominant in the relationship and demands attention and respect. Lurie asserts his superiority when he contemplates over his relationship Melanie, "To the extent that they are together, if they are together, he is the one who leads, she the one who follows. Let him not forget that." (13). Lurie inhabits a power institution that propagates knowledge to a variety of students. But Lurie mishandles his position partaking in corrupt practices of awarding fabricated grades and attendance to Melanie to disguise his affair. He further exploits the system

to uncover records and gain access to personal information of Melanie. Lurie's sexual assault on his student is the squandering of the trust the university has in him. Lurie's sense of power and authority derives from his privileged position that controls esoteric knowledge meant only for the few that engage in his whims and fancies. Melanie is then a victim of these power institutes and people who manipulate and abuse the system for their own nefarious needs. Melanie coaxes Lurie to gain access to his expertise in William Wordsworth and Lord Byron, the latter which is a research interest of Lurie because he envisions a similarity in his libertine lifestyle and frivolous impulses to Lord Byron. But Lurie's intention to teach Melanie is marred with his lust for the body of the "other". Lucy Valerie Graham comments on Lurie's dissipating knowledge with malicious intent. She writes :

Lurie's misuse of Melanie exposes operating at the level of gender and at an institutional level... Immersed in a falsifying Romantic tradition, David speculates that beauty does not belong to itself, and thus justifies his underlying assumption, as Melanie's educator, that she is somehow his property. (Graham, 438)

Foucault's examination of the penitentiary system and history of disciplinary power bodies and the subsequent punitive elements is well documented in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Foucault analyses Jeremy Bentham's idea of the "Panopticon" prison structure as a centralised system (a tower structure in the middle of the cell block overlooking all the prison cells monitored regularly by guards) of surveillance for the inmates. Foucault's understanding of the panopticon system in the modern times is that this power will not be exclusive to a particular system or institution but will be prevalent everywhere. The invention of recording devices because of advancement in modern technology such as video cameras being setup has questioned serious issues of privacy.

The Foucauldian concept of the "disciplinary power" which traces its history from the sovereign ruler to the prison system as dispelling punishment can be examined in the novel through the committee set up by the university to oversee the scandal. Just as Foucault traced issues of

power structures and modes of punishment, In *Disgrace* the committee set up is a fictional interpretation of Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a South African government organisation. The TRC was an organisation founded in 1996, it was established under the guidance of President Nelson Mandela and the Archbishop Desmond Tutu served as its first chairman. Sue Kossew comments on the purpose of the TRC and its relation to the novel, "...a number of early commentators on the text have seen a parallel with Truth and Reconciliation Commission process; that of making a public apology for the past crimes of apartheid and receiving an amnesty for any public admission of guilt." (Kossew, 159)

The committee in *Disgrace* serves as a reminder of the scrutiny, disciplinary and punitive bodies that Foucault had discussed. The committee setup by the university operates with the assembling of cameras to record and pass judgment on Lurie. The media coverage of the proceedings of the committee becomes open for public discourse and perusal. But the committee has deeper political motivations; it functions with the purpose to give solace and justice to the age-old injustices on the black community. The committee demands an admission of guilt and apology not only for the rape but also a confession of wrongdoing for exploiting and violating a black student. The implications are far more serious, the committee's agenda is for Lurie to be made an example and further heed warning for future transgressions enacted by any other faculty member. In a debate with Noam Chomsky in 1971, Foucault addresses the issue of the university as a facilitator of knowledge and as a power structure. He debates :

...The university and in a general way, all teaching systems, which appear simply to disseminate knowledge, are made to maintain a certain social class in power; and to exclude the instruments of power of another social class. Institutions of knowledge...also help to support the political power. (Foucault : 1995, 1)

Then, the university committee serves as an allegorical representation of the TRC that functions within the same parameters. It propagates as an authoritative body that allows and provides agency to a white professor the freedom to exploit a black student. It is not only the power dynamics

of social class and hierarchy but also race relations. The code of conduct of the university reiterates the post-apartheid guilt, the notification addresses that “Article 3 deals with victimization or harassment on grounds of race, ethnic group, religion, gender, sexual preference, or physical disability. Article 3.1 addresses victimization or harassment of students by teachers.” (Coetzee, 17)

The committee acts as an overseer of a disciplinary body which is also adamant on counselling and reformation. It further invokes divine intervention and to seek religious help through a confession from a priest to absolve Lurie of his guilt. The committee is not entirely successful in coaxing a confession of remorse or penitence or for the act of sexual abuse; rather Lurie mocks the committee and admits, “I was not myself. I was no longer a fifty-year-old divorcee at a loose end. I became a servant of Eros.” (23). The committee concurs that it is their duty to protect its integrity and be wary of the misuse of their positions and race relations, “...As teachers we occupy positions of power. Perhaps a ban on mixing power relations with sexual relations, which, I sense, is what was going on in this case.” (23). The committee’s purpose is to forewarn as the scandal serves as a cautionary tale for future transgressors who mishandle their positions of power. One of the most integral and defining functions of the TRC and the university committee is to cleanse your soul through the act of repentance. Lurie wholeheartedly disagrees with this concept. Lurie believes he’s being subjected as scapegoat to a larger political and social issue of race relations. The theological method of confessing for your sins is somehow preposterous for Lurie, he replies, “Before that secular tribunal I pleaded guilty, a secular plea. That plea should suffice. Repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse” (25).

Spectacle of public guilt and shame and punishment has its long history. Foucault addressed this similar issue in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, while discussing the failed assassination attempt of King Louis XV of France perpetrated by Robert-François Damiens. Concerning the TRC and the committee, a mere confession wouldn’t suffice, and punishment must be severe. The committee’s purpose is to subject Lurie through a rigorous and thorough procedure without a chance of escape. He has to be disciplined with due diligence. Coetzee in his essay, “Confession and Double Thoughts : Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky” describes his understanding of the concept of confession. Coetzee does

not believe that a confession done with utmost sincerity isn't outside the realm of further introspection and scrutiny. There can always be doubts and suspicion of being insincere. Coetzee argues in his essay that "Confession is one element in a sequence of transgression, confession, penitence, and absolution. Absolution means the enclosing of the chapter, liberation from oppression of the memory." (194). Coetzee endows Lurie the agency to reject absolution and accept his punishment without an ounce of repentance. Lurie is so deeply enamoured by Melanie that he refuses to forget her. He candidly watches her perform at a theatre one year later, delusionary hoping to reignite the affair. Therefore, the absolute rejection of absolution and repentance is exercised because Melanie represents for Lurie a memory, he can't repress along with his seething lust for her. Though the TRC was successful at the onset, but it became highly controversial because of its stringent rule to demand repentance as it tried to compensate for the generational violence.

If the power dynamics in the first half of the novel represented the white man exploiting the black woman, the latter half is a role reversal of black-on-white violence. The rape of Lucy, Lurie's daughter by multiple black men and the subsequent acceptance of the child being borne out of the rape is a highly controversial element that brings forth issues of reinforcing racial stereotypes. It seems that Coetzee hopes to represent the duality of violence existing on both fronts. But as a post-apartheid novel it has led to severe criticisms as critics have commented on the novel being supporting the white cause through the portrayal of powerless and hapless victims. Coetzee has been condemned on the manner of his portrayal of the white family as unfortunate casualties of past atrocities and the black man as savages. These controversial portrayals may be debated whether there are preconceived notions, prejudiced or even being racist caricatures. Nadine Gordimer, the Nobel and Booker Award winning and stalwart South African author, severely criticized Coetzee in an interview published in a book review of *Disgrace* by Rachel Donadio. Gordimer comments on Coetzee and the novel:

There is not one black person who is a real human being...I find it difficult to believe...having lived here all my life and being part of everything that has happened here, that the black family protects the rapist because he's one of them...If that's the only truth he could

find in the post-apartheid South Africa,
I regretted this very much for him.
(Donadio, 1)

Powerlessness in *Disgrace* is the inability to act and protect. Lurie's futile attempt of protecting his daughter and himself at her own farm can be seen as emasculating him of his fatherly duties. He is no longer the dominant force in this new space (the farm surrounded by black farmers and labourers). He is relegated to being incapable to adjust to a space that he has neither control nor represents the authoritative figure. The Foucauldian concept posits that modes of power will always face resistance. Similarly, Lurie's relationship with daughter is predicated on his failure being the dominant person. There is a struggle in power relations as he faces resistance through Lucy's sexual orientation as a lesbian, and the incapability to understand the circumstances of Lucy accepting her child borne out of the rape. Lucy's compliance to succumb to her brutal state and problematically agree to marry a black man who possibly knew her rapists has been a topic of debate and severe criticism. Lucy addresses the issue in the novel :

What if...what if that is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying? Perhaps that is what they tell themselves. (Coetzee, 67)

Lucy's decision is a stark reminder that the post-apartheid black on white violence and trauma seems to be based on the consequence of past atrocities on the black community, and this perspective isn't as straightforward as possible. Coetzee is often labelled of having racial bias in the novel; the white characters are well developed whereas the black characters are seen as mere reprobates. Lurie as a sexual offender is given agency of seeking redemption. The black perpetrators are relegated to being faceless intruders exacting an apartheid debt. This polarizing issue that the novel addresses maybe examined at least through the transformation and exchanging of power structures in a post-apartheid South Africa. Is Lucy's decision reflecting the apartheid white guilt or

the fear of another attack or altercation? Do centres of power that existed before the apartheid no longer exist or is there inherent violence on both sides that are in constant state of flux that have a larger societal impact. Another perspective of Lucy's decision to remain on her farm is to display a sense of strength in the midst of adversity. She is wary of the impending risk, her decision reflects a defiance against the forces that seek to render her powerless, even as she acknowledges her own vulnerability. While one of the dominant themes of *Disgrace* suggest the utter powerlessness of individuals trapped in a hopeless and complex situation, the novel still provides the characters an agency and capacity to restore their lost sense of dignity and sense of self-worth. Lucy understands and problematically accepts her precarious powerless situation not merely out of fear of retaliation but as an act of resilience against further racial violence.

Disgrace, then unveils the duality of this complicated issue, if the first half delved in an examination of the domination of white supremacy the latter a debatable inquiry into acceptance and conformity. The novel may not provide definite answers concerning race relations, but it does take the stance of how power, whether social or political are utilised and corrupted by individuals and organisations. It is a post-apartheid narrative where peace and racial harmony is yet to be achieved whether in the case of Melanie's violation or Lucy's mute subjugation.

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