



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

Apartheid, Oppression, Counter-Violence: A Foucauldian Reading of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

Mr. Sandeep Kumar Sharma

Researcher, Department of English, Punjabi University, Patiala, Punjab, India.

Abstract

J. M. Coetzee is generally considered as one of the most renowned and celebrated writers who is known for the realistic portrayal of South Africa both during and after apartheid. This paper is focused on the relevance of Foucauldian concept of Power/Knowledge Discourse in the Booker Prize winner and Nobel Laureate John Maxwell Coetzee's renowned masterpiece *Disgrace*. Coetzee presents a complex account of the interrelationship between eros, the body and disgrace in the novel. Power represses and distorts the identity of an individual and the search for identity and the dynamics of power operate throughout this novel and make the individuals universal beyond the African situation. The novel faithfully depicts the white minority on the verge of extinction both ideologically and physically.

Keywords

Disgrace; Oppression; Rape; Power; Apartheid; Post-apartheid.

J. M. Coetzee, the South African novelist, twice Booker Prize winner and Nobel Laureate among the contemporary novelists, is perhaps the only one who is rigorously engaged in exploring issues crucial to the fictional discourse, locating himself in the complex historical past and in the fractured social present of the post-apartheid South Africa. Coetzee's self-consciousness that runs through all his works informs his understanding of the historical, political and social forces as they act and interact with each other in the context of South Africa. Coetzee's work has been considered as particularly interesting for academic criticism, the reason being the apparent versatility of Coetzee's writing strategies that combine an extremely sophisticated style, and a thought provoking ethical and political representation of the violent history of South Africa based on personal experiences. Eric P. Louw contends, "Coetzee is widely considered one of the most renowned and celebrated writers, who is known for the fact-based portrayal of his native country both during and after apartheid, and is further distinguished by his acute awareness of marginalization and his affinity for rural settings" (Louw 126).

Coetzee is basically concerned with the South African reality and represents the complexity in unfolding the issues of identity, power and freedom. He evaluates the African conditions in the context of the modern European literary tradition without undermining the basic issues that shape the African reality in the apartheid and post-apartheid segments of time in the troubled history of South Africa. His major novels are rooted in South Africa, implicitly and explicitly and became universal and relevant for all time. Almost all the major characters of his novels undergo the process of identity crisis and losing power and position because of the power structure of the colonizers or

the changing power equations. His novels constantly remind us that oppression, torture, injustice and victimization are not only confined to South Africa but these are universal. Robert M. Post remarks, “By siding with the oppressed, he has become one of them” (Post 72).

This paper is focused on the relevance of Foucauldian concept of Power/Knowledge Discourse in the Booker Prize winner and Nobel Laureate John Maxwell Coetzee's renowned masterpiece *Disgrace* (1999). *Disgrace* has become Coetzee's most discussed novel, inspiring what a renowned critic Don Randall calls “a flood of ...response” (Randall 212). In addition to being a commercial success, Lucy Graham has asserted that it is “a literary triumph” (Graham 4). Reading between the lines, one can easily find that the novel fully and clearly illustrates the Foucauldian concept. Post-apartheid South Africa is the milieu of the novel. The novel is the first attempt of the writer to deal explicitly with Post-apartheid South Africa and the picture it paints is a cheerless one as it will not comfort any race, nationality or view point. *Disgrace* has been described by Gareth Cornwell as “Coetzee's first mainly realist novel offering a pessimistic view of post-apartheid race, gender and power relations” (Cornwell 248). Rita Bernard says, “*Disgrace* is indicative of Coetzee's abiding interest in the colonial past and suggests that a crisis of definitions, relationships and responsibilities lies at the heart of this troubling post-apartheid work” (Bernard 384). The novel unfolds the dynamics of power when the changing power equations mar personal relations. It presents a bleak picture of the new South Africa where the whites have lost their supremacy and the blacks are emerging domineering and settling accounts of the history of the apartheid South Africa. The novel asks uncomfortable questions about the relationship between the coloured and the whites and it gives grim account of the white minority on the brink of extinction because of the changing power equations. The protagonist, David Lurie, has to accept an ever increasing pain at the end of the novel. He says, “one gets used to things getting harder, one

ceases to be surprised that what used to be as hard as can be, grows harder yet” (Coetzee 219). This single sentence describes Coetzee's notion of life in the new South Africa where brutal tyranny has been replaced by brutal anarchy.

South Africa was a British colony but now the power has shifted to the natives. With power shift the people who were dominated by the whites, dealt with cruelly, tortured in their own land, have now gained upper hand, and are seeking revenge now. They are no longer the silent sufferers as they used to be. The system of power in our society is like a machine of which everyone becomes a part. Foucault insists that power is never simply a system of dominance, in which the dominated ones are always subordinate and disempowered. If Melanie, the coloured girl is raped, she is not the only one who has fallen victim to the perverse mentality of David Lurie, the white. He feels that the experience is not quite the rape but undesired experience. The complaint against Lurie is made not by Melanie but by her boyfriend. Lurie is told by the inquiry committee of the university that he must apologize and undergo counselling. But showing resistance he admits his guilt and outrightly refuses counselling for something that seems natural to him and even fine because he has given outlet to his biological needs. He refuses to apologize and to avoid dismissal, he resigns. Later in the novel, David's daughter Lucy is raped by three black men equally cruel and she has to keep quiet saying it is a private matter. This shows that Foucault's theory justifiably applies to this novel as power, when it changes hands, has its deep impact on the life of the dominants and the dominated ones. Lucy's use of power against her father highlights another characteristic of power: the omnipresence of power. As power is exercised in every kind of relationship in different forms, Foucault proclaims, “Power is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. I* 93). Its repercussions are based on

equal justice as the whites in South Africa have to confront the same behaviour and the retaliation takes on the form of retributive justice. David is compelled to live at a remote dog farm and his daughter Lucy is to marry Petrus who is a native of South Africa.

The abuse of the female body is shown in the novel in the form of the rapes. The change that comes in David is brought by rationalising of power; at one point he seriously thinks of asking his doctor to castrate him as one sterilises a domestic animal. This change comes in him when he is in depression because of his inability to control his sex urge, as he is fifty-two, but he never undergoes such operation. Foucault's notion that power and knowledge discipline a person, is clearly seen here when David thinks of obeying a discipline, as he prefers to channelize his energy at the animal farm and clinic. Coetzee puts him in such a situation that he must endure both psychological degradation and physical torment. After he has fallen to disgrace and fled from Cape Town to his daughter Lucy's remote farm, she tells him that this is the only life there is, which they share with animals. In the light of the insult given to him and his daughter, David still demands justice which he does not get. Lucy understands all this but he does not, that is to live where she lives, and they have to tolerate brutalization in the form of burglary, rape and humiliation. She tells her father, "Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept...to start at ground level with nothing...no cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity...like a dog" (205).

After the rape Lucy has no difficulty in understanding that the economic developments have taken place with the transfer of power and the emergence of post-apartheid South Africa. She says, "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 this is what they tell themselves" (158). She talks to David about his decision to stay there in the farm. In this context the Foucauldian concept is apparently true that power not only oppresses or

suppresses, it also produces as it has produced a new consciousness in both Lurie and Lucy that they have to adapt themselves to the changes which are taking place in the post-apartheid South Africa. So the effects of power are not negative but positive in nature. Here the rape of Lucy has made her confront the consequences of the apartheid.

In South Africa during the apartheid, segregation was evident and the blacks were treated as minority whereas in fact they were the majority. Oppression is still alive in the post-apartheid period. Now whites are the real minority, hence victims of hatred and prejudice. The oppression suffered by Lucy reflects the post-apartheid situation in which whites became less powerful or even powerless. This substantiates Foucault's argument that power relations in our societies remain unstable because neither the dominant agent constantly sits in the position of controlling, nor the subordinate agent absolutely submits to the control of the dominant agent. Lucy is one of the strongest characters since her power is provided by her indomitable and iron will. Power has an objective or a goal and power relations arise only when there is a conflict, where there is conflict, there is power. So power is confirmed as a force to forbid, to prohibit, to say no and to punish while someone breaks laws, rules, taboos or order. The threat of being punished informs individuals to maintain their manners and abide by all constraints. But Foucault in his theories specifically mentions that power cannot be seen as merely repressive, negative, prohibitive or causing the imposition of false forms of consciousness. Instead of arguing that power is good or bad and that power relations can only be repressive, Foucault suggests that power has a positive and productive aspect as he states in *Discipline and Punish*:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms; it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact power produces, it produces reality, it produces domain of objects and rituals of truth. The individual

and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 194)

When we talk about power, the first thought that comes to mind is, someone or some group owns something named 'power' and which they exercise over others, then we immediately picture a structure of hierarchy in which the stronger who holds power stands over the weaker. As a result, the representation of power is considered to be, if not repression, nor domination, then definitely submission. Lucy suffers a shock by the Blacks' hatred during her rape and it is personal and impersonal at the same time. The history of racial oppression metaphorically becomes the story of Lucy's life but in David's case there are two roles played almost simultaneously; the white man (oppressor) abuses the black girl and the black men abuse the white man's daughter (oppressed). The Professor plays both roles: colonizer/oppressor and colonized/oppressed person which signifies the Foucauldian concept that power is complex and it exists at a micro level among the people and is not controlled by one person or group. Foucault also asserts that power relations are modifiable and potentially reversible. However Lurie is only aware of the second one and his oppression is portrayed as impotency in relation to his daughter's choice, strength, rape and will power. Moreover, Petrus as well as the three black men who raped Lucy are a permanent threat to them. David is unable to deal with this new reality of living with his daughter in the countryside and its consequences which oppress him even more. At first he is oppressed by society because of Melanie's affair, when private life turns into public. When Lucy is raped, oppression and guilt is even worse, since she refuses to talk to the police and the rapists are still around. David feels oppressed by the latter ones and by his own daughter.

As stated earlier, we see David, a disgraced university professor, escaping to his daughter's farm in the Eastern Cape after being made to resign. An English Language and Literature Professor, he is a product of a problematic

colonial system. He is a part of the colonial discourse that has provided him with the rigid linguistic framework through which he functions. Language, which has once helped him, now fails him. Having been brought up in the western tradition and with the language of the Empire, he is now incapable of coping with the events and the changes that have taken place around him.

Michel Foucault sees individuals as merely “Vehicles of power as power must be analysed as something which only functions in the form of a chain” (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 98). In its role as an instrument of power, language also acquires the power to circulate. Initially, it is brutally inflicted on the other, then it is absorbed by the other, only to be thrown back at the person who has initiated it in the first place. “Power produces knowledge - power and knowledge directly imply each other. There is no power relations without the co-relative constitution of a field of knowledge nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (McNay 63). This development is evident in the character of Petrus when he assumes the role of the master, his language is not the original language but a distorted version of it as demonstrated by his conversation with David. In fact, Petrus is the most complex character in the novel, he remains inscrutable throughout, perhaps he embodies ambivalence of the new South Africa. Petrus benefits from the new regime but it is unclear what is his position towards those formerly powerful in the rearranged scenario and what are his uncertainties and fears about the present time.

The implication and consequence of Lucy's rape compels her to accept a marriage proposal which would otherwise have been completely unacceptable, as the third wife of Petrus. She accepts because she understands that rape has robbed her of her being, has made her relinquish control of her life and accept the new emerging power. When Petrus asks David for his daughter's hand, he is affirming the new order that has developed in South Africa. He negotiates an equal partner over the body of a woman; all through the attack on Lucy, Petrus

has been suspiciously absent. When he finally shows up, he is “wearing a suit too tight for him figuratively assuming the role that is not inherently his, the master and an equal partner in an alien system and as with the suit, the role has been handed down” (113). Unintentionally, Lucy finds herself cast in the unwelcome role of a farmer's wife, a victim of a white-turned-black dominance. As David's masculine power declines, Petrus's power increases. This means that not all masculinities are losing power but only those that are now outdated ones.

In the post-apartheid political system it is asserted that man may be deprived of what he had. The author wants to suggest that the whites find themselves lost due to the new political winds blowing and they resist this change which means that all the problems which offend the whites, they think, emanate from the shift of political system. They are deprived of their earlier privileged position. In the case of Professor David Lurie we see that he loses his direction as well as authority when he is out from the university. As a result he is exposed to further trouble as he is displaced and he has to flee the city life he used to lead. David himself reflects: “I am no longer marketable. The scandal will follow me, stick to me” (88). When his daughter is gang raped, he himself is set on fire and physically assaulted while Lucy's dogs are shot; the material suffering of the body, animal or human, is a common fate in the novel. This account of power makes it appear as though people are unable to escape from power. However, Foucault sees this as only a problem for those who still believe power is repressive and negative and he suggests, “A society without power relations can only be an abstraction” (Dreyfus and Rabinow 222). In this way, David has become a poor victim of the operations of power at a much wider level. Foucault insists that “power is a series of complex relations and can operate in an unpredictable manner and due to this complexity, power cannot be said to represent the interests of one group or individual” (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 98).

Paula M. Krebs writes that initially “Blacks are hostile to Whites, always waiting their chance to turn the tables on their masters especially sexually” (Krebs 65). This is evident in *Disgrace*. Colonialism employing sexual dominance as a form of control is certainly one of the cruelest forms of governance for the objects of the desire, which is usually female, undergoes a double kind of subjugation, to a man and to a system. Hania Nashef contends, “Female sexuality is a construction of male power. Constructed for her by others, belonging in essence to ideology, female sexuality dictates that a woman's experience of the heterosexual relation should be of being possessed as an object” (Nashef 96).

In *Disgrace*, J.M. Coetzee presents a complex account of the interrelationship between eros, the body and disgrace. In the novel “the body is very strongly linked to power, desire and disgrace” (Kossew 55). Incapable of stifling his own desire, David after other affairs progresses to preying upon one of his students, Melanie, young enough to be his daughter and quite exotic: “She is small and thin, with close cropped black hair, wide almost like Chinese cheekbones, large, dark eyes” (11). His infringement of the University sexual harassment code, by having a sexual liaison with a student by allowing eros to act through him David Lurie abused his academic authority and privileged male status over a female student. Michel Foucault's notion that power leads to such circumstances which bring about drastic changes in the life is true here in this case also. David's molestation of his student is also a kind of violation of the educational ethics of the university where no one can overstep the boundaries of the morality because everyone has to follow the discipline, because discipline as a form of self-regulation encouraged by institutions permeates modern societies. As Foucault rightly remarks:

Discipline consists of a concern with control which is internalized by each individual. It consists of a concern with self-control over one's postures and bodily functions, concentration, sublimations of

immediate desires and emotions. All of these elements are the effects of disciplinary pressure and at the same time they are all actions which produce the individual as subjected to a set of procedures whose aim is to discipline the self. (Mills 43)

But Lurie showed absolute defiance by overstepping and overlooking the disciplinary code of the university by falling in an affair with a student and he had to face serious consequences.

Foucault says that power is operative also and it is clearer in David's case. It is not the sheer fact that David has abused his position as a faculty member that brands him a rapist, but the pleasure he has derived from exercising that power when he finds the experience 'enriching' shows the operative aspect of power. During the proceedings of the tribunal, his colleague Swarts suggests that banning should be exercised regarding teacher-student relationships. Swarts also reminds him that a teacher occupies a position of power in the academic world and tells him that he should not have mixed power relations with sexual relations. The intention here seems to be that David Lurie had misused his power and position to exploit his own student, this could prove to be more appealing for David Lurie, as a ban always makes the objects more desirable. Therefore, a ban would mean that he stands to lose more control over his life. His perverse desire can be interpreted as the product of the ruthless apartheid system. Under the post-apartheid regime the university now serves the dominant economic-political order because it assists late capitalism's interest in the creation of docile and productive bodies. Thus the University Committee's hearing of Lurie's case reveals that the confession/punishment that the university seeks has political value for the current state of affairs in South Africa. Foucault argues that proper order is maintained by institutions through the production of docile and productive bodies. The institutional disciplining, surveillance and punishment of the body creates bodies that are habituated to external regulation working "to discipline

the body, optimize its capabilities, increase its usefulness and docility and thus produce the types of bodies that society requires” (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 139). But David's refusal of both confession and contrition is a gesture of resistance to the newly emergent world-order with post-apartheid South Africa's institutions.

David Couzens Hoy clarifies Foucault's idea that “power would be a fragile thing if its function was to repress only” (Hoy 130) and if David actually reclaims some dignity at the end of the novel, it is because he gives up everything, gives up more than a dog ever could; his daughter, his ideas about justice and language, his dream of writing an opera on Byron in Italy and even the dying animals he has learnt to love without reservation, without thought for himself. He has learnt to accept a discipline. His power according to Foucauldian notion gave him a new ideology and knowledge. This has brought him nearer to truth and ground realities of life and there is a total transformation in him, his ways of life which is the positive aspect of power. Sara Mills rightly remarks, “Even at their most constraining, oppressive measures are in fact productive, giving rise to new forms of behaviour rather than simply closing down or censoring certain forms of behavior” (Mills 33) and this sea change and the productive aspect of David Lurie's character is visible when there is a marked transformation in his attitude in the concluding part of the novel. Foucault no longer believes that power only “suppresses, ignores, separates, conceals or hides instead he proposed that power is productive” (Merquior 156).

The rape on Lucy becomes the turning point in the second half of the novel and Lurie wants to make it public and demands justice. However, there is only brutality and mistrust in new South Africa. Petrus is only a farm labourer but he has coined a new word for himself when he calls himself a ‘farm manager’. Thus the status of Petrus changes dramatically and he is no more a peasant from apartheid South Africa toiling with hands. He borrows a

tractor and within hours ploughs the whole of his land. With every passing day, he emerges stronger and more powerful, outplaying Lucy on all fronts as it happens in the game of chess. It is a different face of South Africa that David Lurie witnesses and feels a sense of defeat in Petrus's progress. David Lurie, who was an oppressor in the apartheid South Africa has become an oppressed and powerless in post-apartheid situation. Lurie, who taught the European classics in the Cape Town University, sells vegetables with his daughter in the countryside. From an elevated position of a University Professor, he has become a 'dog man', a caretaker of dogs. There is a gradual degradation on all fronts in his life. Here the unstable characteristic of Foucault's concept of power is highlighted that power does not only work from top to the below but also from the bottom to the top. As it has been previously mentioned, power is a network of relations, therefore, when power is in action, subjects who stand at the top of the power also receive the powerful force from the bottom. The top and the bottom, as rivals in a tug of war propose to influence and to win over the other, according to its interests and due to this reason, power is suggested to be unstable and goes on changing hands. Animals also play a significant role in the novel because their marginalized status, and their struggle for survival make the state of disgrace more severe for David and he realizes that his life has lost all its material value. At last, David feels himself like a crippled man without any power, position or identity.

To sum up, Coetzee grew up during the days of apartheid in South Africa and tried to represent the issues of identity, power and freedom. The trajectory of power affects the issues of identity, dignity, race and gender in the novel. Operation of power leads individuals to very complex dimensions in new South Africa. Lurie learns to accept the change after the harrowing experiences of losing job, identity, power and at last, his daughter Lucy and he reaches the stage of total renunciation and surrender. As the novel develops, Petrus becomes more and more powerful and Lurie weak and powerless as a result of

the changing power equations. Power represses and distorts the identity of an individual and the search for identity and the dynamics of power operate throughout this novel and make the individuals universal beyond the African situation. The novel faithfully depicts the white minority on the verge of extinction both ideologically and physically. It presents a very harsh picture of new South Africa where the whites have lost their identity and learn the incorrigible lessons of oppression, exploitation, victimization and injustice in their turn in the reversed roles and they have to accept the truth and begin a life from a scratch.

Works Cited

- Barnard, Rita. "J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the South African Pastoral." *Contemporary Literature* 44.2 (2003): 199-224. Print.
- Coetzee, J.M. *Disgrace*. London: Vintage. 1999. Print.
- Cornwell, Gareth. "Realism and Rape in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*." *Critique* 43.3 (2002): 307-322. Print.
- Dean, M. *Governing Societies: Political Perspectives on Domestic and International Rule*. Berkshire: Open University Press, 2007. Print.
- Douthwaite, John. "Melanie: Voice and its Suppression in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*." *Current Writing* 13.2 (2001): 130-161. Print.
- Dreyfus, H, and Paul Rabinow. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Harvester: Brighton, 1982. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of a Prison*. Trans. A. Sheridan. New York: Pantheon, 1977. Print.
- . *The History of Sexuality Vol. I An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon, 1978. Print.
- . *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*. 1972-1977. Ed. Gordin Colin. New York: Pantheon, 1980. Print.
- Gaylard, Gerald. "Disgraceful metafiction: Intertextuality in the postcolony."

- Journal of Literary Studies* 21.3 (2005): 315-337. Print.
- Graham, Lucy. "Yes, I am giving him up: Sacrificial Responsibility and Likeness with Dogs in J.M. Coetzee's Recent Fiction." *Scrutiny* 27.1 (2002): 4-15. Routledge. Web. 6 Nov. 2011.
- Hoy, David Couzens. "Power, Repression, Progress: Foucault, Lukes, and the Frankfurt School." *Foucault: A Critical Reader*. Ed. David Couzens Hoy. New York: Blackwell, 1986. Print.
- Kossew, Sue. "The Politics of Shame and Redemption in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*." *Research in African Literatures* 34.2 (2003): 155-162. EBSCO. Web. 10 Feb. 2012.
- Krebs, Paula M. *Gender, Race and the Writing of Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Print.
- Louw, Eric P. *The Rise, Fall and Legacy of Apartheid*. London: Praeger, 2004. Print.
- McNay, Lois. *Foucault: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Continuum, 1994. Print.
- Merquior, J.G. *Michel Foucault*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987. Print.
- Mills, Sara. *Michel Foucault*. London: Routledge, 2003. Print.
- Nashef, Hania A.M. *The Politics of Humiliation in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee*. London: Routledge. 2009. Print.
- Post, Robert M. "Oppression in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee." *Critique*. Winter (1986): 67. Print.
- Randall, Don. "The Community of Sentient Beings: J.M. Coetzee's Ecology in *Disgrace* and Elizabeth Costello." *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 33.2 (2007): 209-225. Print.

MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Sharma, Sandeep Kumar. "Apartheid, Oppression, Counter-Violence: A

Foucauldian Reading of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*." *Literary Quest* 2.4
(2015): 85-100. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.