

The Empire Critiqued: History and the Ethics of Responsibility in Coetzee's *Disgrace*

Ashish Kumar Pathak

Coetzee's *Disgrace*, despite its Booker and Nobel winning feats, has been received with reserved praise, particularly, in South Africa. Said this, it deems that this literary masterpiece doesn't fit well in the tradition of essentialist and native postcolonial African writing constituted by writers like Chinua Achebe, NgugiwoThiongo, Chinweizu, and Madubuike. Indeed, Coetzee will find his existence more feasible with writers like Wole Soyinka and John Pepper Clark who write with a syncretic view of modern African culture not reducing their vision to exclusively pan-African models, traditions and norms. While encountering some of the charges laid against the novel, one is reminded of Achebe's ranting against Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* where the latter is ruthlessly accused of dehumanization of Africa by using a Eurocentric white perspective to penetrate into the reality of the colonies in Africa. Though Conrad and Coetzee are separated by a span of a century, one writing at the advent of Colonialism and the other at the end of the same, they have been accused of almost same charges. I, however, believe that instead of valorizing white and Eurocentric perspective in a subtle neo-colonial manner, Coetzee is delineating limitations and failure of the colonial perspective of observing reality by stripping and denuding the dominating colonial urge emblematic of the mighty Empire.

David Lurie, fifty-two-year-old literature professor, imposes a sexual relationship on a female student, Melanie Isaacs, who first accepts it reluctantly and then lodges a complaint against him to the university administration. Consequently, Lurie is questioned by a committee of competent officials and without taking recourse to confession or repentance he adamantly abandons the job and goes to live with his daughter, Lucy, on an outskirt farm. Lucy makes a living by agriculture and dog breeding which is largely incomprehensible to Lurie in the beginning. But as he is coming to terms with the new world, Lucy's rape and vandalism on the farm completely change their lives. Eventually, accepting it as a verdict of history Lurie is searching for redemption but only meets disgrace and abasement in his task of putting dogs to death and disposing of them.

To begin with, Lurie's relationship to his farm which is taken care of by his daughter is that of a colonizer and his colony where Lucy is no more than an agent. Despite his mastery over French and Italian, he doesn't like the black African's language and the mysterious African culture, as is known to him, is tempting as well as repulsive. His ambivalent attitude towards the black African way of life makes the texture of the novel. It is, for instance, noticeable in his lustful craving for Melanie and his disdainful expression for Lucy's helper friend Helen. Undoubtedly, Lurie treats the black Africans and countryside as the 'other'. About Helen Lurie enquires, " 'How is Helen?' he asks. Helen is a large, sad-looking woman with a deep voice and bad skin, older than Lucy. He has never been able to understand what Lucy sees in her; privately he wishes Lucy would find, or be found by, someone better (*Disgrace* 60)." Thus, it is white male's denigration of African black but at the same time Lurie doesn't fail to accept the process

of hybridization which manifests itself in his own daughter. While observing Lucy during his first encounter he broods, "Curious that he and her mother, city-folk, intellectuals, should have produced this throwback, this sturdy young settler. But perhaps it was not they who produced her: perhaps history had the larger share" (*Disgrace* 61).

Hence, constant reference to history in the novel is emblematic of Coetzee's revisionist historiography through fiction. Lurie's statement is a part of history seen through the eyes of a colonizer where terms and conditions are a matter of convenience, where no dignity, honour or self-respect is at stake. In fact, Lurie ignores the native view of history which has to be written from the latter's point of view. The consciousness of new history dawns on Lurie when he feels for the first time that it is for the blacks to write history by unsettling the so called dignified and peaceful world of the whites. It disrupts the European notion of history. Lucy is raped by three black men from the neighbouring farm, but she is reluctant to report it to the police, to much shock to her father, even then she knows the rapists. Lucy takes the rape as atonement for the historical guilt of her ancestors. Unlike Lurie, she knows that this historical guilt is bigger than an individual's life. Lurie's flawed sense of individualism has been well portrayed by Coetzee in making the former an instructor of romanticism. The portrayal of Lurie as the follower of Wordsworth and Byron in the post-apartheid Africa is the strategy of the author to critique the canon of literature set by European standards. It also shows the failure and invalidity of that romantic worldview in the contemporary African continent. Coetzee's subtle dismantling of the colonial discourse imposed on the third world is well articulated in *The Empire Writes Back*:

Writers such as J.M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, V.S. Naipaul, George Lamming, Patrick White, Chinua Achebe, Margaret Atwood, and Jean Rhys have all rewritten particular works from the English 'canon' with a view to restructuring European 'realities' in the post-colonial terms, not simply by reversing the hierarchical order, but by interrogating the philosophical assumptions on which the order was based (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 32).

Lurie's romantic aggrandizement of personality is evident in the beginning of the novel. It opens with a highly personal, romantic and rather melodramatic note, "For a man of his age, fifty two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well" (*Disgrace* 1). But Lurie's romantic and hedonist ideals fail him when confronted with harsh post-apartheid world of Africa where the balance of power has been disturbed.

Lurie's imperial urge has also been exhibited in his being instructor of courses of communication. As Todorov points out in *The Conquest of America* that one of the key tools of colonial oppression is the control over means of communication. Undoubtedly, Lurie's art of seduction is largely assisted by his imposition as master of communication on Melanie. Here, he is altogether mistaken in identifying that even those who do not know the English tongue and its creative expression know what it is to be exploited, seduced/raped, mistreated and degraded. Particularly shocking is Lurie's encounter with Melanie's boyfriend who "wants to show that he knows about more than just motorcycles and flashy clothes. . . Perhaps he does indeed have intimations of what it

is to have a mad heart" (*Disgrace* 33). This incident in the novel marks the beginning of corrosion of Lurie's false sense of superiority that he tries to assert over his pupils or say, black Africans.

Further, in his inquisition by the committee, Lurie refuses to take the responsibility-moral or ethical - for his act of abuse of power and position in seducing and exploiting Melanie Isaacs. In front of the committee Lurie asserts, "I was not myself. I was no longer a fifty-year-old divorcee at a loose end. I became a servant of Eros" (*Disgrace* 52). This has been the colonial impulse behind a long history of exploitation but Coetzee shows how this is reversed and Lurie is forced to accept the reversal in a deeply shocking manner. The moment of Lucy's rape and Lurie's helplessness to rescue his daughter demonstrates the altered balance of power and judgement of history. Only then, Lurie realizes that one's superiority arises by arbitrarily being in position of power which may alter any time. The way he reduces his seduction- cum- rape of Melanie to a purely irrational impulse called 'Eros', the rapists of Lucy relegate that barbarous act of rape and vandalism to fun and in that fun lies the revenge of history. Lurie's helplessness while Lucy is being raped in a new world is evident here:

He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa. He is helpless, an Aunt Sally, a figure from a cartoon, a missionary in cassock and topi waiting with clasped hands and upcast eyes while the savages jaw away in their own lingo preparatory to plunge him into their boiling cauldron. Mission work: what has it left behind, that huge enterprise of upliftment? Nothing that he can see (*Disgrace* 95)

Thereafter, for the rest of the novel Lurie is like a fish out of water, in fact, not completely out but on a shallow shore where life is not quite like life. The same is true for Lucy who takes the rape as the price she must pay in order to be allowed to stay and continue an undignified life like the dogs for which she cares.

However, one can say that Coetzee is representing cultural and racial conflict in a subtly biased manner as the plot primarily focuses on the traumatic experience Lucy and Lurie go through. Does the author really want to show that the post-apartheid Africa is no longer a secure place for white people to live in? As one scholar writes, "In the end, there is only disgrace, and the narrator seems to come to the conclusion that there is no longer a place for white people in South Africa" (Leusmann 62). But I disagree with Leusmann as it is very narrow interpretation of the facts in the novel. What about the disgraceful existence of Melanie's family? This is the question that reappears on the surface of the novel and makes the focussed spot a blind spot. The point of insight in the narrative is what about the dignity of Melanie's parents? Where will they flee from disgrace?

In this way throughout the narrative there is an interplay of present and absent, manifest and latent or suggested and thus absent and suggested are invoked more loudly. Lurie's Satanism is very subtly exposed in his encounter with Melanie's family when he pretends to apologize to the Isaacs? While depicting the history of the event with his emphasis on the word "fire/Eros" that Melanie struck in him, he hurls more insult on Mr Isaacs and his gaze is equally lustful for Melanie's sister, Desiree.

Nevertheless, Lurie is given a dignified dinner by the Isaacs. The generosity of Mr Isaac who thinks of intervening on behalf of Prof. Lurie to reinstate the latter in the university makes him stoop further in his own eyes. This aspect of the novel refutes Coetzee's fellow Nobel laureate's charge that

... there is not one black person who is a real human being ... I find it difficult to believe, indeed more than difficult, having lived there all my life and being part of everything that has happened here, that the black family protects the rapist because he is one of them ... if that is the only truth he could find in the post-apartheid South Africa, I regretted this very much for him (qtd in Donadio 1).

To meet this charge it can be said that Helen and Bev Shaw are black Africans who are at the other extreme of the rapists and offenders. Moreover, what Lucy says about those rapists that "they do rape" is equally suggestive of Lurie's habit who would not hesitate in seducing Desiree or even her mother. He has to solve his problem of sex which he keeps doing even by sleeping with Bev Shaw. Hence, one can evidently find that Coetzee has represented natives not only as brutal assaulters but also as people more capable of forgiveness and sympathy, two traits of humanity which keep life going on this earth. It also exhibits the epitome of colonizer, David Lurie's satanic arrogance and unrepentant conscience which deserves to be reprimanded by the judgement of history.

Further, Coetzee candidly exposes the masculinist and racist tendency of Lurie as colonial master. In view of his seduction of Melanie, Lurie's tempestuous hatred towards Lucy's rapists function as a double standard. It is Lucy who makes Lurie feel it intensely:

Hatred ... when it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me any more. May be for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange- when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her - isn't it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife in; exciting afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood- doesn't it feel like murder, like getting away with murder? (*Disgrace* 158).

This utterance of Lucy brings together the rape of Melanie as well as Lucy. It blurs the distinction between Lurie and Lucy's rapists. It exposes Lurie as a white anachronism of the colonial era who can only call 'rape' what black men do to white women.

Moreover, another feature of epistemological colonial discourse is the production of an 'other' which is entirely knowable and visible. Coetzee's critique of this colonial power and ethnographic practice is implied in Lurie's attempt to know Petrus and his mind and his complete failure in this attempt. Petrus's refusal to yield to Lurie, on the contrary to trap him in his insidious plan, is subversion of the colonizer-colonized axis.

To conclude, having paid sufficiently closed attention to narrative perspective and unearthing hidden points of insight in the novel, it is wrong to say that Coetzee valorizes Eurocentric white perspective over the black African subject. The novel, on the contrary, offers a criticism of the white Empire rather than a reinforcement of black stereotypes.

The author very skilfully shows the racial relationship which exists in the post-apartheid South Africa where white and black have a relation of mutual distrust.

Locked we are into Lurie's view of things, we do not gain much sense of what the new South Africa means to those who are poor or black. For the most part the new South Africa to them would be much the same as the old South Africa. To black as well as white, there are new fears, about personal safety (Roberts 237).

Thus, Coetzee offers a very balanced critique of post-apartheid Africa where responsibility of restoring harmony and reconciliation falls on both races. Neither every Lurie can be a racist or rapist nor all black Africans.

Works Cited

- Ashcroft, B. G. Griffiths & H. Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*. 1989. London and New York. 2002
- Coetzee, J. M. *Disgrace*. 1999. London. Vintage. 2000
- Donadio, Rachel. "Out of South Africa". *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*. 16 Dec 2007. 1-2 19 Jan 2009. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/16/books/review/donadio.html>>.
- Harvey, Robert. *The Fall of Apartheid: The Inside Story from Smuts and Mbeki*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2003
- Leusmann, Harold. "J. M. Coetzee's Cultural Critique". *World Literature Today*. Vol 78 (Sep - Dec 2004) pp. 60-63 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40158503>>