Whose Disgrace is J.M.Coetzee's novel Disgrace?

Ayesha Khosla
Assistant Professor, Department of English, Cultural Studies and Foreign Languages, GSSDGS Khalsa College Patiala

***Abstract*— This paper deals with the meaninglessness of life as experienced by professor David Lurie, a white professor in post colonial South Africa. The licentiouness of David costs him his job as his sexual advances towards one of his students is reported to authorities. He has only one option left which is go to Salem and stay with his daughter Lucy. As the events unfold, Lucy is raped and finally chooses to give birth to her child without knowing the identity of the father of the child. Thus Coetzee points out that the repercussions of wrongdoings of white towards blacks come to them in diverse ways and form. David's pathetic life by the end of the novel is a strong statement on the final destructive path of colonialism.**

***Index Terms:* colonialism, existentialism, Sartrean, subaltern.**

INTRODUCTION

J.M.Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* has tantalized and perturbed the readers time and again with its soul-stirring renditions of the meaninglessness and hollowness of man in post-colonial South Africa. The significance attached to and entanglement in sensual pleasure is the hopeless state of the white professor David Lurie, the central character of the novel whose youth has been the saga of the fulfillment of his bodily needs and his multiple sexual escapades with the women whom he had encountered in the path of his life. His life mirrors the fearful and catastrophic condition of modern man who has been struggling with his physical and shallow existence without the comprehension of his real motive or mission in life. The journey of David Lurie in the novel can be similar to the journey of modern man writhing with the pangs of meaningless existence.

The beginning of the novel gives a vivid picture of the pathetic and deplorable life of David Lurie, a fifty-two year old professor of English at Cape Technical University. He is grappling with the fear of ageing and losing his male virility so much so that he is aghast when even Soraya, the prostitute he patronizes weekly --- stops receiving him. He imagines her and her colleagues shuddering over him "as one shudders at a cockroach in the washbasin in the middle of the night" and wonders if he can ask his doctor to castrate him as one neuters domestic animals. The ugliness associated with old age has started playing havoc with his psyche and he desperately wants to get over this dread before he completely loses his attraction and becomes the object of ridicule and contempt among women.

In his existential study of this fear of David Lurie, Eric Grayson opines that the fear of old age in David indicates the fear of death. He rightly points out that the "problem of sex" which professor Lurie claimed to have solved in the first sentence of the novel is also the problem of his approaching death (Approaches, 71). In his desperation to have as many relationships as he can before he ages completely, David has an affair with one of his students Melanie Issacs that puts him in hot soup. Melanie arouses in David a passion of his youth which he was losing gradually with the passing of time. Erik Grayson connects David's sexual escapades with Sartre's theory of the existence of the Other which implies the "permanent possibility by being seen by the Other", the awareness which leads the individual to see himself or herself as the other might (cited in Approaches, 71). This state creates a tendency in a person to pass judgement on himself or herself as an object whose foundation remains exactly in the other's control. David enters his "flurry of promiscuity" only after feeling that "glances that would have responded to his slid over, passed through him". He reflects that "perhaps it is the right of the young to be protected from the sight of their elders in the throes of passion (Disgrace, 44).Grayson further notes that his assessment of his appearance by the others is so powerful that by the time he is with Bev Shaw, he thinks: "Let her gaze her fill on her

Romeo… on his bowed shoulders and skinny shanks" (150).

In Sartrean existentialism, the individual living in bad faith will often attempt to recover freedom of self definition by assimilating the other's freedom. Significantly Sartre gives sexual desire as the example of this dynamic. The carnal impulse, for Sartre shows the individual efforts to reduce the other to a purely corporeal form and to make the other recognize his or her fundamental objectivity. So, it is not surprising that David attempts to convince Melanie, his student that "her beauty does not belong to her alone….she does not own herself" (16).When Melanie does not reciprocate desire for him, he struggles with the idea that perhaps he is "an ugly sight" (9).

The fact that David finds his colored student Melanie Issacs accessible ascribes to the rule prevalent in colonized South Africa. Ann Pelligrini states that a white man had virtual access to the bodies of all black and coloured women during the colonial regime (cited in Approaches, 111). But in the Mandela regime things had changed completely. Such types of relationships would not be tolerated and it has dire consequences for the professor. The complaint of sexual harassment is lodged with the authorities against David by the girl's father. Many of his colleagues eye him with contempt and students tend to shame him by slipping a pamphlet under his door on which it is written: "Your days are over Casanova" (43) Interestingly, Lurie does not even make an attempt to defend himself against the charges because he does not understand the deeper implications of his actions which for him had been natural under the given circumstances. He resists the spectacle of public "prurience and sentiment" which the committee expects him to show. Even his apology is devoid of any sincerity and honesty inciting the dissatisfaction of the committee at such a way of apologizing. He is still unable to comprehend the realities of Post-Colonial South Africa because in colonized South Africa he had lived the life of a philanderer.

The relationship between Lurie and Melanie has been treated by critics as a prelude or even an analogue to the gang rape of Lucy. Rita Bernard in her essay "Prologue: Why Not to Teach Coetzee" points out that David has also failed in his lectures on the Romantic poets and uses a gnarly passage on sense perception in Wordsworth's poetry; by speaking about being "in love", the professor himself is sickened by his pedagogical and ethical failures (Approaches, 37).She further states that the trajectory of Lurie's humiliation underscores the validity of a comment from the novel's very first pages: " the one who comes to teach learns the keenest of the lessons while those who come to learn learn nothing" (5).

David has one daughter Lucy from his previous marriage and this is the only family that he has. The only choice left with him is to go to live with his lesbian daughter Lucy who owns a small farm near Salem. The farm of Lucy opens a new vista for David and having moved beyond the realms of city life, he gets rejuvenating glimpses of rural life and gradually starts blending with its soul comforting scenic beauty. When he is getting attuned to the rural life and starts appreciating its certain aspects, he is in for a very unsettling shock when he is badly beaten and Lucy is gang raped by three young black assailants. This is when he realizes the helplessness and meaninglessness of his life in the wake of his inability to save his daughter:

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 plunging him into their boiling cauldron. Mission work: what has it left behind, that huge enterprise of upliftment? Nothing that he can see (95).

This condition of professor Lurie shows the crisis that he goes through regarding the functions of language. David has been struggling with the language from the very beginning of the novel. Regarding the courses of Communication Skills that he teaches at the college, it is stated:

Although he devotes hours of each day to his new disciple, he finds its first premise, as enunciated in the Communications 101 handbook, preposterous: 'Human society has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other.' His own opinion which he does not air, is that the origin of speech lie in song, and the origin of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul (3,4).

Even his conversation with his student Melanie Issacs is very limited. Melanie hardly projects her opinions or views during her affair with Lurie. There are moments when hardly any conversation erupts between them. At one time it appears as if professor Lurie is simply forcing himself on her:

Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had desired to go slack, die within herself within the duration like the rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, far away (25).

Carrol Clarkson in her essay "Teaching *Disgrace* at The University of Cape Town" discusses the problematic of language used in stories set in South Africa. One of the reasons for professor Lurie's difficulty in communication is the usage of English language. She justifies this problem by saying that in the fictional world of Coetzee, characters express the doubt that European languages and culture can offer any legitimate medium of response to Africa. Insistently in *Disgrace*, the sociopolitical aftermath of colonialism is indexed in the anachronistic disjuncture between a European language and the Africa it attempts to address or represent in that inherited language (Approaches, 136). When Petrus uses the word "benefactor", Lurie reflects:

A distasteful word, it seems to him double-edged, souring the moment. Yet can Petrus be blamed? The language he draws on with such aplomb is, if he only knew it, tired, friable, eaten from the inside as if by termites. Only the monosyllables can be still relied on, and not even all of them.

What is to be done? Nothing that he, the one-time teacher of communications, can see. Nothing short of starting all over again with the ABC. By the time the big words come back reconstructed once more, he will be long dead (129).

Carrol Clarkson further argues that it does not seem possible to write about a South African landscape in English and obliterate all thought of colonialism in the same gesture (Approaches, 137).

After Lucy's rape there are many instances in the novel wherein we find the breakdown of communication between the father and the daughter. David feels that Lucy is simply not interested in sharing her plight with him for the possible reason of his own helplessness in this situation or it could be the guilt that she has in her heart for the wrongdoings of whites against the blacks during the long history of colonialism in her country. Lucy behaves in an erratic manner and becomes a sort of recluse depreciating her existence to mere replica of animal existence. After this incident, she tells her father to stick to his own story about what the assailants did to him rather than tell her side of the story because she wants to tell others what happened to her in her own way. When Lucy does not talk about the rape with the policemen, David is bewildered and shocked. When he asks Lucy why has she not told the whole story, she says, "I have told the whole story. The whole story I have told" (110).

This significant remark entails the crux of the whole novel. Gayatri Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" gives a vivid picture of the problems posed for the suppressed group to express the atrocities meted out to them. Similarly Lucy does not know what words can express the turmoil she has gone through and moreover it is the outcome of her own race's tyrannies exerted over the black community. She has become the victim of inter-racial contempt but resolves to tolerate its blows rather than leave the place and go to Holland where her mother lives. But Lucy's insistence on living on the farm, live as Petrus's concubine and giving birth to the child of one of the rapists is "humiliating" for David. He says, "Such high hopes, and to end like this." She replies, "Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity."

" Like a dog".

"Yes, like a dog" (205).

Lucy almost starts living like a stone without showing any inclination to talk about her anger, resentment and victimization. David is in vain to make her talk about her pain and turmoil:

There is snappiness to Lucy nowadays that he sees no justification for. His usual response is to withdraw into silence. There are spells when the two of them are like strangers in the same house (124).

David feels that it is perhaps a part of "private salvation" which makes Lucy hide from the police the exact details of what had happened, and asks her, "You can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?" Lucy answers him, "No. You keep

misreading me. Guilt and salvation are like abstractions. Until you make an effort to see that, I can't help you" (112).

For the first and last time when she does talk to her father about what she had gone through, she says," It was so personal. It was done with such personal hatred. That was what stunned me more than anything. The rest was… expected. But why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them." Then David replies, "It was history speaking through them. A history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps. It may have seemed personal, but it wasn't. It came down from the ancestors" (156).

Louise Bethlehem in her excellent essay "Refusing Adamastor: Lucie Lurie and 'White Writing' in *Disgrace*" insists that the analysis of discourses of interracial rape must take cognizance of the construction of white womanhood in a given context, together with the regulatory effect of that construction. She also makes a valid point when she argues that the white woman's body becomes the site where hierarchies of race are articulated, where inclusions and exclusions are forcibly enacted---whether or not violation actually occurs. So the representation of inter-racial rape in this context shows the violation of the white female body and simultaneously the violation of that body as boundary" (Approaches, 111).

Another disconcerting feature of the novel is the redemptive journey of David which shows his empathy with animals. He discovers his own animal like existence and meaninglessness of his life when he starts spending time at the clinic of Bev Shaw who used to work for Animal Welfare Association earlier but now works independently.. She euthanizes animals to free them from the troubles of old age or other painful diseases and he somehow develops a strange kind of similarity to them in the process of helping Bev Shaw with her work. When in the beginning Lucy asks David what he thought of Bev Shaw's work for animals, he makes fun of their work as not being very beneficial and compares them to Christians of a sort who look "cheerful and well-intentioned" (73) but later indulge in looting. This angers Lucy and she vehemently puts it: "But it is true. They are not going to lead me to a higher life. This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals….To share some of our human privileges with animals. I don't want to come back in another existence as a dog or a pig and have to live as dogs or pigs live under us" (74).

This is the first major comparison of the life of human beings with the animals. While watching dogs at the clinic of Bev Shaw, David observes that the dogs fight little while having food. "They are very egalitarian, aren't they," he remarks. "No classes. No one too high and mighty to smell another's backside" (85). He is the one who holds the dogs still when Bev needles them. Despite assisting in so many killings, he has not been able to get used to it and at times he gets so sentimental that he cries when he is alone. He also takes charge of disposing of the dead bodies of the dogs. He is "a dog man: a dog undertaker; a dog psychopomp; a harijan" (146).

He feels sad for the two Persian sheep that Petrus brings to be slaughtered for the feast at his home. They are kept outside the house and to be fed until the day of the slaughter. David is much concerned about the fate of the sheep:

A bond seems to have come into existence between himself and the two Persians, he does not know how. The bond is not one of affection. It is not even a bond with these two in particular, whom he could not pick out from a mob in a field. Nevertheless suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him (126).

The affinity and closeness with animals develops only when we understand the fact that human-beings can fall to the level of animals and sometimes beyond that too. David slowly gets transformed when he finds that his own period of young age has been nothing more than what animals live like. He had engaged his energy and time only in pursuit of women. He realizes by the end of the novel that he has missed so much in his life while living in the matrix of allurements of city life because it had kept him away from the smoothening and enlightening impact of nature on man. When he visits Lucy on her farm by the end of the novel, he is enchanted by the beauty of the place and he wishes that the "utter stillness" of the moment would prolong. But he has never ever in his life noticed the beauty and spiritual serenity of nature:

The truth is, he has never had much of an eye for rural life, despite all his reading in Wordsworth. Not much of an eye for anything, except pretty girls; and where has that got him? Is it too late to educate the eye? (218)

Perhaps on his journey of redemption, David realizes that he is not in a position to keep anything in his life. In all his roles in life---- that of a father, husband, professor, friend , he has failed miserably. In a bid to acquire grace, he even "gives up" the limping dog, his partner in his ageing years. Kay Heath suggests various possibilities about the significance of the ending. She cites various critics and their opinions: David finds grace through abjection (Cooper 35; Boehmer, "Not Saying" 349)), achieves enlightenment as an asexual grandfather (Segall 45), or avoids responsibilities for his failings (Diala 58) or does Coetzee resist such conclusions (Attridge, J.M.Coetzee 177) (cited in Approaches, 172). Whether Coetzee tries to evade such conclusions or not has different interpretation, but the condition of modern man is nonetheless not different or diverse from David's and the path of abjection followed by David has brought many shuddering awakenings in us or as David in a contemplative mood thinks: "There may be things to learn" (218).

WORKS CITED

[1] Coetzee, J. M. Disgrace. New York: Penguin, 1999. Print.
[2] Williams, Patrick, and Chrisman, Laura, eds. Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.Print.
[3] Wright, Laura, Poyner, Jane, and Boehmer, Elleke , eds. Approaches to Teaching
[4] Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Other Works New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2014.Print.