

## **J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* from the Perspective of Michel Foucault's Theory of Power/Knowledge Discourse**

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### **Abstract**

J. M. Coetzee is avowedly considered as the most distinguished and remarkable writer who is known for the convincing and undistorted portrayal of South Africa during the apartheid and the post-apartheid periods. This paper is an attempt to scrutinize Coetzee's monumental work *Disgrace* from the perspective of Michel Foucault's Theory of Power/Knowledge Discourse. Coetzee presents a graphic account of the interrelationship in eros, the body and disgrace. Power represses and distorts the identity of an individual and the search for identity and the shifts of power operate throughout this novel and make the individuals universal beyond the African situation. The novel faithfully delineates how the White community on the verge of extinction socially, politically and morally due to the changing power equations.

**Key Words:** Disgrace, oppression, rape, power, apartheid, post-apartheid.

John Maxwell Coetzee hailed from South Africa, is one of those few eminent writers who are committed to highlight issues crucial to the fictional discourse finding himself in the complex historical past and in the wounded social structure in the post-apartheid South Africa. He is one of the most prominent and celebrated writers in English language who has been honoured with many prestigious literary awards and honorary doctorate degrees. *Disgrace* (1999) is unquestionably considered as his masterpiece and has been compared by critics to Daniel Defoe's immortal creation *Robinson Crusoe*. Eric P. Louw contends, "Coetzee is widely considered as

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 has endeavoured to unfold complex issues of power and identity crisis in South African social and political set up with his first hand knowledge in this novel. He emphasizes the varied aspects of contemporary South African life especially in the apartheid and the post-apartheid periods. The background of all his novels is concerned with South Africa and his novels are not only limited to the South African conditions and surroundings rather it has a universal appeal. His novels reflect his intense concern with power and hierarchical order to a great extent. A close study of his novels shows that all the prominent characters of his novels struggle for a meaningful existence as they suffer the problem of identity crisis because of the changing power structure in South African colonial system. His novels thus a faithful account of the colonial realities and illustrate that exploitation, racial prejudice, injustice and discrimination which are not only limited to South Africa but are the existential realities of every society which undergoes the changing power equations. The remarks of Robert M. Post about Coetzee's enlightening portrayal of South African oppressed classes are quite noteworthy, "By siding with the oppressed, he has become one of them" (Post 72).

This research paper is an attempt to analyse J. M. Coetzee's prominent work *Disgrace*. from the perspective of Michel Foucault's theory of Power/Knowledge Discourse. *Disgrace* has become Coetzee's most widely read novel which inspires Don Randall to appreciate this novel as "a flood of ...response" (Randall 212). Another great critic Lucy Graham has also acknowledged this novel as "a literary triumph of Coetzee" (Graham 4). The novel portrays the dynamics of power when the changing power equations have brought a sea change in the different spheres of South African life. It presents a wretched picture of the new South Africa where the Whites have lost their power, position and dominance and the Blacks have become influential and commanding and are settling the accounts of exploitation and oppression faced by them in the past. The novel exposes unpleasant issues of the relationship between the Blacks and the Whites and it gives a detailed and comprehensive account of the White community which is on the brink of extinction because of the changing power scenario. The protagonist, David Lurie, has to

accept his crushed destiny by all means 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 elucidates Coetzee's perception of life in the new South Africa where the Whites have to accept their lot and they are at the mercy of the domineering Black community.

South Africa was a British colony but now in the post-apartheid era due to the changed socio-political scenario, power shifted into the hands of the Black people who were subject to all kinds of humiliation, oppression and discrimination at the hands of the Whites since ages. They are no longer the silent sufferers as they used to be in the past and it shows that the system of power in our society is like a machine of which everyone becomes a part. Foucault argues that power is never simply a system of dominance, in which the dominated ones are always subordinate and disempowered. It is noteworthy that if Melanie, the Black girl is raped, she is not the only one who has become a helpless victim to the treacherous mentality of a University professor. David Lurie feels that the experience is not quite the rape but a kind of undesired experience. The complaint against Lurie is made not by Melanie but by her boyfriend. David is advised by the inquiry committee of the University that he has to be apologetic and undergo counselling. But unexpectedly he shows resistance and admits his guilt but outrightly refuses any kind of counselling because the whole experience seemed natural to him and furthermore he has just given an outlet to his sexual urge. With this decision, Lurie refuses to apologize and to avoid dismissal from the University job, he decides to resign. Later in the novel, David's daughter Lucy is raped by three blacks equally cruelly 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*).

It is noteworthy that during the apartheid era in South Africa, there is a great discrimination and injustice in the society but the exploitation still continues in the post-apartheid period because now the Whites are the real minority and they are subject to all types of humiliation, prejudice and degradation. The disgrace and dishonour faced by Lucy symbolises the post-apartheid situation in which the Whites became powerless because of the shift of power in the hands of the Blacks. This illustrates Foucauldian hypothesis that power relations in our social set up are always changing because neither the powerful agent eternally sits in the position of commanding, nor the subordinate agent surrenders to the control of the authority. There is no doubt that Lucy is one of the strongest characters as her power is provided by her unbeatable iron will. Power always is goal oriented and it undergoes a change in relations when there is a conflict or opposition. It exercises its own force and its own laws to prohibit or debar or punish if someone breaks the established laws. It has its own taboos, restraints and checks and the fear of being punished by the powerful compels the individual to abide the laws and orders but whenever there is a change in power equations, individuals try to settle the old scores. But at the same time Foucault asserts that his concept of power should not be understood in negative terms as only negative, or coercive or threatening. In this context, Foucault manifestly proclaims that power has a positive and productive aspect also which he substantiates 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)

Whenever there is a discussion about power, the first assumption that comes to mind is, someone or some group owns something named 'power' and which they exercise over others with the intention to show or establish the supremacy, then individuals visualize a hierarchical structure in which the superior who holds power looks down upon the subjugated or the suppressed. Consequently, this kind of illustration of power is considered to be, if not suppression or oppression, then surely submission. This aspect is further highlighted in the novel when Lucy suffers an unexpected incident of her rape and it is personal and impersonal at the

same time. Thus the history of racial prejudice symbolically 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). In this novel, David Lurie plays both the roles i.e. the oppressor and the oppressed 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 proclaims that power relations are changeable and sometimes 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 incapable to face this new societal order of the post-apartheid regime and is living with his daughter in the countryside facing the reversal of his position, power and identity. At first he is exploited at the hands of the society and faced disgrace due to his affair with a black student and as a result his personal life has become a topic of public conversation. When his own daughter Lucy is raped by the three Blacks, this oppression and guilt is worse because she has refused to report the matter to the police as the three culprits are still roaming at large. In such a terrible situation, David feels more helpless and ashamed at the hands of his own daughter. Commenting upon the intrinsic relationship between power and knowledge, Lois McNay rightly proclaims, "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).

The socio-political scenario of South Africa in the post-apartheid period it is asserted that man may be deprived of what he had. Due to the new political order, any thought to resist this change means an individual or group may be a subject of all sorts of humiliation, insult and vendetta by the mighty black people. In this changed scenario, the Whites are deprived of their earlier privileged status and this aspect is vividly portrayed by the novelist when David loses his position and authority when he loses his respectable job of the University. Under the prevailing circumstances, Lurie was compelled to leave his luxurious life and came to lead an isolated life at the dog farm. David himself admits: "I am no longer marketable. The scandal will follow me,

stick to me" (88). When his daughter is gang raped by the three Blacks, he himself is psychologically defeated and physically attacked, while Lucy's dogs are shot. All such incidents reflect that the material suffering of the body, animal or human, is a common fate in the novel. Thus David Lurie has become a hapless victim of the operations of power at a much wider level. Michel Foucault comments, "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).

In this novel, the novelist depicts the bodily desire though it is immoral and the shame that David had to face after his attempt on Melanie who is of his daughter's age. He could not control his passion, he did not spare his student even and finds Melanie quite attractive. "She is small and thin, with close cropped black hair, wide almost like Chinese cheekbones, large, dark eyes"(11). His deliberate violation of the University sexual harassment code, by having an illicit affair with a student is a crystal clear example of how a University Professor misused his privileged position just to gratify his sexual urge. It reflects 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 University code where no one is supposed to transgress the limits of the morality because everyone has to follow the discipline, because discipline as a form of self-regulation encouraged by institutions permeates modern societies. But Lurie showed open disobedience of such ethical codes of the University by having an immoral physical relationship with a girl student and thus he has given a clear invitation to his misfortune and wretchedness. In this context, the Foucauldian hypothesis is apparent as the profound French thinker maintains that while living in society, an individual is not free to say anything or to do anything according to his own choice because there are checks by the society which Foucault termed as 'discursive limits' and while living in society, it is very difficult for an individual to transgress such limits and David Lurie's intentional infringement of the University code of ethics led to lose his power, position, job and even identity.

The Foucauldian theory of power always demands an extensive study because the concept of power should not be understood only in negative terms of oppression or repression as David Couzens Hoy further substantiates Foucault's idea that "power would be a fragile thing if

its function was to repress only" (Hoy 130). David Lurie in this novel has learnt to accept discipline due to the changed socio-political structure of the post-apartheid South Africa and thus got a knowledge to accept the harsh realities of life and there is a visible change in his outlook which is a positive impact of power. Sara Mills rightly remarks, "Even the 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 behaviour"(Mills 33).

Conclusively, Coetzee has portrayed the graphic picture of South Africa in the apartheid and post-apartheid periods in this novel and he has highlighted the key issues related to the problem of identity crisis due to the change at all levels-social, political, economic and even psychological. The novelist has depicted the various forms of exploitation, injustice, prejudice and victimization in a very precise manner. The novel is an outstanding example to show how the operation of power leads human beings to undergo complex circumstances and situations in the post-apartheid South Africa. David Lurie, the White ultimately learns to accept the change after the agonizing experiences of losing job, identity, and finally the terrible incident of his daughter Lucy's rape . This Booker Prize winning novel can justifiably be analysed from the perspective of Michel Foucault's theory of power/knowledge discourse. The novel shows very convincingly that whenever the individuals undergo the changing power equations, they suffer much and they go through many unpleasant situations and experiences as David Lurie and his daughter Lucy have accepted their changed destiny and they have to begin life afresh.

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