Violent Homogenization : An Essay on Coetzee's Novel *Disgrace*

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J. M. Coetzee (pronounced: cut - zee - uh) was born in Cape Town, South Africa in 1940. He came to literary fame with his novel *Life and Times of Michael* K (1983) that won him a Booker Prize. He again won the Booker Prize in 1999, the only writer to have done so, for the novel under discussion. Then he finally crowned his literary career with the Nobel Prize in 2003, to which he mildly reacted to his interviewer David Atwell saying that he wondered why there was not a Nobel Prize for music, since music was "more universal than literature which is bound to a particular language" (1).

In fact, in the novel we are discussing, Coetzee's protagonist David Lurie stresses the fact that "the origins of speech lie in song and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlong and rather empty human soul" (4).[1]

Disgrace is Coetzee's eighth novel, and a shorter novel at that, only 219 pages in my Vintage publication. The protagonist of the novel, David Lurie, is a white South African, who was a professor of Classics and Modern Languages, but then as the Department was closed down becomes a professor of communications at the Cape Technical University. Already twice married and twice divorced, he discovers himself as an unsuccessful teacher, and sulks. On the other hand, he is still driven by sexual appetites, and on an impulse seduces a very young student called Melanie Isaacs who attends his course on Wordsworth, and has sex with her a couple of times both in his flat and in her dormitory. But the girl feeling repulsed at this relation leaks it out to her boyfriend. The matter is reported to the university authority that wants him to repent in public. He refuses and resigns his post and leaves Cape Town and joins his daughter Lucy at her small holding in Salem near Grahamstown. While working as a helping hand at an animal clinic run by a philanthropist woman called Bev Shaw, he contemplates writing an opera on the amorous life of Byron, a project he had conceived long ago, but is yet to fulfill. Events at the farm,

however, take a direction beyond his control. Lucy's farm is attacked by a group of three black men (two adults and a boy actually), who loot her house, steal his car, attempt to burn him up, and rape Lucy. Thereby Lucy gets pregnant, but refuses to lay charges against the culprits, and declines his offer to let go of the farm. While she surprises him by her conviction that abandoning the farm would mean conceding defeat, she shocks him into a new realization by saying that becoming pregnant by the black man is essentially a part of the process of homogenization, that is, the white blood getting acclimatized to the black Africa.

Disgrace, as is expected of a post-colonial text, is structured thematically by the binary opposites like center/periphery, parent (empire)/child (colony), imperial language/appropriated language, acquiescence/resistance, etc., but it problematizes the issues by drawing on the fact of biological law (the reporductive system) which is not amenable to a post-colonial paradigm. Lucy's begetting a child through rape is in no way to bring about racial harmony, but the truth is, as she recognizes it ("What if ... what if that is the price one has to pay for staying on?" [158]) is the only way left to homogenize a post-colonial situation.

Even then, Coetzee's sense of homogenization has grown out of an attempt to assimilate, on the one hand, the seemingly irreconcilable dichotomy, which critic D. E. S. Maxwell has long ago labeled as a disjunct between place and language, meaning the "intolerable wrestle with words and meanings . . . to subdue the experience to the language, the exotic life to the imported tongue" (24), and, on the other, to sanitize by interrogation, the equally intolerable fact of economic exploitation by the colonial power, thus giving shape to his anti-imperialistic attitude.

Coetzee's concern with language, as critic Vinay Dharwadker has pointed out, is shared by other South African writers such as Dennis Brutus and Ezekiel Emphalele who wanted to shape "indigenous models" for their writings, which meant that a non-European mode should be pursued (74). Even when he is describing the most violent of the scenes (Chapter Eleven, the rape scene), Coetzee shows his ability to internalize the power of language the way Stephen Slemon has defined appropriation, that is using the language of the colonizer for the purpose of the colonized (188).

Coetzee, however, is very focused on the problematic of the language, and shares Karl Marx's worry about "the 'White Man's Burden' of globalizing enlightenment" (190) through an imperial language as he makes his protagonist David Lurie feel both shocked and amused at Petrus's bad English. Petrus is a black African who earlier worked for Lucy as the dog-keeper ("dog-man" [64]) as Petrus introduces himself to Lurie, savoring the phrase) but then becomes an independent farm holder, and to the great dismay of Lurie declares that he will one day marry Lucy. Talking with this Petrus, Lurie becomes "convinced that English is an unfit medim for the truth of South Africa" (117).

If the process of homogenization has struck us as the main point of the novel, Coetzee has established it by making Lurie consider it as both a personal dilemma and a historical necessity. Both aspects converge at one point late in the novel, when he tries to console Lucy, seeing her completely shaken at the realization of how much an object of personal hatred she was to the rapists, that there is nothing personal in it, but everything is historically determined : "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).

In his interview with Tariq Ali, Edward Said said that he could not read literature as anything but history (3). Coetzee's novel also can be read as a palimpsest of the colonial past of South Africa, the apartheid in particular, during which sustained repressive politics was conducted against the black, and the novel's events, like Lurie's fall from grace or his daughter's problem in living as an independent woman in a remote town, can be better grasped as mere consequences of that past.

South Africa, like India and Nigeria, as categorized by D. E. S. Maxwell, has been an invaded country (25), and the black South Africans might have, to borrow a description from Said, "for centuries endured summary justice, unending economic oppression, distortion of their social and intimate lives, and a recourseless submission that was the function of the unchanging European superiority" (372).

But *Disgrace* is written in the post-apartheid period, and the vision of Africa propagated by the Conradian "imperialist world-view" (373) as a heart of darkness is replaced by a new sense calling for homogenization, even at the cost of having a daughter lose her chastity by a racially different agent.

Thus when the father and the daughter talk about the raping incident they both rather try to play it down; the daughter in declining to abort her fetus admits the fact that as a woman she loves to become a mother irrespective of who the father is: "why? I am a woman, David. Do you think I hate children? Should I choose against the child because of who its father is?" (198), and Lurie, in attempting to negate her benign attitude by emphasizing the more fundamental laws of biology, where sexual urge is initiated not in spite of but because of the reproductive system, "They [Lucy's rapists] were not raping, they were mating. It was not the pleasure principle that ran the show but the testicles, sacs bulging with seed aching to perfect itself" (199).

Lurie's perception is by implication an acknowledgement of the fact that against this sexual-cum-reproductive drive, the racial differences, white skin and black skin, do get homogenized. Lucy, too, unaware about it though, establishes the fact that semen is neutral to race.

In the post-colonial context, Lucy's pregnancy, thus, comes in reversal of the past history of South Africa, particularly the apartheid period, which reverberates with the repressive acts (raping included) of the white people on the black, and is recorded in such masterpieces as Dennis Brutus's *A Simple Lust*. The literature of reemergence of the black naturally enough is concomitant of the literature of resistance; hence the utterance of the black boy in *Disgrace* ("we will kill you all" [206]) who was a party of the group that savaged Lucy, and who is now caught red-handed peeping at Lucy naked in her shower, metaphorically anticipates a basic point in Coetzee's acceptance speech of the Nobel Prize, entitled "He and his man," which is a parody on Robinson Crusoe, and in which Coetzee describes the opposite turn of history, when the colonized rise in defiance, attack the colonizers, as the boy and his two adult friends (all black) have done in *Disgrace* :

> [W]hen the first bands of plagiarists and imitators descended upon his island history and foisted on the public their own feigned stories of the castaway life, they seemed to him no more or less than a horde of cannibals falling upon his own flesh, that is to say, his life; and he did not scruple to say so. When I defended myself against the cannibals, who sought to strike me down and roast me and devour me, he wrote, I thought I defended myself against the thing itself. Little did I guess, he wrote, that these cannibals were but figures of a more devilish voracity, that would gnaw at the very substance of truth. (7-8)

The nomenclature denoting cannibalism and "devilish voracity," suggestive of the brutal and savage nature of the colonized Americans, Asians and Africans (in the eyes of the white settlers) bears closely on Lurie's ironic reflection on this reverse mode as he surveys the vandalized and looted house of Lucy's :

> A risk to own anything : a car, a pair of shoes, a packet of cigarettes. Too many people, too few things. What there is must go into circulation, so that everyone can have a chance to be happy for a day. That is the theory; hold to the theory and to the comforts of theory. Not human evil, just a vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant (98).

Later on, when Lurie will discover his own house at Cape Town in an equally devastated condition, he will perceive the same "vast circulatory system" to be at work as "another incident in the great campaign of redistribution" (176).

While Lurie's sense of "redistribution" could be understood in Said's phrase as "urgently reinterpretable and redeployable experiences" (379) of the post-colonial society, the complex relationship between the empire and the colony in respect of transplantation and homogenization has kept Coetzee preoccupied for long, as is evident in one of his early works, In the *Heart of the Country*, where, as critic Helen Tiffin notes, it is shown how Magda, the protagonist, is made to recount her experience in the black Africa in a way which does express the fascination but withholds the repressive measures adopted in the process of conquest and colonizing :

> This is not Hendrick's home. Not one is ancestral to the stone desert . . . . Hendrick's forebears in the older days crisscrossed the desert with their flocks and their chattels, heading from A to B or from X to Y, sniffing for water, abandoning stragglers, making forced marches. Then one day fences began to go up . . . Men on horseback rode up and from shadowed faces issued invitations to stop and settle . . . Fascinating, this colonial history : the first merino is lifted from shipboard, with block and tackle, in a canvas waistband, bleating with terror, unaware that this is the promised land where it will browse generation after generation on the nutritious scrub and provide the economic lease for the presence of my father and myself . . . (150).

This view, apparently an evocation of the early phase of the settlement when the later consequences were difficult to imagine, however, is complemented by an acute observation from Lurie, where he expresses his utter disappointment, as Conrad does in his story "An Outpost of Progress," with the missionary activities :

> 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)

At the ending, David Lurie has adjusted himself to the life of an assistant at the animal clinic of Bev Shaw. The clinic supposed to be treating ailing animals has actually worked as a place for losung (a German word for killing), that is, killing disabled animals. Looking after the dogs at the clinic, Lurie takes to a dog that has a lame hind leg. He becomes fond of him, loves him, but decides to offer him to Bev Shaw for its ultimate destiny :

> Bev Shaw, in surprise, asks, 'Are you giving him up?'
> Lurie replies, 'Yes, I am giving him up.' (220)

The submission here is broadended in the Nobel lecture as an acceptance of the fact that the black Africans have emerged, a fact to which the whites can only acquiesce :

> But now, reflecting further, there begins to creep into his breast a touch of fellow-feeling for his imitators. For it seems to him now that there are but a handful of stories in the world; and if the young are to be forbidden to prey upon the old then they must sit for ever in silence. (8)

The love-hate relationship acts as the scaffolding of any post-colonial text, as much as Lurie's giving up his fond dog is a symbolic code for his coming to terms with his daughter, in which mood he can only sacrifice her to the land of Africa. It also suggests that Lurie who said he was too old to change has finally acquiesced to the burden of history, and is even ready to become a grandfather ([Joseph] 217) of a

son fathered by a black man, a feeling carrying the same significance as the phrase "touch of fellow-feeling" of the Nobel lecture.

The signals are clearly for not only a rereading of history but also actually re-living it from the other end, in whatever way it is possible. This is homogenizing, and the plot of *Disgrace* is mainpulated toward it through Lucy, Lurie's daughter, who has acted all through the novel like an evangelical character with a mission, for which she has become an abstracted formulation of an idea rather than a real character. But she confronts her father decidedly on every point regarding her position in a post-rape (post-colonial) situation.

As father and daughter repeatedly argue over which step should Lucy take, the dichotomy between parent (that is, empire) and child (that is, colony, pre-liberated or liberated) comes into play, and it is Lucy's stubbornness that prevails over her father's apparently flawless logic, thus confirming, in a way, what Said expressed as his conviction that the post-colonial literature would mean an individuated action free from old colonial trappings ("Two Visions," 372).

Lurie, however, seems to be in no position to appreciate Lucy's choice of a career. And Lucy retorts, "You think, because I am your daughter, I ought to be doing something better with my life . . . You think I ought to be painting still lives or teaching myself Russian. You don't approve of friends like Bev and Bill Shaw because they are not going to lead me to a higher life" (74).

After the raping incident when Lurie wants to know why Lucy is not laying charges against the culprits, she says, "The reason is that, as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone" (112), which she repeats at a later stage when Lurie insists her on having a trial : "Don't shout at me, David. This is my life. I am the one who has to live here. What happened to me is my business, mine alone, not yours, and if there is one right I have it is the right not to be put on trial like this, not to have to justify myself - not to you, not to anyone else" (133).

While at every exchange Lucy answers in a similar manner, but she finally clinches the point in reply to the letter Lurie wrote to her asking whether she has decided to "humble yourself before history" (160).

And Lucy replies :

> "Yes, the road I am following may be the wrong one. But if I leave the farm now I will leave defeated, and will taste that defeat for the rest of my life.
> "I cannot be a child for ever. You cannot be a father for ever. I know you mean well, but you are not the guide I need, not at the time." (161)

Later, she says, "I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours is to you, and in my life I am the one who makes the decisions" (198).

Read along this line, the title 'disgrace' assumes a representative significance, for Lurie's loss of position or Lucy's getting pregnant seems to be then integral, in the reverse order, with the course of history that now encounters the brutality of the colonial history on its own terms - right or wrong, and so, what could have been viewed as a case of personal ignominy for David Lurie seems to be rather consequent upon what had gone before. Disgraced, of course, but not Lurie, but his history. Lurie on the other hand appears to be graceful (his daughter helping him a great lot in motivating him) because he sacrifices everything - his reputation, his position, his daughter, and on top of everything, his precious ego just to redeem the past. Perhaps, that is how the path to homogenization in a post-colonial society can be paved : sacrifice on the part of the colonial forces and resistance and appropriation on the part of the post-colonized. Perhaps the great Nelson Mandela embodies the trend in which the contrariness collapses and a new vision is regenerated.

Edward Said happily enlists a group of writers as having shown a distinct post-coloniality, like "Rushdie, Derek Walcott, Aime Ceasire, Chinua Achebe, Pablo Neruda, and Brian Friel" (379), and we can safely include J. M. Coetzee in that group.

Notes

[1] All textual references are from J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, (Vintage 2000).

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