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**THE PROBLEM OF WHITE IDENTITY AND CULTURE IN J. M. COETZEE'S *DISGRACE***

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**Abstract:**

*Culture is one of the most important and basic elements of human life. Culture can also be termed as the behavior which is transmitted from one individual to another. Culture differs from society to society and from nation to nation. Moreover, now the concept of transculturalism is gaining momentum as the world is shrinking and being globalised. Transculturalism focuses on the problems of contemporary culture in terms of relationships and attaining power. It highlights the differences, dissonance, tension and instability as it emphasizes stabilizing effects of social connections and organization and also the disintegration of groups, cultures and power.*

**Keywords:** *Culture, identity, apartheid, transculture, etc.*

Coetzee is a highly acclaimed South African writer whose novels have won him many prizes including Booker Prize and Nobel Prize. His works, besides commenting on the politics, literature, culture and society of South Africa, talk about the inhuman behavior of the colonizer upon the colonized. Though his novels seem to throw light upon the issues of South Africa, the themes of the novels can be considered as a universal one. In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee tells David Attwell That:

No Afrikaans would consider me an Afrikaner. That it seems to me, is the acid test for group membership, and I don't pass it. Why not? In the first place, because English is my first language, and has been since childhood. In the second place, because I am not embedded in the culture of Afrikaner and have been shaped by that culture only in a perverse way (341).

Life in South Africa is intolerable for a man of colour. South Africa is a country of great physical beauty but its soul is dead. The most notorious political fact of South African history is the Apartheid policy. It stands for the political system of racial segregation in South Africa, where the white minority discriminated against and politically disenfranchised the black majority for decades. Although the system of apartheid has vanished in 1994, it has left deep scars in South African society that will take many years to heal. *Disgrace* takes place in South Africa, a country that for many years was ruled under a system of racial segregation called Apartheid. Apartheid, which in Afrikaans means "Separateness," was a system held in place from 1948 until 1994.

Coetzee's novels are characterized by their well-crafted composition, pregnant dialogue and analytical brilliance. The dilemmas of his novels are based on South African reality, but often presented in a timeless, metafictional form and carrying a plurality of meanings. The plot of Coetzee's novels represents a universal time and space. There is no specific moment in history and there is not a specific place in which his plots develop. Samuel Durrant describes this trait of Coetzee's writing by observing, "Rather than providing a direct historical relation of the conditions of apartheid, they



instead provide a way of relation to such a history. They, teach us that the true work on novel consists not in the factual recovery of history, nor yet in the psychological recovery from history". This universal historicity makes it possible to relate to many different societies in many different places.

*Disgrace* (1999) is a Second Booker Prize winning novel by Coetzee which is set in South Africa in the late 1990. It is a strong statement on the political climate in post-apartheid South Africa. It is a brilliant novel written after the demise of the apartheid regime that deals with the collective mood of present day South Africa's white population at the end of the dark 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is a novel on post-apartheid violence, continues this theme and also reveals the early obsession of Coetzee to study human beings from the perspectives of female characters. It is a story about a man's largely unchecked sexual addiction and how it has completely destroyed his life. Everything which he does is centred on sexual intercourse and how to get it more frequently. This Story, along with its main character, is atrocious. The novel opens with a consideration of the fate of an aging scholar, a specialist in the Romantic poets who is reduced to teaching introductory courses in Communication which he despises, as the university has changed its emphasis from liberal arts to that of technical education. The protagonist named David Lurie is a fifty-two-year-old English professor at University of Cape Town. He is twice married and twice divorced scholar of Romantic poetry. He is the man of lust that is sex. At the beginning, we learn that he gets his jollies out by visiting a prostitute named Soraya once a week. He sees himself as an aging, but still handsome, Lothario. He begins a stalk affair with Melanie, a student in his Romantic course. He invites her home, makes dinner for her and also gets her liquored up. She is oddly passive and ambivalent about the relationship. A young man Ryan, a Melanie's boyfriend, confronts David about his relationship with Melanie and filed a Complaint against him. When the affair comes to the attention of university, the charges has been lodged against David under the university's code of conduct. The charge deals with academic tribunal after a misbegotten affair with a student, he refuses defend himself against charges of sexual harassment. But when he blurts out an apology, the members of tribunal are not satisfied with his confession. The committee recommended that professor Lurie be dismissed with immediate effect and forfeit all benefits and privileges.

David Lurie became a victim of the great rationalization. His university has been remade into technical college, and he teaches courses in 'Communication Skills' that he finds nonsensical. Leaving the university in disgrace, Lurie goes to visit his lesbian daughter, Lucy, who lives alone in a rural town of Salem on a smallholding in the Eastern Cape. Lucy welcomes David into her home and helps him get familiar with his surroundings. When David tells her about why he is here, Lucy lets him know she already got the scoop from Rosalind. Lucy is eking out a meager existence managing dog kennels and raising flowers and vegetables for the market in cooperation with her black neighbor, Petrus. For a time Lurie finds a sort of peace on the farm as helps Lucy, though the two have had an uneasy relationship since he and Lucy's mother divorced some years earlier. Lurie stays with her daughter and then shares her house and life also by forgetting he is a professor. When Lucy takes David to the market, he meets Bev and Bill Shaw. He starts to help Bev at animal clinic. He tells her his stage of disgrace. He spends all afternoons in the surgery, helping as far as he is able. Finally, Lurie becomes a caretaker for dying animals. He helps with the dogs in the kennels, takes produce to market, and assists with treating injured animals at a nearby refuge. He also spends time on his new academic project, and opera based on the love affair between the British poet Lord Byron and his mistress, Teresa Guiccioli. With this work he lives in peace. But as the balance of power in the country is shifting, the fragile peace is shattered.

When David and Lucy are out and taking a couple of the dogs for a walk, the farm, where he works with his daughter, is invaded by three men (two men and a boy) who at first pretend to need help. The boy tells Lucy that need to use the phone because the sister of one of the men is having an



accident. When the tall man indoors to use the phone, the second man runs into the house behind them and locks David out. He gets the car keys from David and then locks him back in. Meanwhile, the tall man with a rifle starts shooting the dogs one by one, splattering brains and guts all over the place. Besides, the second man and a boy come back in the bathroom; douse David with alcohol, set him on fire, sexually assault Lucy and leave with David's car. During this whole nightmare, Petrus, the African farmer who is nearest neighbor of David and Lucy, is nowhere to be found. He became increasingly too troubled and ambiguous. He promises Lurie about protection from further attacks to Lucy only if she marries him. Lurie tries to raise the subjects of the rape, but he gets no any political and legal protection there. After this incident, Lucy falls apart both physically and emotionally. But, she does not want to pursue the crime as a rape. She is only willing to report it as robbery and assault on David; not on herself. The relationship between David and Lucy grows increasingly strained. When David finds the boy in the party given by Petrus, he confronts the boy. Petrus gets in the middle of their fight. David wants to give information to the police but Lucy gets upset. She does not want David to ruin everything for Petrus. This experience brings repressed emotions to the surface, driving Lucy and David's relationship to a breaking point. David realizes that he has to leave the place. David comes back in Cape Town and finds that his home has been robbed. He gets a phone call from Bev about Lucy and he gets shocked. When he comes back to the Eastern Cape, Lucy reveals to him that she is pregnant and she can't deal with having an abortion. She is considering marry Petrus as a business deal and a way of protecting herself. Her decision to keep the baby, and marry Petrus throws David to loop.

J.M Coetzee presents the problem of white identity in *Disgrace*. The identity is formed through 'self' and 'other'. The problem of white identity and reversal roll of identity are projected throughout the novel *Disgrace*. David Lurie the, A white professor of Romantic literature, finds himself at odds with the new dispensation where old certainties are gone. In this new age he is deprived of the privileges of the race and anchorages. While he is morbidly aware of his ageing body; he is also victim of the dehumanizing effect of the great rationalization of global capitalism. Once a professor of Modern Languages, he is now relegated to the role and adjunct professor of communications, with the re-christening of his institute from Cape Town University to Cape Technical University. David falls short of the standards of the puritanical times he lives in, as he refuses to issue a public statement of confession and remorse though he is ready to plead guilty to the charges brought against him. The consequence of his unchecked impulse ultimately leads to his disgrace in the academy. David is slapped with a case of sexual harassment and loses his position in university. Banished from the university and its respectable white South African citizens, David steps out into the stark and harsh geographical, social, racial and political realities of post-apartheid South Africa—a life for which nothing in his cloistered and self-preoccupied life in the academia has prepared him to face. With two failed marriages behind him, David turns to Lucy, his only child and seeks temporary sanctuary on her homestead in the rural Eastern Cape. The idyllic reunion is short lived as Lucy's homestead becomes the target of a vicious attack in which Lucy is raped and David assaulted by a black man. Humiliated by the display of his helpless impotence as a father and protective male, David is frustrated further by Lucy's incomprehensible decision not to press charges of rape and to stay on in the farm despite the impending signs of danger. Shaken by the turn of events, David plunges himself heading into a series of activities and be it volunteering at the Animal welfare. Coetzee's protagonists become the exemplification of the absence of the univocal identity exposing the fact that what tradition has accustomed us to think of as identity. What happens in *Disgrace* where the depiction of new South Africa and the changes which have taken place in the balance of power between the whites and blacks clearly leads Coetzee to develop his questioning of the very concept identity?



The attack on Lucy's smallholding and her rape is manifestation of the economy of hate that operates in the structure of racial otherness. A white woman settler and small-scale farmer in rural Eastern Cape, Lucy is the 'other' of Petrus and the majority black population settled there. In a situation where the white hegemony is slowly replaced by black cruelty, David discovers that like the dogs in the Animal Welfare Clinic, all that is left at his disposal in his physical body, a shroud of flesh without transcendent meaning. Lucy enunciates the lack of transcendent meaning when she tells to David that "there is no higher life. This is the only life, there is, which we share with animals" (74). Through the white characters, J. M. Coetzee explores the predicament of white marginalized self while struggling for ethical reconstruction integration in a country that renders all such efforts futile.

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