

---

**POST-APARTHEID SITUATION IN J. M. COETZEE'S DISGRACE**

V PRADEEP RAJ

---

**Abstract:** The term 'apartheid' acquired widespread resonance, and it is commonly used outside the South African situation to designate a variety of situations in which racial discrimination was institutionalised by law. An extreme instance of this is when the Post-structuralist philosopher and cultural critic, Jacques Derrida employed the term in an influential essay, suggesting that it had acquired a resonance as a symbol that made it an archetypal term of discrimination and prejudice for later twentieth-century global culture.

In J M Coetzee's novel, *Disgrace*, the central character, David Lurie is a South African professor of English who loses everything: his reputation, his job, his peace of mind, his good looks, his dreams of artistic success and finally his ability to protect his daughter. He is twice divorced; he is not satisfied with his job as a Communications Professor, teaching at a Technical University in Cape Town in Post-apartheid South Africa. His 'disgrace' comes when he seduces one of his students and does nothing to protect himself from the consequences. Later takes shelter with his daughter who is dependent on a black man in rural South Africa.

**Keywords:** Apartheid, Post-apartheid, Racial discrimination, Prejudice, Global culture.

---

**Introduction:** Apartheid sparked significant internal resistance and violence as well as a long arms and trade embargo against South Africa. Since the 1950s, a series of popular uprisings and protests were met with the banning of opposition and imprisoning of anti-apartheid leaders. As unrest spread and became more effective and militarised, state organisations responded with repression and violence. This, along with the sanctions placed on South Africa by the west made it increasingly difficult for the government to maintain the regime. Reforms to apartheid in the 1980s failed to quell the mounting opposition, and in 1990 President Frederik willems de Klerk began negotiations to end apartheid, culminating in multi-racial democratic elections in 1994, which were won by the African National Congress under Nelson Mandela. The vestiges of apartheid still shape South African politics and society. Although the official abolishment of apartheid occurred in 1990 with repeal of the last of the remaining apartheid laws, the end of apartheid is widely regarded as arising from the 1994 democratic general elections. In the novel *Disgrace*, Professor David Lurie's soul is indeed empty. A middling English professor in Cape Town, South Africa, Lurie is filled with desire but lacking in passion, the key ingredient to unlocking the great works he explicates to his young, glassy-eyed students. Twice divorced, and estranged from his daughter Lucy, Lurie "has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well." But after being abandoned by his favourite escort, Lurie seduces a young student of his, and the not-so-consensual sex between them becomes a big problem for the teacher. Lurie is fired from his post and retreats to his daughter Lucy's smallholding in the South African countryside. Lucy is an old soul, a gentle and understanding spirit who trains and kennels dogs alongside neighbours who have, until

very recently, been subjected to decades of dehumanizing treatment under apartheid. Then, in a shocking act of violence, three men invade Lucy's home, gang rape her, and set her father on fire with lighter fluid. Though the physical wounds heal quickly, both father and daughter spend the remainder of this novel wading through the emotional aftermath of the attack. In spare and surprisingly non-political prose, Coetzee explores the double-edged sword that is power. Lurie's near-rape of the student in Cape Town, where he is a powerful but apathetic teacher, could be an allegory of South Africa under apartheid. But out in the post-apartheid countryside the dynamics have been reversed, and it is his daughter who must atone for the older man's sins. This is a difficult and wonderfully-constructed story – deceptively easy to read, every sentence weighted with some double meaning. Coetzee wisely skirts any overtly political analysis of his homeland. He is more concerned with the power of language to make sense of – and justify, and enable, and hide, and wonder at, and atone for – the disgraceful acts of human history. David Lurie is dismissed from his teaching position, after which he takes refuge on his daughter's farm in the Eastern Cape. Shortly after becoming comfortable with rural life, he is forced to come to terms with the harmful result of an attack on the farm in which his daughter is raped and impregnated and he is violently assaulted. He cannot speak about the attack with his daughter, Lucy, because she says that he will never understand what happened to her. It does not take her to see her rape, in spite of the trauma of that experience, as psyche, physical, and economic retribution for her historical complicity in the apartheid. For her to exist as a white middle class young woman in post-apartheid South Africa with a piece of land in the rural hinterland is to have resources impossible for the victims of

apartheid. Her possession of that smallholding testifies to her father's economic and social standing during the period of government sanctioned segregation, the interregnum, as Nadine Gardiner has called it, as the narrator of *Disgrace* remarks,

“When the commune broke up, the rump moving on the New Bethesda, Lucy stayed behind on the smallholding with her friend, Helen. She had fallen in love with the place, she said; she wanted to farm it properly”.

After the rape, Lucy has little difficulty grasping the economic ramifications to transfer of power that occurred with the emergence of a post-apartheid South Africa.

“They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying?

Perhaps that is what they tell themselves”.

The trauma of the rape has instead of numbing, made her an acute genealogist who is able to draw attention to the forces, circumstances, contexts and practices that restrict, situate and institutionalize discursive formations in her society. The rape has made her confront as the consequences of the apartheid and this completely undermines the enlightenment doctrines of instrumental rationality and progress. When Lurie accuses her in ironic terms for acceptance of suffering in the present to compensate for the misdeeds of the past, Lucy's response is striking

“No. You keep misleading me. Guilt and salvation are abstractions. Until you make an effort to see that I can't help you”.

What is exposed to disabling critique here is Lurie's entire modus operandi and the historical-conceptual framework inherited from the enlightenment and the

romanticism it bred. Lurie has resolutely refused to accept that in post-apartheid South Africa the white middle class is in part responsible for apartheid's legacy of poverty, educational deprivation and an inadequate or even inconsequential police force. If in the past he never made the connection between apartheid and economic exploitation, Lurie cannot make it now in the post-apartheid context in terms of its continuing ramifications. Lurie does not think he is personally liable for apartheid evils, Lucy recognizes that the apartheid was a catastrophic racial, economic and cultural undertaking that caused immense human suffering; she sees that contemporary South African society is enmeshed in a play of wills and brutally competing forms of subjection. She thus knows that “Petrus has the vision of the future in which people like Lucy have no place”. Even Lucy also knows very well the way of survival in rural South Africa by renouncing her white privilege. She says about Petrus that:

“He is not offering a church wedding followed by a honeymoon on the wild coast. He is offering an alliance, a deal. I contribute the land, in return for which I am allowed to creep in under his wing.

Otherwise, he wants to remind me I am without protection”

Conclusion: Lucy understands the new historical situation in South Africa that is to forego the white privilege in the country's hinterland. This situation is quite unaware to Lurie. He tries to avoid Lucy from the alliance with Petrus, he himself wants to protect Lucy from the clutches of rural black man but it is in vain. Thus the whole situation seems to be the instance of post-apartheid South Africa in J M Coetzee's *Disgrace*.

## References:

1. Attridge, Derek. *J.M.Coetzee & the Ethics of reading*. Chicago and London: the University of Chicago Press, 2004
2. Attwel, David. “Race in *Disgrace*”. In Attridge and McDonald, eds., *J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace, Interventions*, 2002:331-41.
3. Baral, Kailash C. *J.M. Coetzee Critical Perspectives*. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2008.
4. Coetzee, J.M. *Disgrace*. New York: Viking, 1999.

\*\*\*

PhD Research Scholar, Department of English  
Kakatiya University, Warangal AP  
Email: [pradeep\\_vootla@yahoo.com](mailto:pradeep_vootla@yahoo.com)