Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999) and postcolonial power

“Call no man happy until he is dead”

Sopocles in *Oedipus Tyrannus*

Thomas Bonnici

*Departamento de Letras, Universidade Estadual de Maringá, Av. Colombo, 5790, 87020-900, Maringá, Paraná, Brasil.*

**ABSTRACT.** The novel *Disgrace* (1999) by the South African writer J.M. Coetzee is analyzed in the context of a post-apartheid society in search of its identity. The story of an uncommunicative college professor, his harassment case, the tragic events on his daughter’s farm and the characters’ decisions are a metafiction of the colonial situation, the balance of power between Negroes and Whites and the dilemmas of their identity. The novel portrays the struggle and guilt of once dominant groups to cope with a changing world in an apartheid-free South Africa. It also shows the need of redressing humiliations and injustices suffered by colonized peoples. At a deeper level, *Disgrace* faces the problem of white writing and disgraced Western literary parameters and presuppositions. Amnesis and historical self-invention seem to form the basis of the decolonization of the mind.

**Key words:** Coetzee, metafiction, South African novel, post-apartheid, power inversion.

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After the huge success with *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) and *Foe* (1986), J.M. Coetzee is reputed to be one of the best fiction writers in English hailing from Britain’s ex-colonies. Although the critic may place Coetzee’s writing within the historical context of South African writers ranging from Olive Schreiner, Nadine Gordimer, André Brink and Mongane Serote, they are worlds apart. Coetzee goes beyond the mere narration of fiction with political aims, especially in the throes of apartheid. The form of his writing is problematic, due to conflicts with the one-time hegemony of Eurocentrism and to the impossibility for the white male writer to cause the emergence of African history and memory. Winner of the 1999 Booker Prize and published in Brazil as *Desonra* by Companhia das Letras in 2000, *Disgrace* appears to be an enigmatic novel, characteristically spare, wayward and open-ended, dealing with post-apartheid South Africa. Shunning the realistic stance, Coetzee’s novel should not be considered a skillful construction made up of words, with nothing as a theme. Neither should it be held to be another non-engaging writing, useless in the aftermath of apartheid policy and in the wake of a society in search of an identity. Has this novel actually any meaning in South African transitional society? Has Coetzee anything to say on the moral choice nagging the conscience of a post-colonial society? What is the “representation of reality” (In Coetzee’s case, is it legitimate to use the term?) suggested by *Disgrace*?

**The fabula of Disgrace**

A reshuffling of subjects due to rationalization of educational resources in the post-apartheid period makes 52-year-old David Lurie teach...
communications at the Technical University in Cape Town. Although specialized in modern languages and literature, David is a poor communicator himself and gives lessons to apathetic students who typically lack the mythical and Biblical background inherent to the understanding of literature. Twice divorced, David satisfies his sexual desires first with a colored prostitute, Soraya, and then with a college student, Melanie. Although the latter is not a case of rape, the girl lodges a claim of harassment. He is arraigned before an investigating committee and pleads guilty. Since he refuses to go further and make a public confession, David is dismissed from college.

David then goes to his only daughter’s farm in faraway Salem, Eastern Cape, a site reminiscent of early history of British settlement and frontier conflicts. Lucy, a lesbian, keeps a kennel and is a subsistence farmer selling her produce in Grahamstown in the weekend. Helped by the black farmer Petrus whose property is adjacent to Lucy’s, she is aware that Petrus is anxious to consolidate his recently acquired independence as a landowner. Nearby there is also a dog clinic run by Bev Shaw, a very unattractive woman who euthanizes old animals. This almost quiet life implodes when three black strangers force themselves into Lucy’s house. They kill the dogs, set fire on David and gang-rape his daughter. Father and daughter are fortunate enough to survive. Later on Lucy knows that the boy rapist, Pollux, is somewhat related to Petrus who, in turn, kept himself suspiciously absent during the whole episode. Further, to David’s surprise Lucy doesn’t press charges. Pregnant as a result of the rape, she passes her land to Petrus and becomes his mistress.

The issues involved make David break away from Lucy, he leaves unfinished an opera with Byron as a character and self-abases himself by having sex with Bev. Moreover, he devotes himself more and more to the dog clinic run by Bev Shaw, putting down homeless dogs. Even though particularly fond of an unwanted mongrel, he gives it up “like a lamb” at the end of the narrative.

Writing fiction in S. Africa

Years of colonial and apartheid history in South Africa have exerted great pressures on writers and are the acid test of white liberal sensibility in South Africa. Realism has been preferentially chosen by writers to reconcile fiction and history. While they couldn’t consider fiction neutral, writers had to avoid the cheap political writing aesthetics and, at the same time, face the issues. For Gordimer, the overt committed Nobel prize writer, fiction writing is representation and the truthful recording of and reflection on facts. In the case of Coetzee, the cautious unengaged writer, things are more complex. Parameters used in the Western novel, mainly the authoritative omniscient narrator equivalent to the intruding colonizer, are shunned and metafiction is extensively employed (Glenn, 1994; Attwell, 1993). Since fiction is story telling, “the novel operates in term of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of the procedures of history and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by history, as a child’s schoolwork is checked by a schoolmistress” (apud Dawes, 1998:140). In fact, the politics of silence and voice coupled to the complexities in twists and self-reflexivity are paradoxically what makes Coetzee’s writing characteristically different from the usual realism in mainstream South African literature. Seemingly poised between post-colonialism and post-modernism, it reveals in its metafiction the groping of the white writer in South Africa. This may be confirmed by Coetzee’s spare style. It has neither the telegraphic style of Hemingway nor the verbosity of Rushdie. With its subtle lyricism, Disgrace reveals a quiet and devious voice suited to express the dilemmas afflicting a white writer in a post-apartheid country. In a detached and restraint way, the novel’s overall understatement is kept elusive, albeit the events are clear enough.

Themes

Colonial situation. In Coetzee’s fiction the colonial situation reveals itself through severance and broken relationship between parents and children and between males and females. Disrupted relationships are bleaker and subtler than Magda’s in In the Heart of the Country (1977). In Disgrace David is a predatory father; his wayward daughter Lucy is physically and ideologically distant from him; practically no links exist between his former wives; his weekly encounters with Soraya are almost professional; those with his student Melanie Isaacs verge on the pathetic; the rape of Lucy is tragic and brings about further severance between father and daughter. Now, these characters have a metonymic function. The fact that David has sex with girls young enough to be his daughters (“‘There, there,’ he whispers, trying to comfort her. ‘Tell me what is wrong.’ Almost he says, ‘Tell Daddy what is wrong’) (Coetzee, 2000:26, henceforth, only page number) is a subtle way of introducing the failure between the colonizer and the colonized. Further,
Soraya and Melanie (“Shift the accent. Meláni: the dark one”, 18) are black and dark respectively, recording a subliminal way of describing exploitative colonialism. Similar subalternity has been extensively employed by Coetzee (Klien Anna in In the Heart of the Country; the photograph caption in The Vietnam Project and the San women in The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee, both in Dusklands (1982); the barbarian girl in Waiting for the Barbarians). The deep flaw in relationships is seen through a case of white arrogance, objectification of natives, subalternity of women.

Lack of communication is almost inherent in the characters. Besides David’s uncommunicativeness, Melanie’s silence is emblematic. The reader never gets Melanie’s side of things, since David quickly appropriates her discourse with his own thoughts: “[Sex] was undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core” (25). The objectified girls are silent whilst he boasts of a “strange love ... from the quiver of Aphrodite” (25) and of the flame-god (166). The bywoner Petrus is impenetrable. “Talking to Petrus is like punching a bag filled with sand” (153). Even Lucy cuts communication with her father when he tries to embrace her after the attack. “My child, my child!” he says, holding out his arms to her. When she does not come, he puts aside his blanket, stands up, and takes her in his arms. In his embrace she is stiff as a pole, yielding nothing” (99). Needless to say this amounts to the voicelessness of the colonized and to the deep chasm between blacks and whites, a recurrent theme in Coetzee. In Life and Times of Michael K (1983), the silence of the hare-lipped black gardener Michael baffles the nurse in the labor camp. “Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory ... It was an allegory ... of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it” (Coetzee, 1985:166). The colonial silence is more emphasized in Foe (1986). Not only is the black Friday tongueless, but Susan Barton’s endeavor to make him speak and tell his story fails completely. Moreover, she herself, as narrator, is almost tricked by the author Daniel Defoe to whom she confides her narrative. Defoe wants to rewrite it as a myth of the male pioneer and the eighteenth century author turns up to be the foe of truth. After centuries of pretending to speak on behalf of the subaltern and silenced native, the white writer finds out the impossibility of furnishing and establishing the native’s memory or history (Bonnici, 2000; Coetzee, 1988).

Nature and balance of power in the post-apartheid world. The spatial scheme of Disgrace comprises shifts from Cape Town to the countryside and back. The protected life David enjoyed changes metonymically into a rural area fraught with unknown dangers. Shunning city and college life, David retires to his daughter’s farm. When he is set on fire, his car stolen and his daughter raped; he realizes the dystopic vision of modern, post-apartheid South Africa. The attack provokes David to a stream-of-consciousness discourse:

> It happens every day, every hour, every minute, he tells himself, in every quarter of the country. Count yourself lucky to have escaped with your life. Count yourself lucky not to be a prisoner in the car at this moment, speeding away, or at the bottom of a donga with a bullet in your head. Count Lucy lucky too. Above all Lucy.

A risk to own anything: a car, a pair of shoes, a packet of cigarettes. Not enough to go around, not enough cars, shoes, cigarettes. Too many people, too few things. What there is must go into circulation. 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. That is how one must see life in this country: in its schematic aspect. Otherwise one could go mad (Coetzee, 1999:98).

The struggle for power starts and anarchy is rife. Violence will repeat itself as sure as anything, but Lucy refuses to leave or prosecute the gang. Further, she refuses abortion and accepts the child from the rape. While in the past she was the landowner and Petrus the sharecropper or bywoner, after the attack she gives her land to Petrus, lives on his land and becomes his subaltern third wife. The shift of power is complete. However, Lucy sees things on the personal plane. “It was done with such personal hatred. That was what stunned me more than anything. ... Why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them”. Lurie’s point of view is on the social and historical plane. “It was history speaking to through them ... A history of wrong ... It may have seemed personal, but it wasn’t. It came down from the ancestors” (156). It seems that she tries to reconcile the two opinions. Lucy reaches the conclusion that living in a “foreign” country, or rather, living in a country that till recently had been considered as a European homeland, without any qualms of conscience as regards to the fate of the natives, has a price. “What if ... what if that is the price one has to pay for staying on? ... They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors” (158). A reminiscence of the young woman in Gordimer’s story “Is there nowhere else where we can meet?” (Gordimer,
Land ownership has always been the great political and strategic support of European colonizers. A 1913 law conceding 87% of South African land to the white minority was revoked in 1995 by the Bill of Land Rights (Oliver and Fage, 1997). Consequently, an initializing of the power shift occurs. A changeover may be seen in a metafictional interpretation of the novel: property and sex. At the beginning of the novel Lucy is a landowner, albeit a mere subsistence farmer; whilst Petrus is a former sharecropper, an ex-landless farmer. “Petrus is my new assistant. In fact, since March, co-proprietor” (62). Due to changes in government policy and to the fact that the wails of Kafraria are gone, Petrus knows that a post-colonial/post-apartheid era has begun. He celebrates this reversal of fortune by a big party. “Because of the land transfer, I would guess. It goes through officially on the first of the next month. It’s a big day for him” (124).

Petrus’s sleigh of hand seems to embody “the blood flowing in the reverse direction” in Greek tragedy. Almost imperceptibly Coetzee records Bhabha’s notion of “sly civility”: Petrus calls himself a dog-man and does the chores; he is polite and wily; he is absent when the gang comes to rape and elusive to the utmost when he is informed of the crime committed; he reacts suspiciously and with great tolerance with the rapist boy and stone-faced before an accusing finger. His silence and self-assured attitude, especially during the party, is a warrant of his hold on the future of history. This atmosphere is especially true when David observes an orator speaking to the attentive multitude (135). He feels he, the white man, is the odd one out; perhaps just as Negroes used to feel in their own country while the white minority was hegemonic. His conclusion is bleak but realistic: “As a woman alone on a farm she has no future, that is clear. Even the days of Ettinger, with his guns and barbed wire and alarm systems, are numbered” (134). In her opinion “it is just a matter of time before Ettinger is found with a bullet in his back” (204).

An overturning of power in sex is another emblem of the colonizer’s downfall. At the start David finds the use of Soraya entirely satisfactory, or rather, an unquestioning and silent object to be had weekly. All of a sudden and without notice, the object transforms itself into a subject. The Negro prostitute shrills to him, “You are harassing me in my own house. I demand you will never phone me here again, never” (10). The reaction of dark Melanie is subtler still since she destroys the college professor and dislocates him. Even though the displacement of a white man is a very distant echo of the displacement of thousands of Negroes in colonial times, it is a reversed metonym of one of the most important features in post-colonial literatures. It is now the white self that will be eroded by dislocation, non-identity and non-authenticity (Ashcroft et al., 1991). Further, there seems to be a parallel between the “violence” of the predatory father alluring twenty-year-old Melanie and his daughter’s rape in front of his very eyes. In colonial and apartheid times native South Africans had to suffer injustice and the indignity of compromise in order to stay alive. In the post-apartheid era whites have no choice. Perhaps this is the chasm between Lucy and Lurie and which harrows David’s conscience. While Lucy feels that she has to come to terms with this situation if she is to be able to continue her chosen life, David still bluffs himself that moral principles may bring orderliness to human nature. Even though more difficult and outrageous for the lesbian and autonomous Lucy, her aim is the amnesis of the past and, above all, survival to carry on with life.

The white dilemma. More than the Cape Town gardener Michael K, David Lurie is broken down almost to nothing before he finds some tiny measure of redemption in his forced acceptance of the realities of his existence. Coetzee brings about this feature through a subtle comparison with animals. David imagines himself shuddered by prostitutes. “They shudder too, as one shudders at a cockroach in a washsbin in the middle of the night” (8). Indulgence is so tiring that he plays with the idea of being castrated as an old dog (9). When he falls in disgrace and goes to his daughter’s farm, she tells him, “This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals” (74). After the rape episode and its aftermath David almost reduces himself to animal existence since he has “become tired, friable, eaten from the inside as if by termites,” while feeling “like a fly-casing in a spiderweb” (107). Reversal of fortune and Negroes’ right to be redressed have produced in the white colonizer the pessimistic attitudes of Lucy’s last discourse: “It is humiliating ... 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” (205).

Disgrace, therefore, portrays the struggle and guilt of once dominant groups of society to cope with a
changing world order in general and a politically upheaval in the special case of South Africa. With regard to maleness, a counter patriarchy seems to be rife and David is downtrodden by a feminist regard to maleness, a counter patriarchy seems to be upheaval in the special case of South Africa. With Disgrace present (as do some novels, notably Gordimer’s male, heterosexual symbol, looks towards the and the years of struggle), Lucy, the opposite of the the pre-apartheid colonial past, life under apartheid many novels in South Africa are being written about David concentrates his attention on the past (as conclusions or decisions are produced. In fact, while his past indulgences and on his wrecked life, no minority. Although David does a lot of thinking on what they always were in South Africa, an intruding easy answer for white men to adapt themselves to protection of her former Negro servant. Disgrace may be a narrative that shows there is no case for white men to adapt themselves to what they always were in South Africa, an intruding minority. Although David does a lot of thinking on his past indulgences and on his wrecked life, no conclusions or decisions are produced. In fact, while David concentrates his attention on the past (as many novels in South Africa are being written about the pre-apartheid colonial past, life under apartheid and the years of struggle), Lucy, the opposite of the male, heterosexual symbol, looks towards the present (as do some novels, notably Gordimer’s The House Gun, dealing with present uncertainties and ambivalence). Since nothing in the novel reminds the reader of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Coetzee is perhaps trying to go beyond the constitutional successes (reassignment of property, hegemony, power over women) and clearing a way for prospects for white integration in post-apartheid South Africa. This is why David reluctantly accepts Lucy’s decision to arrange things. A home for her and her child will be provided in Petrus’s polygamous household.

The conviction that the days of Western hegemony are gone and a new methodology has to be discovered or invented may be corroborated by the impotence David feels when measuring things through the classics or the Western paradigm. The variable nature of truth and the impermanence of the world, characteristic of South African reality at present, are diagonally opposite to classical standards. In Coetzee’s Age of Iron (1990), the cancer-torn Mrs Curren also sees the world through the prism of the classics. She found them wanting. The advice, drawn from Thucydides, given to the teenage son of her maid Florence, hunted by the police for his involvement in a township resistance group, is rejected. Similarly David discovers the irrelevance of the chamber opera on the last days of Byron in the context of South Africa.

David’s tortuous path and, consequently, the white man’s rehabilitation, are traced and a solution may be advanced by David’s final attitudes. Volunteer work in the animal clinic and his awkward relationship with Bev Shaw are a form of annihilating his sense of superiority. Although he refuses to admit it, actually it is the way Lucy has chosen. Although he tentalizes with the statement “You wish to humble yourself before history”, David seems to realize that the redemption of the white man in post-apartheid South Africa only emerges when he gives up everything: his daughter, his ideas about justice and language, his opera on Byron and the old endeared dog which he leads to the sacrifice (220). Even so, a new South Africa is not immediately forthcoming and the confused advances and wayward issues in the novel are still symptomatic of the difficult process towards subjectification and autonomy.

Conclusion

“The dog with the hole in its throat still bares its bloody teeth ... Contemptible, yet exhilarating, probably, in a country where dogs are bred to snarl at the mere smell of a black man” (110). David’s thoughts while burying Lucy’s dogs after the attack probably give the right dimension to attitudes that should prevail during the period in which Negroes and former colonizers, who to a certain extent are natives too, are working for the consolidation of a reconciled nation. In the wake of collective apologies (for instance, the Reconciliation Walk, the South African Truth Commission, Tony Blair’s apology for the Irish Great famine, Clinton’s apology on slavery and on the mistreatment of Africans and the Catholic Church apology for the Shoah), a reading of Disgrace may subliminally show paradigms of reconciliation. Coetzee’s novel would be the object of the gaze of the world’s public opinion which frames all discussion of collective responsibility. South African “Europeans” of Dutch and English stock have been defined by the wrongs they committed as colonizers and apartheid constructors, for which they should apologize. On the other hand, native Negroes and other non-white citizens brought as indentured labor especially during the
last 150 years are defined by the wrongs they suffered and for which they ought to receive apology. However, collective apologies are seen as abortive rituals and surely lack little transformative power (Trouillot, 2000). Perhaps the real solution is that advocated by Disgrace. Amnesis, the will to forget the colonial past, is "symptomatic of the urge for historical self-invention or the need to make a new start - to erase painful memories of colonial subordination" (Gandhi, 1998:4). The dog with its white fangs instinctively open to devour the non-white native is dead and buried. Similar to overturned white hegemony, it lies on the ground as a contemptible object. Since redressing of rights is a mandatory ethical stance and Lucy is placed within the context of a paralyzing sense of loss, Coetzee seems to suggest that the remedy is the seeking of “a new culture and subjeethood around a reinvention of tradition” (Lloyd, 2000:219). By accepting to be Petrus's third wife, passing over her land to his ownership and receiving the child of rape, she adopts a “complex form of living on that do not simply preserve belated and dysfunctional practices, but potentialities for producing and reproducing a life that lies athwart of modernity" (Lloyd, 2000:219).

Now this boils down to the intervention of ethics in politics and the interruption of the latter by the former (Marais, 2000). David's self-conviction that he will not change is defeated by his learning to love. “He has learned by now, from her [Bev], to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer had difficulty in calling by its proper name: love” (219). In fact there is a restoration of filial bond, responsibility and selflessness towards Lucy. It seems that this grounding in responsibility is Coetzee’s formula in the post-apartheid period. It is the heralding of a “form of writing which, by maintaining the otherness of the Other, enables the work to work” (Marais, 2000:179).

Thus, on the metafiction level, white writing, denoting the Western literary canon and criticism, is uncommunicative and on the run, or rather, disgraced. It has been responsible for many predatory instances, ideologically objectification and degradation of Negro native literary manifestations. The Byron opera will be disposed of. Other literary theories inherent to traditional native structures will be available. “This is not something I want to hear. This is not how we do things”. WC: he is on the point of saying, We Westerners” (202). While it is “dangerous” to insist on Western literary forms, the safer path of hybridity (“A woman must be marry”, 202) and even total indigenous overhauling are suggested. Needless to say the white man’s “decolonization of the mind” will be the last thing to be given up. “I thought you would save him for another week,” says Bev Shaw. ‘Are you giving him up?’ ‘Yes, I am giving him up” (220). Surely the dissolution of the impact, in Africa and elsewhere, of an expansionist Western ideology and, at a wider level, the imperative substitution of fiction written within the Western tradition is a colossal theme.

References

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