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The Public and Private Dichotomy in Coetzee's
Disgrace

by

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The Public and Private Dichotomy in Coetzee's *Disgrace*

These are puritanical times. Private life is public business. Prurience is respectable, prurience and sentiment. They wanted a spectacle: breast-beating, remorse, tears if possible. A TV show, in fact. I wouldn't oblige. (*Disgrace*, 66)

This passage in which the protagonist, David Lurie, boldly rejects the cyclical nature of state intrusion into private lives -- from Puritan times to twentieth-century post-apartheid South Africa -- is pivotal in shaping the central characters in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. David's argument is presented here to counter an academic committee's public interrogation into what he thinks ought to be a private matter, his sexual relations with a student. Lurie scoffs at the widely publicized disciplinary hearings, refuses to defend himself in basic ways, and flouts the committee's request. He muses that: "these are puritanical times. Private life is public business" (66). His recalcitrance and unwillingness to adapt to new realities is Coetzee's portrayal of a false sense of entitlement that David, and the former ruling class he represents, possesses. By analogy, Coetzee's depiction similarly indicts an evolutionary post-apartheid South Africa that wrestles with political change in the historical context of powerful elites and a subjugated majority.

Disgrace includes two harrowing stories: The campus novel in which David Lurie, a Professor at Cape Town University, has an affair with one of his students, Melanie – privately he calls her Meláni, the dark one (18) – and is denounced before a committee of inquiry; and the anti-pastoral novel, where his

grown daughter, Lucy, lives on a small farm in the Eastern Cape, where she runs a kennel for dogs and sells vegetables and flowers from her garden at a weekly market. Both become victims to three centuries of colonial violence when they are attacked.

Through historical fiction, *Disgrace* demonstrates that personal actions have political significance. Coetzee also exposes the need to embrace the liberal, feminist ideological legacy – “the personal is political, the political is personal” – by tapping into the deeper psychological attributes of complex human relationships with interlocking issues of retribution, state-sponsored justice, and private justice. His leading man displays hunger for the truth and consolation and also discovers the deeper tension there. The spirit of new political realities and upheaval of centuries of white domination in South Africa blows at full speed through the Luries (David and Lucy). Testimony, truth telling and apology are stifled and displaced for these central characters, but more so for David, who rejects public debasement.

Coetzee largely examines the conceptualization of the public and private domain as an interrelated system of social relations rather than as two largely separate spheres of existence and finds that while the public and private sides of man seems to be divergent, if understood properly, they are complementary. Therefore, the definition of his characters’ identities is wrought with contradictory impulses that mirror socio- cultural and political tensions through which the South African nation has evolved. A cursory look at all these tensions suggests that one

is always looking at the dichotomy through a moving prism, with its lines not clear-cut but refracted according to time and circumstance. In the end, Coetzee leans towards discrediting the public sphere, yet he deliberately pits the ethical/private sphere against the political/public sphere, intimating that personal choices are intrinsically political.

Coetzee dissects this complex, dichotomous debate and stages it in a number of ways: with David's relationships with women, especially Soraya and Melanie; within David's consciousness as he comes to terms with his personal yet public disgrace through Lucy's attack; in David's confession to Mr. Isaacs; and in the wider socio-political conditions of a transitional, post-apartheid South Africa. Moreover, Coetzee expertly negotiates this ambiguity by juxtaposing conflicting perspectives to enable an imaginative representation of the unique subjective experiences and responses of multiple characters as they struggle with the historical and social processes that violently shape their lives.

Set at the turn-of-the-millennium when South Africa is flirting with social collapse, *Disgrace* is a complex exploration of the collision of private and public worlds. Although the author keeps the focalization¹ confined to David – the novel's white, middle-aged and decidedly washed-up academic protagonist – there are glimpses into the other characters that illustrate the fluctuating distance between their interpretations and responses to events in the exploration of the

¹ For a more general evaluation of focalization, see Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction*, in which she writes that focalization occurs when "[t]he story is presented in the text through the mediation of some 'prism,' 'perspective,' 'angle of vision,' verbalized by the narrator though not necessarily his" (73). The term "focalization" dispels some of the confusion between perspective and narration when terms like "point of view" are used because "focalization" more explicitly broadens visual sense to include "cognitive, emotive, and ideological orientation" (73).

relationship between the self and society. For instance, David sexually exploits his student, Melanie Isaacs, has sex with Soraya, a prostitute, and is openly interrogated by a school review committee, but he refuses to publicly confess. Later though, in his subsequent apology, “on his knees and touching his forehead to the floor, before the mother and sister of his former student” (173), David appears to offer some degree of public confession. Additionally, Lucy is subjugated to sexual violence, but insists on not dealing with it openly.

These varied interpretations tend to move toward a collapse of the private/public, personal/political binary that preoccupies Coetzee’s literary art. The “private lives” of the citizens are invaded by the “public domain” as the ramifications of apartheid-era state violence penetrate private spaces in post-apartheid South Africa: The obscure spatial conception that the author conjures here points to the impracticality of clear-cut divisions between “private” and “public” space and the inescapability of South Africa’s political history as it touches lives.

The first challenge is played out in the beginning of the novel, where David seems to control “the problem of sex” (1) very well through his trysts with the “exotic” prostitute Soraya, whom he does find “entirely satisfactorily” (1). The poised, controlled hero marks his love life with cold logic: “intercourse between Soraya and himself, must be he imagines, rather like the copulation of snakes: lengthy, absorbed, but rather abstract, rather dry, even at its hottest” (2-3). Although he gives readers the impression that he has power over his love life, the animal imagery indicates that David is driven by innate, animalistic desires which

he does not manage well. At the outset, David is totally self absorbed and intellectually arrogant. His solution is therefore routinely reducing women to objects with which he gratifies his desires. This [**dis**]satisfaction (emphasis mine) mostly rotates between the “exotic” Soraya and later, the “dark-one”, Melanie.

His arrangement with the prostitute threatens to fall apart because “one Saturday morning everything changes the memory [of Soraya in the street with her sons] hangs uneasily over them” (6). Lurie however, cannot accept it: it was an arrangement that worked, and the alternatives do not satisfy him. He convinces himself that “he has no wish to upset, what must be for Soraya, a precarious double life” (6), but is helpless in probing her secret further. “Though Soraya still keeps her appointments, he feels a growing coolness as she transforms herself into just another woman and him into just another client” (7). After she ends her private, business arrangement, David intrudes on that space by hiring a private detective to track her whereabouts. Soraya takes control of her privacy and handles the permissible parameters of their relationship. “I don’t know who you are, she says. You are harassing me in my own house. I demand that you will never phone me here again, never” (9-10). This becomes the first real signal that David is losing that grip of control of his life, his affairs, and others’ perception of him.

Themes of voyeurism and intrusion keep emerging in the novel and are directly related to who remains on the outside/inside, and at what critical moment. David deliberately blurs discursive boundaries of his career, art, and family because “Professor Lurie is all for double lives, triple lives, lives lived in

compartments" (6). Soraya, like David, is guilty of compartmentalization, and for this reason David becomes a voyeur as he tries to become an "insider" in her private, family affairs. The prostitute and maternal roles are clearly segregated, and as such, "of her life outside Windsor Mansions, Soraya reveals nothing" (3). She fiercely protects her private space (home) and shares with David only her escort services, which she clearly distinguishes in terms of space, time, goods, and payment. David refuses to accept this and proceeds to tread on her personal space. Indeed, this is the first instance where he is denied focalization – a denial that not only restricts his access but also his mobility.

Coetzee suggests that David's sexuality is linked to a sense of authority and entitlement. As his privileged, bourgeoisie position at Cape Town University is "rationalized" and his sexual encounters with Soraya cease, he considers himself emasculated: he "ought to give up, retire from the game" (9). Thus his loss of intellectual authority is paralleled with the loss of sexual gratification. As he suffers intellectual castration in the "emasculated institution of learning," (4) there is no other appropriate end.

When the sexual encounters with Soraya end, he moves on to impose himself on his student, Melanie Isaacs. Their interactions are laced with tensions. First, she is a student, and as her professor, David has certain professional responsibilities. Second, David refers to her privately as the "dark one", but there is no clear indication about her ethnicity. Subsequently, it is difficult to thoroughly analyze their relationship through a racialized lens. The very reference of the word "dark", however, and the former white ruling class to which David

belongs, make a plausible case that his sexual encounters with Melanie include issues of race, class, and power.

As already indicated, *Disgrace* opens with a discussion of David's rather aggressive sexual behavior and reveals his history of desiring "exotic" women (in fact, he selects Soraya, a prostitute, because she is labeled as "exotic" in a catalog). David is immediately characterized as a man who assumes that he has the right to possess (or purchase) women's bodies without responsibility towards them or respect for their lives², as Lucy Graham notes. Later, while David admits that he must "detain" (19) the unwilling, unresponsive Melanie in order to "thrust himself upon" her (24) because sex with him is "undesired to the core" (25) of her being, he continues to insist that it was "not rape, not quite that" (25). Indeed, he claims that his having (forced) sexual intercourse with her does not constitute rape because "[s] he does not own herself" (16). When he asks Melanie to spend the night, he convinces her and himself that, "a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it" (16). This is typical of the master/slave discourse and evident in the post-imperialistic project that Coetzee expounds.

Rob Nixon identifies the socio-historical colonial, social and legal structures in which women were "ordinarily institutionalized as male property" (77). Rape is more blatantly utilized as a tool of colonial repression, or what

² Lucy Graham illuminates the issue of rape in *Disgrace*. She points to "a poster for the New National Party before the 1999 elections" that "states that women are raped daily, that the party is 'deeply shocked' at the ANC's 'unfeeling' attitude, and that the new Nationalist [sic] Party plans to institute capital punishment for rapists" (435). See Bakker (FP), election advertisement for *The New National Party*, 1999 elections.

Nixon deems “a war of dispossession... a male war” (77). In the crossfire of such a war, Nixon claims, “women find themselves unenviably cast as first-class icons but second-class citizens. They are denied the arms to defend themselves while are weighed down with symbolic responsibilities as guarantors of homeland, ethnos, and lineage” (77). Rape, in such circumstances, is used not only to torture women, but is also aimed at men (as David will later discover) and the collapse of the familial structures of the “enemy.” In allowing David’s inability to think of his assault on Melanie as “rape” and his utter incomprehension of the reasons behind the corrective measures against his behavior, Coetzee argues that the racialized conceptions of rape in colonial and apartheid South Africa continue to structure the discourse surrounding rape and its legal treatment in the post-apartheid state. A transformed country then, the author reiterates, does not necessarily equate to transformed attitudes about private/public selves.

But David’s arrogance, based in part on intellectual notions and philosophical abstractions and in part on his temperament, fortifies his belief that his actions with Melanie are justified and authorized. Instead of “retiring from the game” David, as a “servant of Eros,” (52) imposes “his rights of desire” (89) on Melanie. Yet, before he forces himself on her, there is a tension between the intellectual and physical sensations he experiences. He acknowledges that it is “not rape, not quite, but undesired to the core” (25). Here, David is almost a sympathetic character because at times he seems to be aware of his own guilt and issues of morality. He retreats into a private confessional mode, albeit momentarily, but he is unable to deny his desire for a younger woman. He reflects

that, “he ought to let her go” (18), but being the true Romantic that he is, he believes “that a woman’s beauty does not belong to her alone...she has a duty to share it” (16). When the voice of reason and the system of conscience interject, Coetzee illustrates that his antihero knows these actions are immoral: “a *child* he thinks, no *more than a child!* What am I doing? Yet, his heart launches with desires” (20). Paradoxically, the protagonist falls from grace and ultimately to “disgrace” because of his paralysis in questioning the “authority” that is embedded in desire and his inability to recognize that he is driven not by that authority, but by his bodily instincts.

Arguably, readers glean that this would probably become a fatal flaw for David. Steeped in Romantic traditions, he explicates the Alpine sequence in Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* for his students. Although David’s linguistic approach to the distinction between “usurp” and “usurp upon” (20) alienates his students, Coetzee uses this symbolic frame to profile his protagonist’s personality and temperament. “As long as David can remember, “the harmonies of *The Prelude* have echoed within him” (20). Thus the discussion of Wordsworthian philosophies reveals the determining core values of David himself. Since to “usurp” is to take over entirely and is the perfective of “usurp upon”, which means to intrude or encroach upon”(21), similarly David’s predatory, sexual “rights of desire” have, in many ways, “usurped upon” Melanie’s private self and her “rights” to reject his “desires.” It is this false sense of privilege and self-consciousness that allows David, for example, to speak for Soraya and later to demand that Melanie and his daughter, Lucy, find their voices.

David's sexual politics resonate, to an extent, through Michel Foucault's ideas on sexuality. Foucault's universal principle³ on the prohibition of such sexuality is what David intensely struggles with. Before he 'usurps' and invades Melanie's personal, sexual space, he thinks to himself that she is a mere child. In what seems like a lover/father role, David tries to make her "tell Daddy what is wrong" (26) when she cries uncontrollably after their sexual encounter. He conflates the lover/father role further. In a parental tone, he muses to himself about Melanie: "She is behaving badly, getting away with too much" (28). When wooing Melanie, "the voice he hears belongs to a cajoling parent, not a lover" (20).

Yet David is imperceptive in recognizing his flirtation with separating spheres. Synonymous with Foucault's ideas on incest, he struggles with the father/lover role when Melanie asks to spend the night. Although there is no suggestion that he wants to sleep with his own biological daughter, his willingness to flirt and play out the prohibited incestuous fetish is significant and firmly rooted in Foucault. Coetzee portrays this very well in the very site of Lurie's sexual tryst with his student: "He makes up a bed for her in his daughter's

³ See Michel Foucault *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction* for a comprehensive discussion about sexual philosophy and its impact on punishment. This dilemma and in many ways, David's sexual rights philosophy (albeit his life philosophy) can be understood in the context of Foucault's work on sexuality, discipline and punishment. The philosopher creates a model to understand one's body and its place in private and public discourses as well how modern prisons as bureaucratic institutions shifted focus on punishment from the perpetrator's body to his soul. In Foucault's *History*, punishment, family, power, and confession are the core of the public/private divide. These are all salient issues that shape and reshape David's life, and are integral to Foucault's theorizing of society's "hypocritical sexuality". As such, in many ways, David is a Foucauldian character.

old room, kisses her goodnight... eases off her shoes, covers her... [Asks himself], Mistress? Daughter? What in her heart is she trying to be? What is she offering him? ... He makes love to her one more time, on the bed in his daughter's room" (26-9). As a result, Coetzee, the author and commentator, shapes a Foucauldean character, one in which, David, a member of the modern, bourgeoisie family, both creates and negates his own incestuous desires, reproducing them through the restraint of incestuous feeling.

Further undertones of private, sexual divergence with the public, state apparatus are made even more problematic with gendered and racial discourse of the colonized past that David represents. During David's disciplinary hearing, one committee member begins to point to the connections between David's behavior and the colonial conditions that once authorized it by saying, "when we try to get specificity, all of a sudden it is not abuse of a young woman he is confessing to, just an impulse he could not resist, with no mention of the pain he has caused, no mention of the long history of exploitation of which this is a part" (53). Ann Stoler argues that this is an exploitation that traces back to an era of South African history in which "sexual abuse of black women was not classified as rape and therefore was not legally actionable, nor did rapes committed by white men lead to prosecution" ("Making Empire" 353). Stoler further asserts that, "the rhetoric of sexual assault and the measures used to prevent it had virtually no correlation with the incidence of rape of European women by men of color. Just the contrary: there was often no evidence, ex post facto or at the time, that rapes were committed or that rape attempts were made. This is not to suggest that sexual

assaults never occurred, but that their incidence had little to do with the fluctuations in anxiety about them” (353).

Readers are led to believe that David is already satiated with sex since he knows how to "solve the problem of sex" (1) and since "sex is the backbone of his life" (7). However it permeates his being and is resistant to the intensive judicial and administrative vehicles designed to control it. As the novel's anti-hero, David seems to demonstrate a keen awareness that "power represses sex" (Foucault, *History* 85), whether that power is internal (private) or external (public). Hence, he views the state machinery (academic committee) as a means to control his servitude to Eros -- an issue he persistently expresses as private. But as David switches from perpetrator to victim, he will later grudgingly acknowledge Foucault's assertion that, "sex is seen as a cause of any and everything" (*History* 65). If this is such a pervasive problem for David, and the lives that he touches, then in a Foucauldean twist, sexual [mis]conduct will require "the direction of consciences, the self examination" (Foucault 120), especially among members of the educated class – David's class. Consequently, punishment must be administered through private and public means, a fact that David refuses to admit at this point in his reformation.

Although David is conscious of his shame and guilt, Coetzee skillfully integrates moral ambiguity within his soul in a way that intertwines repulsive action with that of a “public” confession. Here, Coetzee challenges his protagonist’s assumption of individual autonomy and the careless freedom with which it provides him the idea of excusing those actions with confessions. The

challenge is played out before an academic “committee of inquiry” (48). David admits guilt but refuses to publicly repent and demonstrate remorse. While it is a turning point in David’s trajectory, it is an incomplete process because he has not yet surrendered self and the desires within. The interrogation (inquisition) does not culminate in a dismissal because the committee has “no power to take decisions” (48), but it establishes its ethical necessity as the catalyst to push David into self-imposed exile.

The scene of interrogation, in which the faculty committee indignantly objects to Lurie’s ‘acceptance of charges’ without remorse, initiates the novel’s exploratory work on the ethical and juridical quandaries. David rejects such quasi-judicial arrangement and questions the efficacy of both confession and the spectacle of deliberation: “I am sure the members of this committee have better things to do with their time than rehash a story over which there will be no dispute’, responds Lurie to his colleagues. ‘I plead guilty to both charges. Pass sentence, and let us get on with our lives” (48-9). Responding to David, his perspective, and his refusal to acquiesce to ethical responsibility and moral culpability, Dr Rassool protests:

Prof Lurie says he accepts the charges. Yet when we try to pin him down on what it is that he actually accepts, all we get is subtle mockery. To me that suggests that he accepts the charges only in name. [...] Professor Lurie pleads guilty, but I ask myself, does he accept his guilt or is he simply going through the motions in the hope that the case will be buried under paper and forgotten? (50-1)

Ironically, at this point, David and Dr Rassool seem to both lack clarity about the definition of accepting the charges but have converging views that public confession is a sham unless there is deliberative reason and sincerity. The major

difference here is that David tries to dodge a literal conceptualization of justice while Dr Rassool demands performative justice. But David takes it a step further; he later contemplates that: “I appeared before an officially constituted tribunal, before a branch of the law. Before that secular tribunal, I pleaded guilty, a secular plea. That plea should suffice. Repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse” (58). Therefore, moral issues of confession and repentance demand a visceral transformation of attitude, emotions and instincts in the private body itself. Woefully though, this primal transformation cannot be objectively measured in a public/legalistic framework, and as such, it is a farce.

Again, issues of intrusion surface. Dr Rassool, symbolic of the bureaucracy, wants access not only to David’s body but also to the inner sanctum of his soul. By whatever means necessary, the public machinations will delve deeply to intrude in that private space in a way that reflects the intrusion that David inflicts on Melanie. This ‘state-censored’ invasion justifies its right to extract truth even by force, and at the expense of pillaging the personal soul. Rassool’s interrogation dramatizes “the potentially dangerous, invasive discipline or even torturous nature of inquiry - by his preferring punishment over participating in the inquiry, [David] tacitly contends that the interrogation itself is more punitive than the penalty” (Saunders 104). Here is the real danger of state intrusion in private life -- the dualism results in ‘disgraceful’ coexistence or intimacies.

David uses privacy as his defense in his “public spectacle” before the committee, but if this theory is traced to its philosophical roots, his defense is flawed and incomplete. The legislative view that there is a divisive threshold between public and private grounds is most dramatically illustrated by the sexual harassment and is also generally proscribed although it is not subsumed within the political/private life dichotomy.

Nevertheless, sexual harassment is rendered unlawful only in particular circumstances within the market, most notably in employment and education; harassment in the street, a public place, is not proscribed. Inferentially, this is a 'private' activity, which is of no interest to the state. 'Private', according to the Victorian legislative schema, purports to relate to an individual's interior life. However, a complaint of discrimination can arise only when religious or political belief manifests itself in some way within the legislative ambit, that is, when it pertains to certain aspects of public life. Over time however, the lines between private sexual encounters and public life have been blurred and have become reactive to socio-historical and political forces.⁴ Privacy then, is the conduit through which one can freely define one's relationship with others, as well as to

⁴ Today, the debate over the definition of privacy remains fierce. While early treatises see the concept largely from a moral perspective, other critiques have varied implications. Judith Thomson in her work, “The Right to Privacy” elaborates, for example, that other interests can often usurp privacy, so the right to privacy has no special place. Richard Posner sees the principle operating through defective economic principles while Robert Bork contends that there is inadequate legal doctrine to make it grounded. From a feminist's perspective, Catherine MacKinnon argues that specialized privacy granted on the basis of gender facilitates threats, control, and abuse. Ultimately, these different lenses respond to socio-economic and political dynamism.

define one's self. Moreover, it is this privacy that allows one's personality and inner self to flourish.

Coetzee frames David's defense about sex with Melanie as a private matter to allow readers to extract the truth: as all political fictions show, there is no absolute privacy. Over time, based on the felt necessities of the time, the state intrudes on the private self. Implicit in this idea of privacy is its connection to one's behavior and regulation of activities. Coetzee illustrates this fluidity mostly through readers' interaction with David and Lucy's transformation. Privacy accords them the ability to control what is known about them and who has that access to them --- insiders --- thereby controlling and maintaining their social relationships.

Coetzee's protagonist's expulsion from the university results in a loss of relative social privilege and entitlement. This loss of position sets him off on a line of flight that eventually leads to the deterritorialization of his personal, social, professional and intellectual world. He would rather retreat to his daughter Lucy's "small town" farm in Salem than accept moral culpability and public confession. Soon after his arrival, he discovers that in this rural community, the rules of the game are different. Lucy is gang raped by three black men, and he is robbed and assaulted, thereby instigating Lurie's attitudinal reversal towards individual/private rights, based on the notion of legal redress. Most importantly, the attack crystallizes, especially for David, that sex is not about the act or the desire but about power. Lucy later describes it as an act of "[s]ubjection. Subjugation" (159).

Lucy's rights-based theories similarly undergo transformation when her private home is invaded by the public, political ramifications of retributive violence, but in the opposite direction from her father. She censures Lurie about "standing up for himself" shortly after his arrival on the farm, whereas after she is attacked, she refuses to submit her rape to the scrutiny of any legal authority. Tension arises between Lucy and David when Lucy refuses to report her rape to the police. David sees her silence as a capitulation: "[s]he would rather hide her face, and he knows why. Because of the disgrace. Because of the shame. That is what their visitors have achieved; that is what they have done to this confident young woman" (115). In this version of events, the three perpetrators become the owners of the story of Lucy's rape, which in turn becomes the story of "[h]ow they put her in her place, how they showed her what a woman was for" (115).

However, Lucy's speechlessness in *Disgrace* rejects the kind of canonization that comingles public with private in a linear way, and her silence becomes what Benita Parry⁵ refers to as "that portentous silence signifying what cannot be spoken" (45). She insists that her rape 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" (112). Lucy's decision to not report her rape to the police attempts to disentangle her rape from the black peril narrative, which David frames. Lucy's claim that her experience belongs in the private sphere

⁵ Benita Parry. "Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J.M. Coetzee." *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee*. Ed. Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996.

prevents its public appropriation as a crime that can be projected onto an entire black community, characterized by white officials as monolithic for political ends. Her preemptive decision later proves warranted; Grahamstown's white police officers arrest the wrong men for the theft of David's car, having *caught* the first group of black men that the unit came across (emphasis mine). In this chain of events, white South African officials view black men as a mass, individually interchangeable. Her "rights of desire" therefore are limited in her refusal to submit her violation to the law and its inability to safeguard her from its intrusive scrutiny.

Drawing on one of *Disgrace*'s conceptualizations of individual rights, Lucy claims the freedom and the right to act on her desire of not being "put on trial like this, not to have to justify myself" (133). Lucy explains to her father:

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 in a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone... (112).

Lucy's assertion that her injury is a "private matter" rather than one that should benefit from "public" gaze is crucial because it also shields her experience from a moralizing gaze. Furthermore, it depicts the ambiguous nature of the public and private spheres. But of course, Lucy is aware that the attack was also fundamentally impersonal (that is, political) and that her response to it, whatever it might be, has no option but to be public and political. She seems determined nevertheless to come as close as possible to removing herself from the public sphere, aware as she is of the reality that to press charges is to enter into a national phenomenon and debate concerning the cycle of black-on-white violence.

Moreover, she is aware that the historical contingencies of her situation warrant and demand her privacy:

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.

This place being what?

This place being South Africa. (112)

However, it's not as though simply accepting the situation avoids an entanglement with those same politics. The irony is that by avoiding one sphere (private), Lucy inadvertently and consciously makes a decision in the other sphere (political).

That's what Lucy means when she says that what happened to her is a purely private matter: she can only *treat it* as private; or else the consequences to her ethical and political self-image will be disastrous. "I must make the political decision," she is saying, "to treat this as a nonpolitical matter."

Analogously, Lucy has clearly accepted the political transformation in the post-apartheid South Africa. The new realities in South Africa are ones that engender violence and revenge; therefore, Lucy's role here is to halt the fueling of inter-racial animosity of the sort systemized under apartheid. Her father poses a question and rebukes her this way: "do you think that you can expiate the crime of the past by suffering in the present?" (112) Lucy's response suggests that she has embraced the political realities instead of the intellectual abstractions her father associates with issues of "guilt and salvation" (112). On the other hand, David is still in the process of coming to terms with this. Later still, however, Lucy confesses that she was baffled and shaken by exactly the personal investment of her attackers: "It was done with such personal hatred. That was what stunned me

more than anything. The rest was ... expected. But why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them” (156). It is in response to this question, in an attempt at palliation, that David offers his poignant hypothesis that “it was history speaking through them ... it may have seemed personal, but it wasn’t” (156).

Here it could be argued that when hatred is so personal, the way to deal with it must be personal, too; when the injury is so personal, the agency that can counter it must inevitably be personal. To turn to the police, to what Judith Butler calls the “state-sponsored censorship” (41) of acts of hatred, would be to run away from the limited responsibility one carries in whichever socio-historical context one functions in. Such an act of escape runs the risk of taking the subject into a realm of philosophical abstractions, where all responsibility becomes absolute in that it can only be referred to an authority capable of deciding rights and wrongs. It runs the risk of what Butler sees as “an intervention in which agency is fully assumed by the state,” an assumption of power that she is deeply suspicious of (41).

Most importantly, Lucy crucially chooses this interdependent way of life. There were alternatives available to her: turning to a prosecuting authority (the Law, her father), having an abortion, and moving away. Nevertheless, she opts for a form of moving on with her life that accepts the limited responsibility each of the actors carries in the drama that has occurred. The question now arises: is this a risky move for Lucy? Does her bridled mouth evoke a sense of passivity, complacency, sympathy, or adoration? Coetzee shapes it as a powerful amalgamation of all.

Several literary critics, such as Michael Gorra and Andrew O’Heir,⁶ argue that Lucy accepts her humiliation and decides to live further in "disgrace". In the following passage on Lucy’s acquiescence, their views seem to apply:

Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. 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.
Yes, like a dog. (205)

Gorra believes that this is not necessarily a sign of passivity or victimization, but rather that Lucy’s acceptance signals strength. He asserts that, "[t]he daughter is marked by an integrity that her father knows he cannot claim for himself." He rejects that this is all hopeless, and concludes that the lives of the characters "remain unresolved and unfinished, their problems and possibilities still open" (*New York Times*). Lowry⁷ assents and thinks that a comprehensive analysis of the novel should not negate its twisted plot that surrounds "a sexually predatory father and an isolated, self-sufficient daughter who is raped by a black neighbor and submits to further sexual contact in the hope that this will bring her in the community with her rapist" (*The London Review of Books Online*, 5). Thus from her post-colonial reading of the text, it is evident that *Disgrace* shows the victory of one expansionist over another and it leaves Lucy silent, without a voice.

⁶ Michael Gorra. "After the Fall" in *The New York Times*. 28/11/1999 and Andrew O’Heir. "Disgrace" in *Salon Books*. <www.salon.com/books/review/1999/11/o5/coetzee/>. 11/02/10.

⁷ Elisabeth Lowry. "Like a Dog", in *The London Review of Books* online, vol 21, no 20 (cover date 14/10/1999)

While these are all plausible analyses, it is important to note that differences in gender, ethnicity, social power and historical circumstances will affect the lives of characters and what they represent. Marginalized voices will at times appear mute to complicate the prevailing, aesthetic values of their time. Against this background, Lucy's unspoken didacticism strongly relates to the Darwinian concept of survival. By not directly accepting the public/political avenues of remedy open to her, she is assimilating deeper into the new South African reality. This has little to do with self-doubt and fear and is more related to acceptance of a new phase of history – one in which private matters are subordinated to public ones. Clearly, if she wants to remain in the new South Africa, there are not many options; therefore, she engages in economic exchange and forms a pact with Petrus -- the one who instigates her rape. She notes with conformity that, “[h]e is offering me 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, I am fair game” (203). This uneasy pact affords her the ability to assert her own private independence because the public apparatus offers little remedy to this cycle of violence that will only become progressively worse. In any social structure, one's resourcefulness is the key to keeping alive? Lucy's greatest strength then is utilizing the resource of her silence.

Unlike her father Lucy, however, does not let her liberal, individual rights make an impact on the political machinations of the present. She chooses not to engage in ideological or hand to hand combat. After her sexual violation, she

reminisces about “this place” (112). In her only unprompted discussion of the attack with David, she understands that “in this place, at this time, it is not [a public issue]... This place being South Africa” (112). What may be interpreted as a disconnection from the space that creates identity construction can also be viewed as the site of Lucy’s identity re- construction. Her disgrace thrusts her to forge economic co-operation with Petrus, the black agent provocateur. As is the case with most members of the former ruling class, there is a major power reversal; Lucy’s last resort becomes Petrus’ new beginning. The once outcast and landless Petrus becomes the owning class. The transgressions of the white past and the disgrace of state-sanctioned injustice via apartheid become ominous for *Disgrace*. Like the temporary advantage Lucy’s alliance with Petrus gives her, post- apartheid South Africa has no guaranteed assurances.

In the sharp contrast between the way that Melanie’s rape is treated in David’s narrative and his reaction to Lucy’s rape, Coetzee calculatingly brings these tensions between the personal and political bodies to the forefront of his postcolonial novel. Just after the robbery and assault on Lucy’s farm, David ponders Lucy’s rape as a piece of “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. Cars, shoes; women too” (98). David sees Lucy’s rape as a political and social problem, closely tied to history, racially charged. His claim that her rape is “Lucy’s secret; his disgrace” (109), and his juxtaposition of women alongside shoes and cars as objects that can be taken or stolen suggests that the rape of a white woman is in some way an attack

on white men and their privileged self as well. Whereas earlier he deplored the public's condemnation of his own wrongdoing and his rights to "remain silent" (188), he embraces the law's function and asserts that "I am Lucy's father. I want those men to be caught and brought before the law and punished" (119).

Lurie's dichotomizing of the law becomes more evident as he goes through a role reversal from perpetrator to victim. He swiftly inverts his opinion and demands the public contrition of Lucy's rapists because he concludes that he is not "wrong to want justice" (119). In an ironic twist, Lurie pursues the very performance of public penitence he had scorned earlier. Lurie possesses an extraordinary capacity for self-serving interpretations of his own actions and those of others. Hence, this dichotomous relationship with the law is self-serving and, as Coetzee postulates, offers comfort and remedy for those wholly within the legal circumference. He comes full circle and once again operates as an outsider.

In a marginalized position, Lurie's vicissitudes occur after his own experience of dispossession. While it is not clear whether David's sexual misdemeanors represent a foil to his daughter's brutal rape, David himself understands that the perpetrators are responding to the "history of wrong" (156) their ancestors bore. This runs equivalent to his former Department Chair's acceptance that, "the hangover from the past, the sooner cleared away the better" (40).

But David's 'problem of sex' is at a crucial interaction with Coetzee's ironical, rhetorical strategy. The author employs this strategy to consistently undermine David's focalization and to render his versions of events completely

unreliable during and after Lucy's rape. Gayatri Spivak⁸ calls it the ability for readers to 'counterfocalize'. She contends that after the move from offender to victim:

the reader is provoked, for he or she does not want to share in Lurie-the-chief focalizer's inability to "read" Lucy as patient and agent. No reader is content with acting out the failure of reading. This is the rhetorical signal to the active reader, to counterfocalize.... This provocation into counterfocalization is the "political" in political fiction – the transformation of a tendency into a crisis. (22)

In an ironic twist, David is also like a voyeur to Lucy's rape. The attack is depicted by the narrator-as-focalized-through-David as part of a larger spate of crimes against whites that the authorities are unable to prevent. Much of the novel relies on David's version of events (sometimes unreliable as shown in his academic interrogation), but during his daughter's rape, he is an outsider to the physical as well as the psychological experience. In *Disgrace*'s most controversial scene, three black men break into Lucy's farmhouse, gang-raping her and assaulting David. During much of the action, David is locked in the bathroom, and the narration of his stream of thought as his daughter is raped is one of the more obvious instances of Coetzee's strategy of subverting David's perspective:

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)

⁸ Gayatri, Spivak. "Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching." *Diacritics* 32.3/4 (2002): 17-31.

This scene evokes many interpretative issues. First, it is clear that these are David's offstage views rather than the views of a more reliable, omniscient third person narrator as Coetzee would want readers to believe. Once again, through the rhetorical strategies of voyeurism and intrusion, David's unreliable narrative draws attention to the ways in which he silences the "many layers of reality," and thus the very silences of the text become points at which suppressed histories enter the plot of the novel. From a Freudian perspective, Ariella Azoulay argues that, "trauma...is given its meaning a second time, only in retroactive fashion when it is articulated and told to an addressee" (34-5). Therefore the audience is the "addressee" through whom the re-enactment of the first rape (Melanie) becomes more meaningful by Lucy's vicious attack. Without this explicit trauma, the more implicit parallelism to the Melanie's "not quite rape" may have been cast in a shadow. This re-enactment, David's offstage scene, Azoulay contends, becomes the narrative articulation of the first sexual violation. The juxtaposed violations involving one white and one non-white victim, as well as, one white and some non-white rapists brings into focus a dilemma of identification posed by the author. The third person narrative voice asks David, "Does he have it in him to be [a] woman?" (160). This becomes an attempt for him to successfully navigate an introspection that leads to a crisis of conscience as he becomes an insider into Lucy's rape and subsequent decisions.

A historical reference that becomes clearer is the mentioning of Aunt Sally, a figure David compares himself to and a figure the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as "an object of unreasonable or prejudiced attack." As Anne

Longmuir⁹ and other critics have asserted, “Aunt Sally,” is, then, a racialized symbol that was characteristic of “the very male, white hegemony” of colonial and apartheid-era South Africa (Longmuir 121). That David, in characterizing himself as a victim of the new South Africa, draws on the figure of an older black woman publicly abused and humiliated by white men presents a deep irony – particularly given his general attitude toward women – that serves to undercut his narrative credibility. Moreover, the “images of black violence against whites invoked by Lurie are, crucially, images drawn from a white, colonial vision of Africa” (Longmuir 120), particularly his reference to Africa as a “dark continent.” Indeed, David’s understanding of black South Africans appears to be entirely informed by colonial representations, from mission work seen as a “huge enterprise of upliftment” (instead of a tool of colonization) to his allusion to the cannibalistic savagery that was a staple of nineteenth-century European depictions of Africans.

Furthermore, as the events of the novel unfold, David’s own conception of the clear boundaries of identity between himself and the men who rape Lucy dissolve. In one scene, David’s identity and that of Lucy’s rapists collapse into one another as David imagines his daughter’s rape:

While the men, for their part, drank up her fear, reveled in it, did all they could to hurt her, to menace her, to heighten her terror.... *You don’t understand, you weren’t there*, says Bev Shaw. Well, she is mistaken. Lucy’s intuition is right after all: he does understand, he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. (160)

David can “be there, be the men” who “drank up her fear” in the same way that he

⁹ Anne Longmuir. “Coetzee’s Disgrace.” *The Explicator* 65.2 (2007): 119-121.

“thrusts himself upon [Melanie]” and “takes her” while “her limbs crumple” (24). By scripting David as a character who casts himself as a victim in the new political order but can also imagine himself in the position of Lucy’s rapists, Coetzee destabilizes David’s view of the new South Africa and draws attention to the ways in which colonial rape myths continue to structure post-apartheid social and political discourse.

Embedded in Lucy’s silence and beneath the plot of *Disgrace* is the novel’s inscription of racialized rape as something that cannot be spoken publicly in the available discourse, and the active reader’s attention to the unspoken allows such historical narratives and subtexts to emerge. However, while David elides and displaces his acts of sexual exploitation, Coetzee’s language and carefully placed silences alert the reader to the parallels between the sexual violations that take place in each half of the novel. Melanie and Lucy experience their assaults in remarkably similar terms. During David’s “not quite” rape of Melanie, he notes that it was “[a]s though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, far away” (25).

David’s predatory position in this scene is likened to that of a fox hunting a rabbit; later, in remembering the event, David describes Melanie as “[s]tepping out in the forest where the wild wolf prowls” (168). Similarly, from an outsider’s perspective, David tries to give readers an inside view and calls Lucy’s youngest rapist a “jackal boy” (202), and Lucy says, “I am a dead person” (161). In constructing these parallels between Melanie’s rape and Lucy’s rape, Coetzee

“scratch[es] beneath the surface of David’s free indirect speech” (Samuelson 144) to reveal the profound double standard on which black peril hysteria operated by exposing the far more prevalent yet largely unspoken white peril that dominated colonial life in the Cape. This absence of an insider’s view not only reveals the fluctuating distance between his interpretations and responses to events and explores the relationship between the self and society, but also produces a text that forms around a void and moves towards a collapse of the private/public, personal/political dualism that preoccupies the vast majority of the work.

Hence, there is neither redemption nor satisfaction for David as he takes on these contradictory roles. But this subversion is Coetzee’s most blatant authoritative voice because he actively challenges Lurie’s perspective, and by so doing, creates a new lens for Lurie to counter his sexual philosophy. If Lucy’s attackers appear like barbarous creatures, David is similarly culpable and must bear the same name. While this is not a justification of individual malfeasance, it is recognition of the dangers of institutional regularization in South Africa -- a nation that previously legally codified violence and oppressions of apartheid. Here Coetzee critiques the cycle of brutality, judgment, and confession, which are all symptoms of retributive violence.

After the rape, David journeys back to Cape Town as if there is some unfinished business. This physical journey is akin to his metaphysical one. The process of identity forming or *bildung* he undergoes in the course of *Disgrace* involves the forfeiture as well as the consolidation of self. This ethical trajectory spins from his initial assertion that his violation of others privately “rests on his

rights of desires” (89) to his eventual acceptance that his inability to influence the endemic violence he encounters with his daughter, means he is “attending to a dying enterprise” (121). David complains that during his self-imposed exile in rural South Africa, “he came to gather himself, gather his forces, [but] [t]here he [was] losing himself day by day” (121). This seems to negate the suggestion of fortification before, but Coetzee implies that individual (micro) needs to be submerged in order for the collective (macro) to benefit. Thus construed, there must be some element of self-sacrifice to facilitate individual autonomy and assumed freedom thereby becoming secondary to collective salvation. Only then one’s rights and desires will result in the incapability of violation of others.

Not only does Coetzee’s protagonist struggle with the difference between these psycho-philosophical abstractions and embedded realities, his impasse is also simply an allegory which allows Coetzee to represent the moral and political paradoxes of all imperial and post-imperial projects. As stated before, *Disgrace* is deeply embedded in the historical realities of post-apartheid South Africa and the complex collision between the spheres as discussed before. To navigate this, the characters must deal with “rights of desire”, and its complex interweaving with the collective guilt of the past and horrors of the present.

Self-realization and self-reinvention are certainly necessary for the anti-hero to atone for his disgrace. At times, however, Coetzee suggests that this can only occur if the political structure delves deeply and touches our personal self. For Lurie, this odyssey and crisis of conscience come after his retreat to Lucy’s farm. Long after vehemently refusing to confess to the school board, David makes

a significant apology to Melanie's father: "I apologize for the grief I have caused you and Mrs. Isaacs. I ask for your pardon" (171). Public forgiveness and confession – former alien concepts for the disciple of Eros - are now inexorably linked to private sex. Here, readers can now sympathize with the egocentric and emasculated professor who has "solved the problem of sex very well" (1) and has "god acting through him" (89). However, the protagonist's earlier refusal to accept the public- styled penitence and atonement on the academic committee's terms, brings him to now confront his real disgrace -- his attack and subsequent paralysis to control his situation or Lucy's. By doing this, Coetzee shapes sex as a trope to demonstrate the ambiguity between the most private yet public parts of human relations.

The confession to Mr. Isaacs dramatizes Lurie's confrontation with his own metamorphosis and his effort to amend his life as well as the other "hardest part[s] of his body" (2), his temperament. The quasi-religious absolution of the committee posed severe limitations, but Lurie confronts Christianity within the Isaac's home as part of his penance. Pamela Cooper¹⁰ observes that this can be seen as the demise of white advantage wherein Lurie tests and realizes the "continuous redrawing and inflaming of the line between the personal conduct and public implication" (25). Lurie faces an implied parallel between Melanie's sexual coercion and Lucy's violation and is apparently coming to terms with his weakened sexual control or impotent experience. Indeed, his yearning for

¹⁰ Pamela Cooper. "Metamorphosis and Sexuality: Reading the Strange Passions of *Disgrace*." *Research in African Literatures*. 36:4 (2005). 22- 39.

transcendence informs Lurie self-abasing act of atonement before Melanie's family.

It is here that the author carefully negotiates the ambivalent questions about power and agency and opens up the novel to a deeper spiritual dimension. However, this opening does not come through reason and intellect as readers have come to expect from Professor Lurie's philosophical musings. Rather, it seemingly erupts from a crisis of self. Mr. Isaacs asks Lurie: "The question is, what does God want from you besides being very sorry? Have you any ideas, Mr. Lurie?" (172) Nevertheless, Lurie responds that, he is "not a believer", and that he will "have to translate...God and God's wishes" into his own terms" (172). At this point, David Lurie is a sympathetic character and achieves the heights of self-forfeiture in order to reach self-consolidation discussed before. He is accepting that in his fall "into a state of disgrace", he does not have to refuse the punishment, but rather can liv[e] it out day to day, trying to accept disgrace" (172).

The spiritual lens identifies this atonement as a pragmatic, political act in that it interprets this confession as a kind of internal compulsion and the tool of new social patterns struggling into being. This is where Lurie's spirit can be seen as "reconfigured but not undermined" (Cooper 29). By revising the trope of human/divine conjunction, the political becomes enmeshed with the spiritual/personal desire. Significantly, Mr. Isaacs explains to David that punishment may not be "enough for God" (172), and as David is having a crisis of conscience, he further remarks: "I don't know Mr. Lurie. Normally, I would say,

don't ask me, ask God. But since you don't pray, you have no way to ask God" (172). Hence the suggestion is that Mr. Isaacs has to be the intercessor between Lurie's private self/conscience and his public reparation to the divine. Again, this provides an allegorical frame for the TRC, whose secular role becomes religious while it mediates on behalf of the perpetrators of apartheid.

Coetzee suggests some kind of self-reinvention, but irresolution for Lurie's private, sexual desire here. Did Lurie truly get a public purgation or catharsis akin to what the academic inquiry had intended with its packaged confession? Readers cannot be sure. From a religious perspective, Melanie's father contends that contrition should not be used as a self-justifying action and can only be given validity/recognition based on its consequent actions. Nevertheless, Lurie in deep rhetorical repentance wrestles with issues of his "rights of desire" for Melanie's younger sister:

With careful ceremony, he gets to his knees and touches his forehead to the floor. Is that enough? He thinks. Will that do? If not, what more? He raises his head. The two of them are sitting there, frozen. He meets the mother's eyes, then the daughter's and again the current leaps, the current of desires. (173)

The implication is that Lurie is moving towards accepting personal responsibility, but has not totally achieved self-immersion, which is the path to collective salvation and self-affirmation that have been mentioned before. The issue becomes more layered because as he remains still an outsider, much later -- experientially rather than temporally-- Professor Lurie indulges in one last voyeuristic act of spying on Melanie's performance before he relinquishes control. There is no clear indication here whether this act of "giving up, like a

dog” (205) stems from the subsequent threat by Melanie’s young lover or from David’s self maturation and self forfeiture. What is clear however, is that in both cases, primarily sexual relationships, unfathomable, unofficially tolerated but morally ambiguous, are forced into the open social world (public) through recklessness and for disdain for public convention.

Paradoxically, the religious-inflected moralism and the “cross of righteousness” (40) that Lurie despised from the committee earlier, has compelled him to this self “abatment” he “had been thinking about [...] for some time” (173). Although this kind of confession is not as infinitely regressive as the artificial one demanded by the committee, Coetzee remains skeptical about its end result. He posits that confession should involve the “self [which] cannot tell the truth of itself and come to the rest without the possibility of self-deception...true confession does not come from the dialogue with its self- doubt, but [...] from faith and grace” (*Doubling* 291). Similarly, Michael Marais¹¹ contends that this release is determined by a tension between the [personal] desire and [public] responsibility. Consequently, there is a complex interweaving of confession and absolution when there is the overriding force of personal, sexual desire. In this case, and as a result of this tension between public and private absolution, the latter triumphs.

How do all these deeper tensions resonate and fit neatly in a transitional South Africa? Coetzee takes his biggest risk to date and shows that there is no

¹¹ See Michael Marais work on Coetzee’s concern for the Other to be treated with respect and responsibility in “Little Enough, Less Than Little”: Ethics, Engagement and Change in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee. *Modern Fiction Studies*. 46.1 (2000). 159-182.

orderly way to resolve these conflicts – conflicts that are expected in transitional societies. Set in post-apartheid South Africa, Coetzee's *Disgrace* probes into the lives of characters whose lives are conditioned by the historical divide between colonizing and colonized peoples. This history collides in a new South Africa in 1994 after the Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) hearings and the newly installed legislation -- a legislation that had risky political and social consequences. It is this risk that permeates Coetzee's work as he takes it a step further with the way he displaces the authority of historical categories of race, class, and gender. What emerges is a modification of South African Literature, one that Poyner¹² argues influences governmental issues and laws. With this reality, she states that "post apartheid fiction reveals that the private can serve as a corrective to the public [and suggests] that 'the dichotomies' of public/private, political/ethical need reconceptualizing" (Poyner 105). Reconceptualization here means that it is indeed necessary to change what belongs in the private as opposed to the public spheres so that both can be utilized as veritable tools to evaluate events and effect changes. The private quest for identity, truth, and healing are inevitable lenses and tools to view and re establish South Africa's public identity. Furthermore, Poyner opines that this new 'order' is a time in which the private proliferates over the public self and self-reflection is necessary. Thus there is more room and space for private matters and confessions and less political censure. It is consequently safe to state that the tensions unleashed by David's odyssey for truth and confession, and Lucy's unquestioning acceptance of South Africa's new realities are largely

¹² Jane Poyner. "Writing Under Pressure: A Post Apartheid Canon?" *Journal of Post Colonial Writing*. nr.2 (103-105).

determined and conditioned by South African historical legacy, and as such, a kind of re conceptualizing of dichotomies that Poyner posits.

This political-historical frontier, where the text is situated, pits characters against each other on the basis of gender, race, and class. Analogously, the TRC project unearthed complex issues of catharsis borne differently by male and female citizens, whites and blacks, perpetrators and victims, and powerful elites and the subjugated majority. The site where the residues of the past seem to be firmly grounded sets the stage for the most blatant commensurability with the novel's chief protagonist -- David Lurie. He is recalcitrant and refuses to yield to public/political authority even as change envelops him and drives him to the edges of society. "I am not prepared to be reformed. I want to go on being myself" (77), he obstinately argues.

This provocative and anachronistic move is where Coetzee is highly productive in his critique of the country's new space. Race relations and remnants of the old dispensation and desires of the new will be most entangled. How can these be reconciled? Coetzee offers no clear-cut response and questions the veritable reformation of the people of South Africa's mixed races when their true desires are to remain refractory. How do the rights and self-entitlement of the privileged races translate into a transnational period where those rights are no longer written in law? Again, Coetzee demonstrates that this is where the complications of the past resonate, not at the political center, as symbolic and half-hearted resolutions are available there.

Disgrace, then, is asking readers to contemplate whether healing is possible under circumstances where people only accept guilt and publicly confess, and whether rampant individualism incurs no necessary cost to others. In the socio-political context, *Disgrace*'s characters and plot evolution mirror the situation within the post-apartheid context of redefining the South African nation. Lurie refers to his inquisition as forged by "gossip-mills, he thinks, turning day and night, grinding reputations" (42) analogously as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) highly sensationalized and comprehensive media coverage.

As such, Coetzee draws an anxious, comfortless picture of post apartheid South Africa. Lurie is also representative of an older, social order that is officially defunct of Afrikaner dominance, statutory racial oppression, and uneasy white privilege. But can this newer order last? Coetzee seems to be ambivalent in his response. Change manifests itself for Lurie in sexual terms – first as a perpetrator then as victim. Both processes are underpinned with desire, and in doing so, the author engages the complex, social relations of the new South Africa through the trope of sexuality. Moreover, as an allegorical frame for the TRC, *Disgrace* illustrates a multifaceted comingling of insiders and outsiders in its portrayal of how characters tailor the political and ethical trajectories for individualistic pursuits. The demarcations that they wish to institute are exactly the ones they seek to undermine.

Furthermore, the author depicts Lucy's attack as an untold nationalist narrative as a way to mirror how the new South Africa's encounter with a new constitution and its controversial TRC, which in their interrelated ways postulate

dominant nationalist discourses based on truth telling, reconciliation and suspension of revenge. David's committee's inquisition, for instance, is an overt satire on the aims and practices of the TRC's hearings. David and his daughter hold diametric views about the appropriateness of legal remedy, but undergo reversals in response to the second crime. But it is clear they are both suspicious that public testimony is liberating and that the defense of individual rights should be kept in a small private sphere (with the exception of David's victimization). By refusing to publicize her crime, Lucy is also displaying her unwillingness to let the authorities "usurp upon" her pain and, the episode yields the conclusion that by insisting on her privacy, Lucy is acting "on a refusal and an introversion of retributive violence" (Graham, 5). Consequently, Coetzee implies that the law does not necessarily play a determinate role in advancing justice and effectuating social restoration. The suggestion then is that there is a need for tempering and modifying our own expectations for social justice.

Coetzee seems to agree that if confessions and healing are extracted this way, they become a shimmering mirage and depicts it through Lurie's rejection of the Committee's pardon, which also points to the inquisition's inability to address the deeper, more fundamental issues that centers on notions of amnesty and revenge. The fact that one confesses but does so with no remorse lends itself to the persistence of unsettling revenge instead of unwittingly encouraging social and cultural amnesia. This kind of self-conscious confession is also infinitely regressive and becomes an end in itself. In another forum, Coetzee comments on the nature of this kind of confession as one which involves "the self [which]

cannot tell the truth of itself to itself and come to rest without the possibility of self-deception. True confession does not come from the sterile monologue of the self or from the dialogue with its own self doubt, but...from faith and grace” (Coetzee, *Doubling* 291).

Lurie’s body (self) is strongly linked to power and desire and ultimately disgrace. It is through his exercise of social power and authority that he satisfies his sexual desires with Melanie, but he would suffer from that unsettling denial and self-deceit if he had publicly accepted culpability without genuine regret. Lucy’s rape is also an exercise of power by the new power brokers in South Africa. Juxtaposed alongside the TRC, Lurie’s process of reconciliation excludes remorse; hence, it makes it difficult to measure sincerity. Like David’s refusal of an empty confession, the failed attempts of the TRC illustrate that there is no easy redemption or sincere expression of apology if the self/body and heart still have individualistic desires. David’s penitence and desire to “speak his mind”, for instance, cannot be achieved because of his own selfish sexual “current of desire” (173) he experiences when he meets Desiree’s eyes. While making amends for his violation of Melanie, his heart is aflame with lust for her sister. It is this inner recalcitrance and awareness of unsettling desires that cause Lurie’s (and by extension, the South African society) confessions and absolution to be complex.

The clashes between public and private lives in *Disgrace* act as a trajectory towards accepting responsibility and the possibility of reconciliation and renewal. Coetzee engages this metamorphism through sexuality, but in an ambiguous way, for the wider historical changes that are registered in South

Africa. By utilizing this strategy, Coetzee tests the fluid boundaries between good and evil; private and public; and enfranchisement and disenfranchisement. This facilitates an opening of a realm of sociopolitical resonances that discourage an easy moral reaction to male desire and otherness entrenched within the Anglo-European aesthetic tradition. In the novel's depiction of a reshaped, Africanist patriarchy, desire and sexuality unveil whiteness as alienated and the native white man as internal exile.

But what visions are offered here for the new South Africa? Again, Coetzee does not give a clear response. *Disgrace* offers a dark depiction of South Africa's transitional tremors, and in the tradition of post imperial projects, a complicated path to reconciliation. Unlike other political fictions that deal with post colonialism and offer some kind of conditionality to resolution, Coetzee suggests no clear mode in *Disgrace* and extends a depiction of how the past cannot be forgotten if responsibility is not affixed to actions. It is precisely this air of contingency and disquiet that is both the novel's strength and weakness and engenders its social and political force. In allowing characters to express their "rights of desire", power relations through sex, and rights to privacy, Coetzee depicts how postcolonial violence and its historical implications can shift or elucidate the way rights based theories of justice structure human interactions, politically and socially.

Although the novel offers no axiomatic ethical solution, it offers a frame that can serve as a prescriptive to the many dangers that accompany human rights when they are employed in the negotiation of social justice. Consequently, the

repercussions of the trajectory of a public/private dichotomy in *Disgrace* are multiform and ubiquitous. Furthermore, the fluid nature of the relationship between both, for Coetzee, represents antithetical, multi-layered forces, being tied simultaneously to the darker, corrosive aspects of human nature.

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