

Alienation and identity crisis in J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace

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Abstract

Alienation and identity crisis are the pillars of post-colonial period. Our Social System is strongly affected by the forces enacting within its realm. Polarity gives rise to a tension and the resultant force its direction and magnitude are decided by the magnitude and direction of the forces enacting. Power and powerless have created polarity specially in post-colonial period, bringing in frustration, alienation identity crisis and at times even revolt. J. M. Coetzee's 'Disgrace' depicts the struggle of a white man and his daughter in quest for their lost identity being the victim of the racial revolt and sexual assault. The impact of post-apartheid context is the main concern reflecting the social status of South Africans. The legacy of the apartheid still hunts the country despite it being ended legally. Robbery, rape vandalism haunts the nation. The novel exposes that how pressing circumstances may lead to devastation and also that transformation within does not necessarily bring in the desired change in society. Till the end Lucy continuously struggled to create and preserve her identity.

Keywords: Alienation, Identity Crisis, Post-apartheid, Racism, suppression, Tormenter Solitude, Vandalism

Introduction

The tension between the power and the powerless has always been an issue of significance, mainly in the post-colonial period. The impact of colonial power can be traced out in varied ways. Subjugation of the victims often give rise to the greatest controversy and lid opens immense possibilities of distortion in human conduct. J.M. Coetzee's award winning novel 'Disgrace' is no exception to this. The disturbing novel handling a very bold issue reveals the falsehood of many established convictions and wide opens the avenues of self exploration and identification. It redefines the behavioural trends and breaks off the established myths. 'Disgrace' certainly holds varied themes all intertwined in the texture of it but an underlying theme of alienation and quest for identity, runs throughout and registers its strong presence. Coetzee's vision made a sharp original commentary on the South Africa of apartheid, but it also explored the human condition with a bleak, dispassionate sympathy that intensely affects all.

David Lurie on whom Coetzee visits a contemporary catalogue of humiliations is a fairly average, twice married, fifty something lecturer at a Cape town university who accused of sexual misconduct with one of his students, chooses not to defend himself but rather to suffer his fate with a noble slightly grumpy, stoicism. In his mind a politically correct process of rehabilitation. He will not give his academic tormentors the satisfaction they crave. "pass sentence", he says, "let us get on without lives". Unlike the heroes of the conventional novels, the protagonist here is no better than a common man with many human weaknesses. There can be seen a sharp contrast between his personal and professional life. A lecturer, a man of letters to whom no poetic work is unread, a great admirer of Byron and Wordsworth, to whom no poetic and aesthetic intricacy is beyond reach, lives a normal rather an extra intense sexual life. Living amongst women since childhood he later becomes first fond of them and then a 'womanizer' in true sense. A man of fifties enriched with numerous pleasant and unpleasant experiences,

sweet and bitter aspects of life. Despite this Lurie holds some heroic qualities. He has self-respect, an unflinching confidence on himself as well as the existing system. He is ready to face consequences as he considers himself innocent. Brave indeed he is with the unceasing fighting spirit and a tendency to strive and never yield.

However the turn of events prick the bubble of complacency and Lurie finds himself on the bare ground of hard realities that crush his aspirations. Lurie after convicted chooses to live in the country with his daughter. May be in quest of solace and peace he decides to settle in a rural set up. Migration here depicts a journey in quest of identity and individuality. In the post-colonial era, the impact of colonialism registers its strong presence. 'Disgrace' is no exception to it. Racism and colour discrimination have been the remarkable and dominating forces. In many ways this is a story about the powerful and powerless. Initially David Lurie is in a role of power which turns to powerless after a sad turn of events. David a professor who is reciting a poem by Byron to his class, states that the poem is about a fallen angel" condemned to solitude" (34). This poem in some ways foreshadows what is to become of David's life. He is a failure at love who loses his job and reputation moves with his daughter (Lucy) in the country and is then beaten and trapped in the bathroom as his daughter is raped. Later his house is vandalized and he eventually takes a job killing and incinerating unwanted dogs.

"Disgrace" is definitive work on South Africa's present state. In an early dramatic scene Lurie is confronted by Melaine Isaacs's father outside of his office at the university. Though the girl's father is white, as Lurie, his words speak to the anger that is the inheritance of forcible white rule in South Africa

"Professor", he begins, laying heavy stress on the word, you may be very educated and all that, but what you have done is not right....we put our children in the hands of you people because we think we can trust you. If we can't trust the university, who can we trust ?...No,

Professor Lurie, you may be big and mighty and have all kinds of degrees, but if I was you I'd be ashamed of myself, so help me God. If I've got hold of the wrong end of the stick, now is your chance to say but I don't think so, I can see it from your face". And when Lurie finds accusation beneath him and turns away, the girl's father shouts, "You can't just run away like that, you have not heard the last of it, I tell you".

The years of suppression create a polarity of power distinctively visible in the novel. Coetzee opposes these kinds of suppressive forces but in a mild way. He presents the bleak reality and unveils it in the most striking manner. Lurie chooses to live with his daughter and safeguard her. Unfortunately the place is being attacked by the intruders and Lurie's daughter is being ravished. The physical and sexual assault bare opens the stark reality, and takes the family off the shackles of security. The novel shows that there is always a fine line between decency and obscenity, personal and public. Disgrace is set in post-apartheid South Africa. Even though apartheid has legally its legacy still haunts the country. Robbery and vandalism frequent the countryside. Rape is a common occurrence. The outrage from a history of oppression and violence cannot be suppressed. Coetzee brings racial tension to the forefront of the novel when David Lurie arrives in Salem.

The novel is unique in the reflection of impact of racism on the whole human society. Years of racial suppression made the victims so desperate to show their strong reaction in the form of revolt affecting the powerful dominating clan of which of Lurie and his daughter are representatives. The victim of subjugation are often being denied of their rightful claims. Whatsoever was personal to them all at once becomes public. Lurie's daughter was brave as her father decides to fight against injustice done but the pressing circumstances steal away from her even the right to protest against the wrong done. The humiliation of rape is experienced by her throughout. Lucy makes the critical decision not to report the rape because to her it is a private matter. She also realizes that in the context of modern South Africa, no true justice will be served. However justice is not served even in the case of reporting against vandalism and robbery. This further demoralizes Lucy and Lurie.

Like Coleridge's "Rime of The Ancient Mariner" a transformation of the protagonist from hater of the animals can distinctively be seen in the novel. Lurie who despises a woman in the beginning for foul smell of animals later finds ultimate peace and way to salvation in performing the rightful rituals of the dead bodies of the dogs. Disgrace further parallels the racial operation of blacks in South Africa with the treatment and view of dogs in the country. This is illustrated in the discussion that Lucy has with David about the animals when he states, "as for animals by all means let us be kind to them. But let us not lose perspective. We are of a different order of creation from animals. Not higher necessarily, just different. So if we are going to be kind, let it be out of simple generosity, not because we feel guilty or fear retribution" (74). David here is not really talking about dogs; he is talking about white and their view of blacks

The most depressing thing has been no evident transformation identified between colonial and post-colonial approaches. Despite dreaming of a 'human society' discrimination at

different levels can't be ignored. 'Justice delayed is justice denied' but in case of Lucy justice is not even dreamt of. The rape is not reported by the victim considering it to be a private rather than a public matter, but even robbery and physical assault remain far away from the shackles of law. The existing situation of South Africa gets a reflection in the statement of Lucy. A hopeless and de-motivating environment can be felt. What kills a person most is neither an external assault nor any problem worth having existential value; it is the 'inner strife' a fight within that sucks the life out of him.

Conclusion

Violence alone is never painful unless a substantial cause acts behind it. And Vandalism and physical and sexual assaults are the most brutal and barest ways of revolting and proving one's identity and depriving others. Migration to alien land within the nation in itself is a sign of either escapism or a quest for identity and individuality. Unfortunately the quest ends up in a passive submission to the forcing circumstances one falls victim of. No social justice is obtained till end. It is said that individual transformation leads to social change. In this case however the protagonist grows as a person, develops and feels sympathy, love, care etc but still as a social being he is not able to revolt on the contrary even loses his previous status, repute and profession. In a retrospect he recalls all the images of his past in the sharp contrast with his present. The mishap makes him close to his daughter who else was leading an independent life with a profession far different from her father's. However the rape draws a clear line of demarcation between the two where gender overpowers the tenderness of relationship. Whatsoever may be the cause but reality lies in the fact that the greatest loss has been the loss of identity and individuality soaked in the permanent shroud of alienation and rootlessness. When it comes to human psychology all humans react in the same way. Alienation and disintegration of personality remain at the core without a fail. The journey leads from nostalgia to an alien world where victims feel alien and uprooted. The 'seamy side' of life devastates them fully and they are hardly left as humans.

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