
SEQUESTERED LIVES: LOCATING FEMALE ISOLATION IN J.M. COETZEE'S 'DISGRACE'

Sheeba Anjum

Asst. Prof. SKIT, Jaipur, India

Dr. Nupur Tandon

Prof. MNIT, Jaipur, India

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Abstract: J.M. Coetzee's seminal work *Disgrace* earned him the second Booker Prize of his career. Isolation is the most poignant theme of Coetzee's most acclaimed and controversial work till date. The present paper argues that Coetzee's love of presenting isolated characters extend to female protagonists also. In the paper, it is described that how women feel isolated socially, physically and psychologically and therefore feel severe identity crisis even in the modern society. The male characters in the story isolate the females after using them for their advantage whereas the female characters- Lucy, Melanie and Soraya and Bev Shaw are all silent women who succumb to isolation after losing their identity in a patriarchal society. The paper therefore aims to investigate Coetzee's work in terms of locating females as isolated subjects. A theoretical approach is adopted which suggest that isolation is existential in nature and sometimes provides an opportunity to carve out a new identity for oneself.

Keywords: Isolation, Identity-Crisis, Female, Masochism.

Introduction: J.M. Coetzee is one of the most intellectual and celebrated author today. A noble laureate, twice Booker Prize winner a recusant African and most importantly a recluse who did not even go to collect his Booker in person, is tough and complicated to understand. *Disgrace* is his most successful but most controversial work till date. Published in the year 1999 and set in the post-apartheid South Africa, it gave a new turn to Coetzee's literary career in both positive and negative way. Negative because after its publication, he was severely criticized for taking up the issue of rape, gender inequality black vs. white and arguing that not much has changed in the post-apartheid society. It was the first novel to be discussed in South African parliament and the then President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki harshly responded by saying that South Africa is not a place of rape only. It is therefore assumed that due to this kind of political upheaval that the novel caused, Coetzee migrated to Australia though he never admitted it. And positive effect was that it established Coetzee's reputation as the world's renowned author as the novel is listed among top hundred books of the millennium.

As the prime concern of this paper is to showcase female isolation, it can generally be described as gender based isolation, racial isolation which leads to their identity crisis. South Africa like any other society is a male dominated society where males are powerful than females. The situation worsens in apartheid period which was marked by racial tension and gender oppression and Coetzee has shown it brilliantly through his popular work *Disgrace* because he has made it felt as he has written the whole novel from a male point of view i.e. David Lurie who is the main character in the story and who controls other characters. Some

other important characters are- Lucy Lurie, Soraya, Melanie Isaac and Petrus. It shows that majority of characters are females still the two some David and Petrus manage to control them.

From the beginning, it has been told that David Lurie, a university professor is a man who is concerned only with himself. He does not even talk to his daughter regularly. First he uses Soraya, a prostitute to satisfy her carnal desires. Soraya is a prostitute having a family life and a very private woman because she does not reveal anything about her personal life even after being asked by Lurie on a number of occasions. Coetzee's description of Soraya explains her isolation and therefore worth quoting: 'of her life outside Windsor Mansion Soraya reveals nothing. Soraya is not her real name that he is sure of. There are signs she has borne a child. It may be that she is not a professional at all. She may work for the agency only one or two afternoon a week, and for the rest life in the suburbs, in Rylands or Athlone. That would be unusual for a Muslim, but all things are possible these days' (3)

Coetzee's description reveals many facts about Soraya that she is pursuing this work of a prostitute because of some reason; she is a mother who has to take care of her children. Thus it is known that women in post-apartheid society were weak, vulnerable and dependent. This is reflected in Lurie's meetings with Soraya, which are fixed according to the convenience of David and she behaves according to his wishes, 'not liking the stickiness of the makeup, he asked her to wipe it off. She obeyed, and has never worn it since' (5) this is actually an example of male supremacy and how women suffered from gender biasness.

After Soraya leaves David without telling him anything, he gets inclined towards his student Melanie Isaac, who is half of his age. A simple and shy girl, she becomes helpless in front of Lurie. Coetzee, it appears has created her character to show the power of Lurie. Graham mentions in this relation that Melanie's molestation 'exposes power operating at the level of gender and at an institutional level'. (437-38) what happens with her makes her even weaker and lonely as she is unable to share her feelings with anyone. She suffers isolation and exploitation at racial level also. In the words of Lurie, "Melanie is a rabbit in the jaws of the fox" (25) Lurie is troubled by his isolation after his relationship with Soraya ends, and that primarily motivates him to cast his eyes on poor Melanie.

As it has been stated that the story has been told from a male perspective, there are males who impose isolation on the females, David Lurie and Petrus treat women as objects and use them for their advantage making them feel powerless and minor characters. David Lurie is the central character and his daughter Lucy is another major character in the story. When she is introduced, she is depicted as a lonely lesbian, living alone on her farm. Her isolation is social, physical as well as psychological. Shattuck (2009) argues very aptly that Coetzee in his novels always tries to show that, 'the cost of apartheid for all south Africans has been a stunted and deformed inner life' (145) but he forgets to mention another feature i.e. isolation.

Eric Fromm states that isolation is psychological lacuna that has to be filled in some way. And Lurie fills it through Melanie whereas Lucy's attempt to overcome her isolation is through her adjustment in the new South Africa. The narrative of Coetzee's novel is based on 'a logic of reprisal and vengeance' (Marais, 161) and this is the new socio-cultural climate of South Africa in which Lucy lives. Her relationship with David is not cordial and strong and therefore she lives alone on a distant farm. There are many reasons for her isolation. First being her inability to handle her relationships well, whether with her father or with her partner Helen with whom

she had a break up. Her failure in tackling social relationships might be due to her troubled early life. Her parents were divorced when she was very young; she is no longer living with either of them. Wendi Gardner, Pickett and Megan Knowles gave the concept of 'social smacking'. According to this term, when social interaction with close relations is less, it results in psychological isolation. This exactly happens with Lucy Lurie.

She is an introvert and living a sequestered life, secondly, her isolation may be due to her father's negligence towards her. Both of them have no regular meetings and conversation. The result of a research conducted by Julie Fitness shows that 'approximately 40% of respondents claimed that abandonment were the worst offences parents could commit against their children' (266) Lucy was ignored and neglected by David Lurie right from her childhood, hence first her father imposed isolation on her which later became self-imposed for her. An earthly character, she suffers not only psychologically alienated but physically isolated when she is attacked and raped by three black men. Lucy's rape is the turning point in the story of the novel and depicts the dark side of post-apartheid.

After her rape she is seen as a woman of lost identity. She becomes silent which is another important aspect of isolation. Coetzee very emphatically has described her plight in the novel: "Lucy keeps to herself, expresses no feelings and shows no interest in anything around her... spends hour after hour lying on her bed, staring into space..." (114) she even refuses to launch a complaint against the rapists and tell David: "what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, another place it might held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone" () these lines clearly show the condition of Lucy, she with her self-imposed isolation is trying to live a life of compromise. Her humiliating position and separate life make her a victim of racism and patriarchy. Lucy's rape makes her a sufferer in every sense of the term. She suffers from abject isolation and acute identity crisis because she is marginalized, powerless, hopeless and suppressed. She refuses to migrate with David and willingly chooses isolation for herself.

Isolation sometimes forces an individual to become silent and passive as happens with Melanie and Lucy. In this relation, Lucy V. Graham rightly points out that, "*Disgrace* points to a context where women are regarded as property, and are liable for protection only so far as they belong to men" (439) as the story progresses, it appears that all females have accepted their isolated position. Soraya leaves David without any information, suggesting that a female is forced to establish relationships but when she is victimized and marginalized (either because of gender inequality, color or race) she thinks it better to leave. The same thing happens with Melanie Isaacs who from the beginning is a shy character as compared to other females in the story. She doesn't express herself fully even after being raped by David Lurie. And then Lucy is there, she also doesn't complain and goes a step further by accepting the offer of Petrus. She in a conversation with David expresses her concern: "Take a moment to consider my situation objectively. Objectively I am a woman alone. I have no brothers. I have a father, but he is far away and anyhow powerless in the terms that matter here. To whom can I turn for protection, for patronage? To Ettinger? It is just a matter of time before Ettinger is found with a bullet in his back. Practically speaking, there is only Petrus left" (204) this indicates that Lucy tries to adapt and adjust with her isolated situation and it can certainly be argued as the possible solution to cope up with the current situation. It is only by accepting her position and her willingness to change; it is possible to get rid of her loneliness. According to Spivak, (2011) Lucy's decision to accept Petrus's offer of a 'concubinage style marriage' is her idea to escape isolation, which is physical, psychological as well as social.

The point of argument is that all the isolated females are seen struggling for their identity. In terms of defining identity, it can be said that it is a matter of recognition. Richard Jenkins in this regard says, 'Identity is the human capacity... to know who's who. This involves knowing who we know who others are, them knowing who we are, us knowing who they we are and so on.' (5) Coetzee's isolated female characters, if Eric Fromm's theory is taken into consideration, are masochists. Fromm tells that masochism is related to powerlessness and the feeling of isolation that instigates the person to seek protection by submitting to other person's will. Lucy and other females are masochists in this regard because this is how they all feel.

Isolation is a troubling factor for them mainly because it makes them dependent. It appears that Coetzee deliberately depicts isolated women in order to draw attention to the fact that they accept their destiny on one hand and on the other, attempt to explore their true self. Spivak comments that, "this is not the novel's failure, but rather a politically fastidious awareness of the limits of its powers". (24) In a racist society, creating fundamentally isolated females, who are subjugated to their male counterparts, is in fact a realist portrayal of the post-apartheid society.

The episode of rape is an example of gender and racial violence against women in new South Africa. The climax of the novel shows all the characters except Petrus, in a helpless situation. David Lurie accepts the political change and lives in exile and Lucy thinks rape is the price she has paid for being a white woman and for living alone on a distant farm. She therefore agrees to be the third wife of polygamous Petrus. There is another minor female character, depicted living alone like Lucy, is Bev Shaw. A neighbour and well-wisher of Lucy, she works at an animal clinic. She always supports Lucy and her decisions probably because she is experienced and knows the reality along with the fact that society always favours males.

All the female characters even after being doubly marginalized in terms of gender race and color at least try to carve a new and realist identity for them. Soraya, though involved in prostitution never makes a compromise with her self-esteem. She leaves David without telling him anything. This act on behalf of Soraya can very well be termed as self-protective act. Melanie Isaacs, a vulnerable and shy girl, gathers courage and files a complaint against Lurie which brings disgrace for him and he has to leave the place.

Finally there is Lucy whose growing love for his unborn child and the realization that she is powerless compels her to seek protection. Hence she accepts her loneliness and allowed herself 'to creep under Petrus's wings' as Cooper (2005) remarks, she is, "literally snatches into a story not her own, into Petrus's neomasculinist narrative" (31) Thus Lucy becomes a masochist, because she accepts Petrus's subjugation for her security instead of her father. As Becker asserts she enters 'symbiotic relationship' to get relief from anxieties, loneliness and helplessness. (56)

Conclusion: *Disgrace*, suggests female isolation as inevitable due to the prevailing conditions and due to which each woman character successfully liberates from her crunch situation and able to strike a balance between the need to maintain their dignity and the desire to be related in the new set up. To recapitulate, Coetzee through *Disgrace* continues to produce deformed relations whether it is males or females, whites or blacks. The novel is a strong comment on a utopian belief and conflict-less relations simply because it is not at all possible. It condemns

the new set up as it brings isolation, frustration and meaningless in life on one hand but on the other hand the novel is a realistic portrayal of the position of women in society as Petrus says: 'a girl is very expensive' (130) Coetzee through this emphasizes the fact that females right from their birth struggle for their identity and for them avoiding isolation in all forms and involving themselves with others become their foremost existential need.

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