

Exploitation and Subjugation of Women in J M Coetzee's *Disgrace*: A Psychoanalytical Reading

Rajesh H K, Assistant Professor of English, Sri D Devaraja Urs, Govt. First Grade College, Hunsur-571105, Mysore, Karnataka

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Abstract

This research article analyses J M Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*, which won the Man Booker Prize for 1999, to scrutinize the physical, economic, sexual exploitation of women and subjugation and objectification of in the patriarchal society. South Africa is notorious for its violence and crime against women. It has been considered the rape capital of the world as highest number of rapes are reported here. Besides children also sexual assaulted and gang raped due prevalence of virgin cleansing myth and lesbians are also raped with belief that it would turn them to heterosexuals. As South African culture patriarchal in nature and foundation of its culture, there is a fear that dismantling the patriarchal set up will result in the collapse of South African culture. Because of this horrible condition of women and children, the President of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, declared that 'violence and crime against women is a national crisis' in 2019. A psychoanalytical reading of this novel will reveal causes behind the exploitation, subjugation and objectification in South Africa in particular and rest of the world in general.

Keywords: Rape, subjugation, exploitation, patriarchy, psychoanalysis, objectification, trauma, depression

A work of literature is an expression of the state of mind and the structure of an author's personality. Literary texts, like dreams and neurotic symptoms, are the expression of the secret unconscious desires and anxieties of the author which were suppressed due to social standards of morality and propriety or reality. In other words, literary texts are manifestations of the neurosis of the author. A psychoanalytical reading of a literary text is the key to decoding the meaning expressed symbolically through similes, metaphors, and images. The childhood traumas of the author, sexual conflicts, guilt, psychological conflicts, ambivalences, unresolved emotions and fixations can be traced in a disguised or encoded form, as in dreams, via principles like symbolism, condensation, and displacement. The novel *Disgrace* by J M Coetzee deals with the subjugation and exploitation of women in post-apartheid South Africa. Women are constantly subjected to suffering and trauma due to rape(including infant rape, gang rape and corrective rape), sexual exploitation through prostitution, denial of justice for crime against women, subordination of women in the name

of culture, religion, ethnicity and gender, sexual exploitation of adolescents in educational institutions denies them opportunity for education, psychological problems such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, sleeplessness, stress, lack of interest in any activity. The portrayal of the condition of women in *Disgrace* is a reflection of the condition of women in South African patriarchal society. A psychoanalytical reading of this novel will unravel the reasons behind these events/incidents and their consequences in the life of women.

South Africa is considered the ‘rape capital of the world’ as the highest number of rape cases of women, adolescents and infants take place here. According to World Health Organization report 1 in 3 or 30% of women are subjected to (sexual) violence and crime. Hence, there are more chances of women being infected with HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases; they also have to undergo abortions and unwanted pregnancies, sometimes resulting in childbirth. 1 in 4 women faced with sexual violence has a chance of infection. Sexual violence against infants and children is very high due prevalence of the virgin cleansing myth. Still, they believe having sex with virgins will cure them of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS. A nine-month-old infant was raped by HIV positive man in October 2001 and another eight-month-old infant was gang raped by four men in February 2002. The infants had to undergo extensive reconstructive surgery as the injuries were very serious. These two were high-profile cases which brought many changes in laws involving sexual violence against women and children just like the 2012 Nirbhaya case in India. The South African parliament enacted Criminal Law Amendment Act, 2007 to review and amend all the laws dealing with sexual offences and violence. But again in 2018, an eight-month-old infant was raped bringing back the South African nightmare. As per the WHO report 41% of the victims of rape were children in South Africa.

Corrective rape of lesbian women is another issue that makes women vulnerable to crime and violence. The South African psyche is that the rape of lesbians will turn them into heterosexuals. One such high-profile case is the gang rape and murder of Eudy Simelane, a lesbian and member of a South African football team and LGBT activist, in 2008. Schools and colleges are also places of sexual violence against women by teachers and other students. This increases the number of dropouts among women. Because of all these reasons the President of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, declared that ‘violence and crime against women is a national crisis’ in 2019. Coetzee in his novel, *Disgrace*, deals with all these issues and the psychological reading of the novel helps to understand the psyche of people and the causes of their violence against women.

It is part of patriarchal ideology to project prostitution as the expression of women’s sexuality to exploit and subjugate women to subsidiary status. It also projects wearing scantily, diaphanous and less dresses as part of the empowerment of women through different media. But in reality, it is a way to fulfil the wish of men to see women half naked and also to objectify women and exploit them for commercial profit as it is happening in advertisements, movies and television serials and adult movies across the world. No woman wishes to become a prostitute by her willingness. Either she is in extreme poverty and lacks job opportunities or

certain anti-social forces in the society force her into this field. That is the reason women belonging to extreme poverty, less educated and most disadvantaged racial, ethnic and caste are involved in the field of flesh trade.

Soraya, the prostitute, paid R400 for a session of ninety minutes. But half of the money goes to the Discreet Escort agency which gets her clients. She is a poor black Muslim woman in poverty who is forced to work to earn some extra income to meet her necessities albeit she dislikes it, and not to explore her female sexuality as projected by a patriarchal capitalist male-dominated society. She is not only exploited economically by the capitalist society but also objectified and subjugated to secondary status. She has to lead a dual life to meet her economic needs. Soraya is not her real name and she has two children with a family. She stops visiting David Lourie when he comes to know about it. Lourie pays a detective to get her details and calls her to speak to her like a predator. She tells him not to harass her. She is not only exploited, subjugated, and objectified but also traumatized by the patriarchal capitalist society, “You are harassing me in my own house. I demand you will never phone me here again, never”(Disgrace 10).

The language that we speak- both of East and West- is male-centered and prejudiced against women. The negative terms of binary oppositions like rational/emotional, strong/weak, clean/dirty, logical/illogical, accept/reject et.al are associated with women and derogatorily used to subjugate women by the patriarchy. While seducing and referring to Melanie or any other female characters, male characters objectify women as if they are not human beings but mere objects without their likes and dislikes. Women are there only to be enjoyed by them: “Because a woman’s beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings to the world. She has the duty to share it” (Disgrace 16). Lourie indulges in sex with Melanie even though she does not like it. He finds it pleasurable. In an influential position as a teacher, he takes advantage of his post and sexually exploits her. Not only Melanie, he also sexually exploits the secretary when she asks for help and then ignores her as if she commodity and not a human being. Patriarchy, like capitalism, wishes to maintain the status quo to perpetuate the exploitation and subjugation of women.

One of the important issues that Coetzee deals with in his works time and again is the malfunction of the judiciary or justice system. Justice looks like a mirage for poor, women and marginalized people in the male-dominated society. The committee set up the institution to conduct an enquiry into allegations against Lourie looks like a farce. It looks like a committee set up to protect Lourie, an agent of patriarchal force. The members are more interested in saving their male colleague rather than giving justice to a black student, who has undergone suffering because of Lurie, “You may find this hard to believe, David, but we are around this table are not your enemies. We have our weak moments, all of us, we are only human. Your case is not unique. We would like to find a way for you to continue with your career” (Disgrace 52).

The men of the committee are part of the collective consciousness of the male psyche and support one another to continue the subjugation and exploitation of women. That’s the reason they speak about crime and violence against women when it happens to members of

our family and they do not when it happens to others just like David Lurie. They defend it by giving one or the other silly reason as David Lurie: "I do not try to describe. It suffices to say that Eros entered. After that I was not the same"(Disgrace 52). Lurie neither denies nor defends the charges against him. When insisted by the female member to come clean on the matter, he accepts the charges without any regret or apology. Nowhere in the novel he feels regret for what he had done. He always asks is that enough for them but he never questions whether it was enough for him. He also tells that it all happened because of the Eros or the ungovernable impulse and not his fault. When a girl asks him, are you sorry for what you have done, Lurie says he is enriched by his experience with women: " 'Are you sorry?' says the girl... 'Do you regret what you did?' 'No,' he says. 'I was enriched by the experience'... 'so would you do it again?' 'I don't think I get a chance again'(Disgrace 56). Lurie behaves like a true representative of male psychology in Patriarchal South African society. It is like the sexual offenders against women defending themselves. They did the deed because of their(women's) dress, and behaviour or because they were in a pub late at night for a drink and it is not their(men's) fault. They were there in the pub or theatre or in a lonely place at late night does not mean that men have a license to rape, do ragging or ill-treat them for being what they are and where they are. It horrible mentality of male psychology to defend their heinous crime.

The patriarchal forces across the world want women to depend on them for their physical, sexual, economic and political needs of women. If anybody tries to break away from this system, the patriarchy feels it is a threat to its power dynamics. Hence, in order to bring social order from their point of view it punishes all the women who try to cross the line. In the novel, Lucy, being a lesbian, dismantles this power structure of patriarchy by choosing a female sexual partner and leading an economically independent life without any need and support of men. The rape of Lucy, the killing of dogs, which are a symbol of power and taking away land from her are the schemes of the patriarchy to make her fall in line and they were successful in doing that. The incident was so traumatic that she never returns to her former self and her condition goes on deteriorating to the lowest level. She gives up her land, does not lodge a complaint against her rapists, even tries to protect one of them and wants to have a child as a consequence of rape. The attack was so shocking and traumatic that she cannot express what happened to her and how she feel about the incident. It escapes the linguistic expression and returns to haunt her and leaves a permanent scar in her mind. It is a message to all the women that if you cross the line there will be consequences. The best weapon for men to control women is to rape them, break their confidence and subjugate them forever.

Another reason for the rape, violence and subjugation of white people is the suppressed wishes or feelings of the black race toward white people. During the colonial rule, the white people exploited the native people in possible ways but they could not do anything because of strong colonial rule. Hence, their wishes for revenge were suppressed in the unconscious mind. But after the end of apartheid, these suppressed wishes began to find expression and the rape of Lucy is one of their suppressed wishes to punish the white

people. Lucy also tells Lourie that we are just paying for what we have done to them in the past and it is a payback time. Lourie does not agree with her but Lucy has a different point of view on the attack on her by the black people. When this novel was published, there was a political uproar in South Africa condemning Coetzee for projecting the country as a land of rapes. Coetzee could not express these views in real life due to certain constraints and political reasons but they find their expression in literature as our repressed opinions are reflected in our dreams.

Lucy's suffering is the embodiment of the suffering of women of rape, violence, unwanted pregnancy and infection of sexually transmitted like HIV/AIDS in South Africa in particular and world in general. The rape cases reported in South Africa are one of the highest in the world. After Lucy's rape, Lourie recalls a similar incident of gang rape of a woman a lavatory for a week. Nobody knew what is happening over there but it happened. The statistics we find in the government records are only the tip of the iceberg. Many cases go unreported due to fear of further attack and other consequences. It is a very common ordeal women face across the world irrespective of education and economic development. When Lucy and Lourie return to their house from Ben Shaw's house, it brings back the horrible incident and causes trauma to them. Lourie even thinks that the rapists are still there in the room. Therefore, he stays in Lucy's room and makes her live in the other room.

It is built in the patriarchal psychology that women should be submissive and has followed its dictum. It does not women who are confident, independent, forwarding like Lucy. If any woman does not follow its rules, she will be taught a lesson either by raping or murdering or insulting her in public so that dare not cross the line drawn by it. She will be shown her place in the society. Lucy was not only raped but also the news rape was circulated in the district to cause her trauma, shame and disgrace. It is also a stern message for other women to fall in line or face the consequences. Even today the women who questioned male-dominated patriarchal values are raped in the broad daylight, videographer and circulated through different social media platforms to punish and also to send a message to others to not cross the line.

There is a strong desire for baby boys in almost societies across the world and hatred for baby girls. That is the reason female infanticide and ditching the baby girls after birth is a very common phenomenon, especially in underdeveloped and developing countries. A woman is seen as a burden to the family and is dependent on men at all stages of her life. She cannot go about her business all alone, she needs somebody to accompany her. A man is thought of as the breadwinner and independent successor of male dominance and patriarchal ideology in society. A man is appreciated for his confidence, independence, and adventurous nature but a woman is condemned for the same. Even though a woman has achieved great success in all fields and is financially independent, still there is crave for boys as she threat to patriarchy. Petrus wants to have a baby boy and not a baby girl as she is a burden to the family always in need of money for one thing or another. The patriarchy controls women with their consent in the name of culture, religion, and morality which are

based on patriarchal ideology in their sexual orientation and preference, dress code, dietary preference and appearance.

Lucy is not ready to lodge a complaint with police against her violator who sexually assaulted her. Because she has to testify if she does. She has to narrate the whole incident time and again whenever she is asked to. The narration of the event is like getting raped again and causes a lot of trauma for the victim. That's the reason in most of cases women do not lodge cases with the police. Lucy was so traumatized by the incident that she cannot express her traumatic experience as it resists linguistic expression. Lucy tries to change the power dynamics between men and women being an independent woman which is against patriarchal ideology but she does not know the psyche of men. That is the reason she asks, "But why did they hate me ? I have not set my eyes on them." (*Disgrace* 156).

The white people are a minority in post-apartheid South Africa and people like Lucy do not exist for them. There are more prone to be attacked by the black majority in the changed country. The native people know that the table has turned and white people are on the receiving end. The white people who have stayed back in the colonies after independence are hated by the native people for their past history. As for Lucy, the white people are paying to stay in South Africa as she paid in the form of rape. The native people think that the white people owe them and the white people have to pay to live there as Lucy paid, "They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying?" (*Disgrace* 158).

When it comes to sex and men, Lucy says, anything can happen. For men, sex is more exciting with the woman they hate as they show her what place is and subdue her to patriarchal ideology by breaking her confidence. The rape is killing a woman, pushing the knife inside and exiting later leaving the body bleeding and covered in blood to die. She criticizes patriarchy including her father who is part of it. It happens everywhere in the world whether it is East or West or whether it was ancient time or in the modern time, or whether it is in an educated society or tribal community. The condition of women is the same, the subjugated one.

As the suppressed wishes of the unconscious mind return in the form of a dream, the traumatic events return haunt as if it is happening again. The victim can never return to her/his original state of mind. There are in constant fear of another attack which will be very traumatic for the victim, "Lucy was frightened, frightened near death. Her voice choked, she could not breathe, her limbs went numb. This is not happening, she said to herself as the men forced her down; it is just a dream, a nightmare. While men, for their part, drank up her revelled in it, did all they could to hurt, to menace her, to heighten her fear (*Disgrace* 160)."

Lurie visits Isaac's family when he goes to Cape Town after his arguments with Lucy over-reporting the rape incident to the police. He visits in order to render an apology for his deed against Melanie but he blames her for kindling desire in him. He says that sexuality was worshipped in the olden days. When Lurie meets Desiree, Melanie's sister, he gets sexually aroused by her beauty albeit she is a small girl. For a crime against women, it is the women who are blamed for it. They kindle a desire in men through their dress, beauty,

behaviour, and attitude. He gets down to his knees and touches his forehead to the floor in his last attempt to apologize for his deed against Melanie. But the very next moment when he looks at Desiree, there is a surge of desire in him. Now we make a judgement about the sincerity of his apology. He is like a serial killer waiting for an opportunity. When Lurie sees Melanie in the opera, he recalls his last encounter with her in Lucy's old room. It is very difficult for him to control his basic instincts.

It is a common phenomenon that the exploitation and subjugation of women across world has been taking place from immemorial. There has been some sporadic action by the law of the nation against the perpetrators but in most of the case they go unpunished for their crime. Even there have been voices of approval for violence and crime against women in the name of culture and religion. Women have been projected as the repository of culture of the land and subjugated and exploitation in possible manner for the benefit men in the patriarchal world.

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