

## Searching for Self-identity: A Postcolonial Study of J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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### Abstract

Nobel laureate, South African writer, J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* is endowed with far reaching meanings. From the postcolonial perspective, the novel illustrates the endeavor of both colonizers and the colonized for harmony in the post apartheid South Africa. *Disgrace* portrays a scene that colonialists' one-time privilege and policies leave a gaping wound not only for the Black but also for the White themselves through conflicts and collisions between them. It is difficult for them to cope with a changing world in an apartheid-free South Africa. On one hand, the once dominant White could not escape from the shadow of their previous hegemony in colonial time. On the other hand, the Black violated the White to assimilate the White, and to give chances the White for redemptions rather than to pour their hatred, and to exhibit their authority. Moreover, the scar of the White's original sin in people's heart could not be healed so quickly that the White carries on the burden of redemption. Therefore, when colonialist policies fade away, to survive in post-apartheid South Africa, the Black and the White living become disoriented and helpless. Both of them cannot help but to expiate and start on a long and painful journey to search for self-identity. They are both searching for a new way to live in coexistence equally and peacefully. To some extent, *Disgrace* expresses a closure on the wake of a smart colonialism past, and an outlet for the Black and the White to search for a new way to coexist.

**Key words:** *Disgrace*; Self-identity; Colonialism; Post-colonialism

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### INTRODUCTION

South African writer John Maxwell Coetzee (J. M. Coetzee, 1940- ) is the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003 for his *Disgrace*. Coetzee has won the British highest honor for fiction—the Booker Prize—twice. (1983 Bookers for his *Life and Times of Michael K*, 1999 for *Disgrace*) As a result, he becomes prestigious all over the country. However, his works has not been brought in China until 1999. The publication of the first Chinese edition of *Disgrace* was translated by Nan Jing Yi Lin Press in 2002. And we knew little about Coetzee's life and his works in the past. Robert McCrum (2003) comments on Coetzee: "*Disgrace turns into a milestone in Coetzee's writing career through its implicative and exact description. Coetzee is the first novelist to have the Booker Prize twice.*" However, many people pay little attention to it. And South Africans find no pride in it. On the opposite, some critics regard *Disgrace* as an "inappropriate" novel. They consider that *Disgrace* not only disgraces the black, but also disgraces the black political power in the South African society. It seems that the novel is about love, desire and morals of the black's tyranny or revenge on the white in post-apartheid time on the surface, which is also the essential standpoint of the existing literature at present. However, actually it replays the white crime in the past through the black violence at present. It is difficult for the once dominant group to cope with the changing world in an apartheid-free South Africa. The colonialist policies leave a gaping wound not only for the black but also for the white themselves. Therefore, both of the black and the white are helpless and disoriented in postcolonial society.

However, both of them are searching. They are trying to find out a way for them to coexist in peace and harmony. Therefore, to make a postcolonial study on Coetzee and his *Disgrace* cannot only afford a new angle for the general study of Coetzee and his *Disgrace*, but also can give a revelation and reflection for people in the new society.

## 1. DISGRACE—THE HALLMARK OF COLONIALISM BRANDED ON POST-APARTHEID TIME

The novel opens with a story about Lurie, a 52 year-old and twice-divorced professor of modern languages in Cape Technical University. As a professor, Lurie takes no interest in his job and he is always looking for an unusual way (sex) to prove his energy and privilege. In the beginning, He often calls a prostitute to “solve the problem of sex”. And then he seduces one of his female students Melanie and makes love with her. But truth comes out soon. It is found by Melanie's boyfriend and parents, which arouses a great disturbance in the college. Lurie is accused by the college, but he refuses to confess in the hearing defense. So he becomes discredited in the college and decides to leave. Lurie is in many ways a typical white South African of the generation that he grew up with in apartheid time. Through his relationships with women in the weak social strata, Coetzee has depicted Lurie's failure in his identity. Because of South Africa's long history of racial oppression and racial discrimination, Lurie is unwilling to change in a world that is changing. So he refuses to give a confession, just as Chapman said: “*The white are endowed with a special racial identity.*” (Chapman, 2001, p.87)

It is common for postcolonial authors to write back to the European tradition. But in Coetzee's case, the gesture is complex. The new kind of literary hybrid produced in the ambivalent operations can be seen as a kind of enlightenment for the existing problems in the wake of colonialism. The question of identity is of vital importance in establishing the niche of post-colonialism which Coetzee inhabits. Coetzee does not put the image of the protagonist Lurie in a big social circumstance when he is building it in the novel. But he sets him in seductions and relationships with several women, all of whom are placed in the weak social strata. However, they are conceivers of the hypocritical prospects of the society, and they conceive a trap with visions for Lurie. Therefore, as the Swedish Academy notes: “*J. M. Coetzee's novels are characterized by their well-crafted composition, pregnant dialogue and analytical brilliance, but at the same time he is a scrupulous doubter, ruthless in his criticism of*

*the cruel rationalism and cosmetic morality of western civilization.*”<sup>1</sup> the image of Lurie is made to open a scene of the white's ethical response to the guilt in the apartheid time. And through the image of Lurie, Coetzee recalls a scene in the past when the white were in a dominant position. Coetzee proves it in the Nobel Lecture: “*I think South Africa in the past 40 years has been a place where people have been faced with really huge, moral debts.*”<sup>2</sup> Coetzee's comment is sharp and profound.

When colonialist policies fade away, the white's privilege disappears along with them. Therefore, Lurie could not escape the shadow of the privileged colonialists in colonial time quickly. He feels it difficult to cope with the changing world in an apartheid-free South Africa. So as soon as the white lose their power, Lurie loses his identity. He feels displaced, confused and helpless, like a sleepwalker in darkness. The colonialist policies leave an unquenchable scar for not only the black but also for the white in post-apartheid South Africa. Along with the disappearance of the past hegemony, the representative language of the white—English—loses its function as well. As a professor of language, as the representative of colonizers, Lurie is suffering a physical or even psychological harassment when his daughter is robbed and gang raped. There is no help, even though “He speaks Italian. He speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa.” (Coetzee, 2000, p.95) The opera *Byron in Italy*, which Lurie intends to prepare about Byron's last days in Italy, indicates the loss of the western civilization and reflects Lurie's mental transformation.

In South Africa, the only address one can imagine is a brutally direct and pure representative, what short-circuits the imagination, what forces one's face into the thing itself, is that of a calling of history. “The only address one can imagine”—an admission of defeat. (David Atwell, 2003) The experience of Lurie is a little similar to that of Thomas', who is the famous surgeon in Milan Kundera's “*Unbearable Lightness of Being*”. (Milan Kundera, 2000) Thomas leaves his work and becomes a glass cleaner to protect his fame and prestige. Though the causes of their circumstance are different, the experience is alike. Both of them are defeated and pay for their rejection.

## 2. ONE BAD TURN DESERVES ANOTHER—THE CHAIN REACTION OF COLONIAL EVILS

Like the protagonist Byron in his opera *Byron in Italy*, Lurie is exiled for his “disgrace” in the college. Byron fled overseas. And Lurie leaves Cape Town and flees to

<sup>1</sup>The Permanent Secretary Press Release 2 October 2003. <http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/2003/press.html>.

<sup>2</sup>Coetzee wins Nobel Prize for literature Thursday, October 2, 2003 Posted: 2:03 PM EDT. <http://www.cnn.com/2003/SHOWBIZ/books/10/02/nobel.literature/index.html>

his daughter Lucy's small farm as a refugee. However, one day Lucy was robbed and raped by three black men on the farm without any omen. Her home was robbed and Lurie was burnt. But Lucy would rather keep it a secret than report to the police. As a white offspring of the ex-colonizers, Lucy becomes the victim of colonialist policies. Her parents' divorce and her tendency of homosexual cause her to exile herself to the countryside. When colonialist policies fade away, the colonial evil would revenge on the body and flesh of their offspring. It is the colonizers themselves that deserve the chain reaction of their sin in the past. The violence on the farm is inevitable. It is not only a violation upon human body but also a symbol of revenge and a historical hatred between different races, which is caused by colonizers. Lucy's secret is Lurie's "disgrace". As the daughter of colonialists, Lucy carries on the heavy burden of the past crimes in the postcolonial society. She wants to atone for the colonialists' sin silently and starts on a long journey to her expiation for the past guilt as a scapegoat of the previous colonialists. The reason that Lurie chooses to work in the animal welfare league at last is that he has made up his mind to close with punishment and atone for the colonial guilt subconsciously. Meanwhile, it has proved that colonialists bring a gaping wound not only to the colonized, but also to themselves and their offspring.

In the wake of colonialism, the white may or may not absolve one from guilty. Lurie commits crimes, and his daughter Lucy atones for it, which just as it goes: "*Then it is over, all this badness.*" (Coetzee, 2000, p.202) Lucy is a sign of hope for the coexistence. The sin of the white's past and the disgrace of apartheid's will be compensated by the white's acquiescence. And in the apartheid-free South Africa, white women are in the redemption and reconciliation for the past colonial evils.

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### 3. ORIGINAL SIN—UNQUENCHABLE SCAR INFLICTED BY COLONIALIST POLICIES

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The white's original sin leaves an unquenchable scar for people in colony, whether the black or the white. As an offspring of the white colonialists, Lucy tries to forget her "*disgrace*" and accept it. She has made up her mind to bear the child who results from the gang-rape on the farm, and continue to stay on the farm. To Lucy, she is a scapegoat of the colonialist policies, carrying on the heavy burden of a colonialist. She is a throwback to the farm, repeating the black ancestor's work and the black history. She first lived with her mother in Holland and then came to South Africa. It is different from her ancestors that Lucy becomes a worker in this African land, instead of being a colonizer. She is longing for a quiet, independent life and an amalgamation with the African field. To Lucy, though there is something of civilization in it, she is a symbol of

redemption and reconciliation to the black and the white. For "life", Lucy chooses to remain and marry to the black Petrus. She accepts Petrus' "advice" to become his third "wife" on condition of contributing her land to him. In the process of analyzing, Coetzee indicates a reconciliation and amalgamation through the violation upon the body and the loss of dignity of women in the weak social strata. Lucy feels shameful for her choice, but she finds a hope in her *disgrace*: "*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.*" (Coetzee, 2000, p.205) Meanwhile, Lucy loses her originally independent identity. She will redefine her identity against Petrus and her unborn child, whose blood is mixed with the black one and the white one. The child belongs to the black pedigree, the earth and the black race. He is also a symbol of hope and amalgamation. The white Lucy would become the "wife" of black Petrus and become a member of the black family, which would ensure her position in the postcolonial society. As a representative of the black colonized, Petrus promises to bring up the child because he wants to take back what belongs to him originally.

To some extent, it is an assimilation to the white colonizers, which implies that aggression and plantation will be defeated by the colonized at last. The violence on the farm is caused by the colonialists. Finally, Coetzee draws a picture of Lucy to bear the child, signifying the amalgamation and reconciliation between the colonizers and the colonized, the black and the white.

Therefore, the novel ends with a scene that Lurie is helping Bev in the animal welfare league. They comfort the dogs, touch and speak to them in their final minutes, giving them "what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love." (Coetzee, 2000, p.188) Coetzee uses "him" instead of "it", indicating the dog. And Coetzee also uses the dog to allude to Lurie. In giving himself up, Lurie finds his own identity. The racism of the human race and all other colonialist policies are abolished, Lurie's compassion is inclusive rather than exclusive: "*A shadow of grief falls over him...for (the dog) alone in her cage, for himself, for everyone.*" (Coetzee, 2000, p.219) It is a crippled dog Lurie is fond of particularly, but the inevitability is inevitable indeed. Lurie decides to give up the dog. Therefore, Lurie carries "him" in his arms like a lamb, re-entering into the surgery for the final, fatal injection.

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### CONCLUSION

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When the majority of the black in South Africa succeeds in coming into power when the colonialist rules fade away, colonialist policies leave an unquenchable scar on both the black and the white in their mind as well as on their bodies.

At the end of the novel, Coetzee raises such a question, "Yet we cannot live our daily lives in a realm of pure ideas, cocooned from sense-experience. The question is not "How can we keep the imagination pure, protected from the onslaughts of reality?" The question has to be "Can we find a way for the two to coexist?" (Coetzee, 2000, p.22)

However, the wheel of the history is irreversibly rolling forward. Can this scar in human civilization be ever healed? Can a way be found for the two to coexist? A final solution is not to be found in the original novel. And, it seems, with *Disgrace* as an enlightenment, people are still engaged in a continual search for a solution to the existing problems in the wake of colonialism.

In the 1990s, when the majority of the black in South Africa succeeds in coming into power, when the colonialist rules fade away, colonialist policies leave an unquenchable scar on both the black and the white in their mind as well as on their bodies. So the white take up the heavy burden of redemption. According to what Coetzee says: "I think South Africa in the past 40 years has been a place where people have been faced with really huge, moral debts."<sup>1</sup> So the white cannot help but to expiate and start on a long and painful journey to search for self-identity. Therefore, both the black and the white are displaced, confused and helpless in the wake of colonialism. Though the wound is too smart to heal, both the black and the white are trying their best to search for a new way for them to coexist in peace and harmony. With *Disgrace* as an enlightenment, people are still engaged in a continual search for a solution to the existing problems in the wake of colonialism.

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