

PSYCHO-ANALYTICAL STUDY OF DAVID LURIE IN J. M. COETZEE'S *DISGRACE*

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Abstract

The present paper is an effort to interpret the behaviour of a protagonist, Prof David Lurie, depicted in J. M. Coetzee's Disgrace with the help of psycho-analytical theory. The novelist has presented the conflict between the black and the white. Prof Lurie is a prey of libidinal force. He is strongly infatuated by egoism. He has unethical relations with many women. Mania for sex proves to be a tragic flaw in his personality which inflicts calamity upon him. His daughter feels that her father is a disgrace for her being a womanizer. She feels that her father is a part of another great socio-historical injustice. So is the reason, the daughter lives with a rapist instead of the father. Prof Lurie tries to trace his identity in the novel. Through the present paper, an attempt is made to interpret the tangible father-daughter relationship so as to make the novel easy for better understanding.

Key Words: Prof David Lurie, disgrace, libido, ego and psycho-analysis

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Psycho-analysis – A Conceptual Analysis:

Sigmund Freud is known as a pioneer of psycho-analysis. The said term is well illustrated as: "Psychoanalysis, as is evident from the name, is a branch of psychology in which mental processes are discovered through analysis of verbal responses" (Sharma 54). Other clarification of psycho-analysis is as follows:

Psychoanalysis is a system of psychology associated with Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) who developed psychoanalytic psychotherapy. His study of the neurotic ailments led him to evolve his theories of normal and abnormal minds. He made inroads into the study of human sexual instincts, interpretation of dreams, working of the unconscious mind and repression. (Sebastian and Chandra 184)

Along with Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva have also enriched the psycho-analytical theory to focus on tangible human relations. Prof Lurie can be studied with the help of the said theory in a better way.

Psycho-analytical Study of Prof David Lurie:

Prof David Lurie teaches English in the technical university in Cape Town. He has published three scholarly books on opera, the erotic nature of Richard of St. Victor's revelations, and Wordsworth's influence on history. Yet, his true desire is to write a chamber opera about love entitled *Byron in Italy*. He is a womanizer teacher who is no more interested in teaching the students in the university. The novel opens with the line, "For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex

rather well" (*Disgrace* 01). He is leading his job monotonously without any enthusiasm. He has divorced his second wife Rosaline. On every Thursday, Lurie enjoys bodily pleasure with Soraya, a Muslim prostitute that he chose from a catalogue at Discrete Escorts. Later, Soraya stops working as a whore. When Prof David phones her, she scolds him saying not to meddle in her personal life.

He feels quite void. To fill up the gap, he tries a fresh girl and marries secretary but does not feel satisfaction. Being a staunch womanizer, he tries to establish relation with his student of Romantic course, Melanie Isaacs. The age and interests of Prof Lurie and Melanie differs. Still, he demands physical pleasure from her. He persuades her to spend a night with him saying: "Because 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" (*Disgrace* 16). When she asks him if she has shared it already with someone, he retorts her that she should share it more widely. One day, he invites her for lunch. Melanie remains reticent. He returns with her to his home and enjoys physical pleasure with her. When Melanie comes to class the next day, Wednesday, Prof Lurie lectures on Wordsworth's *Prelude*. To clarify in terms of psycho-analysis, Lurie's act of teaching literature is subliminal defence mechanism illustrated in psycho-analysis in which the subject takes delight in great things to forget anxiety.

Prof Lurie begins to molest her continuously. His first bodily encounter with his student runs in the following way in the novel:

He takes her back to his house. On the living-room floor, to the sound of rain pattering against the windows, he makes love to her. Her body is clear, in its way perfect; though she is passive throughout, he finds the act pleasurable, so pleasurable that from its climax he tumbles into blank oblivion. (*Disgrace* 19)

The next afternoon, he visits her without informing her. Again, he enjoys physical pleasure with her against her desire. She remains passive during the sex. Prof Lurie

ignores every indication that Melanie is reluctant in physical union, instead choosing to interpret her behaviour according to his own desires. Lurie notices:

She does not resist. All she does is avert herself: avert her lips, avert her eyes. She lets him lay her out on the bed and undress her: she even helps him, raising her arms and then her hips. Little shivers of cold run through her; as soon as she is bare, she slips under the quilted counterpane like a mole burrowing, and turns her back on him. Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. (*Disgrace* 25)

Melanie requests Prof Lurie to leave immediately because her cousin Pauline will be back soon. He leaves quickly and watches Pauline from his car. Melanie stops attending classes. He adjusts her grade in the examination. She rips the advantage of her relation with Prof David. One Sunday night, she visits him. They have sex one more time. The description runs like this: "He MAKES LOVE to her one more time, on the bed in his daughter's room" (*Disgrace* 29). It is observed about sex: "There is nothing derogatory or clandestine in sex. In fact, sex is the bed rock of all relationships" (Kumar 84). Prof Lurie tries to establish relation with the student through sex. Melanie's boyfriend comes to know it and threatens the Professor. Melanie gets disturbed mentally. She misses all tests.

The very next morning, a complaint has been filed against him and includes a copy of the corresponding section of the Code of Conduct he has been accused of violating, Article 3.1: the victimization or harassment of students by teachers. Prof Lurie is shocked by the notification and refuses to believe that Melanie has lodged the complaint on her own. He thinks that Pauline might have instigated Melanie to file the complaint against him. When Prof Lurie goes for the Vice-Rector, [Aram Hakim](#)'s office, the head of his department, [Elaine Winter](#), and the university chair, [Farodia Rassool](#), are present. They inform Prof Lurie of the harassment charge and further accuse him of falsifying

Melanie's attendance records. Hakim, who unlike Elaine is somewhat sympathetic, advises Prof Lurie to seek legal advice.

The hearing begins. Manas Mathabane, Professor of Religious Studies, chairs the hearing. The committee expects a confession from Prof David for his misconduct. Mathabane contacts Prof Lurie to discuss the terms of the settlement. In exchange for his statement, they offer Prof Lurie a leave of absence and a return to teaching conditioned upon the consent of the Dean and the head of the Department. Prof Lurie denies the same. He says:

What goes on in my mind is my business, not yours, Farodia. Frankly, what you want from me is not a response but a confession. Well, I make no confession. I put forward a plea. As is my right. Guilty as charged. That is my plea. That is as far as I am prepared to go. (*Disgrace* 51)

To interpret the behaviour of Prof Lurie from psycho-analytical view point, it can be said that he does not want to prove himself innocent in the sex scandal. It is observed that ego is functioning strongly in his personality. He has certainly crossed the limits of a teacher in his behaviour with his student. He has used Melanie selfishly to enjoy bodily pleasure with her. Prof Lurie is a prey of libidinal force which is illustrated in psychoanalysis as:

Freud contended that hidden emotions or drives are involved in human conflict. He referred to these drives as libido and believed that they were form of psychic energy analogues to the individual's supply of physical energy. Just as some people are more athletic, some have stronger libidos. Freud also believed that the psychic energy or drive level of the individual sets up an inner state of tension that must somehow be reduced. In general, libido can be seen as desire for pleasure, particularly sexual gratification. (Sarason 63)

Prof Lurie observes that the committee requires repentance from him and refuses to do the same. However, Prof Lurie should feel guilty for his wrong act with the student. To interpret Prof Lurie's behaviour in psycho-analytical language, it can be said that the ego in his personality resists him from admitting guilt. In psycho-analysis, ego is clarified like this: "The ego is the psychological component of the personality that is represented by our conscious decision-making process" (<http://study.com> Web). It is a part of human personality functioning on conscious level. Its main concern is with the subject's safety. Ego functions on reality principle. The subject tries to protect the ego in every possible way because it helps to save its personality from being disintegrated.

Prof Lurie resigns and goes to visit his daughter, [Lucy](#) in Salem, a town on the Eastern Cape. She welcomes the father. She has become rustic now, barefoot in a flowered dress. She makes her money from her kennel and from selling produce and flowers. Prof Lurie stays in Helen's room, Lucy's girlfriend who has recently moved back to Johannesburg. Lucy has been living in the farm alone.

Lucy's farm is no more than a converted stable where [Petrus](#), Lucy's assistant, and his family live. On that particular day, Lurie has an opportunity to meet Petrus, a tall man in rubber boots. At dinner that night, Lucy delicately initiates the subject of her father's dismissal. He reveals that he has protested the insistence of the university to reform his character. Lucy offers a shelter to his dismissed father. Lucy acquaints Prof Lurie with the farm life; he begins to help his daughter to sell her produce and to run an animal refuge. At the refuge, he encounters with [Bev Shaw](#), a robust woman. Prof Lurie is repulsive for Bev in the beginning because she is least attractive and her house smells dirty. Prof Lurie also meets her husband, Bill.

On one such a day, Prof Lurie and Lucy walk together on the farm; they encounter three men whom they've never seen before. They attack on Prof Lurie and his daughter. Prof Lurie tries to comfort his daughter but she walks away and locks herself in the

bathroom. She, finally, comes out and agrees to seek help from a neighbour. She tells Prof Lurie that she has been raped. [Petrus](#) is nowhere to be found. Prof Lurie cannot get his daughter to tell him why she refuses to report the rape. It is observed that Lucy and her father are emotionally detached from each other. It seems that she has no faith in law and justice in South Africa.

Prof Lurie is suspicious of the timing of Petrus' absence and questions him; [Lucy](#), however, refuses to consider his possible role in the crime. When Petrus comes to the house, he has heard about the robbery and asks if Prof Lurie is all right. Petrus does not ask about Lucy. Petrus encourages them to go to the market so that they will not lose their stall; however, Lucy is reluctant for public appearance. Prof Lurie thus visits the market in wounded state for Lucy. Petrus offers a party to celebrate his land transfer. During preparation for the party, Petrus purchases two sheep for the feast. Prof Lurie feels sympathy for the sheep, saying: "I'm not sure I like the way he does things - bringing the slaughter-beasts home to acquaint them with the people who are going to eat them" (*Disgrace* 124).

To interpret the said statement from psycho-analytical view point, it can be said that Prof Lurie develops sympathy for the animals in the farm. To clarify it in psycho-analytical terms, it can be stated that he displaces the grief and shame he will not allow himself to express about the rape of Melanie. The displacement defence mechanism is illustrated like this: "Displacement is a redirection of an impulse onto a substitute target. If the impulse, the desire, is OK with you, but the person you direct that desire is too threatening, you can displace to someone or something that can serve as a symbiotic substitute" (Shukla 60).

Lucy does not allow her father to call police. She insists her father that it is her private matter. Prof Lurie becomes sorrowful because her daughter is not ready to share her feelings with him. As their way back to the farm, Lucy offers the detail account of

sudden rape on her to the father. Lucy sincerely feels that Prof Lurie will not be able to understand her bitter experience of the rape being a man. She scolds her father saying:

Hatred . . . when it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me anymore. Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange – when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her – isn't it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife in; existing afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood – doesn't it feel like murder, like getting away with murder? (*Disgrace* 158)

After pondering on the past filthy history of her father with Soraya and Melanie, Lucy comes to the conclusion that Prof Lurie is a predatory sexual creature, a womanizer and a rapist. Her unforgettable bitter experience of rape has completely washed out any sympathy for her father's banishment from the university. The daughter feels that her father is a part of another great socio-historical injustice.

Prof Lurie meets his ex-wife, [Rosalind](#), to discuss [Lucy's](#) safety on the farm. Gradually, Rosalind turns the topic back to Melanie's case. She expresses her anger that Prof Lurie has risked his career for a trifle affair. Meanwhile, she mentions that Melanie is in a play at Dock Theatre. Prof Lurie decides to attend her performance. Melanie's boyfriend, Ryan, resists him. On that very night, Prof Lurie enjoys physical pleasure with a young prostitute. To interpret his act in terms of psycho-analysis, it can be asserted that his act appears to be out of utter frustration. He wants to forget his tension by taking delight of sex with a whore.

The fact of Lucy's pregnancy is revealed to Prof Lurie. Over dinner, Lucy informs Prof Lurie that the young rapist, [Pollux](#), [Petrus'](#) brother-in-law, has returned. As a compromise, Petrus agrees to marry Lucy. Lucy takes the proposal positively. She thinks that she needs protection being a forlorn woman. She tells Prof Lurie to tell Petrus to provide her protection in exchange of her land, adding that she is ready to accept the

label of Petrus' third wife. Lucy's conscious mind believes in life instinct rather than death instinct. So is the reason, she prefers to live rather than committing suicide after the rape.

The next morning Prof Lurie takes a walk with Katy. They catch Pollux spying on Lucy while she is taking a shower. Prof Lurie causes the dog attack on Pollux and kicks him on the ground. Lucy saves the boy. Lucy and Prof Lurie admit that the boy is mentally disturbed, but for some reason, Lucy protects him. To interpret it in psycho-analytical language, it can be stated that she has to live with them anyhow in that area. So, she copes with the rapist by adjusting herself. She feels that her father is unable to protect her. She feels that her father is a disgrace for her being a womanizer. She cannot trust her father. She needs protection. She is a practical minded woman. So, she saves the boy from her father.

Prof Lurie has sex relations with [Soraya](#), Melanie, Bev and a prostitute. He traces gratification out of sex relations. He is back where he has begun at the beginning of the novel, seeking solace from a stranger for pay. Neither Prof Lurie nor Lucy is optimistic about bright future. Lucy accepts a humiliating position as Petrus' third wife in exchange for protection. Prof Lurie, incapable of redeeming himself for crimes that seem to follow from his misconduct from the very beginning, resigns for bringing disgrace to teaching profession.

Conclusion:

In the present paper an effort made to interpret the behaviour of Prof David Lurie depicted in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* with the help of psycho-analytical theory. He is tantalizing in nature and so cannot cope up with a woman for a long time. Sex proves to be a tragic flaw in his personality which inflicts calamity upon him. A conclusion has been drawn from his eccentric behaviour that he is certainly disgrace for teaching profession.

The novelist has presented the conflict between the black and the white. He wants to preach a serious message that a teacher should be sincere and more mature towards his students. Prof Lurie's daughter, Lucy, also feels honestly that he is a disgraceful father for her. She cannot adjust with him because being a rape victim, she visualises her father as a rapist. So is the reason she adjusts with the situation and lives her life without the help from her father. It is noticed that Prof Lurie traces his identity throughout the novel. An attempt is made to interpret the tangible relation between father and daughter with the help of psycho-analytical theory so as to make the novel easy for better understanding.

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