

**THE JOURNEY TO THE HEART: A CRITICAL STUDY OF
J.M. COETZEE'S *DISGRACE* IN TERMS OF
RACIAL DESOLATION**

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Abstract

*Man is a social animal who suffers acutely for its own deed. Every person once in a life time is alienated from self or others in terms of caste, creed, race, or identity. This alienation results in a big dissolution in a person's life. One of the reasons for which a person gets alienated is racial discrimination. Race not only categorizes the colour and identity but it also considers the differences between the ethical groups, nation, people or tribe. These differences can clearly be understood through the pre and post-Raphaelite literary works. One of the best examples is that of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Nobel Prize winner 2003 and Booker Prize 1999, describes the character of David Lurie, middle-aged and twice divorced, who teaches romantic poetry and a great patron of William Blake possess a very impulsive nature. The nature of him leads to his victimisation and helps him evoke all the faultiness. The post-modernist study and the structuralism involvement help to analyse the differences between the radical and the racial attributes. The nature of the very concept of racial discrimination is always deep-rooted that is due to the radical nature of the fellow beings. The journey to the heart will find the subterranean darkness and the clings from the multi-layered crafted fallacy.*

Keywords: Alienated, Identity, Racial Discrimination, Victimization, Subterranean Darkness.

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Man is the only social animal who is blessed to enjoy varieties of emotions. These emotions make them social beings. They are also the ones who suffer a lot due to their own deeds and activities. At some point of time or the other, man gets alienated from self or others by caste, creed, race, or identity. This alienation results due to a big desolation in a person's life. Occasionally, the alienated-self acts very irrational that it loses its state of mind. Peter Heller in his novel *The Dog Stars* portrays the protagonist Hig as the only one who survives the pandemic flu which had wiped each and every one he knew. He survives the fatal epidemic because he was fortunate. He lives in a hangar with his dog. Hig's wishes, "I want to be two people at once. One runs away" (Heller. *The Dog Stars*, np), shows the isolated Hig who tries to hold on his sanity in the wilderness of alienation. One of the main reasons for a person to experience alienation is racial discrimination. The racial discrimination affects many human institutions like marriage, friendship, etc. Race not only categorizes the identity of colour but it also considers the differences between the ethical groups, nation, people or tribe. The dark texture of the skin has so darkened the mind of the people that they are damaging the society and its values. There are ample examples to justify its matter of being. One of the finest examples of racial discrimination is Caliban (the son of the witch Sycorax) from Shakespearean play, *The Tempest*, who is represented as a monster "A freckled whelp, not honour'd with a human shape" (Fleischer. *The plays and Poems of William Shakespeare* by William Shakespeare, 4). It illustrates that Prospero who has invaded the land of Caliban

has have colonised his territory over Caliban's native land and consider him as a wild and deformed man. If one closely reads the novel then it will be clear that the wilderness and the deformation as a consequence of the alienation as Caliban was all alone until Prospero and Miranda arrived at the island. The colonization of Caliban depicts his bondage and captivity, and after his acquiring of knowledge his work marks the post-colonisation ideas, "You taught me language, and my profit on't, Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you, For learning me your language!" (Shakespeare. *The Tempest*, 39). Hence, there is a major need to eradicate the racial discrimination in order to save the humanity.

Martin Luther King Junior addresses a public speech in 23rd August, 1963 at Washington D.C. Civil Right March where he states that, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" (Sirimarco. *The Civil Rights Movement*, 122) in reference to Emancipation Proclamation which freed millions of slaves from the heinous act of slavery and slave trading. And in response to this cultural turning point which has a profound effect on the "God's Children" show a change in the acceptance of people. As Anthony Trend, an executive speechwriter, writes back in response to it that, "The right man delivered the right words to the right people in the right place at the right time"(Trendl. "I Have a Dream Analysis"<https://americanspeechwriter.com/i-have-a-dream-martin-luther-king-jr/>) indicates that the racial discrimination has a vast history which transformed man into an isolated being. With the new movement, the darkness of the human mind has been wiped away. The darkness which the heart suffer never washes away like that of the post-colonial effects. These differences can evidently be eradicated by realizing the past mistakes and analysing it. Self-realization is essential for a modern man. Self-alienation consumes a man internally so much so that the self-acknowledgement will be a painful ordeal as that of David in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. The sexual predatory father is one of the major elements in *Disgrace* which leads to isolation.

The novel *Disgrace* can be read as a half campus novel and half anti-pastoral which accurately justifies with the shifting of David from Cape Town to Salem. The power politics and the self-alienation are some of the prominent themes that Coetzee explores. Some of the portrayal imprints a chaotic image which sometimes leads the reader bamboozle with their pessimist approach towards humankind. David runs a single course on Romantic poets in the Technical University where he is a very poor communicator with poor material for the South African students who lack the grounded education system. The source of the South African literature lacks in the 'post-Christian', 'post-literate' and 'post-apartheid' period. Besides, David was a patron of Lord Byron who tried his hands at opera which deals with the love affair of Byron, who was indulged with his half-sister, Teresa Guiccioli (a 19 year old girl). Due to the scandalous relationship they were ostracized in England. David is also like Byron possesses decent looks and a significant liking towards 'exotic' women. He satisfies his sexual desires by indulging in a relationship with a colored sex worker named Soraya and then after with a pretty dark girl who was about his daughter's age named Melanie Isaacs.

In *Disgrace*, J.M. Coetzee portrays David as self-obsessed, who loses his peace of mind and his dream of arty success. He is also depicted as the one who loses his ability to protect his daughter from being raped. David Lurie, a professor, at a Technical University of Cape Town staged in post-apartheid South Africa, have an impulsive affair with a prostitute and wants to have a romantic relationship even knowing that she has a family before having an offensive relationship with one of the university student, Melanie Isaacs 'the dark one'. The illicit relationship of David brings him '*Disgrace*'. David regards himself as 'Daddy' to Melanie. The implication is of an unnatural father, a predator, than that of a protector. There are also close examples like the unnatural father in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. This offensive nature of his shows his alienation. He is a lover of beauty wants a companion to share his sexual desires. The art of seduction is appreciated in literature but where David was positioned was an educational arena and to have a sexual

relationship with student is a great offence. The condemnation for his predatory acts catches everybody's attention resulting in his resignation. This shows that the loss of 'Power'. The power shifts can sometime isolate man. Isolation some time leads to self-obsessions, as that of David who "I am being asked to issue an apology about which I may not be sincere?" (Espindola. *Transitional Justice after German Reunification*, 199) refers to his imaginative truth where he does not find himself as guilty due to the isolated self. The isolated self does not allow him to see the truth through any other lenses.

To study isolation referring to David's situation is a great task. David suffers adversely when he realizes his position. The power which he holds has been long gone and the new age is very different from the way he has lead it. *Disgrace* explicitly deals with post-apartheid period in South Africa. And the power politics of David has been shifted, so he being a white alienates from others. Lucy, David's daughter, knows their position and tries to cope up but David always tries to fight a way back. His power shift is clearly visible when he was asked to give an apology for his sexual in dominance and he distinctly resigns the post due to his self. While he travels to Lucy, his isolation takes a new approach where he feels as being disintegrated from the society as well as the self.

The self-desolation occurs if the heart is alienated amidst the social groups. It can also happen if the person is detached from self and attempts to find his happiness in the act of sexual empathy, which we discover in the case of David. He was dissatisfied with himself and does not feel being a part of the system his daughter belongs to. Lucy was leading a peaceful life until David comes to stay with her in Salem. Lucy, a lesbian, was large and plain in physique which David rejects. So the life she sustains was that of a farmer named Petrus who occasionally helps her. Petrus who often says that "everything is dangerous today" (Coetzee. *Disgrace*. 64), make David nosy about him that being in power the black man is in terms to settle the debts of the past. Lucy knows how to share privilege with black and she adjusts with the situation. David strongly feels disgusted by

Bev Shaw presence, who runs a local animal clinic. To him, she was a 'remarkably unattractive' middle-aged woman.

The journey to the heart begins for David when he realises that the power shift has already been in account with the implementation of Emancipation act. When three black men intrude the house and raped Lucy, David was powerless. This terrible feeling of helplessness is also found in Ruben Olivier, the protagonist of *The Right of Desire*, who could not protect his loved one. After the inhumane incident, when David asked Lucy to file a report, she said that 'the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too' (Coetzee. *Disgrace*. Ch. 11). These lines show Lucy's knowledge of power shifting game but David, on the other hand, tries to hold on to the righteousness. The display of indifferent mind-set reveals how the father and the daughter are diametrically opposites of each other. He operates in a mind-set that is impulsive by nature, whereas, Lucy understands the state of affairs very well. David feels pity and compassion for her when he recalls her words, 'They see me owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying? Perhaps that is what they tell themselves.' It also makes him desperate because he thought it was the doings of his which his daughter has to repay. The fallacies helped him to understand that "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap". Here the words of David's wife Rosalind echoes back 'You are too old to be meddling with other people's children.' (Coetzee. *Disgrace*. Ch. 5).

After the impetuous situation, when David gains composure he recognizes that his activities were irrational. He also realises that each individual's story is different having their own trajectories. Like the black-men, they have their own stories to say but they will not say in English because English is the language which has marginalised and ostracized them. This marginalisation makes him aware about the position of the individual-self and the isolated-self which vanishes with self-realization of the situations around him as

correctly quoted by Courtney Milan, “When someone else’s safety and acceptance in society is on the line, your personal discomfort comes in a very distant second” (https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/2906892.Courtney_Milan).

Lucy does not file a rape complaint against the wrong-doer because she knows the fact that if she takes any action then she will be at a risk of another attack. When she discovers that she is pregnant she agrees to become Petrus’ mistress and signed her property over to him without any complications even though David protested. Lucy knows that being a lesbian and getting raped is heinous. As she was pregnant, she needs social security and she agrees to the condition laid by Petrus. She wanted to start her life again with new power by paying off the debts ‘with no cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity’ (Coetzee. *Disgrace*. Ch. 22, 205). She admits that the brutal act was unjust and not reporting it makes her more humiliated. She is right on her part to start her life all over again which was a major turning point in David’s acceptance towards morality.

The self-help can be carried out with self-repentance as is the case with David. He understands the mental condition that Lucy undergoes. Being a lesbian, she was detached from social terms of relationship but she was impregnated by the viciousness of rape. The previous impositions of David comes to an end with the desires that he said and had earlier experienced, ‘The truth is, they wanted me castrated’ (Coetzee. *Disgrace*. Ch. 7). When he understands alienation, he comes in terms with the flowing tide ‘Without passion but not without distaste either’ (Coetzee. *Disgrace*. Ch. 17). And the ‘remarkably unattractive’ Bev Shaw makes him comfortable and a peculiar kind of bond grows between them. This was a new step for David towards a moral development which completely satisfies his being.

Disgrace deals with much larger contexts than that of political propagandas. The space for one’s own self is the major indication which Coetzee clearly points out. According to Adam Mars-Jones (*The Guardian*) in his review on *Disgrace*, he comments

that, “any novel set in post-apartheid South Africa is fated to be read as a political portrait, but the fascination of *Disgrace* is the way encourages and contests such reading by holding extreme alternatives in tension. Salvation, ruin” (Mars-Jones. “*Guardian Review of Disgrace*”, 11-25). The protagonist of *Disgrace* is not a man of virtue as that of Hamlet or Macbeth yet the readers sympathise David due to his isolation as the opening lines of the poem, “Sailing to Byzantium” by W. B. Yeats refers “No Country, this, for old men” (Yeats. *The Tower*. “Sailing to Byzantium”, Line 1). The preceding line of Yeats expresses the desires of a man who is abandoned and unwanted in the society. Towards the end of the novel, David fights his isolation and establishes a substantial relationship with Bev Shaw “their strained relationship on a more equal footing” (LeBlanc. “Hushed Resolve, Reticence, and Rape in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*”: 158-168). His subjugating the ‘remarkably unattractive’ Bev marks a new path of salvation for him as he tries to explore a new human “by annihilating his sexual vanity and his sense of superiority” (<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v21/n20/elizabeth-lowry/like-a-dog>).

The self-realisation of David after Lucy’s suffering was a turning point which changes the different perspectives (Lucy’s tragedy, Petrus motives, power enforcement of black over the white) into forefront like that of Petrus whose motif was to get hold on Lucy’s land and to be the landowner whereas it also portrays that when the power is shifted it acquires a new definition and it is the exploitation of one owns power. ‘Wake up, David. This is the country. This is Africa’ (Coetzee. *Disgrace*. Ch. 15) indicates that there is always a sense of belongingness. The blacks does speaks in French or Italian to overcome their marginalization. Thus, *Disgrace* is regarded as one of the most unflinching post-apartheid exhibitions on emotions. *My Traitor’s Heart* by Rian Malan is another fine example of the apartheid era which describes the moral mysteries and the unruly unfriendliness. The desolation of David ends when he chooses not to defend himself rather would fight his fate with noble, strength and patience. This approach of David

makes him a hero who tries to rectify things by coping up with the flow even if it does not satisfy him.

David, at the end of *Disgrace*, accomplishes his salvation due to his repentance. Coetzee depicts the issue that affects the western people such as the issues of humanism, moral responsibilities and accountabilities, etc. David achieves a compromise in life by submitting himself to the reality of life. He attains maturity which is evident when he gives up the young lame dog to be liberated by mercy-killing in spite of his special love for the dog and the dog's love for him. It is symbolic because by giving up the dog he loves, he also gives himself up to the reality of life thereby gaining peace of mind and freedom from his sense of guilt and sense of disgrace.

Disgrace faced many criticisms because it represented very rustic view of South Africa. Nadine Gordimer, a South African author and a Nobel Prize winner, comments that "In the novel *Disgrace* there is not one black person who is a real human being" (Bradshaw and Neill. *J.M. Coetzee's Austerities*, 13) which goes to show the attitude of the East towards the Orient. *Disgrace* comes with surprising and distressing situations. It arrests the reader's attention despite remaining one of the most disturbing novels. *Disgrace* was accompanied by *Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photograph and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life* an exhibition which depicts the conflicts and struggles of the people against the apartheid. It reflected the personal and private reflections in a very subjective manner. The character of David may devastate emotionally but soon catches the fancy of the reader as 'YOUR DAYS ARE OVER, CASANOVA' (Coetzee. *Disgrace*. Ch. 5) was brutally attacked by three black men when the power shifts from the East to the West. To live a righteous and dignified life is most important for people than to be live a life of alienation.

The journey to heart resulted in the salvation of the characters of *Disgrace*. David discovers the true nature of love and a companionship that he earlier rejected on the physical grounds. The novel concludes, 'Yes, I am giving him up' (Coetzee. *Disgrace*, 24) that shows that he is now able to release his past memories and change for better. The

dilemma which encloses a person's mind must be swept through humanity. *Disgrace* is an integral part of life which one comes across in a person's lifetime. It is the time that taught to bow down and accept the situation which will finally lead to self-love and make one able to accept the errors, like that of David who at the end, works with Bev Shaw in the Animal Welfare Centre which he disliked at the first. He finally understood the true value of life that led to his salvation. As salvation comes to those who believes "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved" (Zondervan. *Holy Bible: Today's New International Version: New Testament*, Roman 10:10).

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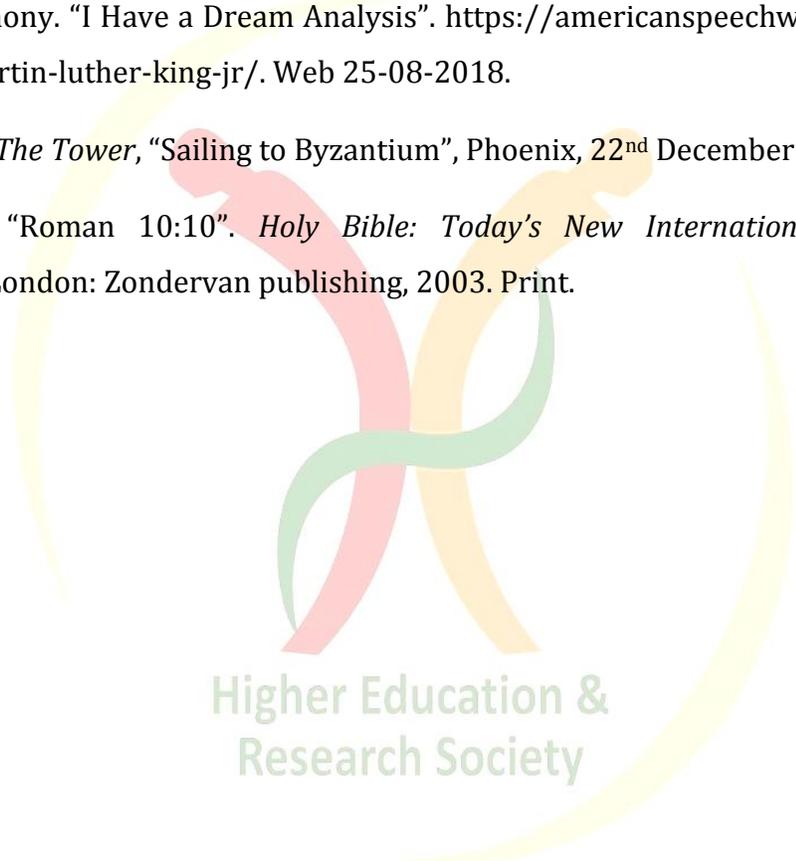
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