

Trajectories of Colonial Crimes and Reconciliation in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Key Words

- Reconciliation,
- Forgiveness,
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- Violence,
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- Development,
- Reconstruction,
- Possibility,
- Precolonial.

Abstract

*The colonization of Africa was based upon racist convictions and paradigms of White man's superiority. The empire employed a vocabulary of discrimination as Edward Said states that "they were not like us, and for that reason deserved to be ruled" (Said xi). Counteracting colonial mindset, South African leader Nelson Mandela's "100 Day speech to Parliament" in which he emphasized on the "Reconciliation Development Program" in South Africa took the notion of reconciliation to greater moral heights. Against all odds, Mandela maintained that "reconciliation will remain shallow if it is not accompanied by thorough-going changes in all areas of life" (Mandela 03). This research study discusses the crimes and violence portrayed in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* are the consequences of colonial history of oppression in South Africa. Furthermore, in post-apartheid South Africa, novels, such as *Disgrace* also reveal the complications of accepting and implementing concepts such as reconciliation, reconstruction, and restitution, recommended by Mandela. This research study closely focuses on Coetzee's *Disgrace* that embodies stories of hatred, forgiveness, and reconciliation as post-apartheid South Africa comes to terms with colonial history of guilt, and crime. This research study explores in depth, the probabilities and improbabilities of reconciliation on the practical scale. Furthermore, it explores the struggles of a white woman who gets raped by black men in post-apartheid South Africa and considers this immoral act as a compensation for the atrocities held by the colonizers against the colonized.*

1. Introduction

Britain appeared as the massive imperial power during the nineteenth century because of its interest in the “other” side of the world. African nation has suffered for decades under the colonial rule, colonial rulers are not only to be held responsible for the psychological, emotional and physical damage that they did to the Africans, rather they are also to be held accountable for the damage that they did to their moral values. The innocence of Africans who used to live closer to nature was also rampaged by the British colonizers. Aphra Behn in *Oroonoko* has clearly mentioned that the primitive Africans had no sense of sin and their innocence was plundered by the British colonizers.

Nelson Mandela emphasized on the need for forgiveness, reconstruction and reconciliation. In his “100 Day speech to Parliament”, he has stated that in order to rebuild, reconcile the nation, and change the system of South Africa, only legislation cannot prove to be of help, “legislation on its own cannot change attitudes. We appeal to all South Africans to ensure that discrimination, abuse, and any other backward attitudes against others, based on differences of gender, race, religion, language or other distinctions are done away with” (Mandela 02). In *Disgrace*, Coetzee has shed light on the possibility and the impossibility of reconciliation and forgiveness of post-colonial crimes. This research study deals with some of the possibilities and impossibilities of reconciliation on the practical scale.

In *Disgrace*, Coetzee represents the post-apartheid South Africa where a white man David Lurie feels “he is more out of place than ever” (Coetzee 04). The disgrace that he is made to feel leaves him no option but to move to Cape Town to live with his daughter Lucy. She suggests him to work at the veterinary clinic without any expectations for being paid for the job, “do it out of the goodness of your heart” (Coetzee 77), in reply to which he says, “It sounds like someone trying to make reparation for past misdeeds” (Coetzee 77). Lucy is somehow able to convince him for the job, although he agrees but he says, “only as long as I don’t have to become a better person. I am not prepared to be reformed. I want to go on being myself. I’ll do it on that basis” (Coetzee 77). Lurie finds it hard to take the step towards reconciliation, or to seek forgiveness for the past crimes, this study argues that what Lurie fails to realize here is that the colonial rule in South Africa is over and the natives are no more afraid of white men. Rather, it seems that it is the natives’ turn to cast the same violence on white intruders; Lurie realizes his helplessness later in the novel.

Lucy is raped by the natives of Cape Town, but what disturbs her more than the act of rape itself is the hatred that she feels from the black people for herself. This paper explores how Lucy struggles in a post colonized South Africa to reconcile with the natives by trying to expiate the crimes of the past; she decides to marry her black neighbor Petrus for hers and her to be born child’s safety. Despite being aware of the further hatred and the violence that await her, she still does not wish to leave South Africa. David asks her, “Do you think you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?” (Coetzee 112), her father fails to understand her because his mind is not ready to reconcile yet. He acts like an obstinate child who has been defeated in the game of suppression but is not yet ready to accept the defeat.

2. Literature Review

The British colonizers victimized and oppressed the natives of Africa on the basis of their belief in their white superiority and the inferiority of the non-Westerners, Said states in his “Introduction” to *Culture and Imperialism*, “the outlying regions of the world have no life, history, or culture to speak of, no independence or integrity worth representing without the West” (Said xix), and post-colonial literature challenges this episteme. On the one hand, the colonized were pressed to internalize the British culture, religion and language and on the other hand, there was an ongoing struggle to resist this imposition of a foreign culture on them. Bhabha’s theory of “mimicry” explains how many of the colonized individuals tried to imitate the speech, behavior, culture, norms, and habits of the colonizer in order to get rid of their own “inferior” culture as defined to them by the colonizer.

Behn in *Oroonoko* writes that the primitive Africans had no sense of sin, it was introduced to them by the colonizers, “They have a native Justice, which knows no Fraud; and they understand no Vice, or Cunning, but when they are taught by the White Men” (Behn 11). The mentioned quote clearly shows that the colonizers plundered not only the resources of the Africans but also their innocence, tranquility, cultural/traditional values and their relationship with nature. The reader of post-colonial literature can easily read into the trauma and suffering that the South Africans had to go through under the white colonizer’s rule.

In his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela has mentioned that the South African people were close to nature which showed their simplicity which was yet not taken away by the West. He wrote, “I discovered the almost mystical attachment that the Xhosa have for cattle, not only as a source of food and wealth, but as a blessing from God and a source of happiness” (Mandela 11). The previously stated quote clearly indicates that the South African people held their simple life as a blessing from God, and it was a definite source of happiness and contentment for them but unfortunately, their source of happiness was taken away from them and roads and buildings were constructed in its place resulting in the loss of happiness for the South African people.

Mandela has also mentioned in his autobiography that the South African people were forcefully made to get the education brought to them by the white colonizer; they had no other choice left to them but to be educated under the shadow of the imperial flag. Mandela says, “The education I received was a British education, in which British ideas, British culture and British institutions were automatically assumed to be superior. There was no such thing as African culture” (Mandela 16). This is how a post-colonized nation in the form of Mandela tried to write back to the colonial empire.

The innocence and simplicity of the African nation were exploited by the white colonizer by inculcating into their minds the fear of being an uncivilized and inferior race who would be crushed against the progressing and developed world; this fear was induced in their minds by their oppressor. British colonizers ruled colonized countries on the assumption that “European ideas, ideals, and experience were universal, that is, the standard for all humankind” (Tyson 420). To colonize the African nation, the British empire used the political tactic of ‘divide and rule’, the colonizers divided their communities and played upon their vulnerabilities.

In Jamaica Kincaid’s *Lucy*, the protagonist moves from the Caribbean to the west to work there as a household maid. Lucy has no desire to go back to her own homeland as she

despises it. She feels ashamed to belong to the Caribbean, “I came from a place where no one wanted to go” (Kincaid 65). This shows the feeling of despise that Lucy holds against her own homeland, she knows that her ancestors were plundered of their innocence and resources but she still continues to hold the opinion of her land as something ‘inferior.’ At another instance in the novel, when she was in school in the Caribbean, she remembers that she stood up once and refused to sing, “Rule Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves; Britons never, never shall be slaves” (Kincaid 135), this incident is an example of resistance and reluctance on Lucy’s part to internalize British hegemonic culture. Lucy is torn between two extremes: inferiority and superiority, she fails to accept either, hence becoming somebody who belongs to nowhere.

3. Research Methodology

This is a qualitative research study and the data has been collected from primary and secondary resources. This study explores the themes of reconciliation, post-colonial guilt, forgiveness, restitution and reluctance in J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* in the light of the following theories, ‘mimicry’ and ‘Other’ famous critical theorists, Homi. K Bhabha and Edward Said. Moreover, this study deals thoroughly with the questions that are raised when a white is left with no other option but to do away with the colonial mindset in a post-apartheid Africa.

The in-depth thematic analysis of Coetzee’s *Disgrace* has been done under the light of Nelson Mandela’s ‘100 Day Speech at the Parliament’. Mandela’s vision was the purgation of the post-colonial societies for the rebuilding and restitution for the welfare of the post-colonized nation. The question that arises here is to what extent the people from the both sides are ready to reconcile. This study explores the possibilities and limits of reconciliation on the practical scale and highlights that the element of forgiveness is not possible without the complete erasure of the past, which is quite contrary to being possible. Furthermore, this study critically concludes that violence and atrocities held on the Africans in the past by the colonizers cannot be answered with violence in return in the present because if it happens in this way, there would be no end to it ever, the cycle would go on with history repeating itself.

3.1. Research Objectives:

- i. To critically analyze the possibilities and impossibilities of the suggestive idea of ‘reconciliation’ by Nelson Mandela as the only way to progress forward for the third and fourth world nations.
- ii. To evaluate the reservations and complications of the decolonized and the colonizer.
- iii. To discuss the crucial role of literature for the peace and prosperity of both the decolonized and the colonizer.

3.2. Research Questions:

- i. What are some of the probabilities and improbabilities of the idea of ‘reconciliation’ by Nelson Mandela to his people?
- ii. What are the complications and challenges posed to the people of both the sides (colonizers and post-colonized)?
- iii. How can literature play a vital role for the welfare of the nations who had to go through the horrible process of colonization?

4. Data Analysis

In *Disgrace*, the guilt of post-colonial crimes has been represented through the characters of David Lurie and his daughter Lucy. On the one hand, Lucy struggles to expiate the crimes of the past by sacrificing herself, she is torn apart psychologically by the hatred she has to face from the black people, and on the other hand, her father is unable to grasp the reality that the rule of the white is over and the natives have taken South Africa back from the colonizer. He refuses to confess about his crime before the harassment committee of his university; furthermore, he also refuses to go under counseling. When he is pushed further to confess, he says “I became a servant of Eros” (Coetzee 52) declining to expose his ‘self’ before the committee where he feels that “he is more out of place than ever” (Coetzee 04). McGonegal in her thesis says, “contemporary subjects confess for the sake of confessing, that is for the sake of creating guilt rather than for the sake of accepting responsibility and enabling reconciliation” (McGonegal 124). He confesses his guilt only for the sake of confession, but refuses to give them a detailed confession (a confession that would mean the exposure of his savageness) removing any chances of reconciliation.

The British colonizers ruled the colonized countries on the false belief that “European ideas, ideals, and experience were universal, that is, the standard for all humankind” (Tyson 420). English language and education were introduced in the colonies, and this resulted in the devaluation and degradation of the native culture, languages, and religion to the extent to be practiced only at home. The native writers of Africa have to write back to the empire about their indigenous culture, values and norms in English language to survive in publishing industry which they cannot do if they write in their local language. Chinua Achebe said, “For me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it” (Achebe 62). Contrary to this, in the third and fourth world nations, each local community has its own local language, English as a common language makes communication between people belonging to different communities easier.

The British colonizers victimized and oppressed the natives of colonized nations on the basis of their interest in the “other” part of the world. This idea has been defined as “othering” by Said that separates “us” from “them”. In *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, the white man Mackenzie says, “I am interested in the other side. You could say that’s how we Europeans are brought up...to be interested in the other side as well. That I suppose is our strength” (Karnad 08). Mandela emphasized on building new towns in the areas affected by colonial violence, although the colonizers have left but the colonial trauma continues to haunt the South African natives. Mandela emphasized that, “Millions have suffered deprivation for decades and they have the right to seek redress. They fought and voted for change; and change the people of South Africa must have” (Mandela 01). Purgation of the

post-colonial societies from the trauma of colonial crimes is necessary to change, reconcile and rebuild the nation.

One of the most horrible crimes of colonialism is that it gave birth to the idea of “double consciousness” in the minds of the natives which forced them to migrate from rural areas to urban areas. Forced migration, either in search of better employment which includes servitude, or slavery, that eventually resulted into, “scattered large numbers of peoples around the globe, and large populations of their descendents have remained in the *diaspora*, or separated from their original homeland” (Tyson 421). The psychological trauma is ever lasting but according to Mandela, reconciliation was significant to create harmony and peace.

The British colonization worsened the position of women in the third and fourth world nations, women became doubly marginalized; on the one hand, they suffered patriarchal oppression by colonialists and on the other hand, from their own patriarchal cultures. Behn writes in *Oroonoko*, “They have Plurality of Wives; which, when they grow old, serve those that success ‘em, who are young, but with a Servitude easy and respected” (Behn 11), this quote emphasizes that the wives of the same person used to live harmoniously and peacefully together until they were introduced by the white colonizers with the idea of being mistreated by their respective husbands.

The fear of white men’s rule has left post-colonial-apartheid South Africa, but Lurie is unable to grasp this reality. Lurie sees one of Lucy’s acquaintances Ettinger, who is a white old man, the only one of his family left in Africa. Ettinger suggests Lurie, “The best is, you save yourself, because the police are not going to save you, not anymore, you can be sure” (Coetzee 100). This statement shows that even the police cannot ensure the safety of white men in South Africa anymore. This leaves Lurie with no option but to try to convince Lucy to leave the place that has become a “disgrace” for both of them. In post-colonial South Africa, even the foreign languages that Lurie knows cannot help him earn respect from the natives, “but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa” (Coetzee 95). He could not save his daughter from the rapists; he feels as helpless as the natives must have felt when their women and houses were plundered and looted by the colonizers.

Coetzee has represented the possibility and the impossibility of reconciliation between the whites and the post-apartheid South Africans. Contrary to this, Franz Fanon in *Wretched of the Earth*, has brought forward his view that “no conciliation is possible” (Fanon 39) in post-colonial societies. He insists that reconciliation is not only impossible but undesirable as well because once the colonial rule has ended, there would be nothing left to be of “interest” to the colonizers “in remaining or in co-existing” (Fanon 45), reconciliation is impossible without the interests and efforts of both the colonizers and the colonized. Contrastingly, in *Disgrace* it is a white woman (colonizer) who is “interested” in reconciliation and forgiveness for the past crimes more than the natives (colonized). During her struggle, the text indicates that she is raped more than once and this shatters her apart psychologically but she does not give up, she decides to give birth to a child who would remind her of the horrible act of rape again and again as a compensation for the atrocities held against the colonized by her race. This act of Lucy can be seen as an attempt to reconcile or expiate for the past crimes that she herself is not responsible for.

Coetzee has represented the possibility of reconciliation and forgiveness through the character of Lucy, whereas it becomes clear that her father does not believe in any such

possibility when he says, “Do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?” (Coetzee, p. 112). To David Lurie, this expiation seems impossible because he is unable to get rid of the idea of his so-called superiority over the African culture and language. The history of violence repeats itself; violence and atrocities held on the colonized women by the white patriarchs are returned to a white woman by the black colonized men. Lucy’s conscience is heavy with colonial guilt, unlike her father she realizes that she does not own the South African territory, rather than leaving she decides to stay to be able to reconcile with the colonized. Her guilt makes her sense the hatred and the anger that the rapists felt towards her during the immoral act, “It was done with such personal hatred” (Coetzee, p. 156). At another instance, she says “They see me as 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” (Coetzee, p. 158). The contrast between the mentality of the father and the daughter is prominent here, one is ready to submit and the other is still reluctant.

To end this hatred and anger on the part of the colonized in post-apartheid South Africa, Mandela developed the “Reconciliation Development Program”. He was aware that the trauma of colonial crimes would continue to haunt the natives for years to come but he saw the possibility of reconciliation and reconstruction as a challenge, “This is South Africa’s challenge today. It will remain our challenge for many years to come” (Mandela, p. 2). In his development program, he also included the rights of the people belonging to other races, religions, and languages. He argued that racism could be ended, and reconciliation could be achieved only if the South Africans themselves stooped up against such discrimination and abuse. Furthermore, he emphasized that, “reconciliation will remain shallow if it is not accompanied by thorough-going changes in all areas of life” (Mandela, p. 3).

In Lurie’s mind, the binary that separates “us” from “them” is as alive as it was in the colonial rule, he is not ready to give up his delusion of superiority and hence, he suffers. When Lucy declares that she will marry Petrus, he tries to make her change her mind by reminding her, “This is not how we do things” (Coetzee, p. 202), this “we” separates David Lurie from Petrus but Lucy does not believe in any such binaries anymore, here the narrator’s voice says, “*We*: he is on the point of saying, *We Westerners*” (Coetzee, p. 202). Lucy and her father are the only white people at the party that takes places at Petrus’ place. This binary of “othering” is also present in Petrus’ (native’s) mind as well, he defends one of the boys who raped Lucy by saying that “He is my family, my people”, and this is where Lurie realizes that it is he who is the “other” in post-apartheid South Africa now and Lucy does not belong to him anymore, she will become Petrus’ wife because she has become “his people” (Coetzee, p. 201).

5. Conclusion

The desire to reclaim a precolonial past in itself is a flawed idea, because much of the precolonial values have been lost because of colonialism. “Many postcolonial theorists argue that, even had there been no colonization, the ancient culture would have changed by now: no culture stands still, frozen in time” (Tyson, p. 422). Towards the end of *Disgrace*, Lurie asks Lucy if she loves the unborn child, she says that she doesn’t but believes that “love will grow” (Coetzee, p. 216), Lucy tells her dad that she would try to be a good

“mother and a good person”, it seems that Coetzee gives his own perspective to the reader through Lucy’s voice, when she advises Lurie to “try to be a good person too” (Coetzee, p. 216).

Coetzee ends his novel by representing the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation through Lucy’s voice. Mandela emphasized that racism could be ended, and reconciliation could be achieved only if the South Africans themselves stood up against such discrimination and abuse. Literature can play a vital role in consolidating the process of reconciliation; multiple novels represent multiple perspectives and multiple perspectives open up multiple possibilities. Literature can help people understand the necessity of reconciliation and forgiveness for the world to become a peaceful and better place to live in, racism still exists as it has continued to exist since centuries; to create a racism free world, both the African and the British writers need to use their writings to show the world a better perspective.

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