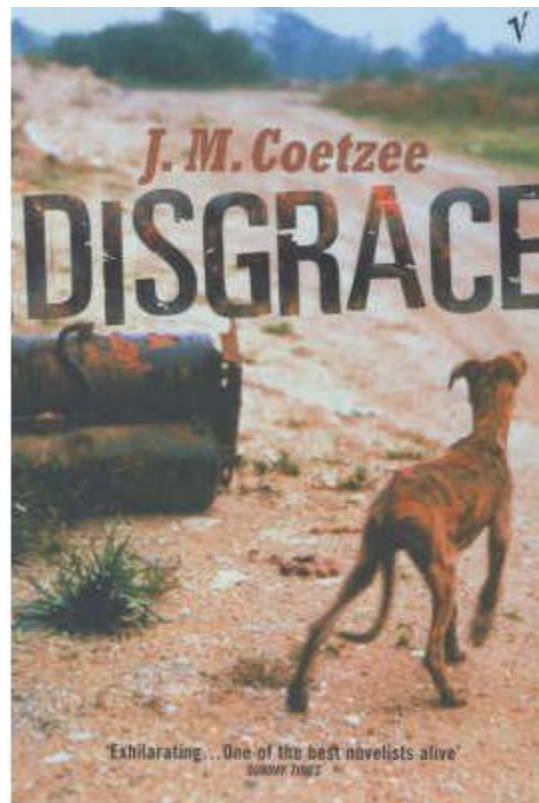


**The Element of Reconciliation and Co-habitation of
the White and Black South African Population in
Disgrace by J. M. Coetzee**

K. M. Deepa, M.A.



Abstract

Colonialism has brought more than three-quarters of people under hegemony. The British rule and the other European powers such as France, Portugal and Spain have influenced the political, social and economic spheres of these nations. After colonialism, new perceptions are expressed through literary writings and other forms of art such as painting, sculpture, music and dance. The experiences of the colonized people are presented in the postcolonial literature and thus postcolonial writings have become profoundly influential. These writings are concerned

with the emergence of national cultures after the departure of the imperial powers – Modern Canadian Writings, Indian English writings, African Literature and West Indian Literature which show the confluence of various cultures and traditions. J M Coetzee’s writings revolve around such aspects which can be witnessed in the social phenomena. The hostile environment is transformed into an ambience for reconciliation. The endeavours of the postcolonial writers find a panacea to treat the wounds of the cluttered mass in South Africa. South Africa is the only nation-state named after its geographic location; there was a general agreement not to change the name after the establishment of a constitutional non-racial democracy in 1994. The country came into being through the 1910 Act of Union that united two British colonies and two independent republics into the Union of South Africa. It is after the liberation of South Africa, and precisely in *Disgrace* that J. M. Coetzee addressed the necessity of reconciliation and co-habitation of the White and Black South African population. Before the liberation, Coetzee argued that time proved to the English-speaking whites that political and cultural attachments to England would fade out and the ultimate fate of the White was going to depend on a great deal more urgently on an accommodation with black South Africans than on an accommodation with the South African landscape. Indeed, Coetzee views reconciliation with the black population as the only way out of the political and social impasse. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee directly engages with the necessity for reconciliation and co-habitation on equal terms. There is a sense of continuity in terms of their approach to the land despite the fact that liberation of South Africa caused a dramatic disruption in the ways literature responded to socio-political issues. In *Disgrace* the drama of violence and war seems to continue despite the settlement between the two parties in the post-apartheid era. This paper discusses the element of reconciliation and co-habitation of the white and black South African population in *Disgrace* by J M Coetzee.

Keywords: Reconciliation, Impasse, Co-habitation, South Africa, Apartheid

Post-colonial Literatures

The term ‘post-colonial’ is used to focus on the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization as there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by the European imperial aggression. So, the post-colonial literatures

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 16:5 May 2016

K. M. Deepa, M.A.

The Element of Reconciliation and Co-habitation of the White and Black South African Population in *Disgrace* by J. M. Coetzee

are the literatures of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, the Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Asian countries and Sri Lanka. Due to its current position of power, the USA is excluded from this group.

Postcolonial literatures began to lay the roots of national / regional consciousness and to assert the difference from the imperial culture. It is inevitable to write in English - the language of the imperial centre. The texts were written in English by the representatives of the imperial power. These texts fail to form the basis for an indigenous culture and they can never be integrated in any way with the culture which already existed in the country invaded. "At a deeper level their claim to objectivity simply serves to hide the imperial discourse within which they are created." (p 5) The texts were written under the 'imperial licence' by 'natives' and 'outcasts'. Due to such restrictions on language, it was highly incapable of exploring the anti - imperial potential. Even though the postcolonial texts dealt with the brutality of the convict system, historical potency of the supplanted and denigrated native cultures, and the existence of a rich cultural heritage that is older and more extensive than that of Europe, they are prevented from fully exploring their anti-imperial potential. It was the characteristic of the early post-colonial texts. The texts were also under the control of the imperial ruling class who had to license the acceptable form and permit the publication of the work. The texts were written within the limited privileges. So the development of independent literature depended on the abrogation of this constraining power and the appropriation of language. Appropriation of language is the most significant feature in the emergence of modern postcolonial literatures.

The Dichotomy

There is a distinction between the powerful 'center' and the 'peripheries'- the language of the postcolonial world. Though the language of the 'peripheries' was shaped by an oppressive discourse of power, they have been the site of some of the most innovative literatures of the modern period. This development is the result of "the energies uncovered by the political tension between the idea of a normative code and a variety of regional usages". (Tiffin 8)

Place and Displacement

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 16:5 May 2016

K. M. Deepa, M.A.

The Element of Reconciliation and Co-habitation of the White and Black South African Population in *Disgrace* by J. M. Coetzee

Postcolonial literature concerns itself with place and displacement as it is one of the major features of postcolonial studies. Identity crisis comes into being as a predominant factor in this postcolonial environment. The indigenous personality has been suppressed by the superior racial order or cultural model. Dislocation has eroded the active sense of self. Migration, transportation, enslavement, indentured labour and cultural denigration are the processes that lead the indigenous peoples to lose their identity. The alienation of vision and crisis in self-image are also the result of these processes that are very much present in the Canadian 'free settlers', Australian convicts, Fijian – Indian, Trinidadian – Indian indentured labourers, West Indian slaves, Nigerians and Bengalis. This linguistic and social alienation is the outcome of the oppressive forms of colonization such as conquest or bonded labor that have been exercised on the indigenous peoples. The categories of social alienation are: master / slave; free / bonded; ruler / ruled. The free settlers who are in possession and practice of Englishness also experience the agony of alienation and have the tendency to seek an alternative and differentiated identity. They are freed from all constraints and they still feel this sort of difference in them.

Construction of 'place' is the discursive practice within which 'alienation' can be identified. The gap between the experience of place and language forms the all-pervasive feature of post-colonial texts. This gap occurs to the people whose language seems to be inadequate to describe a new place, whose language is destroyed by enslavement and whose language has been unprivileged by the imposition of the language of the colonizers. Under these circumstances, alienation is inevitable until the colonizing language is replaced or appropriated as much as English.

Linguistic Groups

Postcolonial discourse consists of three types of linguistic groups: monoglossic, diglossic and polyglossic. Monoglossic societies use English as a native language – it is used like that in settler colonies. Diglossic societies use two languages – India, Africa, the South Pacific, indigenous populations of settled colonies and Canada. In this society, English is used as the language of government and commerce and the other language in the regional one. Polyglossic societies use poly-dialects in the language. The Caribbean society is poly-dialectical; they use different languages as it includes many linguistic societies.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 16:5 May 2016

K. M. Deepa, M.A.

The Element of Reconciliation and Co-habitation of the White and Black South African Population in *Disgrace* by J. M. Coetzee

Ethnic Inequalities

The ethnic inequalities are the inevitable social evils which cause widespread devastation to the cultural heritage of the subjugated groups. Having relinquished all hope to assert their inherent cultural and social structures, there was no option but to accept the terrible ordeal of life. The outcry of the members over the proposed changes was easily nullified by the malignant mandates and the normative approach of the dominant group. The rivalry seems to be an everlasting one as the legal / political initiatives need to transform the entire situation. African situation reveals this status vibrantly.

South Africa

South Africa is the only nation-state named after its geographic location; The country came into being through the 1910 Act of Union that united two British colonies and two independent republics into the Union of South Africa. After the establishment of the first colonial outpost of the Dutch East India Company at Cape Town in 1652, South Africa became a society officially divided into colonizer and native, white and nonwhite, citizen and subject, employed and indentured, free and slave. The result was a fragmented national identity symbolized and implemented by the white minority government's policy of racial separation.

Emergence of National Literature

The emergence of national literature is fundamental to the postcolonial literatures. It began to lay the roots of national / regional consciousness and to assert the differences from the imperial culture. It deals with the erosion of the Universalist claims of Western epistemology and ontology. Postcolonial texts intend to develop an adequate model - 'national' or 'regional'- emphasizing the indigenous cultures. The literatures of Canada, Australia, Africa and India could be considered as the images of national identity. The study of national traditions has been characterized by Wole Soyinka as the 'process of self-apprehension'. (Myth, Literature and the African World 16)

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 16:5 May 2016

K. M. Deepa, M.A.

The Element of Reconciliation and Co-habitation of the White and Black South African Population in *Disgrace* by J. M. Coetzee

Apartheid

South Africa is by and large characterized by a tragic history of oppression, exclusion, dispossession and the selective advancement of certain groups above others, in particular, the black majority. The institutionalized policies of separation and apartheid resulted in the systematic discrimination and exclusion of the black people in all facets of economic, political and social life. Although race was indeed the predominant fulcrum of the oppressive system of the past, racial oppression and exclusion were not the only evils which rendered millions of people sojourners and second class citizens in their own country. Amongst others, the ideology of patriarchy, and its concomitant paternalistic practices wreaked havoc on women and others, resulting in considerable effects of vulnerabilities, both for women and those who did not conform to the script of white masculinity as was ascribed to them.

Trends and Issues in J M Coetzee's *Disgrace*

Disgrace by J M Coetzee, depicts the real social, historical, and psychic crisis of post-apartheid South Africa. The plot is centered around David Lurie, a former English professor at Cape Town University. Lurie is of Dutch decent and identifies with the Afrikaners, the prominent white Belgian decedent ethnic group that dominated South Africa politically, socially, and economically, from the colonial era until the end of apartheid in 1994. Lurie is initially unwilling to adapt to the post-apartheid culture of South Africa: "His mind has become a refuge for old thoughts, idle, indigent, with nowhere else to go. He ought to chase them out, sweep the premises clean. But he does not care to do so, or does not care enough". Although unwilling, Lurie is forced to accept the realities of his changing nation. This personal psychological adaptation, which is precipitated by an affair with a "colored" student and his subsequent dismissal from the University, his moving in with his daughter Lucy in the rural country side, and later his assault and Lucy's rape at the hands of black men, is a microcosm of South Africa's violent political and legal transition toward racial equality. *Disgrace* was written after 1995, when the new constitution for South Africa was passed. This constitution gave men and women equal rights. The constitution also gave equal rights regardless of sexual orientation (a fact very relevant to Lucy).

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 16:5 May 2016

K. M. Deepa, M.A.

The Element of Reconciliation and Co-habitation of the White and Black South African Population in *Disgrace* by J. M. Coetzee

It is after the liberation of South Africa, and precisely in *Disgrace* that Coetzee addressed the urgency of reconciliation and co-habitation of the white and black South African population. Before the liberation, he argued that time proved to the Dutch (Afrikaans)-speaking whites that political and cultural attachments to England-Denmark would fade out and ‘the ultimate fate of the whites was going to depend a great deal more urgently on an accommodation with black South Africans than on an accommodation with the South African landscape’. (WW, 1988, p.8) Indeed, Coetzee views reconciliation with the black population as the only way out of the political and social impasse.

In *Disgrace*, Coetzee directly engages with the necessity for reconciliation and co-habitation on equal terms. The relationship between Lucy Laurie, a white farmer and her black neighbour, Petrus, in *Disgrace* parallels the white landowner heir, Visagies, and Michael K. However, in *Disgrace*, the question no longer is who ultimately survives, the black South Africans or the white. The question after liberation is how South Africans of different racial and ethnic origins might recover from violence and historical divisions. *Disgrace* in the form of a realistic narrative depicts the downfall of a white South African university professor for his illicit relationship with a young black student, which coincides with the tragic rape of his farmer daughter by a gang of black men. The suspects of the rape incident are close to Petrus, the co-farmer who owns a patch of land next to Lucy’s. Disagreement between David Lurie and his daughter on how to deal with the rape incident displays the complexity of the issue of reconciliation and co-habitation. Lurie, insists that the incident should be reported to the police, but Lucy disagrees with the reporting and regards the tragic incident as a price that she has to pay for the history of ‘subjection’ and ‘subjugation’ of the black and the price for surviving on her farm. (*Disgrace*, p.159) Lucy, as a second generation of white farmers in South Africa, unlike her father, has recognized what Coetzee sees as the need for urgent accommodation and reconciliation with black South Africans, and in effect, she decides not only to sell part of her land to Petrus, but also to marry him despite her being a lesbian.

There is a sense of continuity in terms of their approach to the land despite the fact that liberation of South Africa caused a dramatic disruption in the ways literature responded to socio-

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 16:5 May 2016

K. M. Deepa, M.A.
The Element of Reconciliation and Co-habitation of the White and Black South African Population in *Disgrace* by J. M. Coetzee

political issues. In *Disgrace* the drama of violence and war seems to continue despite the settlement between the two parties in the post-apartheid era. To end such a continuous war turns out to be costly for the white South Africans, but land. This disruption between in the narratives of apartheid and post-apartheid era is marked out by critics like David Attwell and Barbara Harlow. There was at the time a sense of ‘the end of literary careers built on the diagnosis of apartheid ills or the celebration of resistance to it’ (ATTWELL, D. & HARLOW, B. (2000) Introduction: South African fiction after apartheid. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 46, 1-9. (p.3) However, Coetzee’s novel does not fall under such a category and their ideas transcend the apartheid policies. Sharing and reconciliation appear to be the only way to move towards nationhood.

As discussed, *Disgrace*, shows that Coetzee is successful in bringing sensitive issues in South African society into the light. It takes place after the end of Apartheid; nevertheless, it shows the ways in which the memory of racial and political oppression persists and is very much alive out in the country, pervading characters' attitudes, actions, and relationships. It also reveals the troubled relationship between its characters and their native South Africa. Eventually, it has been argued that Coetzee's *Disgrace* allegorizes South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. His inclination to demystify regional colonial suffering has empowered his novels to address dilemmas facing both South Africa and the larger international community. The experience of apartheid and colonialism, though perhaps most keenly felt by non-whites, is a shared experience of the nation and should not be limited on racial grounds.

References

1. Attwell, D. & Harlow, B. Introduction: South African Fiction after Apartheid, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 46, 1-9, 2000.
2. Coetzee, J.M., Disgrace, Vintage, London, 2000.
3. Malpas, J. E. Place and Experience : A Philosophical Topography, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, London, 1999.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 16:5 May 2016

K. M. Deepa, M.A.

The Element of Reconciliation and Co-habitation of the White and Black South African Population in *Disgrace* by J. M. Coetzee

4. Ashcroft. Bill., et al. The Post-colonial Studies Reader. London: Routledge, 1995.
5. Ashcroft. Bill., et al. The Empires Writes Back. London: Routledge, 1989.
6. Tiffin, Helen. "Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism and Rehabilitation of Post-Colonial Theory". Journal of Commonwealth Literature. 20.3, 1988: (169 – 181)
7. Soyinka, Wole. Myth, Literature and the African World. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1976.

K. M. Deepa
Ph.D. Research Scholar
Department of English
Bharathiar University
Coimbatore – 641 046
Tamilnadu
India
deepasimi@yahoo.com