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RACIAL VIOLENCE IN COETZEE'S AFRICAN NOVELS

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As a Liberal Funk novel, *Public Enterprises* Minister Jeff Radebe criticizes *Disgrace* for illustrating the ways in which white South Africans still believe in a certain stereotype of the African: "In this novel J. M. Coetzee represents as brutally as he can the white people's perception of the post-apartheid black man."¹ The argument is built on the idea that Coetzee's novel reflects society, that the views of the white characters in *Disgrace* may be equated with those of white South Africans in general. Yet the corollary of this reading would mean that the black rapists in *Disgrace* are representative of most black people in South Africa, which is exactly what the ruling party would like to refute. In their submission during the Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) hearings on racism in the media, the African National Congress (ANC) protested against the white media for propagating negative depictions of black Africans. This attitude is most noticeable in reports about crime and rape. But intriguingly, Coetzee himself, in a review published at the same time as the novel, takes Breyten Breytenbach to task for reporting, gruesome reports ... of attacks on whites horror stories have become a staple... aimed at driving whites off the land and ultimately out of the country and thereby promoting white paranoia. And in *Disgrace* Coetzee subverts the black peril narrative, by simultaneously scripting what Sol T. Plaatje referred to as white peril, the hidden sexual exploitation of black women by white men that have existed for centuries. While „black peril“ imagery was a common feature of racist political discourse throughout the twentieth century, the subversive status of „white peril“ literature is confirmed by attitudes of apartheid censors. In 1977, Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* was placed under scrutiny, partly for representing an apparent rape of a white woman by a black farm-worker as well as the white farmer's coercion of a black female servant. Coetzee reminds us that it is by no means only white who suffer from criminal violence in new South Africa.

In The narrative of Jacobus Coetzee, with its memorable description of colonial brutality, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, with its representation of a state apparatus relying on torture and cross-border raids, *Life & Times of Michael K*, with its state of war in a future South Africa, and *Age of*

Iron, with its vivid depiction of the violence in the townships and the systematic viciousness of the police, Coetzee, quite as much as any South African author, has registered for his time and for future generations the brutality, the anger, and the suffering of the apartheid era. After the democratic elections of 1994 and the sweeping ANC victory that brought Nelson Mandela from prison to presidency, one might at least expected from his pen a novel with a tinge of celebration and optimism.²

But set in a turn-of-the-Millennium South Africa flirting with social collapse, *Disgrace* has a morally complex depiction of race, sex, and class. It begins with Professor David Lurie trying to find a rational solution to the problem of sex. When the arrangement with the part-time prostitute Soraya breaks down Lurie has a short– 99 lived affair with the new, young secretary, ironically named Dawn, whose views highlight the situation in post-apartheid South Africa.

Lurie then seduces a twenty-year-old student, Melanie Isaacs, whom he lures over to his place for a simple tagliatelle with mushroom sauce and few paragraphs of one-sided Wordsworth-based discussion, and before he knows it he has forced his way into her apartment and forced sex on her, all the while invoking Eros, to whom he feels he must be true. A mistake, a huge mistake, he realizes, but it is Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core.

The physical description of Melanie Issacs seems to point to the fact that she is, in the South African nomenclature, Colored. Once the reader grasps this, much of Lurie's affair with his student becomes clearer and more sombre. Farodia Rassool, a member of the committee of enquiry and herself a woman of color, speaks out: Yes, he says, he is guilty; but...he is confessing to, just an impulse he could not resist, with no mention of the long history of exploitation of which this is part. In her words there is perhaps an echo of the frustration of that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission faced with confessions of racist guilt but unrepentant acknowledgements. In any other context, behaviour such as his would have been seen as an unfortunate slip, a peccadillo, and

accorded with a measure of indulgence. But this is contemporary South Africa where his encounter can only be contextualized within the several centuries of colonial history in which white men debauched black men with impunity.

Thus denounced David flees to his daughter, Lucy. It isn't a safe place, as David and Lucy soon find out; several days after David arrives, three black men 100 invade their house, killing the dogs Lucy keeps, gang- raping Lucy, and driving away in David's car. Their relationship, formerly close, crumbles under the stress of this trauma, and it only gets worse when Lucy refuses to report the rape to the police, calling it purely a private matter.

Lucy represents another form of engagement with history. As a woman, she is victimized both by her domineering white father and by black men. A white lesbian, she is raped by three black men, a condition, and the novel indicates, worse than the violation of a virgin. Although the victim of a rape, Lucy is intrigued that her assailants treat her as an object of vengeance.³

With no love for the baby in her womb, at least not yet, Lucy looks forward to motherhood. The point, of course, is that Lucy contemplates her attempts at self crucifixion as a form of restitution: what if that is 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....They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. For Lucy it is a good point to start all over again at ground level. With nothing....No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity. Lurie calls it humbling herself before history but if Lucy's mode of engagement with history is Coetzee's valid paradigm for whites' negotiation for a precarious foothold in post-apartheid South Africa, then his conception of their fall from grace evokes near absolute depravity.

Locked as we are into Lurie's view of things, we do not gain much sense of what the new South Africa means to those who are poor or black. For the most part the new South Africa to them would seem to be much the same as the old South Africa. To black as well as white, there are new fears, about personal safety.⁴

Petrus, the representative, remains almost entirely inscrutable; the racially or socially privileged

character can gain virtually no understanding of inner world of the other who has excluded from such privilege. Thus Lucy's will to sacrifice notwithstanding, in her supposedly objective evaluation of her place and that of other white farmers in her neighborhood is inherent the dread of ethnic cleansing.

There will certainly be readers who protest against what they regard as the representation of black men as rapists in *Disgrace*, just as there will be those who read David Lurie as exemplifying the white experience in post-apartheid South Africa. But it is important to acknowledge that the novel dissolves clear boundaries of identity between Lurie and the men who rape Lucy. Like these men, Lurie is also a rapist and (albeit in a different way) a dog-killer. Michael Marais notes that the scene in which Melanie is raped has resonance with Lurie's imagining of his daughter's rape. Although Lucy's story is hidden from Lurie and from the reader, Lurie agonizes over possibilities, and eventually stages an appalling scenario in his mind where he 'becomes' the men who violate his daughter. 102 He can, if he concentrates, lose himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, and fill them with the ghost of himself. In this imaginary „reading“, the scene of violence is represented, but Lurie's narration is not from the viewpoint of perpetrator or voyeur, but from the position of weakness and suffering Coetzee's is thus most disturbing and somber about racial harmony. His white characters are invariably doomed. If Lucy proclaims white renunciation, Lurie invokes memories of the immediate past in order to rebuke the racially unpalatable present. Again, the black characters are perhaps too deprived, brutalized, and aggrieved to inspire any hope. In the end, Coetzee does not create any delusions of the immediate possibility of reconciliation so soon after apartheid.

References

- 1 Dooley, Gillian. *J.M. Coetzee and the Power of Narrative*. Southampton: Cambria Press. 2010. p. 146.
- 2 Farrell, Brace. *Critical Essays on J. M. Coetzee*. London: Twayne Publishers. 1998. p. 16.
- 3 Gobodo-Madikizela, Pumla. *A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Woman Confronts the Legacy of Apartheid*. York: Mariner Books. 2004. p. 74.
- 4 Dooley, Gillian. *J.M. Coetzee and the Power of Narrative*. Southampton: Cambria Press. 2010. p. 237.

