



Courting The Id in Dystopian Fiction: A Freudian Study of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Abstract: This article explored the moral decadence in post-Apartheid South Africa and examined the injuries that such immorality had on the psyche of the post-apartheid South African woman. It further analysed the necessary shifts in perception and interpretation that depressed South African woman had to grapple with in the face of the immoralities that ensued and identified the new vision of self, art and the world which women invent to liberate themselves from the shackles of morally decay societies. From this perspective, the work anchors on the hypothesis that most post-colonial African societies build immoral societal boundaries which give room to high level of immorality, thus creating avenues for varied philosophies and new modes of survival. Written against the backdrop of Psycho-Analytic theory, the work concludes that there is the dire need for the moralization and reconstruction of public institutions for mental stability and nation building.

Keywords: Courting, Id, Dystopia, Fiction.

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INTRODUCTION

Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* published after the abolition of the obnoxious apartheid regime in South Africa portrays characters groveling under the yoke of hardship and living under the dictates of their desires. The protagonist of this creative work is Professor David Lurie; a university don who cannot put his libido under control. His inability to tame his sexual urges and the unethical behavior of other characters in the novel can lead to the premise that they are being maneuvered and ruled by the id.

Psychoanalysis can be used to make an exegesis of the novel. Sigmund Freud stands tall in the domain of psychoanalysis and is considered a caryatid or watershed of psychoanalytical theory which has influenced the interpretation of literature immensely. One of Freud's theories is the tripartite model in which he argues in *A Practical Introduction to Literary Theory and Criticism* edited by Keith

Booker that "... the human psyche is not a single integrated entity but in fact consists of three very different parts ("id," "superego," "ego"), essentially three different minds, which have different goals and desires and operate according to different principles (29). If we subsume Freud's tripartite model under Coetzee's *Disgrace* we would realize that most of the characters in the novel are teleguided by the pleasure principle which they cannot control or repress. The id is the site of natural drives, a dark area of seething passion that knows only desire and has no sense of moderation or limitation. Hence, if not put under reins the consequences can be dicey. As opined by Freud, "The superego is an internalized representation of the authority of the father and of society, authority that establishes strict limitations on the fulfillment of the unrestrained desires residing in the id (29)."

The id is therefore the raw unscrupulous desires inherent in mankind while the superego is

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like the moral police officer that moderates the actions of people. The ego is the principal interface between the psyche and the outside world. The ego moderates between the authoritarian demands of the superego and the unmitigated desires of the id. In common Christian doctrine, the id is the devil or the bad angel while the superego is the Holy Spirit or the good angel. Those who pay allegiance to their id are usually responsible for their undoing. Aristotle states in *The Poetics* as translated by S. H Butcher that "Characters are of course implicit from the first, since all actions are actions of individuals" (22). Character is therefore fate.

Freudian Psychoanalysis Basis

As previously stated, this study projects the characters' traumatization and how they grapple with everyday challenges. Consequently, we consider the Freudian Psychoanalytic theory basis to reflect on the condition of their mental world in order to understand absurd performances and behaviors. Psychoanalytic criticism surfaced as a critical theory in the twentieth century and allowed the interpretation of literature in terms of psychoanalysis therapeutic measures. These measures, to treat mental problems, bring the unconscious motifs into the conscious mind through a free talk. The whole process builds on the Austrian Sigmund Freud's theories of how the mind, the instincts, and sexuality proceed (Barry 96). Then Sigmund Freud's assumptions afford the establishment of a psychoanalytic critical approach to literature.

Basically, the Freudian psychoanalysis approach is quite visible in daily human experiences and arguably finds expression in Coetzee's *Disgrace*. Then it is based on this view that the Freudian approach helps better to understand literature. For, literary texts are basically about human behaviours (Tyson 11-12). The approach consists of exploring procedures of neurosis therapy to discern characters psyche as a reflection of human beings. With this qualification in mind, Cudden articulates that Freudian feedback presumes that a literary piece mostly voices the subdued desires and anxieties hidden in the unconscious portion of the mind. They are stored there as a result of a prior suppression of upsetting scenes experienced during the period of infancy. Thus, Freud observes that the narratives as dreams and tongue's stumbles indicate "a return of the repressed." Whereby readers may experience a perplexing sensation of familiarity, called "uncanny" by Freud, provoked by this returning repressed ("A Dict" 568). Then psychoanalytically, literature tends to unchain suppressed data in the mind of the writer through the literary personae which stimulate the readers.

Courting the Id

Disgrace is a post-apartheid bleak and haunting novel based on Professor Lurie David's proclivity for wanton sex and the consequences therein. Lurie who was once a professor of classics and modern languages at Cape Town Technical University is relegated to teaching "communications skills" in the changing climate toward pragmatics and rationality in post-apartheid South Africa. His alienation from social relations from two divorces and his recent estrangement from his daughter, Lucy, further make him a social misfit thereby increasing his passions. Lurie's social aloofness leads him to satisfy his sexual urges with Soraya, a strumpet. When the relationship grows sour, he begins to satisfy his carnal desires with a twenty-two-year-old student in his Romantic Poetry class named Melanie Isaacs.

After a couple of dalliances with her, Melanie's attendance in his class becomes sporadic. Melanie's boyfriend harasses Lurie and vandalizes his car. The university summons him before the disciplinary council after Melanie files a sexual harassment case against him. The university's disciplinary team gives him ample opportunity to apologize but he is not contrite. He chooses to rusticate himself and moves to Salem to his daughter's smallholding on the Eastern Cape. Lurie and Lucy are attacked by three black men and the latter raped. Lurie later returns to Cape Town only to find out that his home had been raided and everything carted away. He visits Lucy again but realizes that she is pregnant due to the rape and is determined to keep the child.

Placing *Disgrace* vis-à-vis some of Freud's psychoanalytic theories exposes some profound truths about the characters in the novel. Conventional wisdom holds that humans are made by nature and nurture. Aristotle believed that "Character is habitual "habitual action," and it is formed by parents and other environmental influences out of comparatively formless pathos (appetites, fears, and the like) which move the very young" (22). Freud pointed out that "As each child grows and enters first the family then society, he or she learns to repress those instinctual drives and the conscious desires they instigate and to mold aggressive and sexual impulses as well as an initially grandiose sense of self to the demands of life with others" (389). Lurie is no exception to this dictum. He has no boy, and his childhood was spent in a family of women. No wonder "The company of women made of him a lover of women and, to an extent, a womanizer" (7). He lived for years and even decades as a Casanova hopping from the loins of one woman to another. As an admirable Crichton with lecherous intimidating looks, this libertine's handsomeness became a bait attracting a bevy of

ladies to his bed. "With his height, his good bones, his olive skin, his flowing hair, he could always count on a degree of magnetism"(7).

The post-apartheid South Africa does not bring about the much-heralded heaven-on-earth hitherto believed the abolition of apartheid would bring. Economically, the country retrogresses in the early throes of the abolition. Lurie who used to enjoy some special perks when he taught at Cape Town University Colleges is reduced to receiving crumbs in the name of pittance when the institution becomes Cape Technical University by teaching "communications skills" instead of the Romantic Poetry he had often dished out to students' amazement. "Once a professor of languages, he has been, since Classics and Modern Languages were closed down as part of the great rationalization, adjunct professor of communications" (3). Lurie's classes are dull, unedifying, and uneventful. He makes no impression on his students and the indifference of the students galls him to the bone.

Lurie is disconcerted, crestfallen, and disillusioned as he is "burdened with upbringings inappropriate to the tasks [he] is set to perform." (4). The university is aware of it and decides to allay the lecturers' frustrations. "Like all rationalized personnel, he is allowed to offer one special-field course a year, irrespective of enrolment, because that is good for his morale" (3). Even with that Lurie is not satisfied, "... he finds its first premise, as enunciated in the Communications 101 handbook preposterous" (3). Lurie's hopes are dashed and his desires suppressed. The idea of writing a critical work on Byron crashes. "...all his sallies at writing it have bogged down in tedium." His desire is to write music to fill the void in his life. But that is however too long an accomplishment.

As a divorcee he is in dire need of a woman if he is to satisfy the third tier of Maslow's hierarchy of needs—love and to be loved. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds.) in *Literary Theory: An Anthology* state that "Loss of love and failure leave behind them a permanent injury to self-regard in the form of a narcissistic scar which contributes more than anything to the "sense of inferiority" which is so common in neurotic" (455). Unfortunately, Lurie does not follow the principles of sexual love and begins having a fling with a prostitute called Soraya. The satisfaction he derives from her is temporary and fleeting. He realizes to his chagrin that "his needs turn out to be quite light, after all, light and fleeting, like those of a butterfly. No emotion, or none but the deepest, the most unguessed-at: a ground bass of contentedness, like the hum of traffic that lulls the city-dwellers to sleep, or like the silence of the night to country folk" (5). Since happiness, as Thomas

Hardy puts it in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, is only an occasional episode in the general drama of pain, he soon falls out with Soraya by destroying the arrangement as he attempts to contact her outside the normal meetings.

On returning from school one Friday evening, Lurie stumbles on Melanie Isaacs, his student from his Romantics course dawdling—a perfect setting for the satyr to cast his net. Aristotle points out that "As the growing person acquires habitual motives, he begins to understand them rationally, and so becomes ethically responsible: we say that he is a good or bad character" (42). Lurie has decided to be irrational by subjecting himself too much to the whims and caprices of his id. Little does he know that Melanie is a femme fatale. As an expert in the classics, the learned professor Lurie forgets entirely about Geoffrey Chaucer's admonishing in "The Nun's Priest's Tale" that woman is man's ruin. Melanie's outfits, as usual, are always striking and alluring. "Today she wears a maroon miniskirt with a mustard-coloured sweater and black tights; the gold baubles on her belt match the gold balls of her earrings" (11). Though he "is mildly smitten with her" (11), he begins debating how to cajole and lure her to his bed. Those who are ruled by the id live by sight and not by the mind. Lurie is a man with predilection for sex that he can neither control nor repress. Rivkin and Ryan opine that "There is no doubt that the resistance of the conscious and the unconscious ego operates under the sway of the pleasure principle: it seeks to avoid the unpleasure which would be produced by the liberation of the repressed" (434).

The ego, as earlier intimated, shuttles between the id and the superego to restrain mankind from committing the unethical. Sadly enough, this is not always possible as the id at times overpowers both the ego and the superego leading to actions that would otherwise lead to evil and shock mankind. Such individuals maybe called sociopaths or human abominations, but psychology has a gentil way of calling them. They are simply being influenced by the id. Freud corroborates man's helplessness when confronted by a powerful unrestrained id. "We cannot help but [succumb to the dictates of the id] because it is brought about by forces and drives within ourselves over which we exercise very little conscious control because they arise from something or somewhere that is beyond our control – the unconscious. Lurie finds himself in a moral battle as his id and his superego grapple over Melanie's luscious flesh. In the end the id takes precedence as he continues to ogle at her whose smile is sly rather than shy.

At first, the coy Melanie is warried of Lurie's advances. But the man had mastered his game to his

fingertips. He sweet-tongues her by praising her beauty in the superlative: "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" (16). Melanie's struggles with herself during this cajolery is an unconscious battle within her; her id battling with her ego and her superego.

The pleasure principle is associated with hedonism. Self-gratification is the bedrock of hedonists. Pleasure seekers do not think about the consequences of their actions. It is therefore not an overstatement to point out that Lurie lacks urizen to guide him to keep his belt and manhood intact. When Lurie casts moral probity to the wind by inveigling Melanie to his home, the first thing he does is put on music; the Mozart clarinet quintet and later introduces wine. "Wine, music: a ritual that men and women play out with each other" (12), and the professor gets the better of her through them. It is degrading that "... the girl he has brought home is not just thirty years his junior: she is a student, his student, under his tutelage" (12). Gold is therefore rusting here and "No matter what passes between them now, they will have to meet again as teacher and pupil. Is he prepared for that" (12)? The consequence of self-indulgence can be fatal. Through the discussion that ensues between Lurie and Melanie we learn that Byron, Lurie's mentor died at thirty-six or "dried up." The young maniac was so given to promiscuity that "He went to Italy to escape a scandal [where] he had the last big love-affair of his life" (15). If show me your friend and I will tell you whom you are is any dictum to go by then Lurie is simply aping his master.

"On the living-room floor, to the sound of rain pattering against the windows, he makes love to her. Her body is clear, simple, 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" (19).

Even during the sexual act, Melanie is not still herself. She is frigid and callous. Perhaps she is still struggling to suppress her superego. After the sexual encounter, her posture suggests indifference. She is still battling with herself wondering if it is the right thing to sleep with a man who can be her father and who is her teacher. The man is not even her husband. She is therefore fornicating. "The girl is lying beneath him, her eyes closed, her hands slack above her head, a slight frown on her face" (19). She is pricked by her conscience or her superego, but the act has already been committed and the far-reaching consequences are awaiting her.

Melanie is Lurie's student. It is not only unprincipled to sleep with her, but morally decadent

to do so. A.D. Sertillanges states in *The Intellectual Life* that "We see then that virtue in general is necessary for knowledge, and that the more moral rectitude we bring to study, the more fruitful the study is" (24-25). For teaching and learning to take place successfully, the atmosphere must be conducive both in the cognitive code sense and moral rectitude must be upheld. Because Lurie fails to live up to expectations by trampling on morals, Melanie is distracted in class and finally abjures the Romantic course taught by her sex mate.

Rivkin and Ryan state that "Repression is essential to civilization, the conversion of animal instinct into civil behavior . . ." (489). For a country to develop and make available the social amenities that make life comfortable, people must control their instincts and desires especially those that are antipodal to progress. These instincts may harm either the initiator or the victim. Had Lurie repressed his thoughtless quest to sleep with Melanie, who is thirty years younger than him, he would have continued as a professor and Melanie would have taken her studies seriously. But because he gives vent to his animalistic drives, he loses everything he has worked for. His self-esteem deflates, his car is vandalized, and his house burglarized after he is forced to sojourn with his daughter. Melanie too awash with shame and finds it difficult to attend classes. Lurie compounds the situation further by giving her credits for courses and tests she does not take. Freud further opined that "Our mental lives derive largely from biological drives, that the highest achievements and ideals of civilization are inseparable from instinctual urges toward pleasure, constancy, and the release of excitation and energy" (389). Because Lurie and Melanie choose to satisfy their biological without considering the circumstances, they must be ready to face whatever comes their way.

After the first sexual act Lurie and Melanie meet a couple of times. But the relationship is sour. Sin stinks. She does not have the courage to look at him eyeball to eyeball. She begins running away from his classes. Even when Lurie entreats her to come to class, "She promises, but with a promise that is not enforceable." Lurie finds himself in a cornelian dilemma. The minutes of pleasure are transmogrifying into ages of pain and regret. "She is behaving badly, getting away with too much; she is learning to exploit him and will probably exploit him further" (28). Lurie is now under the whims and caprices of his student.

Now Melanie has the effrontery to ask him if he sleeps with Amanda another student in the same class. He does not respond because he has no interest in the wispy blonde girl. She asks him why he got

divorced as if they are now equals. His deadpan and brusque reply is, "I've been divorced twice. Married twice, divorced twice" (29). The philanderer does not know that "Joy has a slender body that breaks so soon" () according to Ola Rotimi in *The Gods Are not to Blame*. After this sexual encounter, he is visited by a student in his office who "... looks older than most students; he looks like trouble" (30). He is trouble personified. He is Melanie's boyfriend.

The boy had tried to repress the fact that Lurie is dilly dallying with Melanie to no avail. Repression as defined by Freud in *A Practical Introduction to Literary Theory and Criticism* is the process through which desires and urges deemed unacceptable by the ego are kept out of the conscious mind by being forced to remain in the unconscious realm of the id" (29). Repression finally leads to catharsis. The moment of release. The boy vents his spleen by scattering papers on Lurie's table. The next day Lurie waits for Melanie in vain for another round of venerie. "Instead, his car, parked in the street, is vandalized. The tyres are deflated, glue is injected into the doorlocks, newspaper is pasted over the windscreen, the paintwork is scratched" (31). The consequences of Lurie's blissful encounters with Melanie are dire. Unfortunately, he cannot turn the wheel of fortune. Melanie's boyfriend "... doesn't act on principle but on impulse, and the source of his impulses is dark to him" (33).

Lurie also receives a letter from the school authority detailing the constitution. His heart is hammering unpleasantly as he reads it. Article 3.1 of the constitution addresses victimization or harassment of students by teachers. The administration summons Lurie about the complaint launched by Melanie and some pre-existing irregularities that seems to involve Ms. Melanie Isaacs. He is offered the second chance to admit his waywardness, confess, and move on after taking a leave of absence. The cocky Lurie is not contrite at all.

The next day he is at the town of Salem on the Grahamstown-Kenton road in the Eastern Cape where his daughter's smallholding at the end of a winding dirt track is found. In this arable land, the more things change, the more they remain the same. He lies to Lucy that he has been having less and less rapport with his students. According to the Bible in Jeremiah 17: 9-10, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" The above scripture intimates that humans are naturally bad. They are prone to evil due to the Adamic nature in them. The sinful nature can be associated to Freud's id or the devil. This bestial nature inherent in homo sapiens is linked to deviant acts like rape, avarice, jealousy, malfeasance, violence, and corruption.

Before Lurie settles at Salem to gather himself and recuperate from the humiliation Lucy's household is attacked by three black men, amongst them a boy. The abolition of apartheid did not transform the economy overnight into an Eldorado. Coetzee's characters are barely eking out a living to make both ends meet. Lajos Egri opines in *The Art of Creative Writing* that "... all human emotion and conflict originated from this one and only source - insecurity" (35). Lucy and her neighbors are mere farmers living a hand-to-mouth life. When hardship and poverty go hand in glove, the people are barely left with no other option than to activate their id in acts of violent sex, vandalism, and burglary.

When Lucy and Lurie welcome the unholy trio who pretend to make a phone call, little do they know that they are walking into their own trap. Lurie is separated from his daughter to a torture chamber where he is clobbered and kicked to near unconsciousness. "He tries to stand up but his legs are somehow blocked from moving" (93-94). The predators are also torturing Lucy. They kill the dogs, take turns in raping Lucy, and make away with valuables including Lurie's car. One would think the unholy trio are under the influence of opiate for the dastardly act they commit. But they are sane and sober. To take turns in euphoria raping a young woman after beating her father to near death and tormenting her is inconceivable. However, Freud points out that "The "unconscious" as he called it, is a repository of repressed desires, feelings, memories, and instinctual drives, many of which . . . have to do with sexuality and violence" (389).

Since the id lacks sound judgment other than self-gratification, Lurie's attempt to save his daughter worsens his situation. The attackers become more bestial. One of them strikes at Lurie's face like a madman. Then, "his hair crackles as it catches fire." Jonathan Swift says in *Gulliver's Travels* that "Man is a little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth" (). It is unheard of that three grown ups would beat a man to near death, torture and gang rape his daughter before setting the man's hair on fire. Lucy gets pregnant, decides to keep the baby to his father chagrin, though will never know the child's biological father. This aberrant behavior can only be associated to one giving vein to the id. The thoughtless individuals in their selfish ambitions can only inflict pain on another to gain fulfillment.

It is interesting to note that when Lucy realizes that the men are coming in bad faith, she calls Petrus her neighbor whom she has sold lands to. Sadly enough, "There is no sign of Petrus" (92). It will be shocking, if not unbelievable, to imagine that Petrus abates in this abhorrent act. Harold S. Kushner

in *The Book of Job: When Bad Things Happened to a Good Person* that "Human beings are meaning-makers, constantly trying to understand our world in terms of cause and effect" (4). Petrus' conspicuous absence during the attack is telling. His Faustian ambition to acquire wealth at all costs makes him forget so soon the selfless services Lucy has rendered to him. Like Kurtz in Josef Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, his desire is to grab as much land as possible to the detriment of the giver. Plato is of the opinion that men are good because they lack the way to be bad.

Petrus is very calculative in his selfish aims. When Lucy is rendered wretched and impecunious, he suggests to her to sell her lands him. She is in a state of penury and desperate. She succumbs. Self-aggrandizement through Petrus' id drags Lucy to the mud and lifts Petrus to the pedestal of wealth. Lucy even meets one of the boys who renders her the scum of the earth and a would-be-mother of a child whose father is not known, in a party organized by Petrus – the parvenu who has begun to flaunt his newly acquired wealth to the world.

Sex to Lurie is like oxygen. He cannot live without it. The short time he is at his daughter's smallholding he becomes used to Bill Shaw who scours for a living by euthanizing dogs. His projection in romanticism is only a distraction because sooner than later his real character comes out. He assists Shaw in disposing of the carcasses. With Lurie, nothing goes for nothing. Not long he begins to have an affair with her. Even though the relationship is short-lived, Lurie has satisfied his id since the instinct believes only in self-gratification irrespective of the consequences.

CONCLUSION

Coetzee characters are thrown to a world which operates like a jungle. It is post-apartheid South Africa where the economy is still at its

doldrums. The society is one where survival is for the fittest. The battle here is for the strong and the race is for the fastest. Lurie, Lucy, Petrus, Shaw, and the three boys who torture the protagonist and his daughter before raping her are all under the influence of the id. The id is sensual, amoral, and instinctive; and those who let it get a better of them are the architects of their debacle. If these characters let their ego moderate between their vaulting desires and the attainability of those raw and bestial instincts, they would live a better life.

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