

Moral Dichotomy: Coetzee's Stance on Moral Dilemma in Postmodernist Society in Disgrace

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Abstract

Coetzee anticipates the moral dilemma of today's individuals, in order to achieve his aim to revert the current trends in moral philosophy which has marked morality with individual partialities. The morality of self/will has pervaded in the society with substantial philosophical argumentation as well. This research intends to study Dionysian morality in comparison with modern (Appolonian) principles of morality as presented by Coetzee. The research is planned to differentiate the two by presenting their roots with logical reasons; Nietzsche's conception of morality and the need of Freudian repression. In the context of Disgrace Coetzee developed his moral theory through circumstantial justice with such a force that all reasons given by Overman (Übermensch) of Nietzsche fail. The paper will unveil the relationship of power and the need for justice. Coetzee proves the importance of Freudian Repression Theory that makes everybody responsible for the concord in a society. The cultivation of Dionysian concept of life only brings disgrace to man, and such philosophies can only be supported when the individual is in power, vulnerability in the society makes man to understand the value of morality and exercise of proper judicial system. South African context of the novel situates the anticipation of Dionysian cult in more understanding way to the audience. To avoid social Darwinism, state institutions should come in action in order to ensure the equal power distribution among the masses. Uneven distribution of power creates only oppressors and victims in the

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society, which further lead society to chaos. Coetzee proves the importance of circumstantial justice over the institutional justice, as institutional justice can punish only but the transformation of transgressor only takes place with circumstantial justice and for the betterment of society, transformation provides better results than punishment because institutions do create a different power structures that also work to suppress people.

Key Words: Morality, Dionysianism, Apollonianism, Overman, Repression.

Morality in Disgrace

In *Disgrace* J. M. Coetzee juxtaposes a dichotomy of Greek art, in his treatment with the protagonist; David Laurie; a university professor in the department of communications. The professor being a teacher of literature is impressed by Lord Byron's poetry, and Byron's poetry had a deep impression of Greek philosophy. This impression of Lord Byron's poetry has deep marks on Nietzsche, who had great respect for Lord Byron. Nietzsche mentioned the greatness of Byron's works in his writings. He admired Byron's poetry particularly in *Beyond good and Evil* and *Ecce homo*; great works of his career. More prominently Lord Byron's poem *Manfred* which is a dramatic poem presented the main character who had similarities with Nietzschean Overman (*Übermensch*). In order to understand David Laurie's state of mind, one has to understand ancient Greek philosophy of life. Hellenic culture had created two main gods; Dionysus and Apollo. They decorated their gods with idiosyncratic attributes; Apollo the god of sun, light and poetry while Dionysus was famous for harvest, wine, dreams and intoxication. Earlier part of *Disgrace* portrays the Dionysian cult in the attitude of David Laurie who welcomes the seductive forces in his life and enjoys the life in any manner available to him. His philosophical understanding of life, owes a lot to Greek polytheistic culture where the function of religion was to remove the guilt of a man. Greek culture portrayed gods for every action in the world; be it good or bad therefore they considered their actions as a result of gods' actions and desires. Here David Laurie exhibits to be the Overman of Nietzsche who relishes the fulfillment of human intrinsic appetites and shadows the patterns of empirical reality about

man (Nietzsche xxvi). The research intends to find links between the two types and their practical implication with their effects on societal harmony.

Disgrace being a complex novel has acquired the attention of various scholars among the global intellectual community. Lucy Graham has studied the comparison of both sexual abuse cases, in her views, Melanie's case was vocalized with demand for justice while in Lucy's case rape is not articulated by the victim. The quietness of Lucy is the result of her understanding towards changed political circumstances (Graham 433-444). Critics focused traumatic sublimation in the novel which is quite an explicit aspect of Disgrace. Kimberly Wedeven Segall talks about the tremor of Apartheid which could not be forgotten overnight, the bruises of Apartheid had affected the souls of Black South Africans. The romanticized world of Lurie is battered by the ghosts of his memory; the memory of his exploitative sex with Melanie and his daughter's rape. This comparison forces him to seek salvation (Segall 44-45). Tom Herron studied Disgrace in relation to protagonist's relation to 'dogs', his volunteer work at Bev's refuge with sick and dirty dogs is the result of isolation from rest of the world. The moment he was hiding his face from the world, the only possible refuge was the company of dogs and this experience realized him intensity of shame Melanie's father would have faced (Herron 468). In Glenn's study about the novel in her article Gone for Good—Coetzee's Disgrace she expressed her views in this way, "In cultural terms, Coetzee emerges as a liberal Afro-pessimist rather than a racist. Liberal Afro-pessimism incriminates white African settlers and history as agents (though not the only ones) of the dysfunctional post-colonial situation rather than simply victims of it" (Gless 80).

In political paradigm, the novel is respected as a complete presentation of the post-apartheid socio-political situation. The novel not only deals with the political situation of that time but Coetzee weaved through the Hellenic morality and circumstantial justice that leads the audience to the understanding of morality and its importance. Because of multi-layered themes, it stands as a valuable piece of writing for many critics. Authenticity of truth and reconciliation commission (TRC) has been challenged by later researchers

who studied it on humanists' level i.e. Gibson (2004) has tried to prove the illegitimacy of TRC in *Overcoming Apartheid: Can Truth Reconcile a Divided Nation?* Critics attacked Coetzee's understanding of post-apartheid racial disintegration and his representation of revenge game in the aftermath of TRC which could not successfully bring the two parties at one point. Psychological lenses explored the impact of long apartheid on a post-apartheid period where it was difficult for common people to accept Black South Africans on equal levels and the same was opposed by Black South African community. Confessional illegitimacy had been the concern of many scholars while studying Coetzee. The intentions of Lucy after being raped are presented quite opposite to the expectations of the readers; for her, rapists were like "debt collector or tax collector" who had a right to demand their debt which their generation had been paying for decades to White South African community. This paper aims to explore Coetzee's moral conception in the postmodernist period to reconnect readers to Socratic morality and Coetzee urges the readers to develop Freudian repression. The demand which binds every human being into an untold social contract where every individual holds a set of responsibilities which are important to maintain balance in a society. The research will primarily focus on Nietzsche's bipolar concept of morality which he argued in *The birth of Tragedy; Dionysianism and Apollonianism*.

The world of intoxication and dream is linked with the Dionysian man, dreams represent true nature of man where he is unspoiled by social straightjackets. Nietzsche attracts his audience by supporting Dionysian idea this way, "According to the idea of Lucretius, the marvelous divine shapes first stepped out before the mind of man in a dream." (Nietzsche 11). For him, poetic accomplishments too require dreams and everybody is excellent at such "plastic art". Inversely Apollonian concept of morality preaches a set of norms, customs, and conformity to man-made standards which develop him into a docile and obedient human being who is void of personal desires and innate attractions. Further, Freud conceptualized repression in this way, "the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious" (Freud 147). Michael Billing's book *Freudian*

Repression: Conversation Creating the Unconscious unlocks the Freudian concept of multi-layered human mind where an important task is taken by unconscious portion. For him, this Freudian psychoanalysis must be called “depth psychology” because of its behavior towards unacceptable things (Biling 12).

The transformation of social man (refined according to set norms) into Overman leads to an imbalance in a society which focuses on individual benefits and desires without considering the harms and insults being inflicted to others (weaker ones). Nietzsche being the postmodernist preacher of the philosophy states, “With the help of the morality of custom and the social straitjacket, the man was made truly predictable”. (May 106) This rebellion against set norms and traditions and a desire to be non-conformist lead David Lurie to rape his student while insisting the righteousness of his action. He presented to be a man of free will and subordinate to his desire. Coetzee first developed a sense of freedom of choice and action and artistically refutes these actions and preaches his audience the morality of conformity where an individual can be expected to perform in a particular way.

Before setting into the trial Mathabane asked him if he had some objection over investigating committee members. His reply shows a different understanding of the world; “I have no challenge in a legal sense,’ he replies. ’I have reservations of a philosophical kind, but I suppose they are out of bounds” (Coetzee 47). Nietzsche illuminates these attic traditions in *The Birth of Tragedy* as contradictory ingredients of Greek tragedy, for him, Dionysian man tends to be inclined more towards nature than becoming a part of nature. Nietzsche follows Schopenhauer’s desire to emancipate man from ‘individuation’ the quality that is the characteristic of Apollonian man. In *Redeeming Nietzsche*, Giles Fraser defines Dionysian man in this way; “the one who is able to puncture appearance and seek and find the ultimate nature of things– which is the basis of salvation” (Fraser 54). So the Dionysian man reconciles to love, peace and nature which man had long abandoned. Coetzee establishes the struggle between two opposing understandings of life; Dionysian and Apollonian, through the actions of his protagonist. The later

part of the novel portrays an apollonian shift in David Laurie, who after seeing agonizing mishaps with his own daughter, during newly freed South Africa laments his past deeds.

Morality is, and had been playing a pivotal role in the philosophical discussions since the man came out of Stone Age and two antithetic understandings of morality had more or less been propagated in Greek philosophical era. The attic tragedy was embellished with two gods, Apollo and Dionysus who had antithetic makings. Nietzsche developed the Dionysian concept of morality in *Genealogy of Morals*; a disturbing book which raised turmoil in the strong foundations of Western Moral conceptions (2011). On the other way round it was the revival of Greek polytheistic concept of morality, which focused on the free will and pleasure principle of life. Dionysian morality encouraged basic human instinctual desires and treated them as the innocence of man without any public makeup. The Hellenic culture had designed different gods who controlled their specific spheres to which they had all the responsibilities as well. If god had some particular quality, then human beings too were exempted for doing that and gods were considered responsible for those human activities. Nietzsche mentioned this concept in this way, "Every evil the sight of which edifies a god is justified" (Kaufmann 69). The protagonist in *Disgrace* had a Dionysian concept of life, which he exhibited during the first half of the novel. When Lucy discussed his past affair he said, "My case rests on the rights of desire,' he says 'On the god who makes even the small birds quiver" (Coetzee 89). Therefore, if gods were rapacious then humankind had no feeling of shame in committing the same action.

With the development of society, the complexity of crime grew and on the other way round the access to truth became difficult. Religion plays a great role in the decorum of society because of the doctrines taught by the prophets of God. However, along with the religious doctrines, there are social values, which work for mutual peace, and progress of that society and for the preservation of these social values, there is a state structure; police, army, and regulatory authorities, which try to maintain the necessity freedom and social

rights of individuals in a society. Now in this developed society, any criminal is answerable to two kinds of forces; religious doctrine and law enforcing authorities. With the passage of time, courts established, with judicial systems to punish those who try to abolish the peace of any society. In fact, the center of all law enforcing institutions was to facilitate human beings and resolve their grievances against other human beings.

With the advent of Christianity, the concept of omnipotent God had become a continuous source of hurting man by the sense of guilt, which was embossed into the conscience of man. It not only deprived man from his innocence but also paved new vistas of cunningness and the purity of man relinquished, as religion wanted to control human beings in order maintain its decorum. This sense of guilt has nurtured a hatred for a natural man i.e. an un-conformed man, plebeians and free souls because the amalgamation of hypocrisy leads man to decency, in Apollonian terms. Nietzsche's concept of The Last Man, which he developed in Thus Spoke Zarathustra, emblems the set patterns by either the societal or religious force but Nietzsche's stance is critical to such perspective. "... with the aid of morality of mores and the social straightjacket, man was actually made more calculable" (Nietzsche 59). According to him, such society is impotent of creating real individuals who are different and want to acquire their instinctual freedom, for the survival of their basic human desires, which man can never get rid of. Man can overwhelm such elements but in order to achieve this goal, he has to exterminate the real man and will have to depart from basic human urges to individual freedom and satisfaction. This all process demands the massacre of natural human being who was born free. David Lurie had all the beliefs according to Nietzsche's philosophy, about God he had no belief that he told to Mr. Isaac when he went to seek forgiveness from the family. Nietzsche too had forsaken belief in religious doctrines for he declared it in thus spoke Zarathustra, "God is dead", in response to such belief the life of will was preferred (Nietzsche 05). His demand of forgiveness was not the outcome of any fear from punishment; neither religiously nor worldly. Lurie even refuses to accept the offer of Mr. Isaac when he suggested intervening on his behalf to university.

In the first half of *Disgrace*, David Lurie appears greatly under the influence of Nietzsche's moral conception in his lifestyle and even during the university trials he remained consistent. The world for Nietzsche was based on the pleasure principle, which emancipates man from moral guilt and focuses on the individual preferences for him. Lurie had been divorced two times, after the second divorce, he managed to live his leisure times in the company of whores and prostitutes. For him the concepts of notoriety or bashfulness had no value, he lived and wanted to live his life in his own way. He used to visit brothels every week for ninety minutes with some prostitute and had long been involved with Soraya; a prostitute who had been the source of his sexual satisfaction for the longest period. An accidental meeting with Soraya in St. George's Street had become responsible for upcoming tremors in Lurie's life. The new secretary in the department had also been in relation with him but that could not go far because of his inability to satisfy her. After the closed sexual chapter with Soraya, Lurie fixed his eyes on one of his students; Melanie. She was the next targeted prey of his sexual infatuations, for which he paved his way in unintelligible labyrinths for the young girl. Being, an experienced man of sexual tricks, he managed to handle the girl gently and moved with fast but firm steps towards her. He had even forgotten the dignity of the profession, which he belonged. Coetzee establishes the parallel between Prof. Lurie and Byron whose life too was full of notorious scandals, which had no effect in changing his attitude.

Lurie knew that girl was too young for him but he was in the grip of his instinctual desires, which he never suppressed. Coetzee hints about it at the time when Melanie had come to spend night with David Lurie, he prepares his daughter's bed for her and his attitude seems to be paternal but in spite of all these facts, Lurie remained under the influence of sexual attraction towards his student. Being an old and experienced man, he never let her think about his created situations and made love with her twice. Further, he started exploiting her for her mid-term exams, attendance etc. to keep her in his control. His conscience too tried to avert his manners but the influence of his sexual appetite had been unbending. He once thought in this way, "A child! He

thinks: No more than a child! What am I doing? Yet his heart lurches with desire” (Coetzee 20). Although he was fully aware of the gravity of his actions but he could not restrict himself. Their relationship was not of love or friendship; it was purely based upon animal desires in man that can easily shatter human stature to dust but for Lurie, he was the master of his life and had created his own moral standards.

Professor Lurie’s Dionysian precepts of life dragged him to “Disgrace” which had become inevitable for him, even outside the university. During the trial at university, he exhibited the stubbornness, although on the insistence of his colleagues, he confessed his crime but his inner-self was never relenting. Here Coetzee presented Lurie a man of completely different order, where his philosophy was not understandable to his colleagues and they too could not convince him to the moral conceptions of Christianity or society. In all circumstances, he remained committed to his previous morality without the fear of being punished. When a university girl asked him if he regret his actions, his answer was void of lamentation as he said, “I was enriched by the experience” (Coetzee 56). Even after spoiling the girl’s repute and bringing insult to her father, he insisted on the right of his desire irrespective of other party’s emotions. According to him, the real confession comes from a heart and if not, it is the result of cunningness leading to certain goals, it cannot be a true confession. As he had no lamentation over the affair with his student, he stood firm in front of all circumstances because he had his own logics, which did not permit him to feel shame in the case. He emphasized the importance of instinctual desires and for him, suppressing the voice of instinct was a murderous action. He discussed this issue with Lucy, “No animal will accept the justice of being punished for following its instincts” (Coetzee 90). According to David Lurie, killing such animal is better than compelling it to forsake its instinct because the pain of abandoning an instinct is drastic for an animal. He was a man of pleasure principle where morality depended on the desire invoking inside him. In all this debate he focused on the individual right of desire without considering the rights of others in the society around him. The societal equilibrium is based on the respect of rights for all, it is not a one-

sided phenomenon, otherwise, the social Darwinism prevails in the society. All colonial regimes are the result of social Darwinism where rights of one group are seized by other powerful group and weak groups at some time start agitation and disobedience which causes chaos in that society. Lurie understood this phenomenon when he himself stood in the position where Mr. Isaac stood once, in spite of all his desires to protect his daughter he could not do so, which introduced him to helplessness and misery of man. Through the actions of David Lurie, Coetzee established the need for social equality and moral values in order to save the society from chaos and anarchy. The rule of might is right or enforcement of personal desires can be relishing to one party but if it is enforced to others, the situation can be drastic.

Coetzee turned the situation to his desired outcomes of such philosophy; Coetzee makes him understand the importance of the traditional concept of morality which is based on conformity, obedience to cultural and traditional norms, harmony and mutual respect for one another's interests. In Everett's words reflective morality is required in order to establish a peaceful society where harmony and respect for all prevails. Coetzee brings about the simultaneous incidents in the life of protagonist with great artistic care to propagate the necessity of structured morality (Everett 395).

David Lurie's deprivation from job and escape started to make him understand the realities of life, which he philosophized at his best, all through his life. The change of place and circumstances had added a lot in changing his philosophical understandings, over which he fought his case during university trials. After the forced resignation from university, Lurie planned to see his daughter who had settled in Grahamstown and made her living by a farmhouse. When he reached there, he found the place stranded from the civilized population, among the people who had no match with him. Soon after arrival at Grahamstown, Coetzee created situations where Lurie had only to listen and obey, Lurie found himself in helplessness at the farm where his voice had no authority. The vulnerability taught him new lessons of life; the pain which he had inflicted on the people he abhorred in his life. Lucy; his daughter treated him like a young student and at the very first day instructs him, how to use

water from the water tank. This phase of his life brings him in a situation where he had no choice to philosophize things; he had no credibility for his scholarship in that area of the country. His escape from Cape Town could not keep sour memories out of his life; he would have understood the whirl of circumstances when Lucy discussed i.e. “What if we don't call it a visit? What if we call it refuge? Would you accept refuge on an indefinite basis?” (Coetzee 65). Plain words flooding with sarcasm can pierce one's heart, either one is felonious or victim and one have to bear sarcasm when he is not in power. Lurie who had already escaped from the society had no choice to argue with Lucy, and he started complying with her instruction obediently.

The rape of Lucy and incapability of David Lurie to rescue his daughter from rapists altogether changed the attitude of David Lurie from long built philosophical understanding of life. Until that time, Lurie himself had not passed through the agony of such torture and abashment. Coetzee here wanted to expose the reality of being vulnerable, until the time, man has the power to inflict crimes to others, he cannot think of the pain and insults, which a weak man bears. Theorizing things and practical incidents have a far different impact on human psychology, which Lurie understood after that incident. Ettinger's assurance further increases his disappointment when he confirmed his vulnerability by saying, “The best is, you save yourself, because the police are not going to save you, not any more, you can be sure” (Coetzee 100). Ettinger warned him about the political change around him, that now police has no compulsion to save white man's dignity anymore, he himself has to compete the opposite power and it took a long time for Lurie to understand the new fact. In such circumstances, when the pain grew inevitable and Lurie could not find a supporting hand, the need for justice became his only voice. He wanted to see offenders on the gallows that had spoiled the life of his beloved daughter but he could not do anything. Coetzee brought him at the same place where Melanie's father once stood and he mocked the situation. All his life he had been at the exalted position in the society; first, he was white and secondly he was an educated university professor with handsome

earnings, so he never experienced helplessness and insult. This experience had taught him the reality of life, which had long been unintelligible for him.

David Lurie's persistence on police report had no effect on Lucy because she was more practical as compared to him. She was aware of the insults coming with the complaint about her rape, she knew that it was the part of reparation for long atrocity by the white South Africans and the most important for her was the stay at the farm, which would have become in jeopardy otherwise. She knew that if she went against the Black South African community, they will not let her live peacefully, only this reason stopped her from conflict with Petrus who had been involved in her rape. Here he wishes his daughter to seek justice for which he himself had objections once, when he was asked by Mathabane about the constitution of committee his answer was; "I have no challenge in a legal sense,' he replies, 'I have reservations of a philosophical kind but I suppose, they are out of bounds" (Coetzee 47). Professor Lurie had only judicial demands for his own daughter, which were void of philosophical remarks. The situation made him understand the necessity of law enforcement, which was the dire need of his daughter. Coetzee represents his condition in this way;

"He has a sense that, inside him, a vital organ has been bruised, abused - perhaps even his heart. For the first time he has a taste of what it will be like to be an old man, tired to the bone, without hopes, without desires, indifferent to the future." (Coetzee 107).

The only desire, he evoked on the thoughts of that incident was to hurt the atrocious offenders, which he could not and it made him feel more miserable. David Lurie had tasted the pain of humiliation himself for the first time and observed his changed attitude as well. Still there was desire of forgetting that atrocious business and return to his previous life but inwardly he knew it was impossible, after all that happened to Lucy. A conflict within himself urged him to forsake and condemn his past. Coetzee demonstrates this

fact at the time when Lurie condemns his old masters who had not guided him to live decent in the society (Coetzee 179).

Life had opened an entirely new chapter for Lurie; the sophisticated university professor who did not like the intimacies with Black South Africans, rather he mocked at Lucy for her relationship with those people but his interaction with them introduced him to a new reality. He was inspired by the attitude of Bill Shaw at the hospital and his helping manners taught him that in this world, even a cup of tea can erect true intimacies. Coetzee artistically exposes the vulnerability of the protagonist and presents the protagonist at the mercy of circumstances. His power to challenge, escaped slowly but steadily from his attitude when Coetzee assures the weakness through different situations i.e. “he slips and almost falls: he is as weak as a baby and lightheaded too. He has to call Bill Shaw and suffer the ignominy of being helped out of the bath, helped to dry himself, helped into borrowed pyjamas” (Coetzee 103). Insults along with the feeling of being inept for resistance against humiliation can crush to earth, his pride, stubbornness and self-esteem had been injured in the cruelest way, which he himself once practiced with Melanie. As studied by Lucy Graham, “And yet David, scholar of Romanticism, is guilty of 'attitudinising' when he excuses his violation of Melanie Isaacs as an act motivated by Eros, or inspired by 'Aphrodite, goddess of the foaming waves’ (433-444). She observes the disjunction between ethics and aesthetics, which is the main theme of the novel.

Lurie who had ever been the admirer of true beauty had inclined to the dumpy, flat and without neck woman. In his happy days, he could never think of building a relationship with such woman who was not beautiful at all but in the whirl of circumstances when his own daughter was not ready to comply his instruction, he needed someone to be close and that was Bev Shaw. Her intimacy forced him to acknowledge the fact of his own status; he made comparison with her in this way, “And let him stop calling her poor Bev Shaw. If she is poor, he is bankrupt.” (Coetzee 150). If she was poor, it was only because of her colour or physical features but she had a soft heart and worked for the discarded animals with keen interest. In Lurie’s case, he happened to be

a heart breaker only because of his own desires, which he could not compromise. His bankruptcy was on moral grounds and his relationship with Bev Shaw made him understand her moral superiority over him.

Coetzee proves to be a moralist in *Disgrace* and in order to preach his moral understanding, he made his protagonist pass through a long arduous path from Dionysian to Apollonian system of morality. Although the protagonist was consistent to spend all of his life by following the Dionysian philosophy of life and his philosophical attachment held him as a social discard not only in his staff but his daughter and ex-wife too condemned his actions. In order to follow his moral perceptions, he had to forsake the societal agreements that abandoned him among rest of the society because there were no common grounds which could connect him with the outside world that believe the Apollonian moral schema. David Lurie followed the instinctual instructions in order to live a self-contented life where society could have no effect in his moral standards. Lurie's transformation from Dionysian to Apollonian moral standards exhibits the need of harmonious moral preferences, which provide equal beneficence and punishments for all humankind. Lurie only understands the severity of his crime when he himself becomes a victim; the rape of his daughter, the burns he gets and robbery. His sense of being superior smashes in the new world at the farm, change in the political condition of the country comes with the reversal of power. The previous debate looks up for the moral issues discussed in *Disgrace* and in the later part of the novel, it proves that man is responsible for putting his share in the maintenance of societal peace, which Coetzee proves by making protagonist vulnerable in the surroundings. Coetzee shows that the man who in the trance of power suspends the rights of other citizens, can be preyed by people who are more powerful. Coetzee results this debate with an understanding that societal moral schema should be based on mutual respect, any powerful can lose his power at different time and place and can become a victim, so respect of the rights of other human beings should not be judged by the social status they possess. The understanding Coetzee tried to make is that

we must respect the freedom of others irrespective of their social status, the need of empathy is pivotal of social order.

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