

Woman empowerment in the Context of South Africa (A Study of the Novel “Disgrace”)

Abstract

As regards the social and gender inequalities, an attempt shall be made to examine the social circumstances of a woman in John Maxwell Coetzee’s novel “Disgrace”, written after 1995, when the new constitution for South Africa was passed. The novel reflects the period of supposed national optimism as to the expression “the rainbow nation”.

The questions investigated into are:

1. Did the new constitution, as claimed, really give men and women equal rights?
2. Despite the equal rights why is it that a young South African woman could be expected to be raped twice in her lifetime on average?

Key words Empowerment, Rape, Colonization, Whiteness, Postcolonial Feminism.

Introduction

Empowerment, as understood in academic quarters, is a means by which the ones who were denied power for centuries gain greater ownership over their lives. This implies management over material possessions, cerebral resources and ideology. Some describe empowerment as a process dealing in awareness and capacity construction leading to greater involvement, efficient decision-making power and control leading to significant transformation. This demands an implicit ability to get what one wants and to influence others on one’s own concerns. As regards women, the power relation that has to be involved includes their lives at manifold levels: family, society, market and the state. Prominently it involves women’s ability to assert themselves. Nevertheless, this is constructed by the ‘gender roles’ assigned to them particularly in a cultural set up which resists change.

World population is no longer expanding at a fast pace. This gradual slowing down is the result in part of processes of demographic transition, in part of population control policies. Research into the determinants of this demographic transition has pointed out in particular the decisive role of women’s literacy rates in triggering a process that has far-reaching repercussions over the entire social structure. As the average number of children per household decreases, a whole array of effects follow: changes in inheritance patterns and economic empowerment of women (with their cultural corollaries), a further decrease of birth rates, changes in class structures, rising education rates, etc. These need to be explored in terms of their socio-cultural implications.

In terms of combining economic, social and environmental objectives, the current trends point at a growing engagement of the humanities with the study of the socioeconomic developments in tandem with the analysis of social inequalities.

The Context

Nelson Mandela led The African National Congress (ANC), and became the first President of South Africa. It was one of the most prominent anti-apartheid movements ever led. Despite the claims and ambitions the President had, violence increased significantly in the country. In this regard, the paper focuses on the theme of rape in the novel which significantly posits the extremities of subversion of power relations and the revenge of the historically snubbed. Emphasis here is on Lucy who is raped by three black men. Evidently, the rape is a violent and brutal act. Although they are strangers, it is described as a gesture employed to settle ‘personal’ score. But her father conceptualises that it is history speaking through them. However the main focus of the paper is on Lucy’s critical decision not to report the rape to police. She realizes that in the context of modern South Africa, no true justice will be done.



Shivalingaswamy H.K

Associate Professor
Department of Studies and
Research English
Tumkur University, Tumkur
Karnataka, India

A White Woman & The Context of Rape

The theme of rape, a predominant feature of the novel, exemplifies Lucy's (the white woman) silence against the violent act and her desperation to get assimilated into the hostile power structures of the new context of South Africa. Interestingly, the descendents of the colonisers, Lurie and Lucy admit the fact that their identity exists in a state of true hybridity. Moreover, whiteness as their identity is impossible in the post-apartheid context of South Africa. The plethora of new post-apartheid identities indicates to them that they have to forge an existence in postcolonial Africa. In the face of hopelessness about the place of whites in the new South Africa, the rape on Lucy shows up as an act reflecting interminable conflict between the blacks and the whites. In fact, the idea of justice is only a distant hope for Lurie, Lucy's father, whose mind is suffused with colonial assumptions. His initial reaction is

"After they did what they did, you cannot expect Lucy calmly to go on with her life as before. I am Lucy's father. I want those men to be caught and brought before the law and punished. Am I wrong? Am I wrong to want justice?" (p. 119)

But gradually it dawns upon him that the savage attack on him and his daughter was not a misfortune. Instead it could be traced down to the colonised state of South Africa. His cry for his daughter's right to justice is a futile gesture since the attack indicates a logic stemming out of the very foundations of African life. He indignantly pleads with his daughter after the shocking revelation about her pregnancy

"Lucy your situation is becoming ridiculous, worse than ridiculous, sinister. I don't know how you can fail to see it. I plead with you, leave the farm before it is too late." (p. 200)

Lurie's offer to take her to Europe is essentially an option followed by the assumption that they are European and it is their home. But Lucy's assumption runs contrary to the colonial mind of her father. She makes an attempt to strike a relationship with South Africa by seeing it as her home. Her unexplainable silence about the rape is construed by Lurie as her repentance over the historical guilt of the whites. His letter to her testifies to his assumption.

"Dearest Lucy, with all the love in the world, I must say the following. You are on the brink of a dangerous error. You wish to humble yourself before history. But the road you are following is the wrong one". (p.160)

A Black Woman & the Context of Rape

Lurie's assumption about Lucy's silence is significant for a reason that has to do with the former's stint as a University professor. Though remarkably well read, he is basically a man who treats women as merely the objects meant to gratify his desires. The theme of rape gains significance in the novel precisely because of Lurie's promiscuous behaviour with one of his black students, as a result of which he is disgraced and terminated from service. Lurie fails to understand that in the new South Africa the women are privileged to offer resistance. Thus his sexual antics render him vulnerable due to the absence of the former power

structures; and surprisingly he becomes subordinated. But he shows no regret and holds on to his opinion that:

"No animal will accept the justice of being punished for following its instincts" (p.90)

Women & New South Africa

The rape of the student and the eventual downfall of the rapist signify the decline of the former conception of whiteness and on the other hand Lucy's rape by the blacks re-inscribes the new formation of whiteness in the new South Africa. Gradually, Lurie realises his inability to control his situation after the rape on his daughter and compromises with the attack as an inevitable and a hostile historical process. However, the hangover of colonisation does not allow him to simply remain without resistance. Rape on his daughter for him is understandably not justifiable and it is an assault on her honour and her identity. He views them as barbaric. Lucy on the other hand seems to acknowledge this as a pure act of retribution. His counsel to her that what they have done to her may be attributed to hatred and animosity fostered by history is simply dismissed by Lucy

"Hatred ... when it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me anymore. Maybe, for men, hating the women makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange – when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her – isn't it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife in; exiting afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood – doesn't it feel like murder, like getting away with murder?" (p. 158)

Lucy's ability to forge a connection with South Africa is typical of struggle for change against a system that has invested all power in men. The decision not to make the assault on her public is a challenge posed to different forms of oppression. In the light of postcolonial feminism, women emerge out of double colonisation and Lucy, a descendent of colonisers knows this. She shows tremendous determination to assimilate into the culture of her attackers; much against the wish of her father. What is vividly clear is Lucy's refusal to accept Lurie's rigid binary logic. She is indeed very conscious of her circumstances when she says:

"What happened to me is my business, mine alone, not yours, and if there is one right I have, it is the right not to be put on a trial like this, not to have to justify myself – not to you, not to anyone else. As for Petrus, he is not some hired labourer whom I can sack because in my opinion he is mixed up with the wrong people. That's all gone, gone with the wind." (p. 133)

Lucy's postcolonial perspective counters her father's perception. Through Lurie, Coetzee reflects on the impossibility of a bridge between the two cultures. And through Lucy he delineates the context in which a woman is placed in the face of hybridised conception of whiteness. Thus, Lucy decides to remain silent since her preference to stay back in Africa is strongly dictated by her wish for life with the indigenous peasantry. Coetzee also indicates the fact that she comes to terms with the prevailing situation in Africa where a white cannot negotiate his identity in terms of

domination. Her subjectivity is inevitably constituted through a process of assimilation. Her existence hangs in balance between political correctness and social correctness. Hence, she chooses to become part of the post-apartheid Africa which no more honours the former distinctions. Hence, the question of dignity in terms of her father's colonial interpretation does not arise.

Conclusion

The humanities today have begun to reformulate the concepts of space, territory and landscape (political, social, urban, natural etc.) as the overlap between physical space and political/cultural space is increasingly questioned. Coetzee's creation of Lucy's character leads us to observe great efforts being put in to redefine space as a dynamic category which lies beyond the bounded horizon of traditional territories. Thus it can be assumed that the organisation of knowledge involves new concepts of spatiality and that 'mapping' is becoming a new paradigm in the humanities today. Virtual landscapes of communication are redefining our sense of space. The human habitat and its landscapes are being redefined in dramatic ways, and new physical and symbolic geographies are needed to explore it.

References

Primary Source:

1. Coetzee, J M, 2000, *Disgrace*. London, Vintage Books

Secondary Sources:

2. Anderson, Benedict, 1991, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso.
3. Aron, Raymond, 1965, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*. Pelican Books, USA.
4. De Beauvoir, Simone. 1972. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books
5. Fanon, Frantz. 2001. *The Wretched of The Earth*. England: Penguin Books
6. Freidan, Betty. 1984. *Feminine Mystique*. New York: Laurel Book