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DISGRACE: EMBLEM OF SURVIVAL IN THE POLITICS OF HUMILIATION

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In the late 1990s, Coetzee was working on another compelling novel, *Disgrace* (1999), set in the South Africa of the time of composition. The struggle against the repressive racist state is finally over, apartheid is a discredited policy of the past, and democratic government has finally been established.

Nor is it possible to argue that the novel makes no claim to represent or criticise ANC-governed South Africa, that it is fundamentally the story of a group of individuals who happen to live in a particular place and time. Quite apart from the fact that a novel dealing with relations between racially defined groups set in immediately post-apartheid South Africa could hardly be read as having no interest in national issues. There are repeated references to the changed times and their impact on the way lives are now being lived. Just as in *Age of Iron*, there are many references to "the times", fleshing out the title's implication that the portrayal of a particular period of South Africa will play an important part in the novel. But what is new in this picture, as Coetzee points out, what are the changes that are making themselves felt in Disgrace interpretable as criticism of ANC policies, and of the national effort of reconciliation and regeneration more widely, as they filter through the local novel? what I propose to do by way of an introduction to some further questions about the novel and its relation to its historical and political context is to examine a number of these references in the text to "the times" in which the characters find themselves living.

In spite of being a university professor, David Lurie's – through whose consciousness the entire work is presented – attitude towards women does not differ greatly from that of the Magistrate's in *Waiting for the Barbarians.* The opening sentence introduces us to a fifty-two-year-old man who, like the Magistrate, claims to have "solved the problem of sex rather well" (*Disgrace 1*). As the novel unfolds, we realize that this is the very problem David has failed to solve. Divorced twice and unable to sustain a relationship with someone close in age and status to himself, he can only be gratified by the women who denote the complete other, in age, race and status, in spite of his claim that he has drawn to wit. One of his ideas of solving the problem of sex is through an encounter with a prostitute on Thursday afternoons. The otherness of the female is set at the opening page: "He strokes her honey – brown body, unmarked by the sun; he stretches her out, kisses her breasts; they make love-Soraya is tall and slim, with long black and dark, liquid eyes" (*Disgrace 1*).

The name Soraya is derived from the Arabic word "Thoraya", which means a very bright unattainable star; this particular star becomes attainable in "the desert of the week Thursday" which has become an oasis of *luxe et volupte*" (*Disgrace 1*). The attraction to Soraya is the allure of the exotic. The relationship with her is simply a monetary transaction. When he sees her in public with her two boys, the mystery is shattered and she loose her appeal to David. The reason for this revulsion is the mendacity of being a wife and a mother, no longer the paid mistress/ the prostitute. He realises that he can no longer exercise full control over the object he has created.

Incapable of stifling his own desire, David, instead, progresses to preying upon one of his students, Melanie, young enough to be his daughter and quite exotic: "She is small and thin, with close-cropped black hair, wide, almost Chinese cheekbones, large, dark eyes" (*Disgrace 1*). The prey has been selected and the object of desire has been scanned and fragmented for easier consumption. Moreover, in order that he may justify his action, he tells her "a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone . . . She has a duty to share it" (*Disgrace 16*). In comparison of Marquis de Sade and Immanuel Kant on beauty, Lacan stipulates that the former sees a "conjunction between the play of pain and phenomena of beauty while the latter does not see an involvement on the part of the object in its beauty (*The Ethics* 261). The object of beauty has to be shared. Likewise, Melanie has been detached from her physical attributes, allowing Lurie to claim that her beauty is public property that can be used to elevate his sexual suffering. He usurps this beauty.

When the university accuses David of harassment, he admits to being guilty as charged, but refused to repent. Kissack and Titlestad remark:

Throughout his experiences of adversity, David sustains a quiet dignity, which is anchored in this sense of humility. It is a dignity that refuses to compromise on what he considers to be one of life's most basic and animating features, the rights of desire ("Humility in a Godless World" 145).

Moreover, by repenting, he feels that he has to apologize for a history of exploitation, and this is exactly what some of his colleagues have urged him to do.

When we try to get specificity, all of a sudden it is not because of a young woman he is confessing to, just an impulse he could not resist, with no mention of the pain he has caused, no mention of the long history of exploitation of which this is part (*Disgrace* 53).

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From a personal issue, abuse of his position as a professor, harassment, and rape, the event assumes wider political implications. Coetzee shows how easily the tramlines of liberal thinking produce unintended regulatory effects; and the purpose of this is to demonstrate that sensitivity to the other is not an automatic capacity for the liberal sensibility, which may be alienated by a 'confession' that does not fit certain normative codes. Critics of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) felt that its approach to the "truth" was sometimes highly selective; and Coetzee's depiction of a quasi-legal hearing, where justice is predetermined, clearly evokes the contemporaneous concerns about the operations of the TRC

This ongoing interest in confession was given a potent point of contextual reference with the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1994. This body was charged with the task of conducting nationwide hearings across South Africa in the hope of bringing to light crimes committed during the apartheid years. The utopian idea behind the TRC was that the transition to a multiracial democracy might be enhanced by bringing together the perpetrators and victims of crimes and eliciting from them confession and testimony to achieve a form of catharsis.

In practice, the process was often flawed and unsatisfactory. The Commission had the power to grant amnesty to the guilty if it was felt that a full confession had been made, that the whole "truth" had been established. Yet, for practical reasons, an artificial closure had to be imposed on hearings, with the consequence that the Judgement of the commission – and the justice is dispensed – was sometimes felt to be arbitrary. Coetzee's depiction of the committee to which David Lurie must confess is clearly related to the concerns about the TRC.

The portrayal of the Committee also indicates the dismay at the development of a rule-driven, regulated society when David asks why he should be made to "subscribe to a statement" he is told because:

. . . it would help to cool down what has become a very heated situation. Ideally, we would all have preferred to resolve this case out of the glare of the media. But that has not been possible. It has received a lot of attention it has acquired overtones that are beyond our control (*Disgrace* 53)

The procurement of the underlying theme of apartheid, in some ways, turns the enquiry into a historical trial of all the ills that such a system has represented and the painful effects of its ideology that is still currently felt. It is ironic that his interrogation takes place on Rape Awareness Week at the university campus. By repenting David sees himself as accepting guilt that is larger than his committed crime. Furthermore, as Kissack & Titlestod see, "any other admission or confession would be complicity with a moral discourse with which he can have no sympathy" ("Humility in a Godless World" 138). For Attridge, meanwhile, "Lurie represents the all-too-typical white consciousness of his time by no means an apologist for apartheid, he nevertheless exhibits on occasions attitudes complicit with racist ideology" (*The Ethics of Reading* 317). Whether David does this consciously or sub-consciously, he remains a product of an apartheid system has formed him. Farred sees him how David himself epitomizes the contradictory apartheid system: "In this stubborn, reticent encounter with the new authorities, Lurie becomes at once an anachronistic symbol of white, apartheid ideology and an ironic representative of anti-apartheid loss" ("The Mundanacity of Violence" 356). Realities and sensitivities change but certain beliefs and characteristics remain. Coetzee explains the implication of such a system on all concerned:

As an episode in historical time, apartheid was casually overdetermined. It indeed flower out of self - interest and greed, but also out of desire, and the denial of desire. In its greed, it demanded black bodies in all their physicality in order to burn up their energy as labour. In its anxiety about black bodies, it also made laws to banish them from sight. Apartheid did not understand itself and could not afford to understand itself. Its essence from the beginning was confusion, a confusion it displaced wildly all around itself (*Giving offence* 164)

This confusion is at the very heart of David's character. He fails to understand the implication of his relationship with Melanie. Michael S. Kochin remarks on the fact that Malanie chooses to wear black on the two occasions she meets David, and that her "somber clothes are one of the few signs of her own attitude towards the affair between her and Lurie" ("Post metaphysical Literature" 7). David justifies it to himself by blaming it on Eros. Pamela Cooper observes how Lurie lures Melanie "with Italian food and Shakespeare, and the unspoken contract of seduction is held entirely within the rules of Western representation" ("Metamorphosis and Sexuality" 25). David even tries to persuade himself that the reason that he has been ostracized is due to changing times. This remark stresses that David's values are extinct, highlighting his sense of survival and alienation. During a conversation with his daughter, he reminds her of an episode involving their neighbour's dog, in some way identifying with the animal, and a feeble attempt at justifying his own position:

It was a male. Whenever there was a bitch in the vicinity it would get excited and unmanageable, and with Pavlovian regularity the owner would beat it. This was on until the poor dog didn't know what to do. At the smell of a bitch it would chase around the garden with its ears flat and its tail between its legs, whining, trying to hide . . .

There was something so ignoble in the spectacle that I despaired. One can punish a dog, it seems to me, for an offence like chewing a sleeper. A dog will accept the justice of that: a beating for a chewing. But desire is another story. No animal will accept the justice of being punished for following its instincts (*Disgrace* 90)

This anecdote only emphasizes his diffusion over his forced resignation. He attempts to persuade himself and others that he has been punished for simply following his desires. By comparing himself to the neighbour's dog,

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he expects to displace part of the assumed guilt, being controlled by his instincts and not his intellect. But David does not want to understand that it is not for his desires that he has been condemned, but because of misappropriation of these desires and power. Therefore, a ban such as the one his colleague suggests would mean that he stands to lose more control over his life. The perverse desire that is in him can be constructed to be the product of the apartheid system. Coetzee, writes:

This separation (apartheid) will remove the white man from the daily view of the black man and thus ensure that an unattainable white culture and life style do not become the object of his envious desire. It will also remove the black from the view of the white and prevent the black from becoming the object of white sexual desire (*Giving offence* 176).

The blacks have been marked as the object of desire in the psyche of the white man is partially what formalized David's desire. Likewise, the lust that permeates the novel is precisely a result of the forbidden, the unknown and the misunderstood. The abuse of desire or power, which turns the other into an object or a slave, remains its worse aspect. When the three youths attack Lucy, their crime does not solely stem from their urge to rape, but has deeper implications. In some respect, it is not Lucy whom they are raping, but what Lucy represents. Envious of a culture that has long marginalized them, they retaliate by placing themselves in the role of the colonizers at the center and not the periphery. Violence and discrimination are the annals that are engraved in the youths' collective memory; they can only resort to what has been imprinted in their subconscious in their fight back, in their revenge. Memmi explains how aggression towards the other develops:

If xenophobia and racism consist of accusing an entire human group as a whole, condemning each individual of that group, seeing in him an irremediably noxious nature, then the colonized has, indeed, become a xenophobe and a racist. All racism and all xenophobia consist of delusions about oneself
including absurd and untrust aggressions towards others (*The Colonizer and the Colonized,* 174).

The delusions that are at play are ones of grandeur and what better way to enact them then through violent acts of control. Hendrik's raping of Magda, in *In the Heart of the Country,* mirrors her father's abuse of Hendrik's wife, Anna, the white master with the black slave. Black/White vis-a-vis white/black is but two sides of the same coin; the roles are now reversed. Magda's rape arises from the very hatred that Lucy has mentioned. In her recounting of it, Magda emphasizes that the act is nothing short of continual humiliation: "He turns me on my face and does it to me from behind like animal. Everything dies in me when I have to raise my ugly rear to him. I am humiliated; sometimes I think it is my humiliation he wants" (*In the Heart* 122).

Realising that she has become nothing but an object to be humiliated, to be used for the revenge of previous wrongs, she questions the role of sex in the power struggle. Dominic Head remarks that "the repetition of the rape scene at once enforces the role of victim on Magda and serves to intensify rather than ameliorate the impression of ordeal". (*J.M. Coetzee* 59). She marvels at the ordeal and tries to equate it with desire, attempting to understand if she is in anyway implicated in what has happened to her. Unlike Lurie, and although acknowledging the problems posed by the desiring body as she ponders ways of dealing with it, Magda is able to distinguish between welcome and unwelcome sex. She equates the abuse of desire with possession:

I am not one of the heroes of desire, what I want is not infinite or unattainable, all I ask myself, faintly, dubiously, querulously, is whether there is not something to do with desire other than striving to possess the desired in a project which must be vain, since its end can only be the annihilation of the desired (*In the Heart* 124).

In another rape account, Elizabeth Costello, the eponymous protagonist tells the reader that when the rapist "was bored with hitting her he tore up her clothes and tried to set fire to them and having fought him off she had created an opening for the evil in him to emerge and it emerge in the form of glee, first at her pain" (*Elizabeth Costello* 165). Costello has always understood how violence can only breed violence and how in this sinister form can be equated with pleasure, a concept that Magda has also recognized. Castello's ways of breaking the chain, however, is to remain silent on evil:

For half a century the memory has rested inside her like an egg of stone, one that will never crack open, never give birth. She finds it good, it pleases her, this silence of hers, a silence she hopes to preserve to the grave (*Elizabeth Costello* 166).

To remain silent over violence is a way of not endowing the act with a voice, not giving it a "new purpose on the world" (EC 166). Likewise, Lucy refused to report the rape incident to the police is her way of trying to put an end to the cycle of violence:

Can I guess? he says. Are you trying to remind me of something?
Am I trying to remind you do what?
of what women undergo at the hands of men.
Nothing could be further from my thoughts. This has nothing to do with you, David. You want to know why I have not laid a particular charge with the police . . . The reason is that, as far as I am concerned. What happened to me is purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone.
This place being what?
This place being South Africa

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I don't agree . . . That is not how vengeance works, Lucy. Vengeance is like a fire. The more it devours, the hungrier it gets.
Stop it, David! I don't want to hear this talk of plagues and fires. I am not just trying to save my skin. If that is what you think, you miss the point entirely *(Disgrace* 112).
Lacan states that according to de Sade the nature of repetition makes "the suffering inflicted on the victim go on indefinitely" and reliving the episode is comparable to opening "the flood gates of desire . . . In essence, pain. The other's pain as well as the pain of the subject himself" (TEP 295). Excessive pain can be morbidly, at certain times, confused with pleasure, Lucy and Costello decide to remain silent in the hope that the completely dark episode is obliterated. Lucy's father fails to understand her point of view as to why she has chosen not to talk of rape. David, however, has another observation to make when he learns of Lucy's pregnancy:
The gang of three- Three fathers in one. Rapists rather than robbers, Lucy called them rapists cum tax-gatherers roaming the area, attacking women, indulging their violent pleasures. Well, Lucy was wrong. They were not raping, they were mating (*Disgrace* 199).
The gang of three is in fact implanting a new reality in the wombs of women they attack, sowing new seeds in the mother earth and asserting that in the new order of things, they are the ones in control.

Female rape is often compared to the unlawful requisition of land. This primarily stems from rape being an instrument of control and subjugation, and more often than not exercised against the feminine. In most languages, as the gender allocated to land is feminine, ravage of the earth is equated with exploitation of the female. Pechey states that rape:
is a familiar metaphor of colonization, and the epidemic of rape that has accompanied South Africa's recent decolonization has prompted concerned individuals in that country to cast about for meanings, explanations, counter metaphors appropriate to a long historical process that began with the violation of the land itself ("Coetzee's Purgatorial Africa" 381).
It is also worth noting that in wars, ransacking of the land has often been accompanied by the rape of women, as the latter were generally considered part of the booty. In Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit,* Sadrodien reflects:
There are certain things people do not forgot, or forgive. Rape is one of them. In ancient times, conquerors destroyed the will of those whom they conquered by impregnating the women. It is an ancient form of genocide . . . you conquer a nation by bastardizing its children (*Bitter Fruit* 204).
Territorial desire often includes appropriation of both land and women. Magda wonders if Hendrik's actions and ambitions lie in starting a line and establishing a farm modeled on the Afrikaner tradition. Her fear is confirmed symbolically not only by the sexual crime committed against her but also by finding Hendrik on a number of occasions adorning her father's clothes:
Hendrik makes his appearance high above me on the platform outside the loft door dressed in the clothes of my father. It is grotesque! He postures. Putting his hands on his hips thrusting his chest out (*In the Heart* 106).
Stepping into her father's clothes is akin to stepping into the territorial possessions of his previous masters. The new master, Hendrick, now dominates everything that has previously constituted the father's estate, including the daughter. Following her rape, Lurie tries to impress upon his daughter that Petrus and his friends are trying to turn her into their slave: "But it is something new you are talking about Slavery. They want you for their slave" (*Disgrace* 159). Deleuze and Guattari discuss how a new system is established, invariably on the relics of the other. Their argument on capitalism is relevant here where they see it as "constructed on the ruins of the territorial and the despotic" (*Anti-Oedipus* 333).

For Fanon, the process of decolonization employs the same violence that was inflicted during colonization. He writes:
Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation nothing of its legitimacy to any super natural power; the thing which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself (*Wretched of the Earth* 28).
In order that he may create himself as human, the object resorts to the same violence that he has been subjected to and has used in his flight for liberty. Fanon states:
If we want to answer correctly. We have to fall back on the idea of collective, catharsis. In every society, in every collectivity, exists – must exist – a channel, an outlet through which the forces accumulated in the form of aggression can be released. (*Black Skin White Mask* 145).
The channeling of aggression is necessary for both the colonizer and colonized. If the release of aggression is stifled then humanity stands to witness violence of the worst kind. On the other hand, Sartre views the aggression of the colonized as a reaction to earlier violence administered by the colonizer. Sartre describes events that occurred in Algeria and Angola when the Europeans were massacred at sight: "It is the moment of boom rang; it is the third phase of violence, it comes back on us, it strikes us, and we do not realise any more than we did the other times that it is we that have launched it." (*Wretched of the Earth* 17). The violence currently taking place in South Africa is a consequence of years of cruel and violent oppression. This is also true of current violence amidst the Palestinians in the occupied territories. Colonialism not only dehumanizes but also distorts everyone who is exposed to it. Moreover, Sartre adds, "that no gentleness can efface the marks of violence, only violence itself can destroy them" (*Wretched of the Earth* 18). At such times, the prevalence of violence makes such incidents the norm. Even though the colonized has regained his ancestral land, the link

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between individual and land has been severed due to occupation. Negligence ensues as it takes years for the relationship between land and its native owner to be re-established. History has ceased to develop in a chronological way and another has been imposed breaking the chronology.

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