

The Moral Space in Coetzee's *Disgrace*: An Ethical Reading in a Postcolonial Context

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“ Poesy, therefore, is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termth it in his word *mimesis*; that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth; to speak metaphorically a speaking picture with this end, to teach and delight”

(Sir Phillip Sidney. Defense, 79-80)

Despite all the debates embedded in the Critical Theory on the purpose of reading literature, the act of reading literature essentially remains an ethical issue. We might read literature for pleasure, for its aesthetics, or in quest for the modes of representation, yet the final purpose of literature remains within the Aristotelian expectation ‘teach and delight’. In his discussion of the value of reading literature, Daniel Schwartz sees the premise of connection between art and life as a strong unifying factor among ethical critics. For him, literature is essential to the development of the mature personality. In this context, Daniel, cited in Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack, asserts that: “Literature provides surrogate experiences for the reader, experiences that, because they embodied within artistically shaped ontology that heightens our awareness of moral discriminations” (5). The questions, however, remain: What ethical package does a given text offer to the reader? And, is this package compatible with the reader’s ethical standards? It is true that some texts preach certain issues which are culturally specific, and in effect, might not be congruent with the ethical values of the potential reader, but it should be admitted that some other texts go beyond the boundaries of local culture to address issues of universal appeal. In both cases, however, the reader seems to be the decisive factor in his/her ethical interpretation of any given text. In fact, the problem of ethical and unethical texts has become a point of contention between the two critics, Richard Posner and Martha Nussbaum. The former believes that we read literature for its aesthetics, while the latter contends that we read literature for the ethics. In “Against Ethical Criticism”, Posner rejects any didactic claim at the expense of aesthetics. He argues that:

Nussbaum thinks moral philosophy incomplete without literature. She does not deny the importance of aesthetic values, but she is

prepared to trade them off against the moral, so that the morality of the work affects its final evaluation of the work of Literature. (3)

Accordingly, Posner opposes any classification of literature in terms of morality or ethical standards. Nassabaum, however, rejects Posner's claims of objectifying the work of art and reducing it to the issue of mere aesthetics. She thinks that reading literature enhances the moral growth of the reader; therefore and according to her, we should be selective and choose the texts that involve the readers' morality. In refuting Posner's claims of detached reading, Nussbaum strongly argues that:

At bottom, then, the appeal to aesthetic detachment is not innocent of politics. To

read Dickens in a detached way is to refuse the invitation of Dickens to reflect. To cling to authors who can more plausibly be read in that detached and political way is to refuse the initiation and other social authors to reflect, (76)

In this sense, Nussbaum seems to be right in thinking that when we read literature, we resist accepting the author's aesthetic point of view whereby he treats characters as 'objects'. Instead, readers tend to wonder and fancy how some literary works maintain a kind of an intimate relationship with the reader, a relationship which helps them to nourish the ascription of humanity and the prospects of friendship (Poetic Justice, qtd. in Davis and Womack). In his distinction between 'ethics of reading and 'ethics while reading', Daniel seems to have resolved the conflict between Nussbaum and Posner. He seems to favor 'ethics of reading' because it allows us to read the text from multiple perspectives. According to him: "an ethic of reading realizes that original and contemporary audiences are polyauditory and that each of us is an interpretive community of one" (12).

In the light of the above debates, one tends to admit that the aesthetics of a given work of art provides the reader with multiple options of interpretation, yet the final and the decisive factor in the act of reading is what and how, we as readers, become beneficiary of the work of art. We tend to dig for the lesson to be learned. In this context, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the ethical lessons that might be learnt in Coetzee's *Disgrace*. In this text, the protagonist seems to go through a journey of self-exploration, a journey that starts by ignorance and ends by full awareness of the reality; it is this conscious awareness of the lessons to be learnt. Accordingly, the reader of this text will certainly benefit from the experience of the others. This reader, however, while involved in the novel, might not embrace the author's ethical point of view, on the contrary, he/she might appropriate the moral message in accordance with his/her ethical standards that might not be completely compatible with those of the author.

Disgrace, a novel written by James Coetzee; mainly deals with the postcolonial situation in South Africa; however, if we closely look at the book, we find out that it deals with ethical issues within a postcolonial discourse. The text, with its postmodernist style, underlies much complexity, a complexity that allows different interpretation. Therefore, this paper will touch only upon two possible interpretations; one has to do with the personal experience of David Lurie, and the other concerns the postcolonial situation

in South Africa. In both interpretations, there is a lesson to reflect on and aptly learn.

The first element, which strikes us in the novel, is the choice of the protagonist. Coetzee seems to fashion David, the protagonist, on the Greek models of heroes, but in a subversive manner; he is neither tragic nor comic hero. David is a prestigious professor and celebrity in the world of academia; yet and according to Aristotle, he is a man with a lapse in his character. (52-53) He is a man whose weakness is blatant in his overriding sexual desire. This desire leads him to his downfall, as is the case in the Greek tragic hero. In this sense, David's experience in life is a journey from ignorance into full awareness of his weakness and the right moral course to follow. However, the lesson to be learned is not limited to the protagonist but also to the reader. The book opens by the scene of David driven by his excessive sexual desire; this desire seems to have blinded and debased him to the level of animals. David, the elderly divorced professor does not seem to care about any moral standard whereby he can resolve his sexual problem. We see him driving to Windsor Mansions in order to make love with Soraya, the prostitute. This lady, who is portrayed by the author as a professional prostitute, is merely a destitute who seems to be a victim of circumstances. A Muslim reader might consider the representation of Soraya offensive and lacking any credibility. If she were really a Muslim as the narrator assumes, she would not be too unfortunate to work as a prostitute because in Islam, a woman like Soraya would not be left alone; she would find many Muslims who would willingly extend their hands to help. So, it is up to the reader to accept or reject this representation. In either case, however, it is the reader's ethical code which is decisive in ethical criticism. At any rate, David's sexual desire makes him forget the requirements of having a stable and dignified life. It is not strange, then, when the narrator comments on such kind of indifference to and irresponsibility in life:

“it surprises him that ninety minutes a week of woman's company are enough to make him happy, who used to think he needed a wife, a home, a marriage. His needs turn out to be quite light after all, light and fleeting, like those of a butterfly” (5).

It is clear that every thing for him becomes illusive except his sexual desire, a desire, which makes him relentless and restless in his pursuit of Soraya. Desperate to satisfy this desire, David does not hesitate to make love with Dawn, the secretary of the English department. However, when he finds her “she works herself into a forth of excitement that in the end only repels him” (9), he shows no more interest in her. Certainly, he is a narcissist who is much obsessed by his sexual desire.

David's story with Melanie is another evidence of his moral degradation. Melanie, a student in his class, is a young girl who steams out with passion and desire.

David, as her professor, is expected to discipline her and other students. Unfortunately, we find him making use of his position and abusing his students instead. We understand that he takes her to his house and seduces her. In class, David's language becomes seductive. For instance, speaking

about the 'Alps and the Darkensberg' mountains is nothing more than an allusion to Melanie's body. Reflecting on this twisted relationship, one might resist interpreting David's affair with Melanie as an act of rape, but if we consider the situation deeply, we find it even worse than rape. Melanie, as hinted above, is a young lady who is curious about sexual experience, yet she has never thought of having an affair with a man who is as old as her father. The narrator, in a very sarcastic note, tries to hint at David's experience with Melanie as a kind of rape: "Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck", (25) Melanie, then, becomes a victim of David's desire and hers. Of course, she has a boyfriend, but there is no hint of her making love with him.

Dictated by his eroticism, David starts to repudiate his moral and academic responsibility and, in effect, he has created a situation where Melanie starts to blackmail him; he has to tolerate her recurrent absence, and worse than that, he begins to give her grades without setting for the exam. When his affair with Melanie is revealed, David has fallen into real trouble; he has to face his own disgrace and defend himself in front of the disciplinary committee. Moreover, he has to justify himself to his students and the public. At this juncture, David turns out as the Greek tragic hero. In effect, we as audience and readers start to feel sorry for him; we regret his fortune and wish that had opted for another course. We start to dislike the members of the inquiry committee who want to press him to make a confession and declare himself guilty in public. In spite of the fact that he admits his mistake and holds himself responsible for what he had done, we find the members of the committee trying to go beyond their human liabilities and assume the role of the Divine Power! David tells the committee that he is a victim of desire: "I was not myself; I was no longer a fifty-year old divorced at loose end. I became a servant of Eros (52). The committee's persistence on David's repentance and confession in public seems to be an act of hypocrisy; they are not as much interested in his salvation as they are in him declaring his repentance in public in order to keep his job. We, however, admire David when he declares that: "Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse" (58). It is not surprising, then, to find that David's refusal to repent in public costs him his career and wraps him up with disgrace.

David's journey to the East, then, becomes a journey of self-understanding, a journey full of endurance and longing for purification and redemption. In this situation, he resembles Shakespeare's King Lear; he has to put up with the fact that he is no longer a leader but rather led and guided by his daughter. He comes to live in a world of reality, a world which is different from the pastoral and romantic world he has been familiar with in the courses he was teaching. He has to accept the harsh reality of the countryside, the violence and the atrocities committed against his daughter, Lucy. We then, feel that David's experience in the countryside is a journey of revelation about the self. He admits to his daughter that the reason of his

ordeal and fall is his desire: "My case rests on the right of desire... on the god who makes even the small birds quiver" (89).

In the countryside, David becomes involved with the animals; it is an involvement which helps him to reflect on his animalistic desire. He tells Lucy how their dog used to chase the bitches whenever they come to the garden of their house. This dog is an animal and an animal should not be punished for its instinctive desire. However, when the overriding sexual desire concerns man, it becomes a burden: "No, not always, sometimes I have felt the opposite. That desire is a burden we could well do without" (90). In the East, however, David's journey of suffering is further aggravated by the rape incident of his daughter. He feels that he is invalid and unable to protect her. Accordingly, despair dominates him, and at this juncture, the narrator gives us inkling about the mental and the spiritual state of the protagonist: "His pleasure in living has been snuffed out. Like a leaf on a stream, like a puffball on a breeze, he began to float toward his end" (107). Lucy's rape has certainly enraged him and invited him to seek revenge on the perpetrators; however, Lucy's reluctance to press the issue forward has made him question the whole idea of rape. It is only when Lucy hints to him that rape is like murder that he starts to realize its horror, a horror which is expressed by Lucy when she questions: "Isn't it like killing? Pushing the knife, like getting away with murder?" (158).

Realizing that rape is a horrible act, David urges Lucy to leave the farm and go back to the West. Yet, Lucy, who seems to have understood the real motives behind her rape, decides to stay and put up with all the difficulties she might encounter. Lucy's behavior is reminiscent of Caliban's rape of Miranda which was excused by Prospero. But as we see her it is not the father but rather the daughter who is willing to excuse the rapist. This echoes Dominique O Mannoni when he pointed out that Caliban's raping of Miranda is excused. This colonial discourse was totally refuted by Fanon who is cited in Green Keith and Jill LeBihan "points out that the white man's fear of black men raping white women, and their desire for profit, heedless of exploitation, can't be excused so easily" (163). Nevertheless the whole rape situation gives Lucy's her father a lesson in perseverance and endurance. What is funny, however, is the fact that David still clings to the lyrical and bourgeois values of Byron. He thinks that he can remedy his decaying world with his new version of Byron's opera. It is a funny way of dealing with an age which is no longer lyrical. The whole Byronic project becomes comic because it is not a genuine remedy. Moreover, the story of Byron and Teresa is not a story of real love but rather of betrayal and deception. Accordingly, David's approach to a changing world is pathetic and is doomed to failure: "Yet first on Lucy's farm and now again here, the project has failed to engage the core of him. There is something misconceived about it, something that does not come from the heart" (18). Still obsessed with voluptuous desire, David has made love with Bev Shaw. The narrator, however, implies that this is not an act of rape since it is Bev Shaw who seeks him; it is, then, a sexual experience which is based on the desire of one party and the acceptance of the other. This final sexual intercourse, however, has aroused David's disgust and awakened in him the dislike of any sexual

experience which is not built on real love. In this sense, David has come to realize that his sexual experience with Melanie was only an act of voluptuous desire. Therefore, it is not surprising when we find David seeking Mr. Isaac, Melanie's father, in order to apologize to the family for all the pain he has caused them. David, who does not believe in God, agrees to accept his disgrace, but when Isaac asks him about the real reasons of his coming to his house, the narrator intrudes and gives an open ended comment: "He is silent" (173). This sentence, which is stylistically foregrounded, conveys David's inability to talk simply because nobody is going to listen to him. In this context, the whole colonial situation is subsumed by the silenced victim. The need to talk, as Spivak puts it, is determined by the need to be listened to. It seems that David lost the power of talking and in a sense the power of imposing his views of the others. David's silence conveys his inability to further subjugate the other and eventually acceptance of his disgrace. Whatever this statement means, it seems that David has learnt the lesson; it is the lesson, which makes him kill the dog at the end. This killing seems to be a symbolic act; this dog which likes music is a symbol of the false values encoded in Byron's opera. The relationship between Teresa and her lover is mainly based on sexual desire, not real love. In this context it means that one should get rid of any animalistic desire that is not disciplined or balanced by love. The question now is: What lesson has the reader learned? The answer to this question is not complicated; we as human beings should never let our animalist desires sway and debase us in the way this desire debased David and made him live in disgrace. This personal disgrace, however, is not the only ethical issue in the novel; there is another level of disgrace, which has to do with a larger ethical issue related to the disgrace of both the colonial and the postcolonial situation in South Africa.

Again, the aesthetics of the book gives a space for a metonymic interpretation that explicitly hints at another ethical issue, also related to desire; it is the desire of the colonizer to perpetually humiliate and subjugate the colonized. In this sense, David with his lyrical love story of Byron and Teresa stands for the Western colonizer and the unsubstantial values of colonization. It seems that he is a product of a colonial culture which depends on denigrating the image of the colonized. It is the culture which Homi Bhabah believes was promulgated by Western newspapers and quasi-scientific works which are replete with a wide range of stereotypes. (17) David with his decaying bourgeoisie values has become anachronistic in the postcolonial South Africa. Accordingly, David's relationship with Lucy, on the one hand, and Petrus on the other becomes the focal ethical issue of *Disgrace*.

When in the East, David, the representative of the previous Western colonial power, finds himself displaced. His stay in the East is an attempt to find refuge; however, the East is no longer a safe haven for him. Being displaced and outdated, David does not show any interest in involving himself in the postcolonial enterprise because he is not accustomed to the equality principle of the new situation. When Lucy asks him to volunteer and help Bev Shaw, he reluctantly accepts the offer and rejects any implication that his service is an act of "reparation for past misdeeds" (77). David rejects

what seems to be the new egalitarian situation in South Africa; it is a situation that denies him the role of the master. He does not want to accept the fact that Petrus can be the owner of the farm and the master of himself. This why, we always see David looking at Petrus with much dismay, mistrust and fear. The narrator comments on David's attitude of frustration over his new subsumed position: "This is not what he came for- to be stuck in the back of beyond warding of demons, nursing his daughter attending to dying enterprise" (121). Lucy, however, represents the new generation of the colonizer; it is the liberal generation that rejects the colonial values of the ancestors. It seems that Lucy has acquired values different from those of her father; she accepts to live in this society on the basis of equality. Further than that, she does not seem to resist any attempt of being subjugated or subsumed by the other. She is unwilling to question any act of violence perpetrated against her. Coetzee, here, seems to adopt Lucy's point of view and consider her perseverance and endurance as an act of penance or expiation for the sins of the fathers. It is no wonder then to see Lucy after her rape unwilling to raise the issue to the public or report it to the police. However, her father, who still adheres to the past values of the previous colonizer, has the desire to inflict the sever punishment on the perpetrators. He feels very angry and sad when he finds himself unable to defend his daughter. The narrator comments on David's pathetic situation and his inability to provide security to his daughter:" He has the sense that inside him, a vital organ has been bruised, abused-perhaps even his heart. For the first time, he has the taste of what will be like to be an old man, tired to the bone without hopes, without desires, indifferent to the future"(107). Certainly, this is the utter humiliation to the previous colonizer. Accordingly, David sees that the best option for his daughter is to leave the place. When finding himself an outsider, he decides to leave the place and stay in Cape Town. Again, David finds himself placeless and the messy situation of his apartment is a symbol of his displacement in a country, which has been occupied for so long and it is the time for him to leave without return. However, when David learns that his daughter is pregnant, he quickly comes back for her aid. Upon his return David encounters Petrus and asks him about the boy, he wants to deny him the right to defend the boy, Pollux. The encounter between the two is a central ethical issue in the book. Petrus tells David it is his duty to protect the boy. When David, however, accuses Petrus of lying, the latter gets angry and tells him: "You go away, you come back again why? ... You have no work here. You come to look after your child. I also look after my child" (201) Pollux, for Petrus, is 'his family', and 'his people'. David, then, becomes to realize that this place is no longer his nor is his daughter's. Therefore, he asks her again to leave the place, but Lucy, as usual, is relentless and refuses to give up. At this point, it is interesting to see how different readers would respond ethically to such a situation. Some would admire Lucy and hail her for her courageous decision to stay and endure the hardships of the newly emergent situation in the postcolonial South Africa. These readers seem to adopt Lucy's point of view and after all that of the author. It is an intriguing colonial discourse, a discourse that calls for dubious alliance or reconciliation. These readers might not find Cotzee's point of view ethically

problematic. On the contrary, they will hail him as an ethical author who seeks for universal harmony. Certainly the ethical standards of these readers are built on the assumption that there is no harm in accommodating the previous colonizers to the new situation by dressing them the gown of reconciliation. These readers might not have tasted the bitterness of colonization or the horror of the racial discrimination. Other readers, however, might admire David's point of view in leaving the place and would consider any attempt of reconciliation as a dubious extension of colonization in the postcolonial era. These readers seem to have ethical standards built on justice and the right of South African people to live free in their own land. They would also embrace Petrus' assertion that David should leave because he has no place. These readers would find difficulty in accepting Coetzee's view of letting Lucy stay even if she is subsumed by Petrus and his clan. In this sense, David remains the hero who has learnt the lesson and realizes the danger of desire on two levels, the personal and the postcolonial; he says in the end:

“Yes agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again Perhaps this is what I must accept. To start from the ground. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity... Like a dog”.
(205)

Here, some readers might not sympathize with David, but they would certainly admire his endurance and his ability of putting up with the humiliation inflicted upon him by his imprudent desire of colonizing and subjugating the others. Again, his killing of the dog still resonates with the animalistic desire established in the first interpretation; a desire, one should get rid of to free the self and the others.

In conclusion, one can say that *Disgrace* is a novel which encodes many ethical issues. These issues, however, are not straight forward; they are wrapped up by the aesthetics of the text. The potential readers of this book might not take the ethos of the book blindly; on the contrary, they might embrace ethical stances different of those of the author. In this sense, one tends to agree with Posener that there is nothing called 'ethical' or 'unethical' text, however, one contends that the aesthetics is not the end of reading process, but rather a means to an end; the aesthetics allow multiple meanings, thus helping to sustain a friendly relationship between the reader and the text whereby the latter, according to Nussbaum, can fancy and reflect, and in effect benefit ethically.

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