

Article

**'Swine! The Word Still Rings in the Air': David's Reaction and the Perpetuation of Racial Conflict in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace***

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Published in 1999, the year of South Africa's second democratic elections, J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* depicts the gang rape of a middle class white lesbian by three black men. *Disgrace* received overwhelming international praise as an engaging and thought-provoking novel, winning Coetzee his second Booker Prize. However, the local reaction differed dramatically as the novel was immediately criticised by the majority of the black community as well as by the ANC, with many South Africans perceiving the depiction of the white and black races as being greatly bound up with apartheid-era race-centred representations of South Africans.<sup>1</sup>

The situating of a white South African female as the victim of post-apartheid violence unsurprisingly caused great offence to the black community who felt this undermined the on-going struggle for democracy and equality. However, as David Attwell points out in 'Race in *Disgrace*', there is an absence in the novel of racial markers used to describe Lucy's attackers— in fact, 'race is bleached out of the episode almost entirely'.<sup>2</sup> Whilst the novel can thus be said to 'invite racism',<sup>3</sup> the racialised reading of *Disgrace* by the ANC underscores how dangerously easy it is to interpret a novel like *Disgrace* (one which engages with the controversial anxieties of post-apartheid South Africa) as being representative of a stereotypical viewpoint, in relation to the larger concerns of a racial and political struggle.

This paper will explore aspects of this debate, discussing the issue of language and David Lurie's invocation of colonial discourse— which seems to signal a return to the old racial hierarchy of apartheid, reinforcing the stereotypical racial categorisations of the colonial era. This paper considers how the English language has become tainted by apartheid and how difficult it has become to speak about Africa in post-apartheid South African culture, without invoking linguistic traces of the country's racialised and oppressive past.

Lurie in *Disgrace* tells himself that the violence he and Lucy suffered 'happens every day, every hour, every minute' in post-apartheid South Africa (98).<sup>4</sup> Although Lurie does not overtly name black South Africans as the guilty parties in regards to all crime, the fact that he ponders this thought immediately after his own attack suggests that Lurie associates violent crime with the same 'race' as his attackers. Consequently, for Lucy to speak of her rape and tell of her ordeal would inevitably lead to an appropriation and interpretation of her narrative by her father in terms of racial stereotypes. It is likely that Lurie would use his daughter's story to support his current demonisation of black South African men,

drawing him further into the conflict of the racial divide. Mike Marais similarly argues that 'notwithstanding his outrage at Lucy's violation, Lurie is himself implicated in the instrumentalising logic which defines relations within this society and which leads to violence against other beings. He is thus party to that which condemns'.<sup>5</sup> Lurie's understanding of his daughter's rape would in turn lead to a hardening of racial barriers, preventing the reconciliation between the two races.

Lurie's physical method of retaliation further fuels the racial conflict in the novel. Through wanting to 'take Petrus by the throat' (119) and wishing the rapists 'harm' (107) and in striking Pollox for spying on Lucy (206), Lurie takes on the position of the 'white master' who attempts to 'teach the blacks a lesson'. In the act of violently beating Pollox, Lurie assumes a role which was previously inscribed onto the political landscape of South Africa during apartheid. In seeking to avenge Lucy, Lurie thus locates himself within a discursively-constructed racial polarity, and when he strikes Pollox, history speaks through him too. As a result, Lurie's reaction to his daughter's rape reinforces the racial categorisations of apartheid.

In a study conducted by M. Benn titled 'Perceived Alterations in Racial Perceptions of Victims of Violent Crime' (2007), a white South African woman who had been robbed and threatened, and whose husband had been shot by a group of black burglars reported that her attitudes towards blacks dramatically changed after the attack:

I have always been very busy trusting and very comfortable, you know, I do not think that I would have behaved any different in a crowd situation with black people or white people. I would expect a white kid to pickpocket me just as readily as I would expect a black person to grab my handbag. I avoid them now, the idea of any physicality with them is like 'yuck', disgust [...] and I do have a different perception of common everyday people I might encounter. I see the potential now for black men to be ruthless, callous and definitely not to live by the same human rules as I am and the abiding mass of people are. Okay. One change for me is that I now see the potential for damage and harm and danger in every black man I see.<sup>6</sup>

From the victim's statement one can notice how the trauma associated with a violent attack leads to the employment of defenses such as othering, distantiation, displacement, projection and splitting. There is clearly also evidence of over-generalisation and the surfacing of categoric and stereotypical ways of thinking.<sup>7</sup> Since the attack, the victim has regressed to using the racialised vocabulary of apartheid. Blacks have once again become associated with crime, violence and brutality. The single traumatic event has thus triggered the colonial beliefs of the past.

Similarly, in *Disgrace*, through Lurie's choice to invoke the latent but not forgotten language of the white master, Lurie's desire for vengeance and his

expression of this desire can be shown to have origins in the racialised discourses of the context in which he is situated.<sup>8</sup>

Lurie uses ‘the flat of his hand [to catch] the boys face. ‘*You swine!*’ he shouts, and strikes him a second time, so that he staggers. ‘*You filthy swine!*’ [...] The word still rings in the air: *Swine!* Never has he felt such elemental rage. He would like to give the boy what he deserves: a sound thrashing. Phrases that all his life he has avoided seem suddenly just and right: *Teach him a lesson, Show him his place* (206).

Lurie thus reverts, linguistically, to ‘the old days’ (116) when white farmers knew how to ‘have [...] it out’ (116) with servants, and ‘social positions were – for some, at least – comfortably fixed.’<sup>9</sup> Lurie’s sudden nostalgia for the old South Africa lies in his inability to cope with the unexpected blurring of power roles between blacks and whites. The ramifications of language choice, as it pertains to rules of address, are thus momentarily emphasised in *Disgrace*. It is also important to note that the insults Lurie expresses towards Pollox are italicised, reinforcing the difference between Lurie’s ordinary and now racialised speech. The constantly grappling and competing racial and power dynamics can thus be seen to be reflected through Lurie’s sudden shift in language, from that of normalised everyday speech to a racially focused vocabulary which mirrors strongly that of colonial discourse. Lurie thus attempts to justify his actions through the use of colonial discourse in order to legitimise his desire to ‘give the boy what he deserves’ (206).

Lurie’s conscious choice to invoke the language previously employed by many white South Africans during the era of apartheid highlights his fall into the linguistic entrapment of colonial discourse – a discourse which had previously separated the races and here does so once again. In a moment of self-reflection, Lurie himself considers how ‘more and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for [...] South Africa’ (117). Thus, for Lurie, and the reader, whilst the category of colonial discourse is thus understood as being originally located within a specific period in history, the words belonging to the discourse ‘still ring in the air’.

In addition, words in the novel are often handled with a meticulous and even burdensome awareness of their morphological, semantic, and cultural complexities. In chapter twelve, the word ‘friend’ for instance, appears with its full etymology, ‘Modern English *friend* from Old English *freond*, from *Freon*, to love’ (102). The listing of etymological information acts to estrange both the word ‘friend’ from itself and from the basic human bond that it defines. By suggesting the transformative journey that the word has undergone over the years, the reader is made to realise that language is by nature, fluid. The instability, which has become attached to language in post-apartheid South Africa, can thus be seen as the result of attempts to reify it by the keepers of language.

However, it is not just the changes to words in the English language that destabilise the reader's grasp of language in *Disgrace*. The constant intrusion of foreign vocabulary also acts to alienate the reader.<sup>10</sup> Coetzee's choice to italicise foreign words such as *j'accuse* (40) and *schadenfreude* (42) reinforces their contrast to English, making these words 'Other'. They are presented with such deliberation that the reader cannot but pause to wonder whether these lexical strangers have any place or purchase on the 'new South Africa' – whether the cultural values in which they are embedded are at all translatable.<sup>11</sup> On one hand, the invocation of foreign words or phrases act to distance the reader from the novel – the ease of reading is broken through the unexpected and abrupt invasion of foreign lexis. On the other, specific foreign words are usually invoked to explain a particular feeling, thought or mood of Lurie's.<sup>12</sup> Whilst the ability to find a precise word to represent one's feeling highlights the capability of language to explain all, the choice to use predominantly foreign words to do so suggests that a singular language or mode of speaking is not enough to represent the world around one, and around the character in the novel. One must therefore repeatedly switch between differing types of speech in order to more greatly express oneself.

The destabilising of English in *Disgrace* suggests that the language has become tainted by the history of apartheid. The constant invocation of foreign languages in the novel can thus be understood as an effort to draw attention to the problematic nature surrounding the use of English in South Africa. And, in turn, Lucy's choice to remain silent can be understood as an effort to escape from the language which she associates with a history she has tried to divorce herself from. Jane Poyner similarly comments that Lucy's refusal to testify is a last-ditch attempt to resist the racist discourses of the time.<sup>13</sup> The linguistic blurring of lexical categories such as colonial discourse, ordinary speech and foreign words confuse meanings, thereby creating a crisis of definition. As a result, all established oppositions and distinctions seem to be under threat of collapse: literally and linguistically.<sup>14</sup>

It is significant to note that at the novel's most extreme moment of crisis, when Lurie is locked in the bathroom during his attack and unable to protect his daughter from sexual violation, he becomes overwhelmed by a variety of languages, none of which however are able to express his suffering:

He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa. He is helpless, an Aunt Sally, a figure from a cartoon, a missionary in cassock and topi waiting with clasped hands and upcast eyes while the savages jaw away in their own lingo preparatory to plunging him into their boiling cauldron (95).

Through this scene Lurie seems bereft of terms to articulate his experience. In an effort to explain the sudden unreliability of speech, Lurie blames his moment of hopelessness on 'darkest Africa'. The latter passage can be contrasted with Lurie's earlier statement that 'human society has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions to one another' (3-4).

By contrasting the 'Darkest Africa' with the languages of 'Italian' and 'French', Lurie suggests that Africa is a place where words lose their value and thus have no meaning - a place shrouded by silence and confusion. Lurie therefore perceives or depicts Africa as a lawless state, Other, almost barbaric in nature, reinforcing the stereotype surrounding Africa typical of the colonial period. Lurie's perception is further illustrated by his choice to describe the continent as 'dark'.

If the English language in the novel is depicted as tainted by the history of apartheid, then Lucy's silence acts to challenge this problematic mode of expression by preventing further flux. By refusing to prosecute Pollox and speak of her rape in detail, Lucy refuses to engage with a discourse which will inevitably situate herself as a white victim of black rape. In doing so, Lucy rejects the opportunity to locate her attackers as individuals who fulfil the black stereotype of the period. Through her silence, Lucy rejects the binaries of coloniser/ colonised, black/ white, attacker/ victim. Lucy's silence thus contests the associations made between race and discourse; her refusal to narrate her rape is an effort to prevent her incident from perpetuating the racial stereotypes and racial conflicts of the contemporary period.

I am by no means suggesting that victims of rape should refuse to narrate their story but I am suggesting that, in terms of *Disgrace*, Lucy's silence should not be read simply as an effort to forget or ignore the event, but rather as an attempt to remove herself from the racial politics behind the trauma and the language available for describing it. By not speaking of her trauma Lucy endeavours to distance herself from the racial conflict at the core of her attack. Lucy thus uses her active silence to challenge history.

By way of concluding this paper, I would like to refer to Lurie's perception of Lucy's silence as an effort to protect her 'secret' (109). Whilst Lurie believes he understands Lucy's decision to not narrate her story, he nevertheless is unable to accept Lucy's chosen silence. Lurie thinks of what the attackers will say on hearing the Lurie family story on the news: '*too ashamed*, they will say to each other, *too ashamed to tell*, and they will chuckle luxuriously, recollecting their exploit. Is Lucy prepared to concede them that victory?' (110). Lurie fears that the rapists will see Lucy's silence as an act of surrender. Lurie's imagining of what Lucy's attackers will think of his daughter's silence can also be said to be revealing of what he personally thinks of his daughter's reaction. At one point Lurie even ponders that Lucy is silent 'because of the disgrace. Because of the shame' (115).

Lurie's sympathy, concern and guilt over Lucy's rape are thus also mixed with his own personal feelings of anger and desire to control the situation. Consequently, Lurie's guilt and frustration at not having been able to fulfil his role as a protective father leads to his demonisation of black men. Lurie's return to colonial discourse by way of justifying his violence to Pollox further underscores his unjust stereotyping of black South Africans. The English language is thus problematised as it becomes the language of separation, acting

to perpetuate racial conflict. And, in this way, the portrayal of language in *Disgrace* asks the reader to interrogate the capability of English to unify black and white South Africans in post-apartheid South Africa, due to its previous employment as a tool used for racial classification.

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<sup>1</sup> South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), *Inquiry into Racism in the Media: Hearings Transcripts XIV.3/3* (5 April 2000), p. 125.

<sup>2</sup> David Attwell, 'Race in Disgrace', *Interventions*, 4:3 (2002), p. 336.

<sup>3</sup> Kai Easton, 'J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*: Reading Race/ Reading Scandal' in *Scandalous Fictions: The Twentieth Century Novel in the Public Sphere* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 189.

<sup>4</sup> J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 98 [Subsequent references are to this edition].

<sup>5</sup> Mike Marais, 'The Possibility of Ethical Action: J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*', *Scrutiny* 2, 5:1 (2000), p. 58.

<sup>6</sup> M. Benn, 'Perceived Alterations in Racial Perceptions of Victims of Violent Crime', Unpublished Masters Dissertation: University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (2007), p. 287.

<sup>7</sup> Debra Kaminer and Gillian Eagle, *Traumatic Stress in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010), p. 117.

<sup>8</sup> Mike Marais, 'J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the Task of the Imagination', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 29:2 (2006), p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>10</sup> Examples can be seen on pages 3 (French), 42 (German), 60 (Afrikaans) of *Disgrace*.

<sup>11</sup> Marais, 'J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the Task of the Imagination', p. 81.

<sup>12</sup> Examples can be seen on pages 1, 102, 103

<sup>13</sup> Jane Poyner, *J.M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), p. 159.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*.