

# Projection of Women in *Disgrace* Lucy Lurie: An Emblem of Resistance

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**Abstract:** J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* mainly focuses on the violent coexistence of the blacks and the whites in South Africa. A parallel theme, however, that runs through the novel shows the women characters of the novel as yet another inferior race biologically vulnerable. This process of subjugation basically rests on the view that women are physical entities before anything else which puts emphasis on their sexual role over everything else. The central consciousness of the novel David Lurie retains that the female body of women matters more than the spirit inside. Seen through his eyes, the women in this novel appear to be entities whose identities are constructed by an onlooker rather than by themselves. This questionable construction of identity not only proves women to be vulnerable but also proves them as people whose bodily existence overshadows their cerebral faculties. The characters are projected as being acted upon in the context of the novel. Again, the issue of the representation of women shares an intricate fabric of a broader social and cultural perspective with other issues like their position and empowerment. This projection, however, is proved to be dubious through Lucy Lurie, one major female character of the novel who successfully creates an independent self-defying construction of herself. This article focuses on the representation of women in *Disgrace* along with the resistance against this representation offered by Lucy.

J. M. Coetzee's Booker prize winning novel *Disgrace* is highly charged with racial issues and dilemmas. As a supplementary theme of these issues the projection of women in this novel is also noteworthy. Irrespective of their race and class women are considered here as physical entities, almost like geographical spaces, which can be occupied and subjugated.

The gender issue goes deep down into different layers of society. It shares an intricate fabric of a broader social and cultural perspective with other issues like identity and position. The women characters are acted upon entities in the context of the novel. One of the major exponents of this projection of women is David Lurie—the protagonist of the novel. The narrator-focaliser's (David Lurie) view of women as physiological entities before anything else is a glaring example of the cultural-literary archetypal presentation of women. Women are women first, having a female body. Simon De Beauvoir alludes to the projection and

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construction of the "Eternal Feminine" in *The Second Sex* (qtd. in Rice and Waugh, 145). The rational order of things excludes the body which is projected entirely on women whereas mind is to be associated with masculinity. Such an obsession with the belief in an inseparable link between women and flesh leads to the depiction of women as "indomitably earthly." The "damning otherness of flesh," as mentioned by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, alienates women from the world of spirit and rationality and puts her into an entirely carnal world. (155) Lurie is a perfect upholder of this tradition. He has one single common grid to measure all women, even his own daughter, which is the physiological grid. Neville Smith navigates the language of *Disgrace* to show how Lurie combines the physical, social and cultural nuances to describe women in the following paragraph.

The narrator-focaliser zooms in on the body of women in a particular way, providing coarse detail and focusing on age and body shape. Coetzee's narrative also questions contemporary media images of the perfect body of fashion in a media industry which dictates ever younger and thinner models. Lucy is described as a flower-child/New Age traveller and peasant wannabe, who ironically does "not want to come back in another existence as a dog or a pig and have to live as dogs and pigs live under us" (p. 74). In Lurie's continuing physiological inscription of the female body, she occupies space like some kind of overripe fruit. She has "put on weight ... her hips and breasts are now ample, comfortably barefoot" (p. 59). Lurie deplores the fact that parents who are urban intellectuals have produced this throwback, this sturdy young settler ... a solid countrywoman, a boerevrou" (pp. 60-61). Instead of interpreting Lucy in purely racial terms related to genetic purity, the term "throwback" is linked to social, cultural and historical origins. For the narrator, Bev Shaw is even more pear-shaped; a "dumpy, bustling little woman with black freckles, close-cropped, wiry hair, and no neck" (p. 72). Mrs Isaacs occupies a kind of margin between settler womanhood and rural paysan in Lurie's taxonomy of woman described above. She is "a short woman, grown dumpy in middle-age, with bowed legs that give her a faintly rolling walk" (p. 169). However, from his lecherous vantage, the narrator concedes that she must have been a "real beauty ... in her day" (p. 169). David Lurie establishes a gendered taxonomy of the women of the Eastern Cape based on cultural and social indicators--a parody of descriptions common to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century travel narratives which recorded taxonomies of fauna, flora and the local inhabitants of the Cape for their European audiences. (Smith 6)

The last few lines of this paragraph perfectly bring out the patriarchal and even imperialistic view of women as properties to be discovered and explored. Men have the privilege to describe women geographically—as a piece of land to be discovered and known, in order to be owned.

The notion that women are women first, then anything else, focuses mainly on the physical reality of them. When some social and cultural realities are added to this issue of identity, their position can be obviously shaky in the social order. Judith Butler indicates the relationship between the physical reality and social experience of women in this way.

Feminist theory has often been critical of naturalistic explanations of sex and sexuality that assume that the meaning of women's social existence can be derived from some fact of their physiology. In distinguishing sex from gender, feminist theorists have disputed causal explanations that assume that sex dictates or necessitates certain social meanings for women's experience. Phenomenological theories of human embodiment have also been concerned to distinguish between the various physiological and biological causalities that structure bodily existence and the *meanings* that embodied existence assumes in the context of lived experience. (901)

In most cases for determining a woman's position and role in the society her physiological and biological existence becomes the dominant factor. In *Disgrace* David Lurie in more than one way reconfirms this notion several times.

A brief account of a few points will make this proposition clearer. The first point is, most of the women characters, seen through Lurie's eyes, are supposed to be analysed first and foremost from their physical aspects. Second, he has his own idea of women as 'He does not like women who make no effort to be attractive' (72).<sup>i</sup> So women, as a duty of being women, must try to be attractive. Third, initially Lucy Lurie is shown as doomed after she is sexually assaulted as if the physiological existence of women is threatened when her bodily purity is publicly lost.

An exploration of these points will illustrate an encompassing image of women as vulnerable sexual objects who are attractive if womanly and graceful, and repulsive if not so. This image, however, is often challenged because in the novel we have two contrasting pictures of the father and the daughter, David and Lucy, clashing with each other to establish their own diametrically opposed ideas of 'good' and 'acceptable'. For David, Lucy's lifestyle is not acceptable as it does not comply with his own concept of an ideal life. He thinks that she should be more careful about her appearance, find a better companion than Helen, who, he supposes, is Lucy's companion, and more importantly, he thinks Lucy should leave this smallholding and go to the city to live a life like her other friends. The traumatic experience of Lucy on her firm of being raped by three blacks and the

aftermath of it seem to be so disgraceful to David because Lucy becomes more careless about herself after that, and even she looks like an old lady in her loose garments and unkempt hair. Here it is noticeable that the reference is again made to the external projection of her physiology.

As an illustration of the first point we can say that Melanie Issacs, as a woman, is subjugated on two levels. First by Lurie himself, who gets involved in a physical relationship with her, who is also his student. Secondly Ryan, the hooligan boyfriend of the girl, also tries to take control of her. The position in which she is in now obviously shows the vulnerability of her existence. She is caught in a two-fold trap. Both the males consider her as their own property. David Lurie tells her that a beautiful woman is a public property. He says '...Because a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it' (16).

This debasing of women's identity, this reduction of them to the level of sexual object is the main driving force of the novel. Almost all the female characters somehow or other conform to this description, seen through David's eyes.

Bev Shaw, another woman in *Disgrace*, is a veteran animal lover. She has a very good career at the animal welfare clinic where she devotes herself completely to her vocation. She does not bother about her feminine self. Extremely careless about her looks, Bev seems to be a human being rather than a woman, beyond all boundaries of gender. The narrator-focaliser, David Lurie, describes her as ... 'a dupmy, bustling little woman with black freckles, close-cropped, wiry hair, and no neck' (72). When Lucy suggests him to give her (Bev) a hand in managing the clinic, David's typical response is... 'I don't think she and I will hit it off' (77). Lucy makes the perspective correct by saying that it is not a matter of hitting off but only working together.

In David's taxonomy women are physical presences before anything else. Their identity is inextricably connected with how they look, and other implications have secondary importance only. As an erotica *Disgrace* makes Bev Shaw surrender to the narrator-focaliser's fixed role as women-baiter when she finds it necessary to have sex with David who, however, does not find it pleasurable but almost repulsive: 'After the sweet young flesh of Melanie Issacs, this is what I have come to' (150). This reduction of the girl to "flesh" is the central emblem of the novel's pervasive metaphor for women as acted upon entities fit to be possessed by active men. Curiously enough, Bev Shaw, as a woman, takes it as a duty to 'please' Lurie by inviting him to share her bed. She is also aware of her looks and does some making up before the act as if to reaffirm David's view of women in the novel's context.

Lurie is pondering over the opera he will write about Byron and his mistress in Italy. The depiction of Teresa, the mistress, is an archetype of the old, rejected,

depressed woman who is now left to her miseries alone. Forlorn and dejected, she has chosen the indoor life, devoid of any kind of hope or rays of sunshine, the life of a prisoner. Towards the end of the novel Lurie visualizes a parallel between Teresa and Lucy. Both have withdrawn themselves from the natural joys and sorrows of everyday life. Does rejection of marriage after a sexual harassment mean withdrawal from life on the part of women? From Lucy we get a negative answer to this question. We see in her an indomitable spirit who is striving hard in a world, more hostile towards her as a woman, to create a place of her own, where she will live as 'A good mother and a good person' (216). Lucy's revival at the end is something that challenges the physiological identity of women and makes it difficult for Lurie to understand this new woman. The role he (Lurie) has assigned to women is formulaic. Women are weak, passive, vulnerable to age, ugliness and sexual repression. But his daughter proves that the opposite of this is the ultimate and triumphant truth. Though devastated and unprotected, Lucy chooses to grow flower on her own ruin in the farm, which she is now planting. This picture of the revival of a woman after abuse is something beyond the understanding of David as it suggests that her (a woman's) life means much more than her sexual identity.

We find that the projection of women in physical terms is a universal factor in the novel's arena. Whether a woman is black or white is not that significant in the matter of subjugation. Melanie, Lurie's student, lives away from her parents in an apartment with a cousin. She is from George, a suburb in comparison to Cape Town. Socially and culturally she is in a very accessible position for someone like David Lurie. On the other hand Lucy, a settler in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape area of the city, in spite of having a good education, is accessible as a victim as socially she is now unprotected and alone. Being a woman she has to pay taxes if she wants to build up a farm on her own. Lucy correctly identifies the attackers as debt collectors and tax collectors. Pollux has the right to peep through her bathroom window and Petrus has the right to propose to marry her in the same way as Lurie has a right to make calls to Melanie and pay a visit to Melanie's flat where he can ravish her against the latter's desire. So not race, but social and cultural identity puts women in a vulnerable state.

As a matter of fact we see that *Disgrace*, using the perspective of David Lurie, focuses again and again on the physiological and biological reality of the female existence. The cultural and social factors also play a very significant role in shaping the identity of the women characters of this novel. This identity reduces them to a position of passive, subjugated entities. They are acted upon by the men. Towards the end of the novel Lurie makes a comment on the fixed roles of women in the world which is mainly based on biological reasons. He comes to the conclusion that as an old man he has lost the right to pursue young women. The law of reproduction discourages this persuasion. At last 'seed' becomes the ultimate determining factor in the identity shaping of women. Lurie thinks 'For

unnatural acts: for broadcasting old seed, tired seed, seed that does not quicken, *contra naturam*. If the old man hog the young women, what will be the future of the species?...Half of literature is about it: young women struggling to escape from under the weight of old men, for the sake of the species' (190). This apprehension for the species is so active in him that he is disgusted at Lucy for choosing to have the baby--a proof of her violation. But as it has been said earlier, Lucy herself is an example of the futility of assigning roles according to physiological, social and cultural considerations. She proves that these are constructs rather than reality and one can be happy even after throwing back all these ideas. The myth centering women that they are first and foremost physical entities, useful in the process of reproduction, which has been implied in *Disgrace* through David Lurie, is not an essential paradigm, but a mere arbitrary fabrication.

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All textual references are from J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, (Vintage 2000).

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