

“I Am Not Minor”: Unviable Redemption and Patriarchal Structure in *Disgrace*

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J.M. Coetzee’s 1999 novel *Disgrace* has received extensive academic study, with many analyses assessing the merit of the main character’s “redemption,” the theme of animal rights, and the broader significance of the novel as an allegory for post-apartheid South Africa. While there is also literature that examines the novel’s displays of misogyny, there is a noticeable lack of research on the patriarchal structure that underlies the oft-discussed “redemption” present in *Disgrace*. As such, this paper argues that the theory of redemption *Disgrace* offers for the future of South Africa is undermined by its reliance on patriarchal structures. The novel indeed constructs a redemptive theory grounded in a moral shift, repentant spirituality, and personal sacrifice, allowing the story to end on a seemingly hopeful note. However, a closer analysis of David’s experiences and interactions with women, especially with Lucy, reveals how these redemptive arcs are facilitated primarily through patriarchal structures, relying on the erasure, silencing, and sacrifice of women; David refuses to respect Lucy’s decisions, lashes out at Dr. Farodia Rassool, and foregrounds Mr. Isaacs’ authority as he dismisses the feelings of Mrs. Isaacs and Desiree. The redemptive theory *Disgrace* offers is therefore unviable because it unethically constructs itself at the expense of women’s autonomy and suffering, in which any “redemption” demonstrated is fundamentally exploitative. Ultimately, *Disgrace* reaffirms the futility of imagining a more just post-apartheid world when this world continues to exploit women.

Keywords: *Disgrace*, South African literature, patriarchy, misogynoir, postcolonial literature, redemption

Introduction

J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* takes on a heavy task for a novel just over 200 pages: how can white South Africans make amends for the violence they perpetrated during apartheid? Some critics claim that *Disgrace* depicts white reformation as a “journey to personal salvation” [3], where the novel offers hope for social transformation through personal betterment. This paper, however, posits an alternate perspective. While *Disgrace* indeed constructs a redemptive theory grounded in a moral shift, repentant spirituality, and personal sacrifice, a closer analysis of David’s experiences and interactions with women, especially Lucy, reveals how these redemptive arcs are facilitated primarily through patriarchal structures, relying on the erasure, silencing, and sacrifice of women. The redemptive theory *Disgrace* offers is therefore unviable because it unethically constructs itself at the expense of women’s autonomy and suffering, in which any “redemption” demonstrated is thus fundamentally exploitative.

Moral Shift and the Disregard of Women’s Knowledge

Over the course of *Disgrace*, David becomes attuned to a broader set of moral principles that place greater value on the nonhuman world. Feminist scholar Marianne DeKoven argues that his gradual attunement to these new ethics constitutes his “salvation narrative,” in which David can only embrace this capacious morality through dogs and *women*, especially Bev Shaw [3]. Thus, many critical texts

focus on the role of Bev Shaw in David’s redemptive journey, with another scholar explicitly calling her “[David’s] redeemer” [7]. However, *Lucy* is actually the first character to introduce to David this respect for the nonhuman, telling him that “[t]his is the only life there is. Which we share with animals... [We must try t]o share some of our human privilege with the beasts.” In return, David refuses to recognize the significance of Lucy’s words, instead dismissing her with the rationale that humans “are of a different order of creation” than animals [2]. His disregard for Lucy’s perspective, especially juxtaposed with his gradual respect for Bev Shaw’s ethical approach to the world, suggests a misogynistic distinction perhaps on the basis of age but more likely on familial hierarchy. Though David may not see Bev Shaw as an “equal,” his choice to have an affair with her—compounded by the narrator’s dry commentary for David to “stop calling her poor Bev Shaw. If she is poor, then he is bankrupt”—at least suggests that David learns to recognize her individual personhood [2]. In contrast, the paternal hierarchy invoked regarding Lucy’s status as his daughter denies her this basic acknowledgment. Well into the novel, Lucy continually criticizes David for his refusal to hear her: “You have not been listening to me” [2]. David’s inability to recognize Lucy’s own capacious morality and thus her role in his ethical shift reflects historical patriarchal dominance of the father over the daughter, where the daughter’s wise words are perhaps unconsciously processed but remain effectively unheard.

The pattern of patriarchal dominance over Lucy repeats throughout the novel, contrary to the notion of redemption leading to self-betterment. Even as David appears to internalize the more inclusive morality that recognizes the intrinsic value of the nonhuman—suggested by his choice to cremate the euthanized dogs' corpses himself—he does not deign to offer such intrinsic respect to his own daughter [2]. “This is the only life there is,” and it is one David shares not just with animals but also with women. Yet, time and time again, he fails to recognize Lucy's autonomy. As Lucy herself later says: “You [David] behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character.... I am not minor. I have a life of my own... and in my life I am the one who makes the decisions” [2]. In this moment, she explicitly puts into words David's inability to view her as an autonomous being. His failure here marks a stark contrast to the same David who could not bear to eat two sheep after tending to them for a few days [2]. David can honor the individuality of two nonhuman animals, but not that of a woman in his immediate family. Of course, it should be noted that David's domineering behavior increases after Lucy's rape, arguably reflecting a genuine concern for his daughter's well-being. However, his assumptions regarding her experience of sexual violence undercut his concern: “But you weren't there [when Lucy was raped], David. She [Lucy] told me [Bev Shaw]. You weren't” [2]. In chafing against Lucy's decision to not share with him or the police the details of her rape and assuming he understands her experience *without* her telling him what happened, David further victimizes his daughter. His repeated attempts to control Lucy and her life thus beg the question: does “David Lurie's salvation narrative” truly place “the possibility of hope” in women [3]? Or does David exploit the wisdom of women for his own self-betterment without acknowledgment of their position as facilitators of his transformation—particularly that of his own daughter—and belittle them in the process? If the situation is the second, the unviability of *Disgrace's* redemptive theory becomes clearer because of its exploitative appropriation of women's knowledge and experiences.

Repentant Spirituality and the Manifestation of Misogynoir

While the presence of women as facilitators of David's ethical journey can be read favorably or unfavorably, the spiritual element of *Disgrace's* theory of redemption is more clearly made possible only through patriarchal structures. Here, “spiritual” refers to the sincere apology, reflecting David's shift toward true remorse for his predatory actions against Melanie. Early in the novel, David displays an utter lack of repentance for his behavior. An oft-cited example is his refusal to apologize and genuinely acknowledge his wrongdoings at the university hearing. Importantly, Dr. Farodia Rassool is the only character to criticize David for his “fundamentally evasive” responses at this hearing, calling him out for how his “abuse of a young woman” perpetuates a “long history of exploitation.” David's response to her justified criticism is to “snap... back” at her, an aggravation not displayed toward anyone else on the committee [2]. In other words, David only lashes out in response to a woman who dares to speak her mind.

David's university hearing has often been considered a parallel to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) [7]. The TRC was criticized “for advocating a form of the expression of

guilt expiation... [that] tended to perpetuate rather than to propitiate and absolve the sins of apartheid” [4]. The university seeking an apology from David for the sake of receiving an apology, uncaring if his remorse is genuine, is thus reminiscent of the TRC's strategy [2]. This assessment, while accurate, is incomplete, as it fails to consider how David's targeted rebuttals to Dr. Rassool's criticism suggest that the presence of a woman's protest negates any possibility of spiritual redemption for him; he cannot take women's opinions seriously. If we consider that Dr. Rassool may be a woman of color—her surname is of Arabic origin—then racialized misogyny must be brought into the conversation: David's adamant refusal to apologize manifests specifically in opposition to the informed outrage of a nonwhite woman, notably the first nonwhite woman in the narrative that he has not slept with. For David, then, sex appeal primarily constitutes his value of nonwhite women, not their ability to speak truth, hence his irritation toward Dr. Rassool's comments; her vocality does not conform to patriarchal, white supremacist standards that seek to silence women of color. Consequently, if racialized misogyny prevents nonwhite women's protest from encouraging spiritual growth, what *can* facilitate the spiritual element of David's redemption? We must look to the opposite end of the spectrum: the necessity of male patriarchal approval and the silencing of nonwhite women.

In the second half of the novel, David comes to understand the harm his behavior wrought on Melanie. To his credit, David's apology to Mr. Isaacs reads as sincere: “I am sorry for what I took your daughter through. You have a wonderful family. I apologize for the grief I have caused you and Mrs. Isaacs. I ask for your pardon” [2]. Upon closer inspection, however, David's apology foregrounds the reaction and reception of Mr. Isaacs, a man, in which the women involved are allowed no response. David specifically goes to Mr. Isaacs to offer his apology, and it is Mr. Isaacs alone who invites David into his home [2]. In the most literal sense, then, a man facilitates David's ability to deliver his apology. Additionally, David refers to Melanie as “your daughter” in the previous quote, emphasizing Mr. Isaacs' paternal authority as her father, whereas using her name would have prioritized her individual identity. David then asks for *Mr. Isaacs'* pardon, not Melanie's or even Mrs. Isaacs', again deferring to the patriarchal figure for recognition of his apology and thus the facilitation of his redemptive journey. The delivery of David's spiritual redemption therefore only occurs at the behest and the acceptance of a man, where the women involved, particularly three nonwhite women, cannot voice an opinion.

Scholars have previously acknowledged this silencing of nonwhite women in *Disgrace*. As media studies scholar Ian Glenn observes, “Women of colour seem destined to be without agency” in the novel, including if not especially in this spiritual turning point of David's redemptive journey [6]. Where David ignores the voice of Lucy, a white woman, the voices of Melanie, her mother, and her sister—implied to be women of color, perhaps South Africans of mixed race—are never given a chance to speak, especially regarding the changes in his character [5], [7]. We might further note that Melanie's mother and sister can only express their true feelings through body language: Desiree displays hesitance around David, and Mrs. Isaacs avoids his eyes [2]. This physical discomfort suggests that unlike Mr. Isaacs, these women might not be so keen as to accept David's apology in good faith. The women's display of nonverbal communication might evince how nonwhite women have

found ways to speak despite the suppression of their voices; there is no questioning the discomfort they feel around David. That said, their discomfort nonetheless goes unrecognized—or worse, ignored—by Mr. Isaacs. Patriarchy thus grants David’s spiritual redemption through the disregard of nonwhite women’s perspectives, from Dr. Rassool to the Isaacs’ women, not unlike David’s individual disregard for Lucy’s autonomy. Even when David finally offers an apology to the Isaacs’ mother and younger daughter, the narrative denies them an opportunity to reply. “With careful ceremony, [David] gets to his knees and touches his forehead to the floor” before Mrs. Isaacs and Desiree, where mother and daughter can only “sit... there, frozen” [2]. As nonwhite women, their silence in *Disgrace* reinforces the violent legacy of suppression of nonwhite women’s voices, especially in opposition to whiteness and patriarchy. What’s more, Melanie, David’s victim, is notably absent from this apology; how can we consider the spiritual healing of David’s redemption viable if he never attempts to offer his sincere remorse to the person he directly harms? As such, it is only through the racialized misogyny of nonwhite women’s silence that David can achieve spiritual redemption. To consider the juxtaposition of Dr. Rassool’s vocal criticism with the silence of the Isaacs’ women, the implication is that only through women’s silence, without a woman “nagging,” was David’s spiritual growth possible. Again, the unviability of *Disgrace*’s redemptive theory arises because of this “redemption’s” suppression of nonwhite women’s perspectives, in which the denial of their voices and autonomy becomes exploited for David’s self-betterment.

Personal Sacrifice and the Exploitation of Women’s Pain

The final element of *Disgrace*’s redemptive theory is the necessity of sacrifice: “What if... what if *that* is the price one has to pay for staying on?” [2]. Though this quote refers to a specific moment of sexual violence, the concept can be construed to refer to suffering and sacrifice in general. What if suffering and sacrifice are the price oppressors must pay for their redemption? Many critics concede that the novel holds “an instinctive awareness of the need for... sacrifice as a basic condition of life in the new South Africa” [4]. As white South Africans, both David and Lucy embody this necessity of sacrifice because of their racial privilege; David committed an intentional act of sexual violence, while Lucy “by default... maintain[s] the traditional, defensive position of the white landowner in South Africa” [3]. However, in *Disgrace*, Lucy’s suffering becomes instrumentalized to facilitate David’s redemption, a strategy that is ultimately unviable because it posits redemption must require an unethical dependence on women’s pain.

If David’s journey is characterized by a “generalized regime of renunciation,” then Lucy’s is constructed through a dual regime of loss and additional burdens [3]. Much of David’s sacrifice is imposed semi-willingly: he walks away from his job, moves out of his home, and in the final act of the novel, euthanizes the dog he connects with the most. The key suffering forced upon him is that of assault and physical mutilation, where the three attackers set him on fire and permanently damaged his ear [2]. Lucy, in contrast, is raped. Whereas David loses part of his ear, Lucy loses part of her vitality. She compares sex to murder—“When you [a man] have sex with someone... when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her – isn’t it a bit like killing?”—and

ultimately concludes that after her rape, “[she is] a dead person and [she] do[es] not know yet what will bring [her] back to life” [2]. Where the suffering imposed on David only damages his pride, Lucy’s suffering traumatizes her and leads to the reconstruction of her identity as someone who is dead—someone who has been murdered. David’s redemptive journey then instrumentalizes her trauma: David only moves to a position of self-reflection because of “the parallels between [his] seduction-violation of Melanie and the rape of his daughter” [6]. For example, in the scene immediately after David’s fruitless conversation with Lucy where he implores her to press charges for the rape and move out of her house, David returns to George to apologize to the Isaacs family [2]. This sudden desire for confession reflects an awareness of his own crime, his rape of Melanie, that has only developed after witnessing the mental deterioration of his daughter following her experience of sexual violence. Simply put, Lucy’s pain allows David to recognize his own criminality, marking a step forward in his journey toward redemption.

Additionally, where semi-willingly “giving up” primarily constitutes David’s sacrifice, semi-willingly “taking on” constitutes Lucy’s. Upon learning her rapists have impregnated her, Lucy chooses not to get an abortion, instead vowing that she is “determined to be a good mother” [2]. As a result of this choice, Lucy takes on the additional burden of sacrificing years of her future in order to raise a child she never asked to bear. Although David initially questions Lucy’s desire to keep the child, he comes to fixate on “[w]hat [it] will... entail [to be]... a grandfather,” a future in which his grandchild can facilitate the development of new and better “virtues” for him. The product of violence against Lucy, the consequence of her suffering and sacrifice, is again instrumentalized to clear the path for David’s redemption—he can become a “better” person because of the product of Lucy’s rape [2]. Once more, patriarchy subtends the framework of *Disgrace*’s redemptive theory, where a woman’s suffering facilitates a man’s ability to grow. This overdependence thus reinforces the unviability of *Disgrace*’s theory of redemption—David is only “redeemed” through the exploitation of Lucy’s victimization and sacrifice.

Conclusion

The fact that patriarchy limits the generative possibility of *Disgrace*’s theory for redemption is unquestionable. What must remain contested, however, is whether the novel is aware of its dependence on patriarchal structures, or whether the very intent of *Disgrace* is to expose the unviability of a redemption that exploits the wisdom and suffering of women for male benefit. Perhaps the nuance with which the novel presents this redemption, such as the narrator’s implicit critiques of David throughout, suggests the second is more likely. At the same time, does this criticism run the risk of replicating the patriarchal structures it seeks to expose? Either way, one can hardly challenge that *Disgrace* “offers a grim vision” of the future for South Africa, including if not especially the country’s women [4]. And maybe for Coetzee to have written a more explicitly hopeful novel “would be to tell another kind of lie” because of this story’s post-apartheid context—redemption and healing for all South Africans cannot come in a wink [1]. If nothing else, *Disgrace* reaffirms the futility of imagining a more just post-apartheid world when this world continues to perpetuate patriarchal systems that ensure the erasure, silencing, and suffering of women.

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