

## The Mute Opera: Coetzee's Secret Weapon

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### ABSTRACT

J.M. Coetzee is one of the most acclaimed authors from South Africa whose novels can be said to be posited in postcolonial context. He has been brutally honest and vocal in his novels when it comes to postcolonial themes such as racism, white supremacy and subjugation of the female. Coetzee talks openly about the disparities which were quite evident in post-apartheid Africa. *Disgrace* is a novel authored by Coetzee that had won him a Booker. It is this novel which elevated Coetzee to being one of the most critically acclaimed writer of his times. *Disgrace* gives us a visual or rather an imagery through its narration and hence can be said to be having the representational power that dictates the entire narrative. This paper shall examine how Coetzee uses 'opera' to covertly address certain important themes in the novel. The paper shall also analyze how this novel is a living example of the social, political and cultural milieu of post-apartheid Africa. This is a novel about a nation, with a heart wrenching history of violence, rooted deep in racism, and colonial legacy.

**Keywords:** postcolonial, post-apartheid, violence, opera, political, racism.

### INTRODUCTION

*Disgrace* is a novel set to music; the magic number 'three' is its instrument and opera its stream of consciousness! J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* is a visual narrative. Its presentation is similar to an opera. Opera with its dynamic display of narratives and representation has the power to create imagery. The narration of *Disgrace* has a striking resemblance to that of an opera. Opera is a form of theatre in which music is a fundamental component and dramatic roles are taken by singers. It has three components- text, music and visual: all the three are interwoven by the author to create a spectacle. Gluck, Mozart, Giuseppe Verdi, Richard Wagner, Richard Strauss are the names that appear in '*Disgrace*'. High tragedy dominated the operas composed by Giuseppe Verdi. The founding principles of Verdi's theatre are the realistic depiction of man and his passions. The plot of Verdi's operas involved moral conflict and powerful emotions. Coetzee has delivered these themes through his recitation and repetition of Byron and Wordsworth with music at its background in his soulful novel. Hence Coetzee's *Disgrace* can be said to be the mouthpiece of the social, political and cultural milieu of post-apartheid Africa.

To validate the above interpretation of this narrative, it becomes important to draw the readers' attention to various factors that are evident across the themes of *Disgrace*. Music seems to dominate the narrator's mind as it does with the protagonist. The Italian word opera means 'work', both in the sense of the labour done and the result produced. *Disgrace* too deciphers the same. "The opera thus takes on a performative function in the text, as it confronts the reader with a knot of opacity and unreadability at the same time as the protagonist himself is coming to terms with the irreducible difference of others." (Lachman, 117). Opera is the foundational structure on which the story has been built with its duets, trios, and ensembles where multiple characters portray conflicting emotions at the same time. There is a curtain call too at the end of the story suggesting its twin relationship with that of an opera. "Between Lucy's generation and mine a curtain seems to have fallen. I didn't even notice when it fell". (Coetzee, 210). Music is the soul of *Disgrace* wherein all the major and minor characters like David, Lucy, Soraya, Dawn, Melanie, Rosalind, Pauline, Amanda, Desiree, Elaine, Rector, Manas, Desmond, Van Wyk, Katy, Helen, Petrus, Bev, Oosthuizen, Bill, Ettinger, Pollux, Evelina, Doreen, and Ryn are all names of either operatic sopranos, dramatic coloratura sopranos, soprano soloists, singers, songwriters or musicians. Even the minor characters of the play within the story Gloria, Sidney, and Miriam are names of singers of recognition. The diction used by Coetzee directs us to Opera in some way or the other. To name a few: the phrase 'la donna e mobile' (ref. the

Duke of Mantua's canzone from the beginning of Act 3 of Verdi's opera *Rigoletto*), the word 'Exotic' used for Soraya (the 18th century critic and lexicographer Dr. Johnson described Opera as an exotic and irrational entertainment) the word 'castrate' can be referred to castrato soprano voice, Meerlust is the wine offered by David to Melanie (wine is synonymous to opera, Mozart's Don Giovanni sings a whole aria to wine, commonly known as Champagne Aria). The deliberate use of words like Schadenfreude, Casanova, innamorata as adjectives for David and Melanie can be traced to children's opera, an operetta in 3 acts with music by Strauss II & La Serva Innamorata an opera respectively. The words quixotic and wintry hint at an opera '*Don Quixote*' and '*The Winter Tales*'. The sound words cacophony and tessitura also point at Operatic background. Filigree and pouter pigeon are the jewellery and costumes respectively that occur in Byron's Don Juan. The phrase 'we are too menny' is from *Jude the Obscure*, Thomas Hardy's prose opera. Pine-scrub of the Romagna can be referred to the music of Emilia Romagna- one of the richest in Europe where Verdi was born. Well performed opera is a treat to the eyes and ears, an escape into another world, sometimes romantic, sometimes tragic and Coetzee has successfully designed his story to depict the same.

Now the question arises, why opera? "*The opera has perplexed critics, firstly because it is such a strange turn for a contemporary African novel to take, and secondly because it fails miserably.*" (Lachman, 117). The answer to the question above would be simple, for its grandeur and almost colossal effect. If this was the idea behind it then, why did David not succeed in writing a grand opera? "Why did he settle for a rather meek one? The fact that Lurie "gives up" the opera holds particular significance". (Lachman, 119). The questions can be answered by positing oneself in the historical specificity, revisiting the conditions of the then South Africa, the time when the nation was going through a political turmoil. *Disgrace* is a novel having post-apartheid Africa at its backdrop. Apartheid was the period in South Africa from 1948 to 1994 wherein racial segregation and discrimination was legally enforced. The origin of the word is 'aparthood'. Apartheid was a system which ensured racial segregation wherein the black community remained politically, socially, culturally and economically subjugated. Social hierarchy and inequality continues to the present day. This continued legacy of neocolonialism had sparked significant international and domestic furore which gradually resulted in economic sanctions on the country. The anti-apartheid movement that gained momentum between 1987 and 1993 was led by The African National Congress. It demanded an end to the racial segregation and exploitation of the colonized blacks. After the end of apartheid, Nelson Mandela along with few others was instrumental in setting up *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission* in the year 1996. He was a prominent figure of the anti-apartheid movement and was eventually released from prison. The main objective of *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission* was to bring together the black and white community and establish a harmonious relationship among them. Their vision was to fill in the crater that divided the two communities by starting afresh with public hearings. The leaders believed that through these public confrontations both the blacks and the whites would express their suppressed emotions, anger, guilt or remorse for their past actions. The Commission aimed to achieve '*catharsis*'. The leaders opined that by doing so, both the victims as well as the perpetrators of crime would reconcile and forget the past. Unfortunately, the Commission failed to achieve its goal. The reconciliation between the black and the white communities was a far-fetched dream. On the contrary, the entire country was struggling to maintain peace. Anarchy ruled the minds of the blacks who took to crime and the Himalayan dream of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission collapsed within no time. These black men, whose hearts were filled with agony and hatred left no stone unturned to harm, belittle, and violate the rights of the whites. They went on a rampage raping white women, murdering men in broad daylight; violence was their reply to the injustice they had faced earlier, and vengeance was sought in the worst possible way.

*Disgrace* can be said to be a revenge novel. It was published in the year 1999 and is considered a canonical text with post-apartheid South Africa at its backdrop. It comes under the corpus of the postcolonial novels that narrate the endeavours of the colonizers and the colonized. *Disgrace* is a polyphonic novel set to precision in its historical specificity where the narration begins in a third person and is often narrated in the present. This style of writing creates immediacy and further blurs the line between the narrator's and the character's voice. This novel is a representation of an empowering literary canon. The postcolonial themes that run parallel in *Disgrace* places it at the altar of other canonical texts. It is only through critical reading, a reader is able to discover the multiplicity of its themes. It paints a telling picture of post-apartheid Africa and engages the reader to examine it with a critical lens. The various themes employed by the author of *Disgrace* are sin and salvation, guilt and redemption, race and colour, sex and sexuality, power/ privilege, and subjugation, refuge and asylum, humans and animals, man and woman, black and white, nature and culture, life and death, etc. These binaries display a grim picture in the narrative. Coetzee has handled these themes quite boldly in his novel *Disgrace*. The arrogant white male, his supremacy in contradiction to the black characters in the novel who fall prey to the hierarchy is intimidating. The narrative sheds light on the ill treatment, oppression and subjugation of the natives at the hands of the white settlers. *Disgrace* is a story of deep-rooted hatred, that leads to vengeance, a vengeance devoid of any remorse or guilt. It depicts a story of ruthless violence towards the 'other.' "*What matters here is that Asia speaks through and by virtue of the European imagination, which is depicted as victorious over Asia, that hostile "other" world*

beyond the seas.” (Said, 56) “*Call your dogs! They said to her. Go on, call your dogs! No dogs? Then let us show you dogs!*” (Coetzee, 160). In the beginning of the novel we find women of colour being targeted and sexually exploited by the white male. He asserts his supremacy over the ‘other’. This otherization of women of colour by the white male is a peculiar example of how the colonizers looked at the colonized. Moreover the women of colour become the victims of ‘double colonization’. The story takes an ugly turn when the white woman faces atrocities at the hands of the very people she trusted. The tables are turned. The white settlers who were once the privileged ones shrink to the bottom of the pyramid. The white woman is raped by a group of black men, one of the men being an adolescent boy. She mentions that she was ‘marked’. “*I think I am in their territory. They have marked me. They will come back for me.*” (Coetzee, 158). Voyeurism at its peak where a woman is not only objectified, but she is also left with mutilated self-respect and lacks any agency over her body. The dignity of a woman lies in her physical self, that very physical self is crushed by the male/males. She is left at the mercy of the same men who have deprived her of her womanhood. The white woman is buried under the debris of colonial history. “*What if ...what if that is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps this is how they look at it, perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see me as I owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors.*” (Coetzee, 158). Finally, she gives in to the pressure calling it as a repayment of the past deeds. The ‘burden of history’ takes a toll on her.

### Conclusion:

By interlocking a grand opera in the beginning of the novel, Coetzee wishes to point out at the gradual degradation of the lofty ideas of reconciliation projected by the leaders of South Africa. He draws parallels with David’s unrealistic dream of composing a Himalayan opera and his failure to do so. David himself admits of having no lyrical in him. “*lyrical. I lack the lyrical!*” (Coetzee, 171). The music, the lyrics are eluding him like castles in the air. From the lush orchestration of Strauss to slightly mediocre violin, cello, oboe or bassoon. His lofty ideas are reduced to ashes and thus he gradually settles with meagre instruments like banjo and mandolin. Coetzee has cleverly and covertly critiqued The Truth and Reconciliation Commission by displaying the trajectory of David’s fall from grace to disgrace.

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