

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL
INSTITUTO DE LETRAS
DEPARTAMENTO DE LÍNGUAS ESTRANGEIRAS MODERNAS
TRABALHO DE CONCLUSÃO DE CURSO

Maria Teresa Segarra Costaguta Mattos

Racial tension in post-apartheid South Africa: A Reading of *Disgrace*

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“... what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, another place it might held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone.”

“This place being what?”

“This place being South Africa.”

—Lucy and David Lurie, *Disgrace*, J.M. Coetzee

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Aos meus pais, pelo amor e paciência infinita com minha delonga para deixar a minha *alma mater*.

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RESUMO

O presente trabalho tem como objetivo analisar a tensão racial em *Disgrace*, livro mais controverso de J.M Coetzee, e verificar se seus detratores estão corretos em suas acusações de racismo. Publicado em 1999, a obra provocou uma discussão mundial sobre racismo devido à sua representação literária da tensão racial na África do Sul após o fim do apartheid. Examinamos o contexto histórico da África do Sul, cujas disputas iniciais entre os colonizadores Europeus brancos e os habitantes nativos do Cabo podem ter influenciado o discurso racial contemporâneo e a polêmica que *Disgrace* suscitou, inclusive no Congresso Nacional Africano. Também discutimos de que forma a ética da leitura de Coetzee e seu posicionamento político manifestam-se através de suas obras e da tensão racial construída em *Disgrace*. Apesar de sua perspectiva sombria acerca das relações inter-raciais na África do Sul pós-apartheid, evidências mostram que *Disgrace* não possui um tom racista, em função do tempo e espaço onde se situa a obra.

Palavras-chave: Coetzee, Disgrace, Literatura sul-africana, Pós-colonialismo

ABSTRACT

This work aims at providing an analysis of how race is depicted on J.M Coetzee's most controversial book, *Disgrace* and whether the detractors of the novel stand correct in their accusations of the novel's racist views. Published in 1999, the book provoked a worldwide discussion on racism due to its literary representation of racial tension in post-apartheid South Africa. This work examines the historical background of South Africa, with its early land disputes between white European colonizers and the native inhabitants of the Cape, and how such events may have influenced contemporary racial discourse in Coetzee's book, and the reaction it garnered, even from the African National Congress. It also presents the ways in which Coetzee's ethics of reading and his political position manifest throughout his body of work and the racial tension built up in *Disgrace*. Despite its bleak views on racial relations in post-apartheid South Africa, evidences show that *Disgrace* does not carry a racist tone, given the time and place of the novel.

Key-words: Coetzee, Disgrace, South African Literature, Postcolonialism

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1 INTRODUCTION

Disgrace, most famous novel of two-time winner of the Booker Prize – one for *The Life and Times of Michael K.* and the second one for *Disgrace*, which also won the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1999 – J.M Coetzee has its story “colored by South African politics” (MELJAC, 2011), and deals with issues such as truth and reconciliation. Published in 1999, only five years after the end of a 46-year apartheid regime, and set in 1997 or 1998, it refers to public sentiments regarding the shift in racial discourse, which people were probably still not ready to discuss.

For opening a discussion on the life in post-apartheid South Africa, where Martin Luther King believed to live “the world’s worst racism”¹, *Disgrace* was the choice of my work. The rich complexity of the book has inspired an ample body of work, which contemplates essays focusing on rape, religion, sexuality, animal cruelty, music, among others. In this dissertation, however, I will focus on how the subject of racial tension in post-apartheid South Africa is portrayed in *Disgrace*. I hope this dissertation can be a small contribution to the discussion of one of the most polemic novels of the decade, as well as add a slight diversity to our mostly Eurocentric course. Written on the brink of the “new” South Africa, five years after the end of the daunting apartheid regime that segregated the black population and denied them of all basic rights, *Disgrace* divided opinions and generated a heated discussion on whether Coetzee was racist or not. In order to make a more accurate account of the events that followed the publication of the book so that the premise of analyzing the aspect of racial tension in *Disgrace* is observed, I will contextualize the period in which the book was published, review the book’s reception and repercussion in the media and amongst fellow South African writers. In chapter 2, the ethics of reading will be put to discussion, given the ample possibilities that *Disgrace* offers to readers. Finally, in chapter 3, there will be an analysis of the book. Special attention will be given to Attridge (2000, 2009) and Attwell (1993), due to their relevant contributions in the studies of J.M Coetzee.

¹ The Martin Luther King, Jr Research and Education Institute: “Apartheid”. http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_apartheid_1948_1994/. Acesso em 13 Nov 2012

2 South Africa: Land of promise and dispute

The end of apartheid (word in Afrikaans meaning *apartness*) meant the collapse of legislated identities. Race, however, is still the biggest issue in the rainbow nation, torn between opting for an unreal ideology of color-blindness and fighting for racial equality. The post-apartheid reality is one in which racism is “likely to increase”. (MOODLEY, 2000, p. 5), and *Disgrace* expresses the fear that South Africa is not able to embrace and acknowledge its ethnic and racial diversity. The ethical minefield that is modern South Africa is the product of the apartheid, described by Coetzee as an “audacious and well-planned crime against Africa” (1992, p.342). Apartheid still has an impact and a presence in the lives of South African whites and blacks. White guilt is a feeling people do not know what to do with².

South Africa is torn between remembering and forgetting (WEISS; MESKELL, 2006), and Coetzee’s exercise of remembering and verbalizing fears and tensions, even if with allegories (especially in his previous works), comes with, if not historical, ethical implications, one of them being that such remembering can be used against repeating the same mistakes in the future. In his acceptance speech of the Jerusalem Prize (1987), Coetzee said that

“The deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life”. (1992, p. 98)

Here, Coetzee calls attention to the fact that the apartheid, a product of colonial times, has provoked underlying effects with deeper roots, which might not go away at the sign of post-apartheid policies.

In order for us to better understand the singularity of apartheid in South Africa, this chapter presents a brief history of the country.

European settlement in South Africa started in 1652, when explorer Jan van Riebeeck arrived in Table Bay on 6th April, thus starting the Dutch colonization of the Cape of the Good Hope, anchored in a slave based economy. Just like in Brazil, South Africa was not intended to become a colony, but rather a stop base for navigators on their way to the East. In 1655, Van Riebeeck refuses to acknowledge that the land he had stepped on already belonged to the peoples living there, the Khoikhoi (or “Hottentots”) and the San (or “Bushmen”), and

² Mail and Guardian, 2012. “Get apartheid on your chest <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2012-11-16-get-apartheid-on-your-chest>. Acesso em 01 Dez 2012

thus started the colonial and racial oppression in South Africa, almost causing the extermination of the latter groups. Meanwhile, the European population burgeoned. Slaves were first imported into the country, and it was at this time that race and ethnic taxonomies became of great importance for characterization: for the burghers, slaves were stereotyped for different jobs according to their background (Angolans, Malagasys, etc), while the British and the non-Anglo whites (Afrikaners) occupied the top of the social pyramid, In 1795 the British empire took over the region, shaping the country into a “racial-capitalist” state (Louw, 2004), and gave continuity to the racist ideology, calling the “Huttentots” lazy, vagrants and thieves (Coetzee,1988). Around 1807, slaves’ import diminished considerably, and locals – called creoles – were then subject to slavery. In 1880 and 1899, the Dutch definitely lost their hegemony to the British in the Boer Wars. The British abolished the slavery practiced by the Dutch and introduced biological racism, while building an industry of gold and diamond exploration, urbanizing cities like Johannesburg and Cape Town as well.

In 1913, as a beneficiary measure for the British in the power, the Natives Land Act, or Black Land Act, as it became known, was passed, and it determined that blacks, who represented 80% of the population at the time, could only own, initially, as much as 8% of the land of the country; later, the percentage rose to 13%. The act, which came after a long and systematic sequence of policies pro-segregation, was valid until 1993, and implied in great impoverishment for the blacks. It was also in 1913 that a pass system was created, removing blacks from “white areas”.

In 1948, the elections were influenced by Nazi sympathizers that instigated a racial legislation similar to the one in Nazi Germany (Coetzee, 1988). They were won by the Afrikaner National Party, which represented the white minority, and proceeded to install the apartheid legislation within the following years. Afrikaners were at the time overpowered by the British, and losing jobs for the low-wage black workers. Violent clashes with the black opposition happened throughout the regime, like the Soweto in 1976 and the killing of Steve Biko in 1977. In 1950, another Land Act was passed, the Group Areas of Act, which affected negatively not only blacks, but also “coloureds” and Indians, and granted land due to evictions of landowners of “black spots”. According to Rugege (2004), 3.5 million people were removed from their lands under different apartheid laws.

In March 1992, President Frederik de Klerk, who had started the movement towards the end of the apartheid soon after the first year of his mandate, held a referendum for the white population on whether the reform should go on, to which the voters agreed, a signal, as Mandela then said, that whites knew the days of “white privilege” were over. Democracy

then started to set its way upon the creation of the Interim Constitution, in 1993, which granted victims of discriminatory laws the right to reclaim their land, had the dispossession happened after 1913, excluding a large number of people who had their land taken before this period. In 1994, the National Party was forced to promote free elections, and Nelson Mandela assumed the presidency.

A survey conducted almost ten years later after the end of the apartheid reported that integration is still an issue in everyday life. According to the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, only 38% of whites would agree to live in an interracial community; 13% of South Africans think it is legitimate to “resort to violent means (...) if government does not protect their human rights” (LOMBARD, 2003, p.2); also, when asked whether they would welcome having more contact with South Africans of other races, 20% of blacks and 11% of whites replied that they wish they had less contact. These figures suggest that racial tension and mutual resentment have not ceased, unfortunately, and that the country should strive for the strengthening of dialogue between blacks and whites.

South Africa has not only dreams, but also political ambitions. The ambition of being, namely, the Rainbow Nation (term coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu), a poetic attempt to embrace all different ethnicities of the land with eleven official languages, but with a long road of reconciliation and internal pacification ahead of its concretization.

1.1 Reception to *Disgrace*

Contrary to his international popularity, Coetzee was never a unanimity in South Africa; *Disgrace*, however, had an even stronger response. Due to its explosive plot, the book has been received with mixed reviews. In addition to this, the fact that it was published so shortly after the end of the apartheid made it harder for readers to distinguish between fiction and reality.

The ANC, the African National Congress, had a particularly strong reaction to the book, and reserved harsh criticism towards Coetzee, accusing him of portraying the black male characters in a racist manner. The ANC, more specifically then president Thabo Mbeki, also reported the novel to the SAHRC (South African Human Rights Commission). Later on, it was pressured to release an apology statement to Coetzee, which did not happen, but they did congratulate him on the book and his achievement.³ It seems that the ANC's reaction to *Disgrace* was expected by the writer:

“The response of South Africa’s legislators to what disturbs them is usually to order it out of sight. If people are starving, let them starve far away in the bush, where their thin bodies will not be a reproach.”
(Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 361)

Coetzee self-entitles his work as white writing, that is, the writing of someone who is “no longer European, not yet African” (COETZEE, 1988). The Nobel laureate is not free from criticism from his fellow South African writers, such as Nadine Gordimer, for a stronger political position.

Says Nadine Gordimer: “In the novel ‘Disgrace’ there is not one black person who is a real human being”⁴. She also claims that, given her life experience, it is not believable that the black families would have protected the rapists just because of their color. Even though Gordimer acknowledges the inevitable national tendency of engaging literature in propaganda and that writers should be able to write freely, she does not feel or understand that this is what happens in *Disgrace*.

³ Mail and Guardian: “The DA wants ANC to apologise to JM Coetzee”. 03 Oct 2003. <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2003-10-03-da-wants-anc-to-apologise-jm-coetzee>. Acesso em 05 Nov. 2012

⁴ The New York Times, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/16/books/review/Donadio-t.html?pagewanted=all>. Acesso em 17 Nov 2012

Another local writer, Chris van Wyk, regards the book as simply racist: “The white characters are fleshed out, the black evildoers are not.”⁵ Renowned journalist Aggrey Klaaste, from *The Sowetan*, found the novel “quite offensive”, and referred to Coetzee as “cynical”. (in Donald, 2002). Jakes Gerwel, a distinguished professor of literature, who participated of Mandela’s government, wrote an essay in *Rapport*⁶, a weekly newspaper, expressing his concern over the representation of blacks and mixed-race as “barbaric” and “whores”, and the “‘exclusion of the possibility of civilized reconciliation’ (Rapport, 2000, apud McDonald, 2002). Postcolonialist Salman Rushdie (2003), despite acknowledging the novel’s literary qualities, also criticizes what he calls a non-developing of the novel’s black characters and interracial misunderstanding.

Apartheid was established in 1948, and with it, blacks lost all rights and freedom in the country. The regimen, which put Mandela in jail for 27 years, came to an end in 1994, and South Africa entered a new phase, however, it is all recent. The spectrum of racial tension and intense animosity, not to mention frequent outburst of violence, still lurks the young country.

As to the critics that *Disgrace* demonizes black men, further studies report that rape in South Africa is more of a gender dispute than a matter of race. Rape is a grim reality of the country that cannot be denied, to the point of one study claiming that 1 in 3 women in South Africa are to be raped⁷. Therefore, the attack on Lucy, to be further discussed, if confronted with “real life”, is not implausible.

President Thabo Mbeki, Mandela’s successor with two terms, has a history of unwillingness to accept the reality of rape in the country. After journalist Charlene Smith was raped, she became an anti-rape activist, and was harshly criticized by Mbeki, who accused her of being racist against black men. Moffett (2006) claims that the racial agenda unfortunately conceals the discussion of the real roots of the problem, which is male domination towards women. She makes it clear that this is not a matter of race, or of South African men, but it is what some individuals do. Such reports were taken with criticism by President Mbeki. In fact, there was a period of time packed with “black peril” narratives,

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Rapport Sondag, 2000. <http://152.111.1.87/argief/berigte/rapport/2000/02/13/4/22.html>. Acesso em 03 Dez 2012

⁷ Moffett, Helen. 2006 pg. 129. This statistics also appeared on an anti-rape campaign starring Charlize Theron: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oZpuY97i_k. Due to complaints from the general public, the film was taken off air.

about sexual violence against white women perpetrated by black men, which omitted the fact that most rapes are intra-racial. (GRAHAM, 2012)

Moffett (2006) explains that for some men, there is a rationale for rape being a means to “correct” women, as if women were “asking for it”, in case they behave in a way that demonstrates a degree of autonomy or self-worth.

Glenn (2009, p.93) reports that Coetzee asked him “If the incidence of rape in South Africa was as high as most scholars believe, why did so few African women report rape to the police?”

Nevertheless, *Disgrace* should not be seen primordially as a social commentary, in disagreement with Glenn (2009), who was a colleague of Coetzee at University of Cape Town.

Glenn deems Coetzee’s writing as liberal Afro-pessimism., which can be seen, for example, in the way he portrays inter-racial sexuality. David Lurie, the name of the character of the story, is a real person, by the way, an award-winning photographer⁸ who claims to have been Coetzee’s student at University of Cape Town.

In cultural terms, Coetzee emerges as a liberal Afro-pessimist rather than a racist. Liberal Afro-pessimism incriminates white African settlers and history as agents (though not the only ones) of the dysfunctional post-colonial situation rather than simply victims of it. Liberal Afro-pessimism, driven by a range of events from Rwanda to Sierra Leone, and generally a result of disappointment and comparative despair at Africa’s failure to advance as Asian countries have, may be related to earlier forms of racism, but is a far more complex response.
(Glenn, 2009 p. 93)

Glenn, who was on the Book Journalist of the Year awards panel judging at the time *Disgrace* was published, makes a distinction between the reaction of English-speaking South Africans and speakers of Afrikaans: the first group had few and “uneasy” reviews submitted about the book, not only because it was considered racist, but also due to its pessimistic view of the country, while the latter took it as a cultural work “worth debating, resisting and claiming.” (Glenn, 2009, p. 81)

The repercussions of the novel had an effect also in the making of the namesake motion picture, produced in 2007: all of the local black actors refused to play the part of Petrus, given his character being so problematic in the stereotyping of black men condoning rape. (GLENN, 2009, p.81)

⁸ David Lurie. <http://www.davidlurie.co.uk/>. Acesso em 21Nov 2012

As for South African exiles, they seem to have opted for a more evasive, neutral evaluation of the book, and almost stoicism regarding violence in South Africa, qualifying Lucy's behavior as masochistic white guilt (PECHEY, apud Glenn):

A novel which suggests that not only can you not go home any more, but that the reasons you left might have been misguided was bound to produce blind spots critical resistance evasions, brand confusion.
Glenn,p.84

And that is what happened with the author, in fact. Glenn sees it as positive that Coetzee remained in Africa during the apartheid, but his departure from the new South Africa can be taken as a somber hint that there is no place for white people in the new country, shaping the reading of *Disgrace*.

The characters' names play a curious role in the story. Apart from the real-life David Lurie, it is also interesting to examine the name of one of Lucy's rapists, Pollux, "born of Zeus' seduction-rape of Leda" (Glenn,p. 86), whom he tricked by disguising as a swan. Another interesting similarity can be traced between Pollux and the very Lurie, who if not raped, acted in a rather predatory fashion towards his then student, Melanie. Lurie is the outraged father of the abused Lucy, but also the transgressor who seeks forgiveness – or something less than that – from Melanie's father, Mr. Isaacs.

Glenn argues that the book manifests general pessimism toward inter-racial relationships, too, since, besides Lucy's rape, it is a colored girl "who leads" Lurie to disgrace, and also it is a white, deeply unattractive, age-appropriate woman who can offer some atonement for the professor, however, the latter situation does not exactly confirm this point of view, for at any point is Bev projected as an ideal mate, so what can be inferred from these characters' dynamics is that they express pessimism in relation to South African sexual politics as a whole.

The novel has also been accused of feeding "white paranoia", an expression that Coetzee had once used to express disapproval towards Breyten Breytenbach⁹. The SAHRC accused Coetzee of representing 'as brutally as he can the white people's perception of the post-apartheid black man' (SAHRC apud McDonald, 2002), and that emigration would be an answer for white South Africans, so as not to live under new rules. *Disgrace* places white man as the victim – not of one, but multiple crimes – verbalizing white, colonial historical fears.

⁹ A South African writer and poet, Breytenbach spent seven years in jail and later disowned to be an Afrikaner, claiming it was a bastard language and a bastard people. In: The New York Review of Books, "Against the South African Grain", by J.M Coetzee. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1999/sep/23/against-the-south-african-grain/?pagination=false>. 23 Set 1999. Acesso em 31 Dez 2012

Again, *Disgrace* is intricate and polemic because of its elements, chosen not so as to project a pacific, harmonious new country, but to make the most of racial tension:

“yet, Lurie’s case is in many ways precisely that of white South Africans in the new dispensation – still guilty in the eyes of the world, still relatively privileged, partly redundant, partly clinging to old habits, in need of reformation and transformation, yet resistant to official definitions of how to feel or be.
Glenn, 2009, p.91

Disgrace is too a novel about the place of whites in the Rainbow Nation. Glenn (2009) believes that, had the novel been written or published some years later, it would have garnered a more comprehensive reception. After the publication of *Disgrace*, more white writers followed on the pessimistic tone about the place of whites in the new South Africa (Glenn 2009), echoing the reality of emigration figures:

“Some 800,000 out of a total white population of 4 million have left since 1995, by one count. But they’re hardly alone. Blacks, coloreds (as people of mixed race are known in South Africa) and Indians are also expressing the desire to leave. In the last 12 years, the number of blacks graduating in South Africa with advanced degrees has grown from 361,000 to 1.4 million a year. But in that time the number of those expressing high hopes to emigrate has doubled.”¹⁰

Lucy, however, once again contradicts what would be expected of her and refuses to seek exile in safe Holland, with her mother.

The South African Human Rights Commission launched an investigation on racism in the media in November 1998. On 5 April 2000, the ANC reported *Disgrace* to the SAHRC, the guardian of the 1996 constitution, as a racist representation of the black as a “faithless, immoral, uneducated, incapacitated primitive child’ (apud McDonald, 2002, p. 323). A few years after the SAHRC debacle, however, Coetzee was awarded the Order of Mapungubwe in Gold, in 2005, by the ANC-led government, for “putting South Africa on the world stage”. (The Presidency apud Poyner, 2009)

McDonald believes that the ANC used the novel only as to call the attention on the matter of racial tension, not necessarily to label Coetzee as a blatant racist, but as a carrier of a white racism fears, that were spread throughout other media outlets at the time.

What can be initially concluded from all of these reviews is that South Africans were concerned that, due to the strong success and repercussion of the novel, the country’s image

¹⁰ The Daily Beast: Fleeing from South Africa. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2009/02/13/fleeing-from-south-africa.html>. Feb 13, 2009. Acesso em 03 Dez 2012.

would be tainted, or rather linked to the pessimism in it expressed, and that it would even compromise the so much sought-after internal reconciliation among blacks and whites.

2 To be a writer in South Africa – Coetzee and the ethics of reading

Despite Dovey's belief that "with a writer like Coetzee, personal biography does not, seem very important" (DOVEY apud Attwell, 1993, p. 6), I will make a brief outline of his personal background. The reason why the author's biography is examined in this paper is in accordance to what Attwell also said: that Coetzee's self-consciousness and acute historicization is due to biography itself. In fact, Coetzee does not have a problem in saying that writing is auto-biography (COETZEE, 1992).

John Maxwell Coetzee was born in 1940, in Cape Town, South Africa, the grandson of a farmer and the son of a lawyer; though he grew up in Worcester. He makes an account of this period of his life in *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997). Rumor says that, when asked whether it was fiction or memoir, Coetzee replied: "Do I have to choose?", similarly to Tolstoy in his work *Boyhood* (GRAHAM, 2003, p.82). It is also rumored that Coetzee started writing partly due to a New Year's resolution, at the age of thirty.

Coetzee graduated in Arts and Mathematics in 1960 and 1961, respectively, at the University of Cape Town. In the following years, he worked for IBM in London, an experience detailed in *Youth* (2002), but also fictionalized – his first marriage, for example, is not documented in the novel. Back in South Africa, the writer received a Masters of Arts degree at his alma mater, followed by a stint in the United States, where he then obtained a Ph.D at the University of Texas for a thesis on Samuel Beckett. He alternated periods between both countries for the following decades, until he moved to Australia, in 2001, after *Disgrace*.

He graduated in English, having written a thesis on the novelist Ford Madox Ford, as recounted in his fictionalized memoir *Youth* (2002)¹¹. He later received a PhD in English, linguistics and Germanic languages by the University of Texas. His dissertation this time versed on the early fiction of Samuel Beckett, whose writing was also affected by politics (the Irish writer started to write in French after joining the French Resistance).

Upon the denial of his visa application in the United States, he returned to South Africa and worked as a professor at the University of Cape Town from 1972 to 2000. In 2002, Coetzee moved to Australia, despite his claims that he never wanted to leave Africa. In 2003, the Nobel Prize for literature was awarded to him. The highly criticized African

¹¹ The Nobel Prize, 2003. http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/coetzee-bio.html. Acesso em 09 Out 2012

National Congress, ANC, which “has been accused of re-racializing society through affirmative action policies” (Moodley, 2000, p.56), had mixed feelings towards his distinction: they thought that it would inspire young writers across the continent, but also accused Coetzee of being a “purveyor of the ideology of racism”, (contradicting Glenn (2009), who claims that the ANC did not accuse Coetzee directly of racism). Mandela stood by Coetzee and lamented his departure to Australia. In truth, before *Disgrace*, Coetzee had already made an attempt to emigrate.

His aversion to interviews is a stimulus to trying to read the author through his characters, not only in his biographical works, but also in works like *Disgrace*, for his similarities with the main character, like profession and built.

Coetzee’s earlier works – *Life and Times of Michael K*, *Age of Iron*, *Waiting for the barbarians*, *In the heart of the country*, *Foe*, have granted him critical acclaim over his depiction of colonialism and apartheid. The first important study on Coetzee was published in 1988: Teresa Dovey’s *The Novels of J.M Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories*. Dovey’s study was relevant due to the fact that it attempted to explain Coetzee’s writing which, according to her, were far too sophisticated, with its complex discursive strategies, to be classified as mere historical accounts. Given the development of history in South Africa, it is not surprising that politics of writing is the nexus of Coetzee’s canon (Poyner, 2002). The very author acknowledges the intense pressure that politics and contemporary society issues exert on South African literature, for it is, according to him

less than fully human literature, unnaturally preoccupied with power and the torsions of power, unable to move from elementary relations of contestation, domination, and subjugation to the vast and complex human world that lies beyond them. It is exactly the kind of literature you would expect people to write from a prison.
(1992. p.98)

There are disagreements over the category Coetzee’s writing belongs to. One of Coetzee’s greatest experts, Attridge, refuses to classify him as a postmodernist. For him, he is rather a late modernist – which Coetzee accepted - or a neomodernist. This debate is almost endless. Weiss and Meskell (2006) describe Coetzee literature as non-fiction. Attwell classifies Coetzee’s work as postmodern and situational metafiction, inserted in the Western European tradition. His relation with it is one of tension, for despite drawing on it, he still objectifies and questions it, maybe as a way to avoid “an accusation of complicity in a history of domination”. Coetzee is, irrevocably and foremostly, a fictionalist, so historicity should

not be used as an unfavorable measure against him, but rather as a tool to better comprehend his South African writing, and in a sense, his unprofessed political engagement initially propitiates a wider perspective in comparison to other white South African writers, such as Nadine Gordimer. Hence, apart from being a postmodernist, postliberal and a postcolonialist, he is also a regional writer, standing apart from all other South African writers. Coetzee is not the typical politically engaged writer, despite having written about, for example, censorship (*Giving Offense*, 1996), which came to an end in the same year, and had, in its period, embargoed some of Coetzee's novels: *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), and *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) (Graham, page 82, 2003)

Says Durrant: 2004 in Weissel and Maikel

Coetzee's novels seek to find a way of relating to this "underwritten" history, this history that is simultaneously internal and external to the history of civilization, central yet excluded. Because they are themselves narratives, part of the history of civilization, they must attempt to relate to that which they themselves exclude, to that which they are themselves forced to under/overwrite. Their metafictional contortions are a way of gesturing toward their own excluded interior, their own encrypting of the realm of material history. [2004, p.32]

If Attwell's assumption on how history imposes itself as a tyrannical presence stands correct, even more so to Coetzee, who stated that "making sense of life inside a book is different from making sense of real life (apud ATTWELL, 1993, p.11), so realism in South Africa seems to be the only way to go in literature, especially for white writers. In fact, Coetzee claimed that the novel should rival history.

Attwell believes that Coetzee's novels are "located in the nexus of history and text, that is, they explore the tension between these polarities". For the South African writer, "positionality is always at issue." (p.3) Says Coetzee (apud Attwell, p.15)

"In times of intense ideological pressure like the present, when the space in which the novel and history normally coexist like two cows in the pasture, each minding its own business, is squeezed to almost nothing, the novel, it seems to me, has only two options: supplementarity or rivalry."

Due to its uniqueness, independence, and opposition to bad/god Manichaeism, *Disgrace* operates in the latter term. Coetzee's writing challenges "colonial versions of history" (GRAHAM, 2003, p.81). He also believes that history and a novel are two different kinds of discourse, and that history should not take have authority over the novel. (apud Attwell, p.16)

Considered by Attridge to be Coetzee's most controversial novel, *Disgrace* is also thought to be one of the most "discussed novels of the late twentieth century" (DRICHEL in Mehigan, 2011, p.148), having raised suspicions ever since its publication (CHOU, 2009). Furthermore, it is "strikingly responsive to the post-apartheid moment" (BARNARD; COETZEE, 2003, p. 204) and its validity relies greatly on its refusal to provide an answer (CHOU, 2009) to the racial power struggle in South Africa. His novels are known to bear "uncomfortable, unbearable questions" (Barnard; Coetzee, 2003). *Disgrace* is faithful to such characteristic, for it does not contain not even "a tinge of celebration and optimism".

South African writer Antjie Krog (apud Durrant, 2004) believes only literature can perform reconciliation, an opinion shared with Adorno (Ibid), that literature is the only way "suffering can find its voice". If that is true, then *Disgrace* could be regarded as an artistic manifestation that propitiates, despite its pessimism, mourning and assimilation.

It is clear that Coetzee's writing is not a version of history, but as Durrant has put it, provides a way to relate to history and remain "inconsolable" before it, a liberating exercise of grief, not of factual information, through art, amidst the "abundance of real suffering" (Coetzee in Durrant, 2004) brought not only by the apartheid but by colonialism as well. Both Poyner and Durrant mention Adorno's 1962 "Commitment" to argue that Coetzee's ethics in writing, as well as his allegories, cannot be measured upon politics, due to the untruthfulness of the latter. Coetzee's writing is not a "digestible" (Durrant, 2004) account of apartheid, but an artistic manifestation of the devastating effects of apartheid not only in the present, but also in the much desired future of the country, effects that are nowhere to be found in the historical version of the facts. Such view on his writing can be confirmed by Coetzee in his acceptance speech of the Jerusalem prize:

In South Africa there is too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination."
(1992, p. 99)

The outrage sparked by the novel draws back the famous anecdote on Picasso's *Guernica*, recounted by Adorno: "An officer of the Nazi occupation forces visited the painter [Picasso] in his studio and, pointing to *Guernica*, asked: "Did you do that?" Picasso reputedly answered, "No, you did." (Adorno 2003)

In Chou (2009), South African poet Keorapetse Kgositsile pondered that in a situation of oppression "there are no choices beyond didactic writing: either you are a tool of oppression or an instrument of liberation. It's that simple". Such a take on *Disgrace* makes it much easier to see racism in the author's intentions. There are opposing views on the matter,

however. Contemporary writer Lewis Nkosi, also in Chou (2009, p.20) says: writers fell into a creative rut with fiction

“which exploits the readymade plots of racial violence, social apartheid, interracial love affairs which are doomed from the beginning, without any attempt to transcend or transmute these given ‘social facts’ into artistically persuasive works of fiction”,

raising a question as to whether literature in such a reality is just journalism. This debate, created by Nkosi in 1967, was later joined in by Coetzee. As Eagleton (2003) puts it, literature is not an objective reality, but rather a construction of the author; however, postcolonial theory has a strong tendency to associate literature with politics.

For Poyner (2009), Coetzee is the ultimate paradox of postcolonial authorship, in which the desire to call attention to the oppressed people might mask an unwarranted authority. According to Poyner, Coetzee cannot disassociate authorship from power, mastery and colonization.

What happens when Coetzee blends in his voice with the narrator’s is that it enables him

First, to raise questions about authority and the capacity of intellectuals to “speak truth to power” (Said, *Representations* 85), and, second, to nurture a critical readership which is obliged to participate in the life of the text. As Edward Said has put it, the public intellectual’s “whole being is staked on the *critical sense*” (apud Poyner, 2009, p.3)

Such critical readership does not dismiss, however, the pleasure of reading, as the author declared in an interview. (News Today in Poyner, 2009) Coetzee (1996, p. 38) tries to please the reader especially while recreating and revising literature, namely, the novel.

Poyner labels Coetzee as an ethico-political author, a definition she is aware that Coetzee himself would have not approved. However, it is one that fits well. Coetzee’s ample use of the third person express his choice for distance, his political voice is rather expressed in the ethical entanglements of his characters. *Disgrace* offers a rich possibility of discussion on Levinas’s ethics of alterity – ethics thought in relation to the Other, respecting the different, the foreign, regarding its views on politics, religion and so on, that is, not seeking to eliminate the otherness. *Disgrace* proposes this reflection for its readers, granted they do not jump to any conclusions. Of course, the book’s reading might, unfortunately, be limited by the readers’ cultural and social circumstances, factors which could be behind the aforementioned accusations of racism the book has been subject to. In this exercise of ethics of alterity, it is also possible, through the author’s mediation, to reassess one’s perception of

Africa, which Coetzee also portrays as unknown and occult, even subject to one's imagination (ATTWELL, 2009), in confirmation of his siding with the European culture.

This apparent shyness from an upfront political stand is in consonance with the context Coetzee was in, since the apartheid regime also meant censorship and restriction on political and cultural freedom. Gordimer was also censored during apartheid.

“Ethically responsible reading, he argues, involves sensitivity and attentiveness to the workings of a text. The text that is experimental and estranging is more demanding of its reader and hence such a text is more ethically charged (Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee* 11)

Coetzee's literature is not the typically committed literature, for it does not fall in the conformity of political protest. His intentions in creating an engaged readership, however, allow “the attentive reader to live through the pressures and possibilities, and also the limits, of political engagement” (Attridge in Poyner).

Willett (2011) believes that is in the suffering that lies the ethical force of the novel, with which I agree. Lurie's ethical transformation happens through pain, his and the others', like the dogs he assists at Bev's clinic.

As for *Disgrace*, it might be said that the reader is put in an uncomfortable position, since it

“is disturbing in many ways, and among the things it disturbs is any simple faith in the political efficacy of literature – a faith upon which some styles of postcolonial criticism are built” (Attridge apud Poyner, 2009, p.09).

For Coetzee, as a white writer, to write against this racist ideology places him in a place of authority which is an easy target of criticism. As Poyner (2009, p.13) brilliantly states, writing on others' behalf threatens the ethico-politics that go to the very heart of the postcolonial text. Post-apartheid, thus, such authority is no longer granted, forcing white writing to struggle to find its place in this new arrangement.

Coetzee's bibliography can be traced and studied in a simultaneous parallel with the history of South Africa. Examining only the time and place of *Disgrace*, it makes sense that, in a post-apartheid context, his writing is in the realms of realism.

In *Permission to Narrate*, Said (1984) cites historian and comparative literature professor Hayden White on the nature of narrative:

"narrative in general, from the folk tale to the novel, from annals to the fully realized 'history,' has to do with the topics of law, legality, legitimacy, or, more generally, authority."

In this article, Said, talking about the underrepresentation of the Palestinian experience in narrative during the siege of Beirut, criticizes the automatic assumption that Arab sources are unreliable, claiming that national narrative should be written to tell the truth in "in an epistemological account of ideological structures as they pertain to specific problems as well as to concrete historical and geographical circumstances." (p. 47)

As a white writer in an African nation burdened with a historical heritage of not giving a voice to the black people, Coetzee exercises his permission to narrate at its most in *Disgrace*; the African continent, with its violent records of colonization, has also suffered of and underrepresentation in terms of counter-narrative, especially in South Africa, where in the apartheid truth was a one-sided story.

McDonald (2002) claims that even the way the narrative is constructed – in free indirect style, in the present tense makes it difficult for any reader, indistinctively of race, not to confuse character and narrator. Little is read about the future in the future tense, one of the exceptions being when Petrus confirms Lurie's desired expulsion from Salem ("I will marry her" , p. 202), as pointed by Smith (2007). I would add that it also makes it difficult to tell fiction from authorship, and for readers to establish a distance from David Lurie, as if the social and historical implications in the novel were not hard enough already. It is very difficult not to read, for example, Lucy's rape as a social construction of South Africa and a symbol of white fear, rather than a pivotal moment in the narrative. Had Lucy's rapists been white, maybe it would have been clearer for David Lurie how alike he had acted in relation to his young student, and he would not have needed his daughter's explanation: 'Lucy's intuition is right after all: he does understand; he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman?' (p. 160).

3 Racial tension in *Disgrace*

Literature may appear to be describing the world, and sometimes actually does so, but its real function is performative: it uses language within certain conventions in order to bring about certain effects in a reader. It achieves something *in* the saying: it is language as a kind of material practice in itself, discourse as social action. Eagleton, 2003, p.103

In *Disgrace* (1999), 52-year-old Professor David Lurie falls in disgrace and disrepute after a sexual indiscretion with one of his students does not end well and generates a scandal that ultimately makes it impossible for him to keep teaching, disrupting a life he regarded as tranquil and satisfactory in cosmopolitan Cape Town. It is ironic that he is betrayed by his desires, given the opening sentence of the book: *For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex very well*. The reader is introduced to his mechanical weekly visits to a prostitute, Soraya, which Attridge (2000,p.103) calls a “perfectly calculated sexual regimen”

It surprises him that ninety minutes a week of a 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. No emotion, or none but the deepest, the most unguessed-at; a ground bass of contentedness (...). (p.5)

Even in this seemingly commercial relationship with Soraya, Lurie fails to follow good sense, when he engages in some mild stalking of the prostitute on her off-duty hours, private detective included. The affair ends in a very embarrassing way, leaving the professor envious of Soraya’s husband. In any case, Lurie is, undoubtedly, contradictory in his speech of moderation and unattachement to relationships. He claims to be contented with his past interaction with the opposite sex:

With his height, his good bones, his olive skin, his flowing hair, he could always count on a degree of magnetism. If he looked at a woman in a certain way, with a certain intent, she would return his look, he could rely on that. That was how he lived; for years, for decades, that was the backbone of his life. (p.7)

He later calls himself a womanizer, because he has always lived surrounded by women, though that did not make him love them more. It is difficult to name precisely what moved Lurie to be so aggressive in his approach to his student, Melanie, who catches his eyes after his “problem with sex” is back, since Soraya has dismissed him as a client. In order to

have Melanie, an aspiring actress who is rehearsing for a play about “the new South Africa”, the character uses of his social power and authority (Kossew, 2003), just like later on his daughter’s attackers do on the farm. In regards to his behavior with Soraya and Melanie, Lurie acts with what Willett calls “amoral predation” (Willett, 2004) for Lurie’s predatory manners towards pretty student Melanie are decidedly ill-conceived: “not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. . . . A mistake, a huge mistake” (p. 25). Lurie rationalizes his preying on Melanie by justifying it as his “rights of desire” (p.89). If both crimes are compared only to their sexual nature, accepting Lurie’s rationalization would be a double standard, and the character himself never makes a connection between the two events. But that is not the point, because of the heavy racial discourse that cannot be sublimated under any circumstances. What both sexual incidents have in common is that they ensue the problematizations of repentance and forgiveness. (Kossew 2003)

The white professor is then taken to a trial at the at the rebaptized Cape Technical University over his abuse of power, but refuses to cooperate since he believes that he is actually being expected to show repentance, which he does not believe in (p.58). His silence at this moment hurts Kierkegaard’s formula of the citizen’s ethical task, which is “ethical task is to develop out of his concealment and to become revealed in the universal” (Kierkegaard 2008, p.59). His reformation comes later, as a result of suffering, his and the others. The trial he is submitted to at the university greatly resembles what was happening in the country at that time, with the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, which he does not approve of:

“These are puritanical times. Private life is public business. Prurience is respectable, prurience and sentiment. They wanted a spectacle: breast-beating, remorse, tears if possible ... I wouldn’t oblige.” (p. 66)

Vermeulen (2004, p.185) argues that “*Disgrace* becomes both a critique of the ethics of expressive unconcealment underlying these hearings, and a novelistic response to the political context urging this expression.” It is interesting to note that Lurie’s somewhat stubborn silence or, in the university’s words, “unwillingness to cooperate” is criticized by Lucy, a character who will later also choose silence over the crime that disrupted her life. In fact, silence becomes a language itself throughout the story, acting as a sign of tension and compliance between the difficult communication between male and female, black and white,

empowered and weakened characters; it is “active with pain and resentment” (SPIVAK, 2002, p.26).

Following the scandal, Lurie chooses self-exile and moves in temporarily with his daughter Lucy, who grows flowers and vegetables and runs a kennel in the Eastern Cape. His seeking of refuge in the country, seen in the novel initially as a dichotomous locus in opposition to the city, appears as a notion that soon falls apart.

Lucy’s life as a lonely farmer is a nostalgic attempt to live the ‘pastoral utopia’ (Barnard, 2003) of a remote time in the country, but can also be read as a desire to remain on the land regardless of all the changes in the white possession of land. In spite of the fact that Lurie fled to the countryside in an attempt to assuage his need for passion, sex is a constant presence in Salem, since he cannot forget his inamorata, Melanie, as ex-wife Rosalind jockingly calls the student, and keeps thinking of past affairs. What he confesses to himself when he thinks of his affair with the old and unattractive Bev Shaw, the lady who runs the Animal Welfare clinic center, and who he condescendingly calls *Madame Bovary*, is that it represents his death as a man empowered by his own virility.

While Lurie has an inability to control himself and his desires, and is a prey to his own body, Lucy’s body was preyed on by rapists (KOSSEW, 2003). One day, upon returning to the farm, he and his daughter are taken by assault by three men, and in the consummation of the ultimate white nightmare, Lucy is raped by the three black men, actually two men and a boy, while Lurie is locked in the bathroom of the house, burned after having alcohol poured on him, and incapable of saving his daughter. In the attack, Lucy’s watch-dogs (a possible sign of the state of fear present even in the countryside) are killed and David’s car is stolen. What follows after this trauma is much worse, for what Lurie feels is that he did not have the *strength* to protect his offspring, which is ultimately a man’s duty, even a misogynistic one, something the character has already been described as (MELJAC, 2011). The fact that he did not protect his daughter from the rape is attested by how Lucy and her friend Bev see the incident. When Lurie tries to console his daughter, his attempts are not welcome, and for Lucy, the attack was not a matter of history, but of gender: ‘Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting’, she says. ‘You are a man, you ought to know’.

His reflections about the current national status following the attack are also charged with pessimism:

Too many people, too few things. What there is must go into circulation, so that everyone can have a chance to be happy for a day.... That is how one must see life in this country: in its schematic aspect. Otherwise one could go mad. Cars, shoes; women too. There must be some niche in the system for women and what happens to them. (p.98)

Lucy's refusal in denouncing the crime is justified by the delicate post-apartheid moment they are living: "In another time, another place [what happened to me] might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not" (p.112).

As shown in the first chapter of this work, land distribution has always been used as a tool for racial affirmation, thus being the object of power disputes. In *Disgrace* too, land is a trigger for racial tension in South Africa: The land, Coetzee goes on to argue, cannot become a place of freedom without a more reciprocal kind of love - a love he names fraternity. And fraternity "comes in a package with liberty and equality": it will only be enjoyed once the structures of power and inequality that defined the apartheid state have been dismantled. Without paying this price - the "very lowest price," in Coetzee's view - the settler's love will be no more than a "sentimental yearning." An aesthetic appreciation of the African landscape, by the same token, will be little more than an alibi for a more fundamental hard-heartedness and inhumanity. But after years of massive denial to the rights of property, as the aforementioned Natives Land Act, Act number 27 of 1913, for example, it is possible to better apprehend the gigantic life change that Petrus can experiment at the time of the novel. A reformed Land Bank now assists black peasants in becoming landowners.

Lurie's human side is shown through his work with the animals at the clinic, specially a dog with which the professor developed a special bond of genuine affection. Their relation and mutual love give Lurie humanization and tenderness in his life, and make him retreat from his more indifferent position of not "losing perspective" on the importance of animals (p. 74). His misfortunes have put him in the same position of humility as the animals he deals with at the clinic.

Lurie's clumsy search for atonement in his pursuit of Melanie's father is somewhat similar to Lucy's refusal to acknowledge the need for punishment of the men who raped her, a silence that she understands is the price to pay in order to stay in the country, a tactic understanding even though she does not act "in terms of abstractions" (p. 112). For Lucy, though, her remaining in silence is a "purely private matter" (p.112).

"How humiliating," [he] says, and she agrees.... "But perhaps it is a good point to start from again [she adds]. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing" (p. 205)

When Lucy's father, trying to make a historical reading of her intentions, asks her "Is it some form of private salvation you are trying to work out? Do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?" She denies it, claiming Lurie misinterprets her. Marais (2006) believes that Lurie's racialized reading of the predicament prevents him from seeing the situation clearly, and what is more, prevents him from his desire to help his daughter. Just like the rapists made Lucy a target of racial justice, her father too is reading her reaction by her race.

As for the three rapists, they might have acted as possible agents of revenge, perpetrating Lurie's violence towards Melanie and putting an end to his white privilege. It is possible, too, that the attackers cannot see beyond Lucy's color. As Lucy recalls the aggression, she describes how personal it was and how race really mattered at that point:

"It was so personal. [. . .] it was done with such personal hatred. That was what stunned me more than anything. The rest was . . . expected. But why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them. [...] The shock simply doesn't go away. The shock of being hated, I mean." (p.156).

To accept Lucy's rape as some sort of racial atonement, though, can border female masochism.

Lucy's silence over the violence imposed on her may be understood as solidarity over the long lived silence of the colonized, depicted in other books such as *Foe* (1986) and *In the heart of the country* (1977).

The concretization of violence, and how it is a product of racial tensions, is present in *Disgrace*, as well as the challenge on how to deal with it. The difficulty in seeing what Coetzee's view is on the "new South Africa" lies too in the question of whether *Disgrace* may be taken as a celebration of violence (BARNARD; COETZEE, 2003). Lurie's ultimate act of love towards the dog of whom he had grown fond at the animal clinic, by euthanizing it, can be perceived as a possible state of grace for David Lurie. (ATTRIDGE apud Meljac, 2011).

The fact is, however, that in *Disgrace*, black men gang rape white Lucy, which Lurie believes was an act carried out of vengeance (p.112) for the apartheid and the oppression of black people, a response to the racial differences imposed by colonialism. About the fact and its historical implications, Lurie says: 'It was history speaking through them, a history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps. It may have seemed personal, but it wasn't. It came

down from the ancestors” (p.156). David, on the other hand, thinks she wants expiation for the “crimes of the past by suffering in the present” (p.112).

It is possible that in Lucy’s mind, the one crime she was a victim of is an effect to the crime of apartheid, a white guilt expressed in another of Coetzee’s character, in *Age of Iron* (1990)

A crime was committed a long time ago. How long ago? I do not know. But longer ago than 1916, certainly. So long ago that I was born into it. It was part of my inheritance. It is part of me, I am part of it. Like every crime it had its price. That price I used to think would have to be paid in shame: in a life of shame and a shameful death, unlamented, in an obscure corner. I accepted that. I did not try to set myself apart. Though it was not a crime I committed, it was committed in my name. (Coetzee,1990, p. 164)

And if history is an acceptable justification for the attack, it could be a justification, too, for what Lurie does to Pollux, in the establishment of a white and black opposition. At Petrus’s party celebrating the land transfer, Lurie and Lucy have an uncomfortable sighting of Pollux, and Lurie is outraged at the fact that Petrus welcomes him at his home, a gesture symbol of his connivance with what happened to Lucy. Later in the story, after his departure, Lurie sees himself forced to return to the Cape after he learns of Lucy’s pregnancy. Even worse, one of the possible fathers, Pollux, is Petrus’s brother-in-law, and is now under his care and protection, under the premise that Pollux is “his people” (p.201). Lurie deems the situation ridiculous and unsuccessfully pleads for an obstinate Lucy to leave the farm. Petrus’s “solution” for the predicament affronts Lurie, thus establishing even greater racial tension:

'You say it is bad, what happened,' Petrus continues. 'I also say it is bad. It is bad. But it is finish.' He takes the pipe from his mouth, stabs the air vehemently with the stem. 'It is finish.' 'It is not finished. Don't pretend you don't know what I mean. It is not finished. On the contrary, it is just beginning. It will go on long after I am dead and you are dead.' Petrus stares reflectively, not pretending he does not understand. 'He will marry her,' he says at last. 'He will marry Lucy, only he is too young, too young to be marry. He is a child still.' 'A dangerous child. A young thug. A jackal boy.' Petrus brushes aside the insults. 'Yes, he is too young, too young. Maybe one day he can marry, but not now. I will marry.' 'You will marry whom?' 'I will marry Lucy.' He cannot believe his ears. So this is it, that is what all the shadow-boxing was for: this bid, this blow! And here stands Petrus foursquare, puffing on the empty pipe, waiting for a response. 'You will marry Lucy,' he says carefully. 'Explain to me what you mean. No, wait, rather don't explain. This is not something I want to hear. This is not how we do things.' We: he is on the point of saying, We Westerners. (p.202)

Lurie then, at a chance encounter with Pollux, finds the boy peeping at Lucy, and in an act of “elemental rage” (p. 206), commands the bulldog Katy to attack him, while calling the boy a filthy swine. So much for “Western” civilization.

Racial tension is strong in the dialogues Lucy and her father have following the attack. When Lucy says: ‘They think I am in their territory’ – it is her first, tentative reading of the three black rapists, which goes some way towards explaining why she refuses to follow her father’s advice to leave the country, a common trend amongst whites in the country, (as seen in the first chapter of this paper).

The most striking inter-racial discourse in *Disgrace* is not about Lucy’s rape, but rather about Lucy and Petrus. Lucy and Petrus’s agreement and work ethics symbolize the hopes of the nation, in which harmony is found and land is reintegrated to the colonized, in an attempt to make history (FANON, 1963, p. 69). Lucy’s utter willingness to adapt to the new social paradigm is unsettling and moving. Theoretically, under this new regime, race should not matter anymore, neither for Petrus, nor for Lucy and her father; the passing of power which cannot be so easily ignored.

Disgrace is then a novel about shame, truth and attempts of reconciliation, both for the characters and for South Africa. Lucy echoes the motivation behind the government’s initiative to found, for example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu), an organ created to help deal with the apartheid heritage and the transitional period the country has had to go through. A minor, but interesting character is Lucy’s well-protected neighbor, Ettinger, who is conveniently described in *eingewurzelt* (“rooted in”), signaling that he definitely does not fit in the new order, he is too much of an European, and a symbol of the old days. After the assault, the old man expresses his colonial racism: “Not one of them can you trust” (p.109) Unsurprisingly, Lucy thinks he is living on borrowed time (p.204) The novel is full of phallic symbols and its characters are crude in their desires, as Barnard (2003) notes: “Hunger and denial are displaced by desire, and desire is figured (appropriately, since the plot concerns prostitution, sexual harassment, and rape) by way of phallic tropes-arrows, snakes, and the like.

Regardless of his ambiguousness, Petrus seems to represent a nuisance to David, with his choosing of what sports to watch on TV and his bigamy, both of these characteristic of a black South African, and targets of criticism and sarcastic judgment from Lurie. It is possible that Lurie feels a hint of jealousy towards Petrus’ liberty to exercise his masculinity with two spouses. When Lurie obliges to help Petrus with the tools, it is clear that there is animosity towards Petrus. While Lurie acknowledges that he might have an “interesting” past, he

cannot help but being condescending towards him, describing him as “businesslike”(p.136) and saying he is not an “old style *kaffir*” (p.140), an expression that is now considered a racial slur. Such “understanding” might sound like a tentative alternative perspective being offered to the reader about Petrus, but it only reinforces Lurie’s intense dislike of the workman, confirming Spivak’s collocation that, once the subaltern is put in the position of the Other , it is a form of epistemic violence. Lurie sees Petrus’s flourishing ambition as a motive not to trust him, and again the two characters are seen as opponents. Not even Lucy can make a bridge between the two characters.

Lucy’s resulting pregnancy of a mixed race child is, Kossew (2003) believes, an “ambivalent message of hope and defeat.” Lucy calls it a “child of this earth” (216) – maybe more than her and her father, who are being rapidly pushed away from there, losing not only territory but also a sense of self and safety. In order to seal this sentiment, Lucy agrees to make a marital arrangement with Petrus, a deal she calls an alliance (p.203), which could be due to the fact that Petrus is all about business, or because ultimately, Lucy understands the underlyings of the attack as a war, and she should surrender to Petrus. From this deal, Lucy will get protection from further acts of violence, since she believes the rapists will come back:

‘But isn’t there another way of looking at it, David. [. . .] They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying? Perhaps that is what they tell themselves.’
(p.158)

By accepting to become Petrus’s third wife, Lucy is also possibly trying to move away from guilt and punishment, in fact.

Lucy and her father eventually grow apart after the rape and its consequences, especially in their view of the land, when Lucy decides to become Petrus’ tenant (p. 204). By staying in, and not taking the emigration route, Lucy “negotiates a postcolonial future” (MCDONALD, 2002, p.329) for her and the mixed-race child she is now carrying, destitute of many of the things she was *entitled* to before the new order; she has no land, no weapons and wants redress. Lucy’s shame will guarantee her continuity in the country (SPIVAK, 2002).

Petrus is the ultimate patriarch, surrounded by wives and children, a big house, abandoning his role of dog-man, of help, of gardener to ensure his line will dominate. He represents a new generation, which is efficient and modern, “unlike Africa” (p. 151). He is

aware that the present times are dangerous, but the readers are not given access to his full perspective (neither Lucy's), since the narrative is focalized by Lurie, undoubtedly a strategy to keep it thought-provoking to the reader, to whom is not offered a counterfocalization. This is the moment, when the reader does not succumb to Lurie's failed reading of Lucy and Petrus when, according to Spivak (2002), reading becomes political.

Final Considerations

While there may be an endless debate as to Coetzee's political orientation and his feelings towards his homeland, it is undeniable that, as Chou (2009) puts it, that "throughout his career, if not necessarily always pleasing the reader, Coetzee has more importantly engaged and provoked the reader", by cogently mixing history and fiction, and, as Attridge highlights, raising questions of practical importance. In addition to this, *Disgrace* holds special importance for being the product and a representation of the historical changes South Africa went through after the end of the apartheid, by addressing the racial tension present in the relations between blacks and whites in a postcolonial context, where land is a much part of power play as it was in the early history of the country as a colony. What is so unnerving about *Disgrace* is that it does not offer a solution, an easy moral lesson, to the conflicts South Africa is dealing with in its recent history; instead, it paints the new order with bleak colors that the official apparatus cannot correct as easily as desired. Coetzee certainly subverted the expectations of what a post-apartheid novel should be like, and for that he should be acknowledged. His opposition to the political period the country underwent from 1948 to 1994 is also clear from his previous novels, and in this post-apartheid creation, in spite of the terrible reality of racial tension, his position still holds true. The outrage generated by the novel is understandable, but it is not an implication that the accusations of racism stand corrected.

The most complex character, Petrus, remains inscrutable throughout the story, perhaps because he embodies the new South Africa; there is no telling what is going to happen. Petrus benefits from the new regime, but it is unclear what is his position towards those formerly powerful in the rearranged scenario, and what are his uncertainties and fears about the present time. The pivotal crime of which Lucy is the main victim is the main reason why the novel was so criticized for racism; Lucy's reaction to it, however, even if it stems from white guilt, is a clear manifestation of a desire to walk towards peace, even if there is a high price to pay for it. *Disgrace* does not manifest a yearning for South Africa to go back in time, but it does express regret over the institutionalized politics of insincere confessions.

As for the accusations of racism that the book has suffered, what can be said is that Coetzee did not make an obvious story for the readers. In making Lurie the narrator, but not an omniscient one, we are forced to see through Lurie's perspective, which is tainted for personal reasons, and does not represent, for example, Lucy and her very diverse view on the

new times in South Africa. As Marais (2006) reasons, “The reader must do what the novel itself admits the writer cannot do and, indeed, what cannot be done.” It is a powerful responsibility trusted on the reader, to engage in thinking and imagining Lucy, Petrus and Africa beyond Lurie’s words, beyond the book’s repercussion, beyond racial and cultural stereotypes exercising the ethics of alterity in their reading, through the rendering of the author.

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