An Analysis of J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace by Means of Hybridity, Ambivalence, and Feminism

A modern ambassador of the arts and anomalous of South Africa, lead vocalist NINJA of Die Antwoord describes himself as a product of post-apartheid influence as follows, “Check it. I represent South African culture. In this place you get a lot of different things. Blacks, whites, coloreds, English, Afrikaans, Xhosa, Zulu, Basotho. I'm like all these different things, all these different people, fucked into one person” (NINJA). The members of Die Antwoord highlight the extremes and satirical aspects of their roots by appropriating South African culture in the same method that hip-hop culture borrows and remixes contemporary culture to create an enhanced expression. Die Antwoord sways between female empowerment and masculine dominance alongside their satire of white culture encountering black culture. At least they are obvious in their intention by the aid of their viral music videos but sometimes the viewer is not awarded the privilege of a clear image as is the case with J.M. Coetzee's novel Disgrace. This novel depicts, alongside a gloomy backdrop of post-apartheid South Africa, the protagonist David Lurie in a crisis involving the loss of his job and dignity while to trying to reconstruct his own character and relationship with his daughter experiencing her own catastrophe. The complexities of this novel involve an enlistment of the reader's morality gauge that can simultaneously be influenced by personal views of the reader as well as those established by Lurie which deserve a deeper inquiry by means of post-colonial analysis.

It would be unfair and erroneous to consider Coetzee's novel Disgrace in a framework of only one post-colonial aspect such as Edward Said's Orientalism which implies a division between colonizer and colonized as explained in Professor Paul Fry's lecture on post-colonialism (Fry). Instead, it is my
intention to borrow from Professor Fry's lecture on post-colonialism that elaborates on Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and ambivalence maintained by the colonizer and the colonized, thereby developing a platform to approach Coetzee's work hovering in the hemisphere above. In the ascension of inquiry, other appropriate means of measure will be solicited for analysis. Interesting contributions from Gayatri Spivak, a female theorist that offers new color and feminist insight to Said and Bhabha's definitive outlook on works of this nature, will be applied to fashion a conclusive interpretation of the text. The main themes in Disgrace include social adjustments to change in a new era and the treatment or misrepresentation of women. By applying a modified postcolonial perspective, it is possible to devise a fitting framework for analyzing Coetzee's Disgrace that is convoluted with Eurocentric influences, tension between races, and misogynistic undertones embedded in the composition as expressed or experienced by the main characters.

Coetzee writes the book in a limited third person point of view to add dramatic effect especially in regards to moral dilemmas. The level of impact and pathos of the writing are integral in the reader's initiation into the mindset or consciousness of an old dog not likely to learn new tricks. This is significant considering that a new era of post-apartheid is developing. The privilege of maintaining this perspective offers the reader intimate feelings of an old white man interacting with women and people of color, but the downfall is that the reader is not awarded the thought processes or testimonies of the other side. What we can gather is an impression of what is exchanged and not clearly stated to develop a more profound revelation of the complexities involved in a post-apartheid setting. The beginning of the book reveals the protagonist reluctant to change until dramatic turn of events influence new considerations.

In devising an application of post-colonial theory, ambivalence and hybridity are integral elements to perceive Disgrace. Johannes Bertens explains hybridity as a negation to the notion of separateness existing between the colonizer and the colonized (Bertens 167). Bertens, in his
explanation of Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, expresses that there in that mingling of forces exists a “fusion of cultural forms” allowing a perspective that acknowledges the waning power of a colonizer clashing with the equally unpredictable colonized in a struggle imposing submission of the other (Bertens 167). In addition, Bertens interprets Bhabha's outlook further by revealing that “the colonizer cannot escape a complex and paradoxical relationship with the colonized” (166). This implies that the distribution of power is not easily defined. Since Lurie is the main speaker, we are mainly afforded his experiences in this complex setting. His measure of morality suspiciously manages to possess the reader to adopt the mindset of a hardheaded part-time-father and failed writer coming to terms in an era of great change both personally and socially.

One should not perceive Lurie as colonizer with a bullwhip and unlatched firearm watching over the enslaved, instead one should consider Lurie's position as descending from Europe although he is not entirely European. He is South African in a once colonized province undergoing a change of power as revealed in the setting. He is in a sense an uninvited guests related to the bad company brandishing European ideals. In the post-apartheid era, Lurie seems to be simultaneously dealing with new arrangements of power in his work, his city, and his country. After his dismissal from the university for an abuse of power, Lurie is shunned away from the great metropolis of Cape Town. Lurie escapes to his daughter Lucy's land where the enterprise of farm living can be earned by invested efforts as is the case for Lucy, David's daughter, and Petrus, a hired black hand. The interactions between these three characters offer examples of exchanges of power and dominance which highlight some peculiarities of the post-colonial milieu.

It is in the outskirts that the story offers a surreal platform. On nature's back, the barren land and isolation offer a fluctuating but primarily level stage where David confronts himself as revealed in his interactions between individuals stemming from different histories of apartheid. For instance, David has interactions with his daughter from a younger and malleable generation. In contrast, he also has
exchanges of dialogue with Petrus that is of the same generation as David but from opposite upbringing. Petrus is not a stereotypical servant. He is a black man that speaks enough English to form relations, delegate and coordinate which are essential in establishing business in an English speaking society. In the interim of David's arrival, Petrus is simultaneously working as Lucy's hired help as well as trying to establish his own claim nearby to indulge in enterprise as may have been predicated in the beginning of colonialism but most likely not in those terms or those hands.

While working or interacting with Petrus, David reveals a glimmer of his belief structure miserably adjusting to the post-apartheid era by internally expressing his views on Petrus as an equal, the limits of the English language and Petrus earning property. For instance, while working at the town market with Petrus, David reflects on the curious dynamic of having Petrus, a colored person, do all the work while he sits. This then leads David to reminisce upon the “old days”. According to the speaker, back then someone in Petrus’ position, as an alleged conspirator, could just be sent away but in this new era Petrus does not take orders (Coetzee 116). This is an instant of David possibly reaching for an easy means of escape, by considering the way of life back then. It shows how he consciously evades feeling uncomfortable since he suspects Petrus is involved in the violent intrusion upon Lucy's body and her home. This scenario also exhibits the influence of the era revealing Petrus’ method of assimilating in a world that once rejected him. His power relies on his accordance to South African law thereby being awarded land and finding his place as an equal although racial barriers may express a different stance on equality.

While inspecting Petrus' appearance, David also undergoes another thought process on how to classify Petrus until he concludes “neighbour” will suffice (Coetzee 116). It is as if David has not been afforded enough opportunities to interact with people of color that were not in a subordinate level but David does establish a sincere curiosity and acknowledgment that “it is a new world they live in” (Coetzee 117). It is not apparent how Petrus feels about David or Lucy because of his distanced
behavior and short words. His words may be concise because of either a language barrier or because he wishes to be brief to not initiate too close to the competition that holds desirable land that he once labored on.

The point where David makes reference to a possible feeling of guilt for colonial intrusion arises when trying to sympathize with Petrus' experiences in the change of era. David, in his thought process, admits a willingness to hear Petrus' story but “preferably not reduced to English” (Coetzee 117). He elaborates that English “is an unfit medium for truth of South Africa” (Coetzee 117). This exhibits David's sympathy to social-political circumstances. This can also be an implication that English is not natural to South Africa and possibly a hybrid language will have to suffice to reflect on the precious artifacts of this part of the world. David is expressing an attempt to cope with another man's experiences under the duress of political circumstances.

Another revelation of David's attitudes should be considered regarding Petrus' accomplishment of becoming a home owner and erecting a future for his family. While Petrus is earning his keep, David and Lucy are continually deprived of their earnings. Petrus exhibits a means of the colonizer rebelling against the establishment by playing the colonized game of acquiring land and industry. Since upon arriving, David has experienced lessons in hardships beginning with the loss of his job and his property. When David first encounters Petrus, the laborer introduces himself as “gardner and the dog-man” (Coetzee 64). Then as the book progresses David undergoes the experience of Lucy's rape and resorts to seeking refuge from idleness and tension at the animal shelter. There he is responsible for the menial task of disposing dead dogs from the shelter after they are euthanized. David admittedly is demoted as the dog-man, a title once reserved for Petrus (Coetzee 146). The text acknowledges a change of role in the power struggle which is necessary for David to develop new considerations that he was resistant against until he took on the position reserved for dog-men, lower class or possibly people of color.
David is not the only one to feel the exchange of control or power, Lucy admits, after considering Petrus' offer to marry her into a secure household, that “Yes, like a dog” she will have to start from baseline to work up the scale again (Coetzee 205). She concedes to it because of how the turn of events unfolded and according to her, marrying Petrus is her best option. David may see this as a step down, implying Petrus is beneath her, while Lucy means to make an effort to cope with the racial divide still revealing itself in unpredictable ways. Meanwhile, Petrus through all of this continues his work to develop a fruitful home. This exchange of roles, including sexual violence, illustrates the unpredictability that Bhabha maintains according to Bertens' interpretation on post-colonialism (Bertens 160). Professor Fry would go as far to consider this as an example of “ambivalence of the colonizer” and “ambivalence of the colonized” that shows how those involved adapt to conflicting attitudes in an arena such as post-apartheid (Fry). Lucy's intent to marry Petrus and birth the result of rape suggests in one part she is trying to maintain sympathy for the hardships experienced by black people in the past but also it is a means of her to not lose any more of her superiority. In addition, it is peculiar that Petrus is able to stand back in times of crisis, as in Lucy's rape, but he is willing to return to her aid if he benefits from the exchange monetarily as is implied in his proposal to marry her in exchange for land rights. This expression of ambivalence expresses one of the many moral complexities of Disgrace that leave it up to the reader to interpret.

The sign of the times surfaces again in David's relation with Soraya, a prostitute and woman of Muslim descent. His perception of her offers another brief sign of a stereotypical influence dealing with a topic deserving of further investigation because it involves the role of women and ethnicity. David, initiates an act of what Professor Fry labels as “ambivalence of the colonizer” by expressing acknowledgement, or acceptance, of Muslim tradition but later he intrudes on her forcibly (Fry). For instance, he offers a gift to Soraya on Eid, a Muslim holiday, but will later challenge his supremacy by intruding on her private life outside their arranged sexual contract. This exhibits David's inclination
to indulge in non-white individuals but in his own dominant terms. The text reveals how David wonders if Soraya has a family and works part-time which would be “unusual for a Muslim” but as almost a premonition he admits “all things are possible these days” (Coetzee 3). Soraya, when intruded upon by David's presence and phone call, exhibits a moment of female empowerment and ambivalence of her own sort by challenging the hand trying to shackle her. Soraya shocks David to defeat when she “commands” him to never call again thus severing their bond indefinitely (Coetzee 10). He is confronted with realities beyond stereotypical expectations of race and gender but the majority of women are not regarded as fairly in the text overall.

In regards to post-colonial theory, objections to Bhabha’s generalizations have been raised. As Bertens explains, Bhabha does not include the influence of gender or culture in his theorizing (Bertens 169). Gayatri Spivak, according to Bertens, tries to be sensitive to diversity or what is labeled as heterogeneity with an emphasis on feminist perspective (169, 170). From a attenuated feminist standpoint, Soraya is afforded an opportunity to express a response on equal grounds which suggests that Soraya, of an arguably lower class as a prostitute and Muslim, maintains a fair presence to not just succumb to David’s expectations accustomed to certain privileges.

Yet not all women are fairly represented especially considering the role of ethnicity and class as Carine Mardorossian points out in her analysis on Disgrace. Mardorossian focuses on the two instances of sexual violations against women involving Melanie and Lucy separately. Mardorossian states “The singling out of one rape along with the normalization of the other, has everything to do with [David's] racialized and racist perspective” (77). What is seen as normalized is David's encounter with Melanie. It seems like a lesser crime in David's attitude even though Melanie is forced to hide from him. There is a lack of Melanie's voice that leaves only a spectral presence of her suggesting that the violation in inflicted upon her impacted her greatly. Admittedly, Mardorossian acknowledges critiques stating that such an attitude as portrayed by David exhibit his inadequacies intentionally to challenge
the reader but interestingly, she suggests “[that] facilitates rather than hampers our identification with the protagonist’s stance” (77). This in turn creates a normalizing effect of the matter which is relevant considering that the normalized rape was imposed by a white man and the singled out rape was imposed by black men. Mardorossian emphasizes the significance of the point of view in the story that although encourages dialogue on morality by offering a “white masculinist subject’s way of thinking,” there is a risk that the difference of treatment regarding the two rapes will be overlooked with an emphasis fueling fear of the other (78). The language is essential in uncovering the distinctions as Mardorossian insists. When considering the impact of the two rapes, the text leads the reader to fear the black man when there should be an equal fear of the white man as well considering David's misguided justifications and unpredictable nature.

The language in *Disgrace* indirectly projects elements of ambivalence between both sides refusing to be the subordinate or viewed as the other, the intruder, the invader, or that force deserving restraints. The curious elements that surface, such as the conflicts arising across race and gender, encourage an investigation of the interchanging and dependent dynamics between colonizer and the colonized. The main body of text, specifically that which represents David's perspective, presents a subjective representation of an individual coming to terms with a change of era that affects the antagonists equally. The weakness of Coetzee's style of writing, represented as David's point of view, is the one sidedness of a complex argument regarding the reconstruction era of post-apartheid. The benefit of this style involves soliciting the interpretive skills of the reader which benefit from utilizing the devices maintained in post-colonialism and feminism. The story may be viewed as racist or sexist but it would be more intelligent to recognize that David's is an outlier, or anomaly, representing one of many distinct dilemmas in that environment. In addition, its beneficial to recognize that the environment, the antagonists, and ideology maintained are adapting to change as humanly possible. The text can not be compared to racist genre or white-supremacy fiction. Similarly, this story can not
be maintained as a conclusive representation of South Africa much like a granular sample can not represent a vast desert. By scanning across the sample towards the vastness one can find a history of industrious life forces colliding towards the present and a path which may lead to an oasis offering reparations and harmony for all.
Works Cited


