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Fractures of Power: The Collapse of Patriarchal Logic in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Abstract: This article investigates the limits of patriarchal logic in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, mapping the ethical failures and gendered tensions that erupt within post-apartheid South Africa. Through the lens of Lucy's radical silence and David Lurie's moral inertia, Coetzee exposes a structure of masculine entitlement that collapses under the weight of shifting socio-political dynamics. The narrative resists conventional redemption arcs, situating female autonomy not as a reconciliatory gesture but as a pointed refusal to participate in patriarchal reparation. Petrus's rise and David's symbolic descent echo a larger postcolonial reckoning, where old hierarchies erode and new agencies emerge. In tracing the fractures—emotional, political, and philosophical—this article argues that *Disgrace* enacts a quiet but forceful deconstruction of power's gendered performance.

Keywords: Gendered Tensions, Radical Silence, Moral Inertia, Masculine Entitlement, Post-Apartheid, Redemption Arcs, Hierarchies.

Introduction

J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* unfolds as a sombre excavation of post-apartheid South Africa's volatile ethical landscape, where the residues of patriarchal entitlement confront emergent dynamics of gender, race, and socio-political flux. At its core lies David Lurie—a once-privileged academic whose fall from cultural capital into moral and existential disarray reflects not only personal disgrace but also the crumbling of hegemonic masculinity shaped by colonial and intellectual elitism.

Lurie's trajectory charts a descent from rhetorical confidence to ethical opacity, exposing how masculinist modes of authority—anchored in sexual entitlement and rational detachment—become untenable in a reordered world. His interactions with Melanie Isaacs, a young Black student, evoke tensions steeped in historical asymmetries: the racialised and gendered gaze, consent blurred by institutional power, and a disturbing detachment that underscores the transactional logic of his desire.



Lucy's narrative, however, functions as the crucible in which Lurie's fractured masculinity is most acutely interrogated. Her refusal to seek restitution or revenge after sexual violence rejects Lurie's paternalistic frameworks and moral calculations, subverting his belief in redemptive order. Instead, Lucy embraces a pragmatic, albeit unsettling, negotiation of identity and survival in the face of structural violence—one that recasts agency through silence, endurance, and disengagement from patriarchal legibility.

Disgrace does not merely chronicle a personal unravelling but stages a larger critique of masculinist decline amidst shifting cultural tectonics. Through affective alienation, ethical liminality, and bodily vulnerability, Coetzee dismantles mythologies of authority and intellectual virility, gesturing toward an ethics shaped not by control but by humility, ambiguity, and fractured relationality.

Feminist theorists such as Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak provide vital frameworks for interpreting *Disgrace's* narrative refusals. Butler's conception of gender performativity questions the stability of David's patriarchal identity, while Spivak's interrogation of subaltern silence contextualises Lucy's refusal to report her assault within a larger critique of representational violence. In resisting traditional redemptive arcs and refusing to grant David ethical closure, Coetzee positions the female body not as a site of reconciliation but as a contested terrain where speech, agency, and silence collide.

Moreover, the novel's rural setting becomes a symbolic crucible where postcolonial ruptures manifest. Petrus's ascendancy as a Black landowner disrupts the colonial grammar of ownership and agency, inviting Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's call for cultural decolonisation and linguistic self-assertion. Lucy's pact with Petrus—a reluctant yet calculated negotiation—evokes a counter-discourse to patriarchal justice, suggesting alternative modes of survival that do not require narrative legibility within inherited moral systems.

This article argues that *Disgrace* dismantles the fantasy of patriarchal redemption by foregrounding ethical failure, female resistance, and postcolonial power reversals. In doing so, Coetzee not only critiques the tenets of male entitlement but also gestures toward a quieter, fractured landscape of justice, where silence itself is radical.

Redemption and Female Sacrifice

In *Disgrace*, Coetzee sketches David Lurie's search for redemption as one steeped in masculine entitlement. His belief in the redemptive potential of aesthetic confession—writing about his liaison with



Melanie—reveals a troubling reliance on women’s suffering as narrative resource. Rather than reckoning with the harm caused, David sublimates Melanie into prose, failing to address the real violence of his actions (Coetzee 141).

This dynamic echoes Gayatri Spivak’s seminal query, “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*”, where the subaltern—racialised, gendered, and silenced—is unable to assert agency within dominant discourses. Melanie’s minimal dialogue and enforced absence from the disciplinary hearings suggest that she occupies this subaltern position: spoken about, interpreted, and aestheticised, but never given voice. Lurie’s poetry and theatrical adaptation render her a muse, not a subject, collapsing any possibility for ethical redress. Further, Judith Butler’s concept of performative gender identity—in *Undoing Gender*—underscores how David’s masculinity hinges on repetition and reinforcement of patriarchal control. His refusal to see women as autonomous agents, particularly evident in his confrontation with Bev Shaw when he says, “I do not find you attractive” (Coetzee 147), positions him as the arbiter of value, denying reciprocal emotional depth. Redemption, in this frame, is not transformative but self-serving, reinforcing the same logic that precipitated his fall.

Lucy’s role is even more complex. After her brutal assault, David urges her to speak, report, and retaliate. Yet she refuses, choosing instead a strategic silence and land-bound compromise with Petrus. This decision resists patriarchal forms of justice which demand legibility and punishment. Lucy embodies Butler’s idea of living outside normative intelligibility—her silence critiques a justice system that protects patriarchal structures and marginalises alternative forms of agency. Lucy’s role intensifies this critique. After her assault, she refuses to speak or retaliate, unsettling David’s sense of justice. Her line- “I am a woman, I am not minor” (Coetzee 161), rejects both victimhood and paternalism. Her silence is not submission but resistance, signalling a reconfiguration of power on her terms.

Ultimately, Coetzee refuses to redeem David in conventional terms. The narrative's refusal to offer closure through confession or catharsis suggests that patriarchal redemption is inherently unstable. Coetzee’s treatment of Melanie, Lucy, Soraya, and Bev Shaw reveals a pattern—each woman resists being assimilated into David’s moral rehabilitation, emphasising that true redemption cannot arise from imposed narrative sacrifice.



Unmaking the Man: Abjection, Vulnerability, and Ethical Nearness

In *Disgrace*, Coetzee dismantles hegemonic masculinity by immersing David Lurie in abjection, forcing him into vulnerable proximity with those he once disregarded—the raped daughter, the euthanised dog, and the Black labourer—all of whom challenge the possibility of moral redemption in a fractured postcolonial landscape.

J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* critically reframes the redemptive arc that traditionally accompanies literary narratives of fall and recovery, especially those centred on the modern anti-hero. David Lurie's descent—from esteemed academic to isolated caregiver in an animal clinic—is not framed as spiritual salvation or moral purification. Instead, Coetzee choreographs a gradual, painful movement toward ethical proximity without mastery, where the encounter with animality becomes a site of unlearning, vulnerability, and non-sovereign recognition. Spoken by Lurie later in the novel, "This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals. That's the example that people like Bev try to set. That's the example I try to follow" (Coetzee 85). This quote refers to Bev Shaw, a volunteer who helps run the animal clinic where unwanted and dying animals are euthanised with care and dignity. After the traumatic events involving his daughter Lucy, Lurie begins assisting Bev—not out of duty, but out of a deepening sense of humility.

Lurie's bond with animals—especially his insistence on performing euthanasia and witnessing their cremation—evokes a shift from intellectual abstraction to embodied care. He does not achieve transcendence; rather, he submits to an ethics rooted in humiliation, intimacy, and dispossession. The animals he tends to are not symbols to be redeemed nor metaphors to be resolved. They remain *abject others*, resistant to narrative closure and outside the purview of anthropocentric meaning-making.

Coetzee thus destabilises the humanist presumption that moral growth must culminate in restoration. Lurie's evolving relationship with the non-human is marked by silence, touch, and ritual—modes that resist linguistic mastery and epistemological control. In this context, *ethical transformation is neither celebrated nor completed*; it occurs in the shadows of postcolonial guilt, compromised masculinity, and affective disorientation.

Through posthumanist and poststructural lenses, we may interpret Lurie's proximity to animals as a form of *disgraced ethical awakening*—one that abandons sovereignty, rejects teleological healing, and



embraces the fractured terrain of relational ethics. As such, Coetzee constructs a radical space where care is decoupled from redemption, and where the recognition of otherness—be it animal, female, or racialised—is both necessary and irreducibly incomplete.

Lucy's Silence as Resistance

Lucy's silence in the aftermath of her rape is one of *Disgrace*'s most haunting and politically charged moments. Rather than seeking justice through institutional channels or expressing outrage through conventional language, she chooses quiet endurance and accommodation. Lucy's silence is political. She opts for quiet endurance and accommodation rather than legibility within patriarchal justice. David's frustration—"But why, Lucy?" (Coetzee 134)—highlights his inability to grasp agency that operates beyond speech.

Judith Butler's theory of "livable lives," as explored in *Undoing Gender*, challenges the idea that autonomy must be expressed through coherent speech within recognisable ethical systems. Lucy's refusal to narrate her trauma defies the assumption that justice must be sought through visibility, disclosure, and retributive action. Instead, she carves out a form of existence that is non-narrative but deeply political—a form of selfhood that operates outside the patriarchal script.

This refusal also echoes Gayatri Spivak's critique of representational violence in "Can the Subaltern Speak?". Lucy's position as a queer farmer in a postcolonial South African landscape places her at the margins of dominant discourse. Her silence critiques not only David's paternalistic desire to "save" her but also the broader system that demands women translate their trauma into something digestible for masculine redemption. Lucy rejects this expectation, declaring, "I am a woman, I am not minor." Her resistance is linguistic, philosophical, and spatial—she chooses to remain on her land, to bear the consequences quietly, and to reshape power on her own terms.

Petrus's role here is crucial. While Lucy's accommodation with him may seem like surrender, it is also a recalibration of power. By joining forces with Petrus—a Black man rising in postcolonial authority—Lucy participates in a form of survival that does not depend on patriarchal justice but on strategic alliance. She reclaims her body and her space not by asserting mastery, but through resilience and negotiation. It is an ethics of endurance, not dominance.



Through Lucy, *Disgrace* proposes that silence can be a radical act—an epistemological resistance that destabilises patriarchal expectations. Her refusal to speak is not a lack of agency but a defiant reconfiguration of it, revealing the limits of a justice system built on masculine speech, visibility, and control.

Postcolonial Shifts and Racialised Patriarchy

In *Disgrace*, Coetzee stages a quiet but forceful shift in racialised power structures by contrasting David Lurie's ethical unravelling with Petrus's strategic rise. While David's cultural capital—built on linguistic privilege and patriarchal authority—crumbles, Petrus gains material and symbolic control, reshaping the narrative terrain of land, agency, and identity.

Petrus's rise is not dramatic—it is administrative, silent, and grounded in land ownership. His encroaching control over Lucy's farm signals the crumbling of colonial land ideologies where white masculinity once dictated authority. David's inability to comprehend this shift is captured in his discomfort with Petrus's negotiation of the rape's consequences: "That's not the point," (138) David says, disturbed by Petrus's calculated language. But it *is* the point—the restructuring of power no longer accommodates white moral urgency.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's concept of *decolonizing the mind* helps parse this shift. David's performative intellectualism, rooted in Western romantic poetry and elite university culture, becomes obsolete. He finds himself writing about animals, burying dogs—symbolic gestures that mark his descent into moral humility. Meanwhile, Petrus's pragmatic control of space and narrative offers a template for postcolonial agency: one that is material, local, and no longer beholden to white linguistic domination.

The farm itself becomes a crucible of symbolic inversion. Once a space of white ownership and pastoral control, it now hosts Lucy's unsettling pact and Petrus's legal ascendancy. Land in *Disgrace* is no longer poetic—it is politicised, layered with histories of dispossession and reclamation. David, stripped of authority, is forced to witness the collapse of his patriarchal and racial privilege without resolution or revenge.

Furthermore, Petrus's refusal to express guilt or outrage reflects an epistemic shift: he does not perform morality in David's language. Instead, he prioritises survival, consolidation, and social climbing. Coetzee presents Petrus not as morally pure but as a realist in a postcolonial world where white redemption



has no sovereign currency. His power is grounded in silence, calculation, and a refusal to legitimise David's perspective.

In this landscape, racialised patriarchy does not dissolve entirely—it mutates. Patriarchal structures remain, but the agents of power shift. Lucy's compromise with Petrus gestures toward uneasy alliances in postcolonial South Africa, where survival may necessitate engagement with evolving forms of authority that are no longer white, no longer redeeming, and no longer narrative-bound.

Conclusion

Coetzee's *Disgrace* offers no easy redemption, no narrative closure, and no salvaging of patriarchal logic. Instead, it orchestrates a quiet but unrelenting dismantling of masculinist structures, where ethical failure is not merely personal but paradigmatic. David Lurie's downfall is more than a descent into humility—it is an exposé of the fragile scaffolding upon which patriarchal authority has long rested: aesthetic mastery, sexual entitlement, and moral centrality.

Melanie's silencing, Lucy's strategic endurance, and Petrus's ascendancy each mark fault lines in a landscape where inherited power must contend with shifting ethical grammars. Coetzee refuses catharsis. He refuses narrative resolution. And in doing so, he demands that readers confront a postcolonial terrain where silence becomes speech, marginality becomes agency, and justice remains fractured but fiercely contested.

The collapse of patriarchal logic in *Disgrace* invites deeper feminist and postcolonial readings—not just of literature, but of the lived realities that undergird it. What does autonomy mean when speech is unsafe? What does justice look like when legibility itself is a form of violence? In raising these questions, Coetzee does not offer answers. He offers Lucy.

This article has argued that *Disgrace* is not a tragedy of individual downfall—it is a philosophical reckoning with power, gender, and the limits of repair. Its refusal to redeem patriarchy is its quiet triumph. And in that refusal lies a challenge: to reimagine survival beyond speech, justice beyond retribution, and agency beyond the inherited scripts of domination. Through feminist and postcolonial lenses, this article has argued that *Disgrace* dismantles the scaffolding of masculinist dominance. The refusal to redeem David becomes its triumph—an invitation to imagine justice beyond domination, and survival beyond speech.



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