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## The Quest for Identity in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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### **Abstract:**

Literature is a mirror in which one can see the reflection of life. It introduces new worlds of experience and it is important because it speaks to the readers and it is universal. Among the twentieth century South African writers, Coetzee is an important literary figure. Through his works he reflects the suffering of the South Africans during the apartheid system. This paper focuses on the disgraceful state of characters' in *Disgrace* because of the lost identity. It also pictures the Whites struggle for existence and individuality.

**Keywords:** apartheid, identity, existence, individuality

Identity is a term used to describe a person's conception and expression of their individuality or group affiliations, such as national identity and cultural identity. The term is used more specifically in psychology and sociology. A psychological identity relates to self-image, self-esteem and individuality. An important part of identity in psychology is gender identity, as this dictates to a significant degree how an individual views him or herself as a person and in relation to other people, ideas and nature. Sociology places some explanatory weight on the concept of role behaviour. The concept of identity negotiation may arise from the learning of social roles through personal experience. Identity negotiation is a process in which a person negotiates with society at large regarding the meaning of his or her identity. Philosophical discourse on identity begins with Descartes. His famous mantra is, "I doubt, therefore I think, therefore I am" (34).

J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* is a controversial work dealing with the issues of rape, hatred and confession between Whites and Blacks in South Africa. Contemporary identity conflicts in South Africa mainly emerge as these various identities seek to assert and re-assert themselves in the context of a multicultural post-apartheid society. Cognizant of the many challenges to create a national identity emphasizes the concept of civic nationalism as it offers a progressive opportunity to mobilize South Africans around a shared national vision. Post-apartheid South Africa, the setting of *Disgrace*, is described as a country full of social and political conflicts. But Coetzee's book is more than just an illustration of contemporary South Africa, even though the country's main problems during its sometimes disgraceful transformation play an important role. The characters in the novel provide it with Universal importance through their life and situations.

The main characters in *Disgrace* include Lurie, Lucy and Petrus. Lurie and Lucy are White settlers in Cape Town. But the apartheid system has created the life of White settlers disgraceful and has made them rootless in an alienated country. They struggle for their survival and for creating an identity for themselves in life. The characters like Lurie and Lucy are the victims of such problems in *Disgrace*. They struggle for creating an identity in the midst of the black marks created by the apartheid system and among the black settlers. They strive to identify with the least honoured creatures in the world like dog and pig. But at the same time apartheid system has helped the black settlers to climb up in the ladder of social hierarchy during the apartheid issue. The example for such a character is Petrus, who is once called a dog undertaker. Coetzee, thus in *Disgrace* portrays the struggles for creating an identity through his characters in the novel.

Lurie's value of desire is ambivalent and anxious. Being lost his position as a University Professor, he now moves to his only daughter, Lucy. The stay with his daughter gains him a new experience with the country life. Lucy starts teaching him about the country life and its pleasant experiences. She introduces him to the world of animals, vegetables, flowers and farm. Lucy takes him to the premises and reminds him about not wasting water, about not contaminating the septic tank. Though knows the lesson he listens dutifully. She then, "shows him over the boarding kennels. On his last visit there had been only one pen. Now there are five, solidly built, with concrete bases, galvanized poler and struts, and heavy – gauge mesh, shaded by young bluegum tress" (61).

Lurie during his conversation with his daughter remarks that, "I wasn't made for marriages" (69). This shows his loss of individual identity in family life. At one point of his conversation he says, "Every woman I have been close to has taught me something about myself. To that extent they have made me a better person" (70). This reveals his need of another individual, to identify himself, his self and to shape him the best. Lucy starts leading the life of her father. It is stated, "So: a new adventure. His daughter, whom once upon a time he used to drive to school and ballet class, to the circus and the skating rink, is taking him on an outing, showing him life, showing him this other, unfamiliar world" (71).

Lucy now serves as a guide and a light house to Lurie. Lurie is in the darkness of the world as he lost his individual identity. Lurie is now guided to a new path by Lucy, who teaches him, "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. To share some of our human privilege with the beasts" (74). Later Lurie decides to help Bev Shaw in the clinic and Lucy advices, "You have only to help her. But don't expect to be paid. You will have to do it out of the goodness of your heart" (77). Lurie feels that his new decision is, "someone trying to make reparation for past misdeeds" (77). Lucy tells her father about the characteristic of the animals and describes, "I can

assure you, the animals at the won't query them. They won't ask and they won't care" (77) and Lurie accepts that, "All right, I'll do it. But only as long as I don't have to become a better person. I am not prepared to be reformed. I want to go on being myself. I'll do it on that basis" (77). This response of Lurie reveals his identification of himself with that of the animals. He expresses his condition and the situation of the bull dog and finds the similarity in them by saying, "Abandoned are we?" (78). After the attack by the three intruders, there is complete change in the life of Lurie and he says:

His pleasure in living has been snuffed out. Like a leaf on a stream, like a puffball on a breeze, he has begun to float toward his end. He sees it quite clearly and it fills him with despair. The blood of life is leaving his body and despair is taking its place, despair that is like a gas, odourless, tasteless, without nourishment. (108)

At a point in his conversation, Lurie gives the reason for his choice of profession as a man taking care of dogs. He opines:

For his idea of the world, a world in which, men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing. The dogs are brought to the clinic because they are unwanted, because they are too many. That is where he enters their lives. He may not be their savior, the one for whom they are not too many, but he is prepared to take care of them once they are unable, utterly unable, to take care of themselves, once even Bev Shaw has washed her hands of them. A dog-man, Petrus once called himself. Well, now he has become a dog-man: a dog undertaker; a dog psychopomp; a *harijan*. (146)

This reveals Lurie's self-identification with the animals especially dogs. His attitude of identifying himself with dogs, makes his acquaintance with the human beings less familiar and he spends a greater time in company of dogs, "Twice a day he feeds the animals, he cleans out their pens and occasionally talks to them; otherwise he reads or dozes or, when he has the premises to himself, picks out on Lucy's banjo the music he will give to Teresa Guiccioli" (211). At the end of the novel Lurie attains the status of a saviour of the suffering dogs by subjecting the dogs to the hands of injecting lethal and their by saving the souls of the dogs. In this case, Lurie concerns not only the bond to human but also the bond to animals. Lurie no longer considers his interest should be prior to others, instead, he knows others' life should be value like his own life. Lurie realizes that he is inadequate to live alone in this world. He needs to be bonded to others. Lurie's tragic experiences actually open his selfish heart and lead him to a higher level of concerning others.

Lucy, Lurie's daughter, moved into a commune on the Eastern Cape years ago. Her commune was a tribe of young people who sold self-made products on a nearby market in order

to support themselves. After resigning his job Lurie stays with his daughter at Eastern Cape. The life of Lucy is quite contrary to her father. Coetzee vividly portrays her life:

Six years ago Lucy moved in as a member of a commune, a tribe of young people who peddled leather goods and sun baked pottery in Grahams town and, in between stands of mealies, grew dagga. When the commune broke up, the rump moving on to New Bethesda, Lucy stayed behind on the small holding with her friend Helen. She had fallen in love with the place, she said; she wanted to farm it properly. Now here she is, flowered dress, bare feet and all, in a house full of the smell of baking, no longer a child playing at farming but a solid woman, a *boervrou*. (60)

At the time when Lurie arrives at his daughter's farm five solid pens have been erected which are inhabited by dogs such as, "Dobermanns, German Shepherds, ridgebacks, bull terriers, Rottweilers" (61). All these are watch dogs. For Lucy the bringing up of dogs is meant for protection and she says, "There are the dog. Dogs still mean something. The more dogs, the more deterrence" (60). Lucy, once during her conversation with Lurie brings a sketch of her country and compares it with the wish of Lurie. She says:

You think I ought to involve myself in more important things, says Lucy. They are on the open road; she drives without glancing at him. You think, because I am your daughter, I ought to be doing something better with my life. You think I ought to be painting still lives or teaching myself Russian. You don't approve of friends like Bev and Bill Shaw because they are not going to lead me to a higher life. But it is true. They are not going to lead me to a higher life, and the reason is, there is no higher life. This is the only life there is which we share with animals. That's the example I try to follow. To share some of our human privilege with the beasts. I don't want to come back in another existence, as a dog or a pig and have to lives as dogs or pigs live under us. (74)

This shows Lucy's close contact with animals and finds that the life of a dog is better than a man and wishes to be a dog or a pig in her next birth. The solid and empowered nature of Lucy disappears after the attack by three intruders, "Lucy keeps to herself, expresses no feelings, shows no interest in anything around her. Lucy spends hour after hour lying on her bed, staring into space of looking at old magazines.... She does not reply. She would rather hide her face, and he knows. Why. Because of the disgrace. Because of the shame" (115). This incident tends her to lose her identity that she holds in her life. Lurie understands that his daughter Lucy is pregnant by one of the intruders. He insists her on having an abortion. But she refuses his request. Lurie enquires the reason for her not preferring the abortion. She gives the reason as "I am a woman" (198). Thus through this attitudes Lucy tries to create an identity in the midst of her diminishing

identity by choosing the identity of a woman. She asks Lurie, “Do you think I hate Children? Should I choose against a child because of who its father is?” (198). Thus she identifies herself with peculiar qualities of a woman. At another instance, she tries to create an identity as a mother. She states, “The child? No. How could I? But I will, Love will grow – one can trust Mother Nature for that I am determined to be a good mother, David. A good mother and a good person. You should try to be a good person too” (216).

Lucy tries to find peace around her by creating an identity. So she chooses to become the wife of Petrus, once the dog- man. She accepts the protection offered by Petrus and thus creates an identity for herself as the wife of him. She says to her father that:

Propose the following. I accept his protection. Say he can put out whatever story he like about our relationship and I won’t contradict him. If he wants me to be known as his third wife. So be it. As his concubine, ditte. But then the child becomes her too. The child becomes part of the family. As for the land, say I will sign the land over to him as long as the house remain mine. It will become a tenant on his land. (204)

Lucy creates an identity by claiming herself in acquaintance with dog or a pig, as a mother, as a woman and also as the wife of Petrus. Thus she identifies herself in the society.

Petrus is a black man working in the farm of the white woman Lucy. He is introduced by Lucy in the novel as a dog- man. She introduces him to her father and says that he is her assistant. Even Petrus introduces himself to Lurie in all his conversation as, “I look after the dogs and I work in the garden. I am a gardener and the dog-man. He reflects for a moment. ‘The dog man’ he repeats, savouring the phrase” (64). He understands his lose of identity in the midst of white owners. Lurie describe Petrus:

Petrus is a man of his generation. Doubtless Petrus has been through a lot, doubtless he has story to tell. He would not mind hearing Petrus’s story to tell. He wouldnot mind hearing Petrus’s story one day. But preferably not reduced to English. More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa. Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulations, their articulations, their articulateness. Like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud, the language has stiffened. Pressed into the mould of English, Petrus’s story would come out arthritic, bygone. (117)

The qualities of Petrus make him mark as an honest man and make other think him as, “a man of patience, energy, resilience. A peasant, a paysan, a man of the country” (117). But he has dislike for English language and for white men in the depth of his hearts. Lurie find him as, “A plotter and a schemer and no doubt a liar too, like peasants everywhere. Honest toil and honest

cunning” (117). Petrus is behind the attack of three intruders on Lucy. He engages three strange men to teach Lucy a lesson. Lucy and Lurie also remark, “Petrus is a penny pincher. In the old days it would have been an ox” (124). At the party arranged by Petrus on celebrating on his new farm and his house, he declares himself as no more a dog-undertaker. He never pays respect for his once owner, Lucy during the party. Thus Petrus, the once called dog-man becomes the land-owner and thus created an identity for himself in the midst of the white men surrounding him. Lucy, who was once his owner, now claims for protection under him. The attitude of Petrus towards Lucy is clearly viewed from her view:

I don't believe you get the point, David. Petrus is offering an alliance, a deal and not a church wedding followed by a honeymoon on the Wildcoast. I contribute the land, in return for which I am allowed to creep in under his wing. Otherwise, he wants to remind me, I am without protection, I am fair game. (203)

Lucy also says about the nature and aim of Petrus, “if is not me he is after, he is after the farm. The farm is my dowry” (203). Petrus gives more importance to his family and his family members. His attachment for his family can be viewed from his decision to protect Pollux, his relative who was one among the three intruders. Petrus tries to create an identity of his family and family members and also struggles to establish a firm place in the society. His attempt to climb up the ladder of the social order succeeds in attaining the high position in the hierarchical order. He climbs the upswing of the social order by his transformation from a dog undertaker, a dog-man and a gardener to land owner of his own former owner.

Thus Coetzee in *Disgrace* presents the strife and struggles the characters have to face due to the apartheid system in the post-apartheid period. The characters includes both White and Black men. The white men like Lurie and Lucy struggles to find an identity in the society. They strive hard to create an identity and identify themselves with the animals like dog and pig. But Petrus, the black man climbs up in the social status because of the apartheid notions and rules. Thus apartheid system created the people to search for their identity for their survival in the society.

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