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From Estrangement to Existential Self: A Study of J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Abstract:

J.M. Coetzee's Novel *Disgrace* is a trajectory of struggles, pain and tragedy in individual's lives. However these are the existential sufferings that become the basis of their existence. Each character in the novel makes intrinsic individual choices which define their lives and existence. Tragedies in their lives provide them the opportunities to assimilate life in the face of tragedy, pain and suffering. David Lurie protagonist of the story in the pursuit of meaning in his life traverses through many ups and down in his life but the inherent instinct of his to not to give up makes him the existential self in true means. Present paper tries to analyze the existential choices made by characters in the novel and also peep into the various aspects of individual's existence in the world.

Keywords: Existentialism, Subjectivity, Individual self, Disgrace.

Introduction:

J.M Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* (1999) is his most acclaimed work. Novel is set in the post-apartheid period. It represents the struggles of individuals for their existence in the world. The central character and protagonist of the story David Lurie's life is a trajectory of existential maturation; full of pain, suffering, guilt, agony, anxiety and many painful experiences. But this does not prove the protagonist victim or tragic hero. Rather these circumstances play crucial role in the development of character and his journey from estrangement to assimilation of being. He becomes the hero of his own life. What makes these individuals different are their choice and "wish to transcend their social and ethical predicaments and achieve authentic modes of living. Not content with being the heroes and heroines of their life-stories, they strive to write these

stories themselves. They want to attain authenticity by being faithful to scripts they have written for themselves.” (Golomb, 1995, 15)

Novel can be seen a series choice made by individuals. These are the distinct choices which make them different from each other. David Lurie is university professor of prestigious position with healthy mind, abundance of knowledge. But which makes him alienated in external world are his choices which he has made, debunking the societal norms and not doing what his society wants him to do. His choices are solely his own. He does not get affected by the external societal norms and designs his life subjectively being aware of the cataclysmic consequences. And the approach that suits this subjective individualism is existentialism. The philosophy of being that makes individual responsible for his own actions and choices. Existentialism is described by Nicola Abbagnano as “a quest for being” (19). It is a search for truth, sincerity and pure existence in a world ridden with illusions and absurdity.

Existentialism is 20th century philosophical movement. It aims at the concept of existence and of how human being tries to find out meaning in their life of existing in the world. For existential being there is no moral authority which can decide good or bad, right and wrong. It's up to individual to decide between dyads like good or bad. The characters in the novel are placed in a varied extreme situation just to make sense and to exist in the World. He tries his best to create meaning out of the absurd situations in his life going through existential trauma which is characterized by suffering, death, guilt, anxiety, anguish and alienation.

As the title of novel suggests, despite the various disgraceful events and stages in in Lurie's life his life can be seen as journey from “estrangement to sexual, creative and existential self-actualization” (Grayson, P.162) novel is divided in three parts. These three parts symbolize three phases of struggles for existence in David Lurie's life. As the novel begins David is seen as a deformed individual who as Grayson explains “attributes his social and professional isolation to external temporal factors” but as the novel progresses burgeoning sense of awareness of his inner-self and quest for authenticity enables him to find a voice to express his inner most concerns. This paper is going to analyze that how the whole corpus of the story moves around the existential themes in the novel. Themes like alienation, suffering, anxiety, guilt, death become instrumental to analyze individual journey towards subjective individual.

Analysis:

The question is not, are we sorry? The question is, what lesson have we learned? The question is, what are we going to do now that we are sorry? (*Disgrace*, p.172)

“for a man of his age, fifty two, divorced, he has , to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well.” (*Dis*: 1) The very first line of the text leaves David in a controversial position. For him sex is a problem to be solved, devoid of any emotional intimacy. David as seen “in good health, his mind is clear. By profession he is, or has been, a scholar...he lives within his income, within his temperament, within his emotional means. Is he happy? “Call no man happy until he is dead” (*Dis*: 2) He thinks he is happy but at the same time he is also aware of the emptiness and void in his life. David’s ontological quest for fullness and belongingness in his life can be seen through his interaction with external world. His relationship with prostitute Soraya makes him happy for time being but lacks the emotional intimacy. Furthermore his acute awareness of aging makes him depressed and disconnected in his vocational life. As he is professor but he does not enjoys his profession. “He continues to teach because it provides him with a livelihood” (*Dis*: 5) Aging for David becomes a nightmare, he can’t live with. For him “ageing is not a graceful business a clearing of the decks , at least , so that one can turn one’s mind to the proper business of the old: preparing to die” (*Dis*:9) His inability to accept the life the way it is, intensifies the sense of estrangement and disconnectedness with the outside world.

Feelings of estrangement and disconnectedness make him alienated from outside world. He cannot feel connected with people from outside world. He tries to find solace in his illicit relationships. As Eric Fromm believes “man, aware of his separateness, needed to find new ties with his fellowman; his very sanity depended on it. Without strong affective ties to the world, he would suffer from utter isolation and lostness” (Fromm p.233) in the quest of belongingness and feel the void he further involves in an illicit affair with his student Melanie Isaacs. Thus, David attributes his social and professional isolation to external temporal factors. His affair with Melanie Isaacs being aware of the consequences of his action makes him rejected and complete outsider. David is not guilty of his choices which he has made. For him it was an experience he was enriched with. He explains to Lucy “every woman I have been close to has taught me something about myself. To that extent they have made me a better person” (*Dis*: 70) He has no repentance, fear and shame of his act. “I have no fear of the committee. I have no fear of the

observer" (*Dis*: 48) for Sartre existential being is an authentic being who is aware of his choices, action and their consequences. Authenticity for Sartre "consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves, in accepting it in pride or humiliation, sometimes in horror and hate. (Sartre. P.17)) He exhibits what Jacqueline Rose calls "a state of mind characterized by ...failure to connect." (Grayson.p.165) It is in the state of rejection and isolation permit existential beings to achieve the high awareness and authenticity of his existence amidst the world. Abbagnano says "man cannot dissolve himself as a person nor can he recognize the reality and order of the world, in the act of being in a relationship with others" (*Dis*: 25).

Lurie's decision to affair with Melanie Isaacs leads to a shift from one phase of his life to another. Grayson explains as "a deliberate capping -off of David's middle age, a transitional event which both exults in and irrevocably closes a stage in professor's life." (*Dis*: 165) David leaves Cape town not with the feeling of and shame but with the state mingled despair and disgust. This transitional phase makes him feel more out of place ever as an academia. Though he does not repent his choices "repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belong to the another world, to another universe of discourse," (*Dis*: 58) whereas he is happy with his choices as he says: "I won't miss it perhaps I'll enjoy my release" (*Dis*: 63) Disgusted by the "emasculated state of academia and tired of criticism" (*Dis*: 164) David leaves the Cape ton. David moves to countryside to live with her daughter Lucy. Rural smallholding outside Grahams town in South Africa's Eastern Cape marks David's uncomfortable first steps into the unfamiliar, though often pondered, territory of old age. From here a series of traumatic events starts in his life.

His life at his daughter's house marks the fall of his position from a reputed professor to an old aged, helpless man. Lucy's rape and the absurd events he has not control over, shatter David's sense of authority. After Soraya's denial of his authority it is her daughter's response which again makes Lurie an outsider even in her daughter's home. Lucy's denial of his authority over her intensifies David's crisis of authority over others. He finds himself helpless. Lucy says "this is my life. I am the one who has to live here. What happened to me is my business, mine alone, not yours, and if there is one right I have it is the right not to be put on trial like this, not to have to justify myself- not to you not to anyone else." (*Dis*: 133) It is the first time "he has taste

of what it will be like to be an old man, tired to be without hopes, without desires, indifferent to the future.” (*Dis*: 110)

What makes him the real existential being is his spirit to not surrender to absurdities of life. He accepts the facticity of life. His acceptance and assimilation with circumstances makes him not victim but an authentic individual. Therefore, he says “I am not unhappy here”, “what happened in Cape Town brought me here.” (148D). with the shift in novel’s setting the shift in David’s perception towards life begins to change. David’s journey towards the self understanding starts. This gradual shift is followed by the various epiphanies and traumatic events happened in his life. His encounter with tremendous death like situations in his life enables him to accept the inevitability of death. He becomes ready to embrace death “I am going to end up in the hole in the ground” (189D) he says and so are you so are we all” as it’s the phase of existence. David also develops a more relaxed understanding of aging as a part of death. Having the understanding of the omnipresent absurdity of life he attains the connectedness with the world around him, the connectedness which was absent in his relationships with Soraya and Melanie “whereas Soraya’s secrecy and Melanie’s youth among other factors, prevent David from establishing a connection with either woman.” (Grayson. P.167) In Ummnao’s view it is suffering that tells us that we exist. Suffering and looming death of dogs presents a situation with which Lurie identifies himself and eventually elicits a genuine emotion and connectedness which was absent throughout the *Disgrace*. His sense of his own individuality also changes his perception to see other as individuals. His earlier disposition to encroach the authority of others changes to respect the individuality of others. He withdraws his authority from his daughter. Leaving her on her own he says “Lucy, it really is time for you to face up to your choices.” (*Dis*: 155)

The shift in David’s attitude towards mortality of life enables him to feel contentment and laugh over his own and similar to his situations. These are the sufferings and harsh realities of life that makes him aware of his own existence which is much more than grieving and brooding over the aging, death, lacks and imperfections. Instead of regarding ageing as “a grotesque struggle to live with bloody stool” (165D), “cracked false teeth and hairy earholes” When Rosalind Tirades over his situation Lurie says “my life is not thrown away, Rosalind. Be

sensible.” (189D) “The shocks of existence” (194D) impart a sense of discovery of his own being which he was not familiar with earlier.

Conclusion:

Existentialism is a philosophy of existence which sees man with absolute freedom to create his own existence. It is through the subjective choices man becomes an authentic being making choices freely. *Disgrace* can be seen as the journey of major character David Lurie's existential maturation. This also can be looked into the emerging symptoms of David's character. As described in the novel Lurie's actions are solely his own, these are brave, irrational and nothing to do with other forces. Secondly existential values are reflected in every space of Lurie's converse with other character in the novel where he neither wants to be dictated nor controlled by others. Third in the process of defending his existence his journey is marked by the feeling of nothingness, death, despair, trembling, anxiety.

At the ambiguous end of *Disgrace* Lurie seems to find grace akin to his true being. He seems connected to society. He seems more compassionate, motivated, filled with the love for dogs (the love which has been absent throughout the novel, the love which he has not felt for anyone before) and trying to be human in inhuman world. Grayson explains David existential journey asserting *Disgrace* shows the ratification of singular individual and existential insistence on the paramount importance of being true to himself. David Lurie consistently and knowingly bears the consequences of his decisions, ever aware of what his actions may lead to. His transformative progress is not passive one rather it is his own determination to invent himself. His downfalls avail him the new level of existence.

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