

Lucy in *Disgrace*: Restructuring the Socio-Ecological Role of Women in the Context of Post Apartheid South Africa

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Abstract: *The present research article has selected J. M. Coetzee's Booker prize winner novel Disgrace and analysed it in the light of Ecofeminism. This novel has been criticised in both positive and negative way by many renowned critics. Chinua Achebe too has criticised it for the incident of Lucy's rape and her response to the event. The present research article tries to explore the very aspect of the novel but with a different concern. The character of Lucy shows some tremendous environmental sensitivities which shine stronger against the background of the region where and the historical time when the novel happens. The decisions Lucy takes and the extraordinary strength she projects may seem unbelievable but they never sound fake. That is the charm of Coetzee's strong characterization. The present article after having discussed the theoretical perspective that is to be used for the enquiry, analyses the character of Lucy exploring her natural instincts towards nature and her revolutionary stand towards the community.*

Keywords: Ecofeminism, environmental concern, apartheid system, post-apartheid South Africa, rape

I. INTRODUCTION

Geoffrey Dyer while reviewing *Disgrace* wrote in *Sunday Telegram* that, "The journey to a heart of narrative darkness has become a safe literary destination, almost a cliché. *Disgrace* goes beyond this to explore the furthest reaches of what it means to be human; it is at the frontier of world literature" (Blurb of *Disgrace*). J. M. Coetzee, the leading South African writer, was awarded Nobel Prize in literature in 2003 and he won the Booker prize twice; in 1983 for *Life and Times of Michael K* and in 1999 for *Disgrace*. *Disgrace* is Coetzee's most discussed and reviewed novel. It moves around the life of the English Professor David Lurie, a divorcee with an active sex life. It is genuinely rooted in the setting of South Africa, transforming from apartheid to a post-apartheid country. Lucy is Lurie's daughter. She herself deconstructs many conventional discourses about gender, marriage, family, rape and trauma. The present research article tries to explore the character of Lucy in the light of Ecofeminism and in the context of the changing power structures in South Africa.

1.1 Socio-Ecological System

Socio-Ecological systems explain the relationship between the human society and nature. The human element in it refers to economical, technological, political and cultural actions of people whereas the Ecological element refers to the biosphere (region) where the life develops. Initially these two components were supposed to be separate from each other but soon their interdependence was acknowledged and registered. Socio-Ecological Systems were the concretization of the intersection between the social and ecological systems. The following figure 1 explains the workings of social and ecological systems and their subsystems.

In the context of the present research article the ecological system is the urban and rural parts of South Africa and the social system is the South African society which is transforming from the apartheid to the post-apartheid psyche. The power structure in the society depicted in the novel is changing. Earlier it is dominated by White people and later it was taken by black people. Socio-ecological system itself is a complex, non-linear and unpredictable phenomenon. In the context of the novel it becomes even more complex.

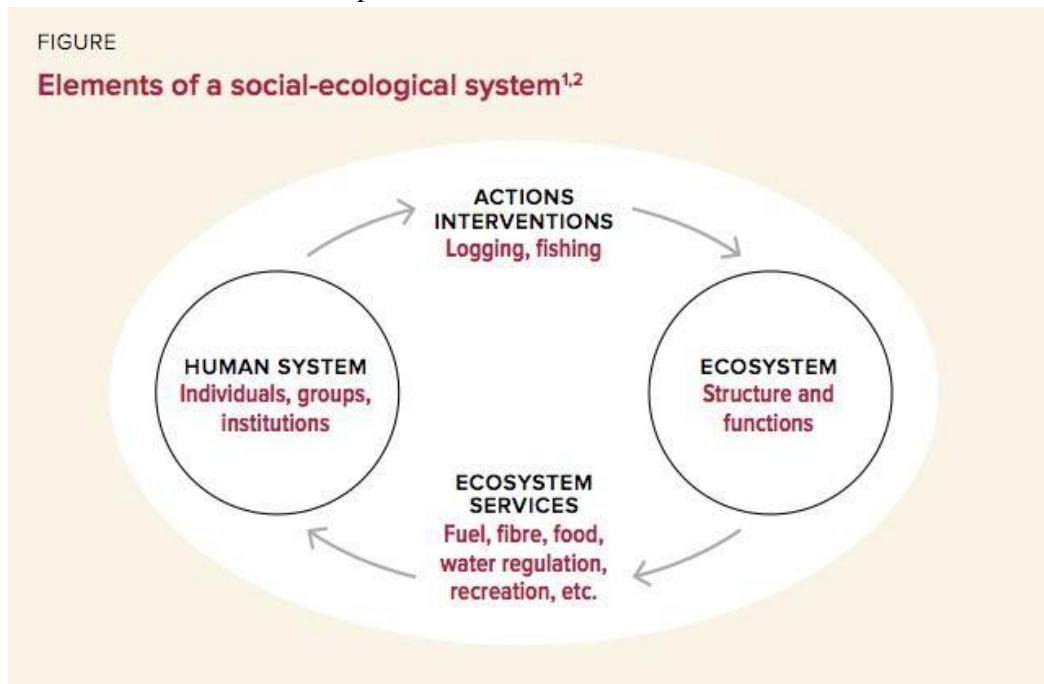


Figure 1: Adopted from the web page entitled “Brief: Complex Socio Ecological System” on the web portal of UCDAVIS School of Education

<https://education.ucdavis.edu/post/brief-complex-social-ecological-systems>

1.2 Post-Apartheid South Africa

Encyclopaedia Britannica defines apartheid as:

(Afrikaans: “apartness”) policy that governed relations between South Africa’s white minority and nonwhite majority for much of the latter half of the 20th century, sanctioning racial segregation and political and economic discrimination against nonwhites.

This racial and colour discrimination was practiced even before 1948; but it was extended by the then ruling National party and was named ‘apartheid’. Its implementation was called ‘separate development’. The later Population Registration Act 1950 officially segregated the South African Society into four groups: Bantu (black Africans), Coloured (mixed race), White and Asians (Indians and Pakistani). It was a brutal way of establishing white supremacy and warranting the exploitation of non-white population, especially the Black Africans.

With Nelson Mandela’s electoral victory in 1994 the apartheid system was demolished. It marked a political upheaval. 80% of the South African population was Black and only 9% were white. This transition from apartheid to a more democratic nation was not a peaceful one. *Disgrace* (1999) presents the dilemma of white people in the post-apartheid South Africa, the central character David Lurie is a White African, living and working in Cape Town who later leaves the city and comes to live with his only daughter Lucy who is trying to establish herself as a peasant in the society of Salem of Eastern Cape.

1.3 Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is also called Ecological Feminism. It’s a branch of Feminism which proposes some principles that explore the relation between women and nature. Francoise d’Eaubonne coined the term, Ecofeminism in 1974. The central idea was to connect gender equality with commitment to the nature. Women and nature both are vulnerable and so, prone to exploitation in the patriarchal society. They bring to notice how social norms are maintained to dominate women and nature. It tries to draw parallels between the oppression of land and the oppression of women. It goes beyond showing the commodification of both women and nature; but also sees men as curators of culture and women as the curators of nature. This ultimately explains how men dominate women and human beings dominate nature. Ecofeminism claims respect for both nature and women. In its initial phase, Ecofeminism was very radical. According to them, capitalism and western patriarchal human society has harmed nature irreversibly. This split between the nature and culture can only be healed by the feminist instinct for nature. Later feminists made it clear that women relate to nature not because they are feminine but because they are similarly oppressed by male dominated society like nature is.

Gaard and Guren (2011) in their paper “Ecofeminism: Towards Global Justice and Planetary Health” state that Ecofeminism dismantles and strongly opposes the mechanistic materialist view of the universe, intrinsic need of capitalism for exploitation of nature, patriarchal domination in the human society, power domination ethics at the political front. The present article tries to analyse the character of Lucy from this point of view.

1.4 Analysis of the Character of Lucy

Lucy deconstructs the conventional discourse of fundamental elements of gender, human relationships, family, parent-child bond and that of rape. The central character and the focaliser of the novel is David Lurie. He represents the very title of the novel. But Lucy stands very strong against and besides him. She fulfils all dictums of Ecofeminist character. On one hand we have

David Luri who thinks in an insulting manner, “A woman’s beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it” (16). On the other hand, there stands Lucy who owns five hectares of land in Salem; toils most of the land; grows flowers and vegetables there; sells them in the local market where most of the customers know her by her name. In doing all these things she defies David’s version of feminine beauty and creates her own beautiful world with “Five hectares of land, most of it arable, a wind pump, stables and outbuildings, and a low sprawling farmhouse painted yellow” (59).

Lucy falls in love with the land and stays there forever. She says she wants to toil it ‘properly’. With wealthy parents living in cities, she would have led a luxurious life in the urban parts of Africa but instead she chooses this; being a peasant. It gets reflected through her way of living that Lucy does not approve living in materialist luxury. Instead, she is a minimalist and lives, in a way a eco-friendly life. Luri imagines how did it happen that they raised a girl like Lucy, “Dogs and a gun; bread in the oven and a crop in the earth. Curious that he and her mother, cityfolks, intellectuals, should have produced this throwback, this sturdy young settler...perhaps history has the largest share” (60-61). Lucy is a product of the transition period of South Africa. She has a depth of sentiments and thoughts and she knows her responsibilities. Lucy shows her feminine sensitivity through the profession she has chosen, the dogs she has at home, the way she helps Bev Shaw to run a shelter for abandoned dogs. Her environmental concerns are overtly stated in the novel like her instruction to Luri not to waste water or contaminate the septic tank. Still Lucy is a very dynamic character. We cannot wrap her into a definite description.

On one hand, there are evidences of her feminine instincts towards nature and society and on the other hand, she shows tremendous strength and patience while witnessing and responding to the revolution happening in the contemporary South Africa. She is not a cisgender person. Her sexual orientation is that of a lesbian. She states her individuality on all fronts of life. She had a companion called Helena who was living with her in Salem who has recently left her. She thinks she has built a place for herself in the community of Salem. Her relationship and communication with her father David Luri has a very rational base. She knows what has happened in Cape Town and she does not judge him on that basis. But she is also now dragged emotionally towards him. After being raped, when Luri tells her to leave the place and get settled in some city where things will be much easier, she refuses to do so. She decides not to run away defeated but to stay and face the situations.

It is not an easy task to nurture nature in the capitalist society. Lucy knows it very well. So she not only becomes a true farmer but she takes care that she handles the professional side of it very well. So, her agricultural activities are practical and keep her going. This shows her environmental and societal aspect of her personality. But the real alchemy is the way she responds to the rape that happens to her. Many renowned literary personalities like Chinua Achebe have criticised Disgrace for this part of the novel.

1.5 Deconstructing the Discourse of Rape

In post-apartheid South Africa, a movement called Circulation of wealth broke out; according to which in apartheid system White people enjoyed wealth and luxury. In post-apartheid system the wealth should be circulated among the black people so that they too get to enjoy the same. So, white people were being robbed throughout the country. White women too were counted among 'things' that were robbed. The White oppressed the African land first. In the post-apartheid period this oppression was answered back through the oppression and exploitation of the White women and the landed property by the black. Lucy's rape and assault is a part of this bounce-back.

Lucy and Luri are attacked by three black people. They are robbed of valuable things and their car but above all, Lucy is raped by them. They file a complaint but for their car. Lucy refuses to file a complaint of the rape. David asks her again and again why she is not filling a complaint against the rapists. She finally tells him what stuns her more in the rape is the hatred involved. She does not see the rape as a crime against her as an individual. She interprets it with reference to the changing power structures in the country. For her, the act of being raped is like paying tax for staying back. Not only this, but when she comes to know that she is pregnant from the rape, she decides to raise the baby who will give her a footing into the community she was trying to be a part of.

Through an Ecofeminist perspective, we can say that, Lucy performs the role of a curator. She is conserving her womb and ultimately safe-guarding her right to decide whether to give birth or not to the child growing in her womb. To do that she decides to marry Petrus, once her tenant and now her neighbour of her father's age. She explains her decision to Luri:

Objectively I am a woman alone. I have no brothers. I have a father but he is far away and anyhow powerless in the terms that matter here. To whom can I turn for patronage? ... Petrus may not be a big man but he is big enough for someone small like me. And at least I know Petrus. I have no illusions about him. (204)

She calls the child "child of the earth (216). When David asks her whether she will be able to love the child, she answers, "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).

II. CONCLUSION

Lucy shines brighter by the end of the novel against the disgraceful life of David Luri with his confinement to Eros. Even in the toughest life conditions Lucy takes the charge of her own life and takes decision which are in alignment to her own understanding of life and the world around. The future is not sunshine bright but she does not fail to see the ray of hope. Lucy, with her asexual cloths and attempt to create a utopian world of her own in the soil of Salem reflects St. Lucy. Even after being raped she does not want to avenge the culprits. She perceives everything around her in a very saint like manner. She is sacrificing for the sins she has not committed but she is wise enough to see that she owes a subtle responsibility. Lucy can be interpreted positively or negatively from Ecofeminist perspective. But the present article feels that Lucy is a multi-layered and genuine character who chooses to be herself despite many expectations of the readers.

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