

Re-Evincing Part of Sisyphus' Dilemma in Post-  
Apartheid South Africa: The Example of J. M. Coetzee's  
*Disgrace*

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**Abstract**

This essay explores the cyclic futility in the socio-political history of post-apartheid South Africa, some of which is captured in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. The tragic story of Lucy in *Disgrace* captures something of the haunting presence of the violent past of apartheid in reverse order. Using the myth of Sisyphus to re-evince the sad picture of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, the work raises questions on the future of post-apartheid South Africa in the hands of black South Africans. Though the thrust of the work reflects more of the sensibilities in South Africa, it is believed in some quarters that other formerly colonised African states share similar political uncertainties. The end of the old order in South Africa and the birth of a new one therefore invite a critical analysis against the people's disillusionment within this period of cataclysmic change. This transitional period is marked by violence perpetrated partly by opposing political parties, the interest of the affluent class in the big drama of divided interests, and an intransigent white supremacist hegemony determined to hang onto power as fictionalised through Professor David Lurie, Coetzee's major character in *Disgrace*. The work proposes a reformative post-apartheid system for a better multi-race South Africa and, by extension, advocates for Africa's re-evaluation and renegotiation of its disadvantaged position in

the world political order which is presently manipulated by western power.

**Keywords:** disillusionment, violence, bad leadership, white hegemony, supremacist ideology, self-aggrandisement

### **Introduction**

Man's existential predicaments have always been conveyed through this mythic picture and the story of Sisyphus in the Greek mythology can be used to illustrate the post-apartheid South Africa condition and, by extension, Africa's political fate in world history. It is a picture of man in despair going round on a cyclic and futile confrontation with insurmountable circumstances. It is upon this mythic platform that we shall examine the post-apartheid South African political dilemma. To reassure Africans with the hope of a brighter future, Thabo Mbeki made a reinvigorating speech about the African renaissance which eventually provoked a battery of pessimistic questions from Niyi Osundare. For Osundare,

What, which Africa is Mbeki talking about? The Africa which shocked the world with the pogrom of Rwanda and Burundi, producing human skulls in prodigious figures which outnumbered the teeming fishes in Lake Victoria? Is it the Africa in which the Sierra Leonean civil war turned the country's most precious export/metal into 'conflict diamonds' and left a land squirming with limbless casualties? Is it the Africa in which Stone age warlords, armed with sophisticated modern weapons had reduced Somalia into a state of anarchic statelessness while assaulting one of the most ancient, most poetic cultures in the world? Is it the continent where a reprobate army General, actively supported by selfish hegemonic forces, annulled Nigeria's freest and fairest election and installed one of the most brutal despotisms in Africa's recent history? Is it Africa with its neck growing shorter and shorter under a debt burden midwifed by the IMF and the World Bank and other slave makers of modern times? Is it an Africa marked by the scars and

lesions of centuries of slavery and myriad spoliations, an Africa still reeling in neo-colonial fever even in a period misnamed as ‘post-modern’ and ‘post-colonial’? (1)

It is possible that Mbeki’s optimism was formed out of a sense of Africa’s resilient spirit to survive the over five hundred years of slavery or that it resulted from a substantial dose of the frenzied euphoria of the 1990 constitutional demolition of apartheid structures in South Africa which four years later led to the unbelievable first multi-racial elections. It is equally possible that it came from the thought that if he the son of Govan Mbeki an ex-prisoner was now the president of South Africa, then anything is possible with the beleaguered African continent. It is also possible that Mbeki had been playing with the imagination that Zeus would one day wake up to find Sisyphus tired at the hilltop but courageously standing on the stone. So many possibilities!

Nevertheless, in the midst of these possibilities, let us not forget that the story of the abolition of apartheid in South Africa caused so much joyful ululation that many black South Africans who had been subjected and subjugated to perennial inhuman treatment from their white neighbours had the impression of an imminent political utopia in the post-apartheid South Africa. Like in many similar African states that equally celebrated at their own peculiar times what they saw as the irreversible retreat of colonialism which was at a point in African history a common cause, black South Africans sang out their soul along with the late Lucky Dube:

If I’m dreaming don’t wake me up  
 If it’s a lie don’t tell me the truth...  
 Being in the darkness for so long now  
 Mr. President, did I hear you well?  
 Last night on TV you said  
 The group areas act is going  
 Apartheid is going...  
 I see the future so bright  
 When the blackie manna coming together  
 With the whitey manna...

Whitey manna coming together with the Blackman...  
Gazing at my crystal ball I see the future so bright  
The fighting's gonna stop now  
We'll forgive and forget I know Mr. President

You can't please everyone but everybody liked it...  
This euphoric spirit explains why Willie Burger and Karina Magdalena Szczurek believe that 'for centuries, South African politics, in history and in literature, has been confounded by questions about race, gender and power and much of the literary works in the country have been swamped attempts at giving answers' (11-12). Put in another form, it was just too difficult to believe that this 'dancing-daylight-demon' or oppressive system, practised by the white supremacist South Africans and wickedly ignored by the world powers (a similar story with the trans-Atlantic slave trade) due to personal gain, was to be finally abolished. Of course, these earlier years of post-apartheid South Africa eventually became characterised by what some writers regard as 'honeymoon literature' which also means 'literature of celebration.' 'Literature of celebration' echoed in songs that reverberated in the jukeboxes of thousands of South Africans. The joyful political air in South Africa then continued to be enjoyed by the freedom fighters who became proud revolutionaries, substantiated by their long held agitation. The graves of other black heroes could almost be heard from a distance with resounding Sesotho, Xhosa or Zulu ululations joining in the celebration of another most expensive freedom for the black race – the first being slave trade.

One could imagine that the restless spirit of Albert Luthuli who is eulogised in one of Dennis Brutus' elegies, 'For Chief' (*A Simple Lust* 170-176), must have joined voices with John Nangoza who was 'shot by the police in a Good Friday procession in Port Elizabeth 1956' (*A Simple Lust* 34) to celebrate one of the world's most costly freedoms. Nelson Mandela who was still trying to recover from his twenty eight years' incarceration (1962-1990) between Robben Island and Victor Verster Prison was generally anointed the first black president of South Africa under the auspices of the ANC political party. There was obviously the

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overriding impulse of praising the unbelievable materialisation of the so-called multi-racial 'rainbow nation.' According to Theodora Chinyere Ojiakor,

Honeymoon literature basically took up the themes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) by highlighting the importance of confronting the truth about the traumatic past in order to promote forgiveness and reconciliation between the victims and perpetrators of violence (134).

Today the 'old apartheid South Africa' which Dennis Brutus qualifies as 'thorn-thickets' according to Kola Eke (22) has not changed very much under the new masquerade costume as 'post-apartheid South Africa.' The few recorded changes have taken place at the top where the rein of political power changed hands from white to black. The second significant change is that of increased crime rate amongst the masses in the suburbs of the sophisticated cities meant for the 'rich only' due to unimaginable circumstances of abundant wealth in the hands of the few mine owners surrounded by poor peasants, poor miners or the poor unemployed South Africans. In the shadow of the mining sites owned by these few rich white and black, most of its migrant workers live in destitute circumstances, sprawling shanty settlements with no running water, no proper electricity and sewage – families in despicable and unspeakable poverty.

It has therefore turned out that many of those who in the past deluded themselves by the triumph of freedom over the old apartheid system, who became so dogmatically immersed in their political posture, limiting their foresightedness with the impression that the ANC held the answer to South Africa's Sisyphean political myth may have to reassess their position since the new sets of black leaders (especially after Mandela) have created a political pathway not so promising nor remarkably different from that of their white bedfellows. This Sisyphean cycle could also be conveyed by the perspectives we get from Walter Rodney's publication of 1972, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, and Stanley Igwe's publication thirty eight years later - *How Africa Underdeveloped Africa*. As both writers basically agree that the

colonisers initiated the socio-cultural, political and economic crises in Africa, Igwe's point of departure is that Africans have, since after independence, incredibly increased the mess itself. Igwe's own examination is, in his words, 'to lay bare the core issue chiefly casual to Africa's continued poverty which however are contra distinct to the views he [Walter Rodney] shares' (6). And this task he actually accomplished.

Increasingly, many are horrified by the political events in the new or post-apartheid South Africa, such as the xenophobic riots leading to the scores of Zimbabwean deaths and other nationalities, increase in crime rates and police repression of demonstrating black miners, political party rivalries, and the enormous unpleasant settlements around Johannesburg, harbouring roughly assembled shacks which are the impromptu patchwork of the poor, the extremely poor and the hopelessly poor. These South Africans are what Lucky Dube will in another album classify as 'Victims.' Relays of such songs of disillusionment with similar titles which are beginning to sound more or less like dirges are increasingly hitting radio airwaves and record studios in post-apartheid South Africa, replacing the previous songs of euphoria. Extracts from the above track explain in some detail the disenchantment of South Africans against their leaders:

Bob Marley said  
How long shall they kill our prophets  
While we stand aside and look  
But little did he know that  
Eventually the enemy  
Will stand aside and look  
While we slaughter, kill  
Our own brothers  
Knowing that already  
They are the victims of the situation  
Still licking wounds from brutality  
Still licking wounds from humiliation  
She said all these words and the

Wrinkles on her face became  
 Perfect trails for the tears and she said;  
 We are the victims every time  
 We got double trouble every time.

From the first moment of apartheid when black South Africans were precipitately and brutally uprooted and exiled from their ancestral farmlands to Robben Island, they have always been 'victims.' Subsequently, the aftermath of apartheid has increasingly heaped layers of new existential problems year in year out. This has equally made writers become interested in class relationships rather than race since the new evil is weaved around the black empowerment policy which has helped a few of the members of the black community to be initiated into the hegemonic affluent white caucus. This dimension of social reality offers writers a template for allegories of the new system in much more evolving critical frontiers. There is the gay palaver as exemplified in Mark Grevisser's 'Mandela's Step-Children: Homosexuality Identity in Post-Apartheid South Africa' (2000), the rape and HIV/AIDS dilemma as reflected in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (2000) and Verenia Keet's *Colored Hill* (2005), the xenophobic and political violence portrayed in Nadine Gordimer's *The Pick Up* (2001) and Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to our Hillbrow* (2001), and above all, the Marxist dialectics of class stratification as portrayed in Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* (2000). Each of these fictional works has in one way or another defined the post-apartheid South Africa, the former global pariah that later metamorphosed into a global inspiration for freedom fighters. These works and many more all have one message in common: once again South Africa has lapsed into another round of social, economic and political gloom and anxiety especially in the hands of black South Africans.

Instead of being a springboard for unity amongst the black South Africans, South Africa's history has resurrected certain resentments in some quarters and/or has been forgotten so quickly in other quarters, thereby creating a modern South Africa that seems to exist without much practical vision. For instance, the South African white supremacist

ideology and hegemonic assumptions which were effectively demonstrated through the practice of apartheid, essentially contingent on the historical conspiracies of racism and racist consciousness, has today almost lost its scars in the history of black South Africans as they are currently responsible for much of the political disorder in the system – black against black. While some critics are worried by the proportion of violence by the black South Africans against their latest enemies (themselves), other critics are disturbed by the continued white supremacist ideology in South African politics.

### **The Example of J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace***

The single statement, 'I won't do it' (58) by Professor David Lurie in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, justifies Chima Amadi's position that Coetzee belongs to the latter group whose interest is to probe the 'egocentricism in whites' (265). Indeed this position is exemplified in the typical character of Professor David Lurie in *Disgrace*. Professor Lurie's and his daughter's story in the novel is one that explores two different, though somehow related, experiences that happened during the transitional apartheid South Africa. It is also a story that reveals the new dimension of one of the persistent social ills in the new South Africa - violence. The plot takes a dramatic twist at the point where Professor Lurie gets caught in a scandalous web with Melanie one of his reserved students. His refusal to publicly accept his guilt, purge it and thereby satisfy the whim of his changing society makes the plot more complicated. This complication is further anchored and somehow interwoven with his daughter's attempt to avoid what she perceives as the gloating reaction of her fellow countrymen, giving 'the story she elected to tell' (108) of what has happened to her in the hands of the three black assailants – rape. Being sceptical about certain perceived consequences within this early period of post-apartheid South Africa, she decides to withhold information from the law enforcement agents in charge of the case. The system has broken down such that citizens have no confidence in the state. She is afraid of the hatred from the new hegemonic race against the old one. She and her father glimpse

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incipient anarchy in what she has undergone at the hands of the three black assailants and also in the way the new system responds to such an assault. Similar unease is reflected in Ettinger's statement: 'Yes, I never go anywhere without my Beretta' (100). Yet in his ruminative mood, Professor Lurie fears for his life: 'if he had had a gun, he would probably be dead now, he and Lucy both' (100). This disenchantment with the system is further expressed through Professor Lurie's fears shared with Petrus:

'Petrus, my daughter wants to be a good neighbour – a good citizen and a good neighbour. She loves the Eastern Cape. She wants to make her life here, she wants to get along with everyone. But how can she do so when she is liable to be attacked at any moment by thugs who then escape scot-free?' (138).

As the anxiety surrounding the case complicates as the police mistakes Professor Lurie's car for a recovered one, and the suspect released on bail without any identification procedure. Could it be at this point that Coetzee is simply criticizing post-apartheid South Africa for sending back into the system, potential criminals capable of inflicting further harm on it? The outcome disillusioned Lucy to the point that she voices out her frustration in the following statement: 'In any event, the trail is cold. Our friends aren't going to the court, not with the police in the state they are in. So let us forget about that' (155). By this statement, Lucy is simply rejecting the new system.

Another significant issue in the novel is the race phenomenon. Part of Coetzee's intention is to use the role played by characters like Professor Lurie to question the validity of the supremacist hegemony in a changing society. These leagues of supremacist ideologues believe in the old order and cannot understand what they see as a meaningless public orchestration of the purgation of guilt. Professor Lurie suddenly finds himself grappling with a new South Africa in which his habitual erotic adventures have become public concern. According to Isidore Diala, 'Lurie's deep disenchantment with contemporary South African history is consistent with his anguished apprehension of his mortal condition' (59).

Professor Lurie is an extremely obstinate and egoistic character who proves these traits in his encounter with every other single character in the work. It is seen also in position on the affair with Melanie. He rejects his lawyer's advice and sees his counselling as preposterous. Angrily, he asks: 'To fix me? To cure me? To cure me of inappropriate desires?' (43) The same is observed in the arguments with his ex-wife, daughter, the university committee, Mr. Isaac and others. He would rather accept any form of punishment including the ones personally inflicted on his own self rather than ask for public pardon. Perhaps Coetzee tries to explain by this that the carry-over of the supremacist virus into the post-apartheid South Africa portends danger for the emerging new nation. Therefore, unlike his daughter who rightly predicts the future political atmosphere, Professor Lurie's inability to come to terms with the changing society will likely drive him to a disastrous end like Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Both major characters are found to be swimming against an all-powerful current propelled by fate, as is the case of Sisyphus, and could not wedge it even with their entire being. Nevertheless, Lucy is likely to fit into such new dispensation going by her views thus expressed:

As far as I am concerned, what happened to me is purely a private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone! 'This place being what?' 'This place being South Africa' (112).

Professor Lurie's naivety also brings to mind another of Achebe's characters – Obi Okonkwo. Obi, Okonkwo's grandson, falls victim of a similar situation in *No Longer at Ease*. As a result of the hybridization of two parallel cultures forced together by history, Obi becomes a good example of one of the first sets of colonial casualties in the postcolonial Nigeria. This phenomenon becomes also for post-apartheid South Africa a great challenge resulting in the contemptible 'worm child' (*Disgrace* 199), as predicted by Prof Lurie.

In a symbolic sense, the novel also analyses man's impersonal and disgraceful treatment of one race by another as metaphorically

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captured through the impersonal treatment of dogs in Bev Shaw's clinic and the massacre of Lucy's dogs. The title of the novel further condemns the new socio-political state of post-apartheid South Africa. The venom of hatred in the novel and by extension in post-apartheid South Africa is well portrayed by not only the rape incident and the way in which it was carried out, but also by the brutal and violent manner in which the dogs in their cages are horribly executed by the three black assailants. Professor Lurie himself equally demonstrates this sign of inhumanity by his actions in Bev Shaw's clinic. He does not realise how these killings have affected him until the day he pulls over by the roadside to cry. Of course, there are elements of disaster not only from Lucy's defilement, but also in her post-apartheid South African system:

The two policemen take off their caps, tuck them under their arms. He stands back, leaves it to Lucy to take them through the story she has elected to tell. They listen respectfully, taking down her every word, the pen darting nervously across the pages of the notebook. They are of her generation, but edgy of her nevertheless, as if she were a creature polluted and her pollution could leap across to them, soil them (108).

The post-apartheid South African police system that Coetzee presents in *Disgrace* is what has been witnessed in recent times in the Marikana massacre of thirty-four black miners. William Mpmembe, a high ranking police officer, according to Bill Van Auken, has confirmed 'that the use of live ammunition in dispersing the protesters was foreseen and authorized' (qtd in wsws.org). This position was corroborated by Mpmembe's boss, Mangwashi Victoria Phiyega, both defending the actions of the police. The more worrying part is that both names sound more or less like names belonging to the black South Africans just as there are investigational reports that all policemen involved in the massacre are black police officers. As more revelations roll out from this bizarre tale before the Marikana investigating committee, one thing is basic: this event has altered post-apartheid South Africa's political landscape, putting one of Africa's most successful liberation

movements on the defensive against a population tired of waiting for an end to poverty, joblessness and gaping inequality.

Political despair is also symbolically captured in the violent rivalries of political parties. The ANC's rivalry with the Inkata Movement caused so much bloodshed that Zakes Mda could not hold back the urge to fictionalise these horrible political moments in *Ways of Dying* (1995). Mda's primary concern in the work is to seriously criticise the 'black against black' violence that erupted within the transitional period. More worrisome is the fact that the characters in these crises were black political opportunists who utilise every chance that comes their way for personal aggrandisement. For instance, it became another opportunity for the usual demagogic rhetoric at the anniversary of the Marikana massacre for such characters as Julius Malema, the former ANC youth leader who was earlier expelled from the ruling party, to exploit the occasion in launching his new political party dubbed the 'Economic Freedom Fighters.' But Malema is believed by some to represent some of the most rapacious elements in the emerging black South African bourgeoisie who are not adverse to exploiting class and political tensions in furthering their own political and economic ambitions. Elsewhere, I have portrayed them as 'masquerades' (2013: 84).

Nevertheless, the Marikana massacre has helped to underscore the continued deepening of the political and social polarization in South Africa, exposing the social chasm separating the working class from the country's ruling establishment which now includes a section of the black population, corporate executives and millionaires. The depressing scenario has spread beyond South Africa; it has become deeply rooted in the African continent and according to Stanley Igwe, 'corruption and dictatorships have no doubt prevailed all over the world but not in the scandalous manner that of Africa has' (73). African politics is undoubtedly characterised by contradictions one of which is the colonial experience whereby Africa was forcibly incorporated into the world capitalist system as an unequal partner. This incorporation has had cultural, economic, social, political, and psychological dimensions and ramifications. Moreover, since it was based on the rapacious

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expropriation of surplus from Africa, this incorporation was not only perverse but has also meant the development of weak material structures characterized by mono-cultural and externally oriented economies in Africa.

*Disgrace* may mainly be about change in the racial hierarchy of post-apartheid South Africa but it is also about other socio-political debris from apartheid South Africa. All through the novel Coetzee subtly reveals the ways in which the West, as represented by Professor Lurie's sexual exploits and Bev's clinic activities, abused Africa. Professor Lurie describes his exploitative sexual adventures as 'enriching' before the investigating committee which symbolically explains the activities of the coloniser vis-a-vis the colonised. Professor Lurie, on the last page of the novel, helps a dog into nothingness, a necessary nothingness for himself as well. The blankness ascribed by the colonial regimes to the land and cultures of Africa is now inverted, absorbed by an individual who is an ancestor of those regimes. The reader is bound to encounter a catharsis of the character and his disgrace, a catharsis that signals a difficult future. There is hopefully an end to a particular history of suffering and oppression but with a bleak future which could open up to another long or longer history of much more suffering and oppression.

### **Conclusion**

Coetzee's apprehension of the substance of the daily routine of South African life through *Disgrace* helps to enhance our understanding of the underlying implications of South Africa's supremacist's history and other social vices which in a symbolic sense re-enacts Sisyphus' repetitive efforts. Professor Lurie's seduction tale and the subsequent gang rape of Lucy are just one tiny metaphoric extraction of the post-apartheid South African political realities. South Africans have not learnt enough from their history to try to ensure that their story does not end up in what Professor Lurie predicts as 'a worm in his daughter's womb' (199). The evil signs of this unborn child are apparent in the

contemporary social, political and economic life of post-apartheid South Africa. If this symbolic child is not yet born, it is possible, especially with the contemporary consciousness of the disadvantaged position of the African continent in world politics, that its ugly features can be changed with an authentic 'African renaissance' in view. Rather than the meaningless and futile drama of Sisyphus being played out in South Africa and Africa, a re-think based on Gene Blocker's cautious note may be just what is needed: 'We can't change reality, but we can change our relationship to that reality ... So long as we demand that the world be meaningful and it is not, we will be frustrated, clinging to the romantic, heroic posture of the Myth of Sisyphus' (36). Simply put, Africans must renegotiate their relationship with the world. Most especially, the African leadership caucus must give thought to this ideological posture as a better alternative to the current political charade of one-step-forward-two-steps-backward.

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