

## Selflessness in *Disgrace*

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### Abstract

This article presents the analysis of selflessness, as one of the features of postmodern literature, in *Disgrace*. *Disgrace*, written by J.M. Coetzee, is considered a postmodern novel owing to the fact that it shares the properties of postmodern literature. One of the features of postmodern literature proposed by Hasan (1986) is selflessness. Selflessness is described as the rejection of a unified self (Quennet, 2000). Postmodern literature presents the character as self multiplication. The analysis on the main characters of the novel, i.e. David Lurie and his daughter, Lucy, reveals that both characters undergo self multiplication. They do not have stable identity from the beginning to the end of the story.

**Keyword:** postmodern literature, selflessness, *Disgrace*

### INTRODUCTION

*Disgrace*, the winner of 1999 Booker prize was a novel written by J.M. Coetzee. This novel which was totally set in South Africa in the post-apartheid era tells about the life of David Lurie, a professor of communication who teaches in Cape Technical University, and of his daughter, Lucy. During post apartheid era, the society in South Africa was deeply unequal. In fact, the political change, from apartheid to post apartheid, was not followed with the improvement of the social condition. There remained social inequality among the members of society. The inequality just shifted from race, in apartheid era, to class stratification. White South African enjoyed privileges because of their social class (Seekings, 2003). As white Africans who lived in South Africa, in the area named Cape, David Lurie and Lucy underwent problems and conflict with people around them despite the privileges they enjoyed because of their race.

*Disgrace* was considered controversial. Some critics argue that this novel is a postmodern literary work since it shares the properties of postmodern literature; while others were against this statement due to the

fact that this novel contains a paradigm shift from postmodern to realistic (de Smet, 2004). De Smet (2004), through his study *J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace and Foe: An Analysis of Postmodern and Political Representation*, revealed some properties of postmodern literature in *Disgrace*. Owing to its controversy, this paper will analyze Coetzee's *Disgrace* to reveal the properties of postmodern literature through the three influential characters, i.e. David Lurie and Lucy Lurie. This article will only presents, the analysis of the feature of selflessness.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Postmodern Literature**

Postmodernism, which is often read as the successor of modernism, covers all aspects of contemporary culture and art. Literature, as a part of culture, also gets the impact of the rise of postmodernism. McHale (1997) argues that what literature changed from modernism to postmodernism is the focus, from epistemological issue to an exploration to ontological questions. Postmodern literature confronts the reader to a question about the world being presented in literary work, whether the literary work presented reality or fiction (Malpas, 2005).

Ihab Hasan, who has conducted comprehensive work on postmodernism in all notions in culture, art, and literature, has formulated eleven features of postmodernism. Those features are indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, selflessness and depthlessness, the unrepresentable and unrepresentable, irony, hybridization, carnivalization, performance and participation, constructionism, as well as immanence (Hasan, 1986). He pointed out that these eleven features are not fixed concept to provide a clear definition on postmodernism. Definition of postmodernism remains "an equivocal concept, a disjunctive category, doubly modified by the impetus of the phenomenon itself and by the shifting perceptions of its critics (Hasan, 1986)

To make the article focused, the analysis is only limited on the feature of selflessness. Selflessness in postmodernism is described as the rejection of a unified self (Quennet, 2000). Postmodern literature presents the characters as **self-multiplication** (Hasan, 1986). There is no fixed and coherent identity. The characters have no stable psychological identity (Quennet, 2000).

#### A. Selflessness of David Lurie

David Lurie was presented as an academician, a professor of communication in Cape Technical University. Formerly he was a professor of modern languages, yet because of the closing down of Classic and Modern Language department, he was forced to switch to the field of communication. He had no choice, but continued to teach in the department since he earned his living in the campus.

“Because he has no respect for the material he teaches, he makes no impression on his students...” (Coetzee, 1999)

“He continues to teach because it provides him with a livelihood, also it teaches him humility, brings it home to him who he is in the world” (Coetzee, 1999).

A scandal with his female student, Melanie Isaac, gave him serious problem. Melanie’s father reported him to the institution that the professor had committed sexual harassment to his daughter. Because David Lurie refused to admit that he was wrong, he decided to leave the university, his job, and his life in Cape Town, and stayed with his daughter, Lucy. During his staying in Lucy’s house, David Lurie became like a jobless person. He did not know what to do. To give him activities, Lucy asked Lurie to help Petrus, a black African who was Lucy’s assistant and the owner of land that Lucy shared with.

“You could help with the dogs. You could cut up the dog-meat. I’ve always found that difficult. Then there is Petrus. Petrus is busy establishing his own lands. You could give him a hand” (Coetzee, 1999)

“Give Petrus a hand. I like that. I like the historical piquancy. Will he pay me a wage for my labour, do you think?” (Coetzee, 1999)

At the end of the novel, Coetzee presented David Lurie as an assistant to Bev Shaw, the owner of animal clinic, who turned into animal slaughter. Instead of helping Bev to cure sick animals, David Lurie helped Bev to turn down animals brought to the clinic.

“He and Bev do not speak. He has learned by now, from her, to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer has difficulty in calling her by its proper name: love.” (Coetzee, 1999)

At this point, it can be seen the element of selflessness in David Lurie. David Lurie lost of his self in *Disgrace*. He experienced degradation on his identity as white African and academician. Both of his identities place him as the member of high society, as an honorable person (Seekings, 2003). However, in the middle of the story, problems faced by Lurie had caused him to loss his identity. He, then, became a helper of Petrus, a black African, which is considered lower than white African. The loss of self experienced by David Lurie is in term of his profession, from lecturer (professor), a respectable job, to a helper of land owner, a dog-man, as well as of social status, from the superior to inferior, since as white African his position should be higher than black African, but his becoming Petrus' labor made him inferior to black African. As Michael Foucolt states that “individual is not pre-given entity...the individual with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desire, forces” (Quennet, 2000), Lurie's selflessness was the product of power that he had exercised toward his student, Melanie, and his institution. In addition, the selflessness of Lurie was also a transformation from a powerful man, i.e. toward his students and people surrounding him, to a powerless man, as a minority in the Eastern Cape, a helper of black African, as well as an animal slaughter. In other word, at the end of the novel

David Lurie was described as having no power toward his self, his body, and people around him.

### **B. Selflessness of Lucy Lurie**

Lucy was David Lurie's only daughter from his first marriage. Coetzee did not portray the characteristics of Lucy vividly in the novel. The description of Lucy's characteristics can be inferred from Lurie's thought and the dialogs between Lucy and the other characters in the novel. Lucy was portrayed as a simple and unattractive young woman, in the mid-twenties, who lived in a farm in the Eastern Cape. She was independence, considered, purposeful and decided to live alone (Coetzee, 1999). Her parents' separation had caused her life to be harder, and thus it shaped her to be a sturdy woman.

“Curious that he and her mother, cityfolk, intellectuals, should have produced this throwback, this sturdy young settler. But perhaps it was not they who produced her: perhaps history had the larger share” (Coetzee, 1999)

As an independent woman, Lucy had made up her mind to choose her own life. She rejected her father's point of view that her living and surrounding was actually not a kind of civilized culture. In other word, Lurie considered Lucy having not good life. Nevertheless, Lucy opposed his father's point of view. She thought that the way and where she lived now was suitable for her. She considered there was no higher life in the place where they live. Her opposition was actually to show that she did not want to be governed by his father. Lucy's rebellion toward his father indicates that she hates oppression. Lucy refused male's domination over her life.

“You think, because I am your daughter, I ought to be doing something better with my life” (Coetzee, 1999)

“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 going to lead me to a higher life” (Coetzee, 1999)

“Because I couldn’t face of your eruptions, David. I can’t run my life according to whether or not you like what I do. No, not anymore. You behave as if everything I do part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character ... I am not a minor. I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours is to you...” (Coetzee, 1999)

Lucy’s rejection on male’s domination indicates that she holds the feminism ideology, particularly radical feminism. It is in line with what is cited by Madsen (2000)... “New York Radical Feminist Manifesto’ sets out clearly the independence of patriarchy and sexual oppression from particular economic and political system”

Before Lurie’s staying at her house, Lucy shared her house with her friend, Helen. Helen was “a large-sad looking woman with a deep voice and a bad skin, older than Lucy” (Coetzee, 1999). Helen was unattractive woman, but Lucy liked her. She shared rooms and activities with her. Since Helen left her, Lucy had lived alone.

“Perhaps they sleep together as together merely as children do, cuddling, touching, giggling, reliving girlhood, - sisters more than lovers. Sharing a bed, sharing a bathtub, baking gingerbread cookies, trying on each other’s clothes. Sapphic love: an excuse of putting on weight” (Coetzee, 1999)

What Lurie thought about his daughter leads to a conclusion that Lucy may be a lesbian. Her much preference on Helen that made Lucy become so attached to her that they shared everything indicates Lucy’s sexual preference to. Moreover, Lurie’s using the word “Sapphic love”, which means *expressing love and affection for woman, relating to lesbians or lesbianism* (Co, to represent the relationship of Lucy and Helen strengthens the assumption that Lucy was a lesbian.

Helen’s leaving the house cause Lucy to live alone in her farm. To give her protection, Lucy decided to keep dogs. Nonetheless, her keeping dogs did not assure her security in the Estern Cape. One day when she was with her father, two men and a boy visited her and did violence against her and Lurie. Pretending to wanting to use the telephone, the two men went

inside her home and raped her. They also attacked Lurie (Coetzee, 1999). In South Africa, women experience violence, including rape. It was estimated that “almost half of all South African women will be raped during their life time” (Martin, Kelly, Turquet, & Ross, 2009). There is also another form of rape occurring in this country; that is corrective rape. This rape was conducted to any women who are perceived lesbian or those with non-conforming sexual orientation. The rapists are often family members, friends, or neighbors of the victims (Martin, Kelly, Turquet, & Ross, 2009; Silvio, 2011). Considering this fact, it can be concluded that Lucy may have experienced corrective rape. Lucy was perceived as Lesbian or woman without conforming sexual orientation (a feminist) from her asexual way to dress, her female living partner, and her living alone conforming that she was not into a man. Lucy’s not wanting to report the crime strengthens the point that she was aware of the corrective rape happened on her.

“David, when people ask, would you mind keeping to your own story, to what happened to you?”

He does not understand

“You tell what happened to you, I tell what happened to me,” she repeats

“You’re making mistake” he says in the voice that is fast descending to a croak

“No, I’m not”, she says (Coetzee, 1999)

The rape gave deep impacts on Lucy. It changed Lucy’s life and identity. After knowing that the rape caused her to be pregnant, Lucy decided to keep her pregnancy and have a baby because she was not ready to go through abortion again (Coetzee, 1999). Lucy’s word *again* presupposes that she had ever experienced an abortion before. It leads to a conclusion that Lucy had ever been pregnant. Coetzee did not describe further about it, but it may lead to another assumption that what caused Lucy to be pregnant before may have become the background that caused Lucy to hate man.

The second impact is that Lucy accepted Petrus’ proposal to marry him. Petrus proposed Lucy to marry him because he was truly aware the “corrective rape” occurring in the neighborhood toward women living alone,

as inferred from his statement "It is dangerous, too dangerous. A woman must be marry" (Coetzee, 1999). The rape had proven Lucy that she needs man's protection. Her dogs could not protect her against men's violence occurring in the area, and South Africa in general. The rape made her aware of it. That is why marrying Petrus will protect her from another similar crime.

"Because I must tell you, this is not the first time. Petrus has been dropping hints for a while now. That I would find it altogether safer to become part of his establishment. It is not a joke, not a threat. At the same level he is serious." (Coetzee, 1999)

Lucy's acceptance on Petrus' proposal and her deciding to keep the baby gives implication on her identity. Lucy is no longer an independent woman, since now she is dependent on Petrus. Petrus can promise her security from violence or "social punishment". Hence, Lucy was forced to accept the idea that woman cannot be an independent in post-colonial South Africa. She can also be said that she cannot hold her principle, that she rejects male domination, that man and woman are equal. In addition, by marrying Petrus, people will consider that Lucy's sexual orientation is conformed, that is toward male, or opposite sex. She cannot keep herself as a lesbian, at least in public place. Considering these facts, one of the postmodern literature features, i.e. selflessness, is found in Lucy. At the end of the novel, Lucy lost her identity. In other word, she experienced a loss of herself.

### C. Conclusion

In addition to De Smet's study on the postmodern features in *disgrace* (2004), the analysis on the three important characters, i.e. David Lurie and Lucy Lurie, in the novel proves that the novel presents the feature of selflessness in those characters. David Lurie's and Lucy Lurie's selflessness are in the form of loss of identity and loss of power; To sum up, the definition of selflessness proposed by Quennet (2000) and Hasan (1986) fit to the presentation of David Lurie and Lucy Lurie. They have no fixed and coherent identity.



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