Memory, spectacle and menace in J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace

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Abstract: David Lurie, the protagonist in Disgrace, boldly rejects the cyclical and persistent nature of state intrusion into private lives in post-apartheid South Africa. He presents a defence to counter a university academic committee’s public interrogation into what he perceives ought to be a private matter, a spectacle of his sexual exploitation of Soraya and Melanie Isaacs. He scoffs at the menace of disciplinary hearings such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, trivialises the opportunity to defend himself, and flouts the committee’s request, musing that in the new black politics his private life is public business. His obduracy to adapt to new political power and lesbian realities exhibits a false sense of entitlement to apartheid privileges. By analogy, Coetzee’s depiction of the plaas and the raped lesbian body of Lucy similarly indicts an evolving post-apartheid South Africa that wrestles with the racialised history and memory of political change. Disgrace taps into the deep psychological attributes of complex and menacing human relationships and the intersectionality of land redistribution, retribution, state-sponsored and private in/justice. I contend, ultimately, that testimony as memory, truth-telling as menace and apology as spectacle are disrupted in a problematic if disorienting archive of narrative in post-apartheid Southern African literature.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
Twenty years after its publication, the novel Disgrace by J.M. Coetzee remains a disquieting narrative, one that justifies a re-examination of its reception and interpretation in the wake of both literary, corporeal and political developments in the post-imperial vision. In this article, I apply ideas of complicities (Sanders), foldedness, conviviality (Gilroy; Mbembe), improvisation (Tittlestad) and hybridity to post-apartheid South Africa, in order to address the questions of ambiguity and mutual “entanglement” (Nuttall) that come to the fore in reading Disgrace. These re-conceptualisations tease and replace Manichaean modalities of binary cultural formations. Mimicry supplants dramaturgy, and it is this foldedness and improvisation that Coetzee textualises in the imaginative construction of alternative worlds. This study extends my abiding interests in re-searching language, identities and cultures (LIC) and the uncertainties that mark a complex post-transitional Southern Africa.
1. Introduction
Disgrace, J.M. Coetzee’s novel, predates Pankaj Mishra’s provocative title, Age of anger, but both texts seek to project the South African and global disparity. Both texts project liberalism as under siege from violent extremism, populist nationalism, xenophobia and ethnic fissures. At the core of these tensions in both texts is an enduring anti-establishment sentiment to the postcolonial apparatus. Mishra’s Age of Anger vilifies liberalism as enabling a vapid spread of an ideology of free markets, individualism, open access, and consumerism. Mishra, like Coetzee, argues that liberation movements both succeeded and failed: they merely overturned obdurate patriarchal and social hierarchies and cultures of chromatic solidarity but left economic, moral and spiritual vacua in their wake. According to Mishra’s bold and somewhat contested generalisations, liberal modernity has generated notions of hybridity, the messiness of insular identities, translocation and the fluidities of geospatial locatedness. Mishra, like Coetzee, also usefully reminds readers that Western narratives of modernity tend to minimize the resentment, rage, and mass violence that accompanied the spread of democracy and capitalism. Still, modern democracies are hardly the only historical sources of alienation, despair, trepidation, and xenophobia. Whereas there is some common matrix between Disgrace and Age of Anger, perhaps the latter is a more exaggerated examination of the shock and dis/engagement with the politics of dissent, coercion and erasure under a black, monochromatic political architecture.

Twenty years after its publication, Disgrace remains a disquieting narrative, one that justifies a re-examination of its reception and interpretation in the wake of both literary, corporeal and political developments in the post-imperial vision. For Coetzee, as for Gilroy (2004), there is disruptive energy embedded in multiculturalism in respect of postcolonial possibilities and racial categories as political enactments. This article privileges the insights of Frenkel and MacKenzie (2004), challenging the speculative postcolonial configurations that Achille Mbembe (1998) proposes. The postcolonial relationship that Mbembe posits is one of “conviviality”, where, as in South Africa’s case, the colonised and coloniser, the victim and the oppressor have to share the same cartographical space. Mbembe (2012, p. 23) describes this new framework as one of “illicit cohabitation” between oppressors and oppressed, resulting in a conception of postcolonial identities as coeval rather than hierarchical. Similarly, Paul Gilroy (2004: xi) uses the idea of “conviviality” to refer to “the process of cohabitation and interaction that [has] made multi-culture an ordinary feature of social life”. In applying ideas of complicities (Sanders), foldedness, conviviality (Gilroy; Mbembe), improvisation (Tittlestad) and hybridity to post-apartheid South Africa, questions of ambiguity and mutual “entanglement” (Nuttall) come to the fore. These re-conceptualisations tease and replace Manichean modalities of binary cultural formations. Mimicry supplants drama-turgy, and it is this foldedness and improvisation that Coetzee textualises in the imaginative construction of alternative worlds, privileging the ambiguities, complicities, entanglements and uncertainties that mark a complex post-transitional South Africa.

2. Navigating desire, sexuality and political scripting in Disgrace
Canelli (2013, p.1) reads Disgrace as a disquieting narrative in its depiction of the shifts in South African power relations and the nature of injustice in post-apartheid South Africa, while Graham (2020:1) locates the narrative as emerging from the crucible of a post-apartheid discourse on rape that registers anxieties about the state of South Africa’s new nation and the transition to black governance. The kernel of the narrative privileges an unreliable narrator, David Lurie, who trails an undergraduate coloured student, Melanie Isaacs, in a voyeuristic and openly libidinal relationship that ends when she is compelled by her inchoate boyfriend to file a complaint of sexual harassment. A university disciplinary inquiry convened to refract and parody the national Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) finds him guilty and the university dismisses him. David Lurie,
disenfranchised, becomes a peripatetic nomad who finds momentary sanctuary with his lesbian daughter, Lucy, at her smallholding in Salem. He carries with him an abiding attitude that brooks no possibilities of adapting as a member of racial minority. Lucy begrudgingly hosts him when he retreats into her world. Lucy farms a piece of land that parodies the productive boere plaas, operates a kennel and works alongside Petrus, a complex if menacing post-apartheid Black South African. In the interregnum, three unnamed Black men come to the farm, scald and assault David, locking him in a claustrophobic toilet, gang-rape Lucy, savagely kill her dogs and drive away in the one car that David Lurie has brought to the liminal farmhouse. In this macabre looting and raping, the novel prefigures the July 2021 saboteurs’ carnival in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng provinces that markedly limed the democratic deficits in post-apartheid South Africa. Lucy and David react differently to this assault on property and being. For David, a white father’s white daughter has been raped in an inchoate polis where an assemblage of forces is unleashed to emplace whiteness on the margins. He instructs Lucy to abandon Salem and relocate to Europe because he is perplexed by Lucy’s depersonalised resignation to black violence. He cannot understand why his own flesh and blood could acquiesce to the new post-apartheid politics of alienation and subjugation in South Africa. For David, Petrus comes through as protecting one of the unnamed rapists, a vexing positionality that is both duplicitous and hypocritical. As a result of the gang-rape, the lesbian Lucy becomes pregnant. David again insists on an abortion of this unborn hybrid, but Lucy equally insists on bringing up this hybrid begotten from an insidious and menacing rape. We anticipate, at full term, a complex Frankenstein whose embeddedness in violence and rupture presages possible futures.

It is essential to ask several questions on the textualisation and enactment of lesbianism in Disgrace before we can address the several other challenges that this novel raises. I read Disgrace as a novel that considers the dynamic aspects of feminine embodiment that cannot simply be understood in terms of gender normativity but one that negotiates a treacherous and liminal path between understanding both the attachments people hold to particular gender identities and styles, and recognising the punitive realities of dominant gender norms and expectations. By locating Lucy on a somewhat derelict and unproductive farm in Salem, J.M. Coetzee makes her extremely vulnerable as femme and lesbian. In fact, there is a sense in which this spatial liminality compounds her marginality in a highly masculinised heteronormative post-apartheid South Africa. Thus, although the character of Lucy is capable of conveying intriguing insights of the several tropes central to lesbian and gay studies, there is an uneasy reader response that emerges in troubling the lived experiences of what Gloria Anzaldúa might have called “threshold people”, people who live among and in-between different worlds. While it is often challenging, difficult, and even dangerous, inhabiting marginal spaces, living at the borders of socio-cultural, religious, sexual, ethnic, or gendered norms can create possibilities for developing unique ways of seeing and understanding the worlds within which we live (Clisby, 2020, p.2).

There is a Pentateuch of challenges that Disgrace presents to the reader and audiences who anticipate a narrative of redemption rather than menace in a new political framework. It is therefore essential to examine what emerges as an implacable indifference in this vaudeville version of narrating the post-apartheid oeuvre.

First, the university disciplinary committee that compels David Lurie to resign parodies the TRC post 1994 in South Africa. The TRC has been severely criticized for providing a platform where the architects and perpetrators of apartheid only made an adequate show of contrition and regret but were hardly punished. After the psychologically scarring rape of Melanie Isaacs, David is literally set free by an effete university legal structure that mimics the hamstrung TRC instituted under Nelson Mandela. The apartheid agents of violence and terror could be “reconciled” to the new conditions of South Africa and move on with their lives, just like David Lurie, most often without the type of justice for which the victims of rape and apartheid hoped.
Secondly, Lucy comes through as a lesbian, one identitarian formation that was recognised in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996). Section Nine of the Constitution of South Africa uniquely privileges protection against discrimination on the basis of gender, sex, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth. In the political and popular construction of the multiracial “rainbow nation” of South Africa, gay and lesbian identities occupied a central position; carrying the rainbow flag of diversity, gays and lesbians became what Munro (2009, p. 398) calls “stock minor character[s] in the pageant of nationhood, embodying the arrival of a radically new social order and symbolically mediating conflicts of race, gender-based violence and class.” By extension, Graham (2020, p. 4) observes that there are two women who are sexually violated in Disgrace: Lucy, the white daughter of the focalizer, David Lurie; and Melanie Isaacs, a young “coloured” woman who becomes the sexual prey of her professor, David Lurie. As a result of what she experiences, Melanie Isaacs seems to have a psychological breakdown (though we never hear her perspective) and drops out of university.

Thirdly, post-apartheid governance and politics are problematised in the gang-rape of Lucy by unnamed black assailants, proleptically re-inscribing the atavistic image of black masculinities. These prototypes are national subjects corporeally mapped in the bizarre and morbid rape and murder of Jesse Hess and Uynine Mwetyana, Meghan Cremer and Leighandre Jegels whose femicide triggered the #MeToo protests in South Africa in 2019. The chilling and gory details of treacherous masculinities (Hove, 2014) and their mediating functions become aestheticised, narrativised and allegorised within the oeuvre of Disgrace. If we assign the same chromatic configuration to the unnamed rapists as the novelist does, perhaps we could establish the same disdain that the novel received from the majority of ANC audiences in 1999: Disgrace is uncomfortably essentialist in its narrative of post-apartheid race relations, failing therefore to construct deeply complex and psychological configurations of black identities and the chronic instantiations of intra-racial femicide in South Africa. Throughout the novel, whiteness (even if this is located on the frontiers such as Salem) remains a metonym for power. There is a conspicuous interpellation of shock, trepidation and disorientation in this narrative that strives to engage with the menace and spectacle of a new politics of hubris (Parker, 2020, p. 1), one that comes through as an amoebic contraption fraught with democratic deficits.

Fourthly, the regimen of illegality, ethics and moral revulsion at the gang-rape of Lucy is narrativised through David Lurie and Lucy herself: the assailants lurk in the background and readers are never allowed into the psychic penumbra of their motivations. In the entire narrative, Petrus is allotted a mere 976 words in his own voice, yet he is the black doppelganger and menace in the novel, prototype of the unruly coterie of postcolonial administrators. In critical discourse analysis, it matters who speaks and from what position. From this evidence, it is possible to read Petrus as the anthropological, the doppelganger, a menacing and inchoate personality (Tolentino, 2020, p. 4) who connives with the nameless rapists in order to usurp the farm and completely dispossess Lucy Lurie.

Finally, in this Pentateuch, the land—a site of complex histories of violence, dispossession and re/appropriation—is depicted as a truncated and unproductive topos, starkly contrasting with the metonymy of land as wealth and belonging in the tradition of the plaasroman. The land features prominently in Disgrace, linking history to individual and collective trauma. Smith (2006) re-evaluates whiteness by suggesting that David Lurie has fallen from an alchemy of white privileges and porous, patriarchal masculinities in Disgrace; Cass (2013) connects the rape to an economy of debt where the white body of Lucy pays for the sins of the fathers. In a highly charged rendition of the dynamics of belonging and becoming, Lucy’s white body is vulnerable in Salem and becomes a site for compensating Petrus’ blackness. She remarks:

Petrus is not offering me a church wedding followed by a honeymoon on the Wild Coast. He is offering an alliance, a deal. I contribute the land, in return for which I am allowed to creep
under his wing. Otherwise, he wants to remind me, I am without protection, I am fair game (my italics).

Alyssa Stalsberg Canelli (2013, p. 76) is succinct in asking the following pertinent questions about rights of desire and indebtedness: “What debts must be paid for the violence of history over the land? Who has the right to collect these debts and from whose sites and bodies are they collected?” I extend these questions by asking: What ethics define the repossession and debt collection? To what extent is violence in the corporeality of gang-rape an adequate form of punishment and atonement? Why does Coetzee’s narrative not problematise the rape scars and compelling experiences of the women of colour embodied in Melanie Isaacs and Soraya in the same complex exegesis of Lucy? Perhaps, even more pressing, what identity and political possibilities are embedded in the avatar of the unborn hybrid that Lucy Lurie carries in her womb, adamant to erase the inscription of a violated lesbian body? It is through a search for answers to these questions that we could proffer new ways of comprehending the despicable aging protagonist, David Lurie. Coetzee tells us that David Lurie remembers “poring over the word rape in newspaper reports, trying to puzzle out what exactly it meant, wondering what the letter p, usually so gentle, was doing in the middle of a word held in such horror that no one would utter it aloud” (Coetzee, 1999, p. 160). The word “rape” and the experience of reading it becomes tied to the word’s meaning in several ways. David observes that the word is often printed in newspapers, although it is never spoken aloud. He remembers that he independently learned the meaning of the word through his own reading rather than through experience or instruction from adults. And he associates the gentleness of the sound p with the violence of rape. I argue that the younger David Lurie’s first introduction to the reality of sexual assault is mediated through language: the graphemic, speech, and sound. Before he understands the meaning and gravity of rape, this word is already a linguistic artifact in his mind, according to Erbland (2020, p. 1). David Lurie grows up perceiving reality through artifacts of language that he himself creates, maintains, and enforces; this first encounter with rape and its linguistic counterpart predetermines his attitude toward sexual perversity and assault. By the time he reaches middle age, Lurie’s tendency to fixate on language moves beyond the scope of his profession and dictates the structures of his relationships with women that he purchases, subdues and victimises.

3. Strategies of becoming and belonging differently in a new polity
A constellation of critics has formulated ways of reading the farm novel, the plaasroman, amongst the most notable being Anthony Chennells (1983, 1999, 2015), Susan Smit-Marais and Marita Wenzel (2006) and all these critics insist on recognising the centrality of the farmland as the family farm ruled by the patriarch, inscribed—with the help of the invisible labour of black hands. In times of war and tension, the land is appropriately imagined as the fatherland; in times of peace and ease, it is often elastically envisioned as the motherland. Wa Thiong’o (2009, p. 108) privileges the farmland as defining a physical, economic, political, moral and intellectual universe. He proceeds to argue that the colonial enterprise sought to subject the colonised to its memory. The colonised, as a worker and a peasant, worked on the land to produce for another—the coloniser. To this extent of subjugating black labour and making the colonised inhabit the peripheral sites of productivity, the land question looms large in Ngugi’s works as it does in Disgrace—the farm, the plaas, becomes a metaphor of the topography and productivity of the motherland. There is no doubt that the land in South Africa remains contested space as dramatised in the multi-layered conflicts between Petrus and Lucy: how can this land question be re-membered, redistributed and re-animated to resolve the tensions of becoming and belonging?

Susan Smit-Marais and Marita Wenzel (2006, p. 1) contend that the novel Disgrace offers a rather bleak apocalyptic vision of gender roles, racial relationships and family relations in post-apartheid South Africa and expresses the socio-political tensions pertaining to the South African landscape in terms of personal relationships. These scholars proceed to submit that as a fictional reworking of the farm novel, Disgrace draws on the tradition of the plaasroman’s anxieties about the rights of (white) ownership of the land, but within a post-apartheid context. The subtext in Disgrace qualifies the dystopic in the narrative, projecting the dangerous effects of new (read
black) political and social structures on white society’s futures in South Africa. In eliding the apartheid architecture of violence and dispossession, *Disgrace* calibrates legitimated coercion and a lack of accountability as the new disruptive threats to white survival and individualism. In apartheid times, the *plaas* is a material and a cultural construct associated with a history of patriarchal and colonial domination. The inversion and subversion to its domination and appropriation by woman figures in the corporeal form of Lucy Lurie and her lesbian partner, Bev, complicates the dystopic materiality of this space even further. Of course, the location of the smallholding in Salem, in the Eastern Cape, already suggests the liminality of this space as the border, a point for the encounter between difference and a locale of hybridity (Smit-Marais & Wenzel, 2006, p. 4).

The 1996 Constitution (South Africa) privileges what Tutu (1996) elaborates as the rainbow nation. This sobriquet, applied to South Africa, is part of the spectacle of political independence that is so central to the framing of the pageant of nationhood. The spectacle of the rainbow nation is obviously a politically expedient mechanism that overlooks and homiletically simplifies entrenched historical differences and antagonisms. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee foregrounds these tensions, making his Petrus a menacing archive of memories of dispossession and entitlement. Petrus therefore legitimately cautions David Lurie that the farm can simultaneously be “dangerous” (1999, p. 64) but also not dangerous: “everything is dangerous today. But here it is still all right, I think” (1999, p. 64).

According to Azoulay (2002, p. 38), this “movement between time and place emphasises the historical moment at which the balance of power relations shifts in relation to place.” The danger posed by the farm depends on the specific circumstances and hierarchies of race, gender, productivity and authority. The farm in *Disgrace* is therefore a site where the issues of gender, racism and power relations are not only most entrenched, but also most impervious to change. Viljoen (2004, p.114) makes an insightful observation of the “subtle and subversive strategies deployed in the narrative” in *Disgrace* that parody and pervert the *plaasroman*. He observes that *Disgrace* does not portray “a child leaving the strictures of the farm for the freedoms of the city, but instead portrays a father leaving the city-university to seek refuge” (Viljoen, 2004, p. 114) on his daughter’s reclusive smallholding. Though initially the unruliness and natural rhythms of life on the farm have a toning effect on David’s discordant life, his venge for life and individuality, and that of his daughter, are thrown into spectacular disorder as a result of the attack, which locates the farm as a site of post-apartheid chaos and turmoil. It is logical at this point to suggest that even though *Disgrace* predates Pankaj Mishra’s provocative title, *Age of anger*, both crystallise the South African and global disorder, when liberalisation is under assault by violent extremism, populist nationalism, xenophobia, ethnic fissures, and apartheid sentiments. Coetzee is perhaps more sardonic and mordant in his estimation of the ANC-led transition. Whereas the nationalist struggle overturned old patriarchal and social hierarchies and cultures of chromatic solidarity, it left economic, moral and spiritual vacuums in the new economy and these challenges trivialise meaningful change. We witness old treacheries and new deceits in the new dispensation as Stephen Chan (2011) would call it.

It is essential that we trace the depiction of David Lurie in the post-apartheid project that informs the dystopic narrative trajectory in *Disgrace*. Coetzee deliberately projects a patriarchal mouthpiece in David, capable of providing the justifications and rationalisations of the agents of the white supremacist apartheid state; one who questions the deliberate blindness of the colonial administrator and the moral bankruptcy of the repressive regime. In the post-apartheid era, David translocates his sexual narcissism, idiosyncrasies and fantasies of intimacy with both Soraya and Melanie Isaacs. This self-delusion allows him to fantasise his libidinal desire for Melanie Isaacs, his student, as an affair of passion. Close reading of the text crystallises the sex act with Melanie Isaacs as rape, save to David himself:

She does not resist. All she does is avert herself: avert her lips, avert her eyes. She lets him lay her out on the bed and undress her … Not rape, not quite that, but undesired
nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, far away (Coetzee, 1999, p. 25; my italics).

The use of the remotely passive voice engenders that facticity of her rape. This is one passage in the oeuvre of Disgrace that pointedly illustrates David’s self-deception, in as much as it also articulates one of the thematic arcs of the novel: Who can claim the “rights of desire” to a body/site and who must submit to those claims? David’s “right” to fragile bodies/sites is projected as sexual desire managed, moulded and directed into particular racialised and misogynistic forms by the colonial and apartheid histories of South Africa. Ironically, the same misogynistic forge shapes the atavistic imprimatur of the gang-rapists who “tame and teach” Lucy not to be a lesbian: it is David Lurie who insists on referring to the relationship between national history and his daughter’s rape. After the viciousness of the rape and his scolding, David begins to realize the enormity of his physical injuries and what must have happened to Lucy. He abstracts the violence in order to find some simulacra of atonement:

“[it’s] not human evil, just a vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant. That is how one must see life in this country: in its schematic aspect. Otherwise one could go mad. Cars, shoes; women too. There must be some niche in the system for women and what happens to them” (Coetzee, 1999, p. 98).

In the immediate moment of intense physical pain, David frames the violence as the residue of a new type of post-apartheid routine if anarchic violence.

In the framing of this segment of the article, I submitted earlier that J.M. Coetzee generates a rather bleak apocalyptic vision of post-apartheid South Africa. This apocalypse is informed by a “transitional anxiety,” represented in feelings of uncertainty, loss, displacement, and disorientation (Cock, 2001). Much of this transitional anxiety has focused around the fear of crime in the postcolonial space, specifically the fact that a different chromatic category takes over the reins of power. The depiction of white South Africans as the primary victims of violent crime at the hands of black criminals seems to draw heavily on the notion of swart gevaar (translated as black threat or danger)—a trope that gained considerable purchase during apartheid and that entailed depicting black people as dangerous and violent threats to the white population (Jurgens & Gnad, 2002). In the white imagination that scaffolded apartheid, it was the duty of white men to guard against this omnipresent threat. The swart gevaar discourse was also deployed and promoted during the apartheid era to justify state-sponsored violence against the majority of black people. Disgrace re-appropriates the swart gevaar discourse and in the choreographed robbery of the smallholding, Lucy’s rape and David’s momentary incapacitation in the toilet, Coetzee depicts the nameless intruders and violators as personification par excellence of the black home invader intent on robbery, rape, and dispossession. To an extent, Sindiwe Magona (1990, p. 2) is on point when she prophetically argues that “…It is a fact that South Africa has had a violent past. It is a fact that South Africa has a violent present. It is a fact that South Africa will predictably have a violent future—unless…” The black police officers to whom the crimes are reported are represented as incapable of identifying the perpetrators and effecting an arrest. Indeed, Coetzee amplifies black masculinity as almost ubiquitously violent and dangerous in post-apartheid South Africa. There is tangible disquiet in Disgrace at the perceived inadequacies of the new political order, a trope that compels readers to the conviction that this is one narrative that tends to amplify the resentment, rage and mass violence that accompanied the inauguration of modern democracies. The gang rape and the threat of material dispossession constitute historical sources of alienation, despair, trepidation, and xenophobia in the novel.

4. Erasure of the lesbian and inscription of the unborn
Speculating on how Petrus might be connected to the attack, David’s ideas are related through the narration: “The worst, the darkest reading would be that Petrus engaged three strange men to
teach Lucy a lesson … " The post-apartheid doppelganger in Petrus is deliberately carved in a chromatic black that essentialises him as unfathomably anarchic, driven to atavistic means of appropriating both Lucy’s land and the white body, subjugating the same white body to an excoriating rape in order to make it unlearn its independence and self-determination as lesbian. The sub-text of Petrus engaging three enigmatic men to teach Lucy a lesson in “belonging” to the post-apartheid nationalist script demonstrably privileges subversion, control and regulation to a gendered masculine-feminine binary, with no other possibilities of identifying oneself differently. Even though other categories of identity are constitutionally recognised, Petrus excises such possibilities of recognition in this uncanny conspiracy and conscription of the three nameless men who victimise and subdue Lucy.

Coetzee deliberately makes them nameless. In this un-naming, Coetzee essentialises and genderises their brutality as ubiquitous. The writer in this instance appropriates the onomastic practice of naming and belonging in order to subvert the complex processes by which black subjectivities, spaces, objects, and other cultural expressions are brought to represent something entirely different from their cultural script of citizenship. In fact, I perceive an uncanny resistance to carve black agency and subjectivity in the writer approximating the contemptible apartheid habitation to generalise all blacks as torpid sexual perverts. The very fact of making the rapists nameless is not only a camouflage, but an intentional authorial scripting that constitutes a “denial of historical freedom … [and] the ethical choice of refashioning” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 345). The tensions resident in the transition from apartheid to post-apartheid South Africa are therefore inscribed in an abnormalised aberration in the three rapists. Not only are the tensions in transitioning problematically represented in this narrative; there is an alter/native lawlessness embedded into such callous behaviour. This deliberate refashioning of black subjectivities foregrounds the antinomian relationship that prevails between South African onomastic cultures, transgressive practices and the institutionalisation of Roman-Dutch law: where the reader is invited to see the rape as debasement of Lucy, the rapists are presented as compassionless, dehumanised and ruthless. Their impenetrable consciences in the act of raping Lucy are not as open to their inner workings as David’s conscience is scripted for us to understand his self-aggrandising justification in accessing female bodies such as the administrative secretary at the university, Dawn, Melanie Isaacs, Soraya and Bev. There is an uneasy rendition of the rape of Melanie Isaacs as patriarchal violence while that of Lucy is scripted as a political tactic. This execrable rape is therefore rendered to communicate polysemous meanings: on one hand, this is an atrocious and inflected version of black if porous masculinities given free rein in a new black political order; it is a coeval and illicit conviviality; and on the other, an inordinate transgression, punishable even under the new post-apartheid dispensation.

When Lucy, who is pregnant from the rape, says that she is “determined to be a good mother … A good mother and a good person,” David thinks, “A good person. Not a bad resolution to make in dark times.” The metonymy of dark times as black governance and politics is patent here. Disgrace ontologises Lucy’s rape to the extent that it becomes embedded in black-white relational dynamics that only the unborn hybrid could prefigure. The biological and behavioural register of raped bodies inscribes and anticipates an unruly counter-corpooreal animation embodied in biopoliticised and uncertain futures. The lesbian, pregnant from rape rather than concession, semantically splits into fragmented shards that mock the psychosocial and biological possibilities of this reconfigured locus of identity.

Coetzee is too skilled a writer to let this pattern in the inscription of blackness be a simple allegorical one. Darkness throughout the book is a motif repeatedly conjured in a racial context, and each appearance of the motif conveys its own sinister meaning. The text’s representations of whiteness and blackness complicate our understanding of the imagery of the rainbow as central to the imagining of a future. In many of its passages, Disgrace intimates that blackness in all its nuances becomes a significant barrier to nationhood; blackness is a trope and mode of representation employed to narrate a country gripped by, or recovering from, the extreme violence of an
ante where blackness is de facto criminalised by apartheid. This reading integrates Chapman’s observation that “it is difficult, in the [African] subcontinent, to separate literary discussion from a social referent when political events have attained the dimension of compelling public narratives” (Chapman, 2003, p. 4). It is not a far-fetched conclusion to read the three unnamed and black rapists who imperil the self-proclaimed lesbian in Lucy as driven by a “motiveless malignity” principally because Coetzee generates an equation between blackness and the descent into an anarchic republic post majority black rule. In a different context, Comaroff and Comaroff (2004, p. 190) contend that the crisis of the post-apartheid polity is evident in its shrinking sovereignty; its loss of control over economic policy, cultural production, and the flow of people, the land redistribution question, and commodities; in the growing disjunction between nation and state. 

_Disgrace_, in my assessment, is a demythologising dystopia in which mutually exclusive versions of history are implicitly placed in mortal confrontation in order to stress the fact that the post and present are not constitutive sets of established truths in which the post-apartheid project and developments originate, but rather a contested site of power, gender and cultural codes, each designed to preserve (or efface) a particular version of cultural and national identity as intimated in the myth of the rainbow nation.

_Disgrace_ is filled with words for blankness and erasure, for what is written and unwritten. How does post-apartheid South Africa accommodate the lesbian, the gay and the homosexual queer Other? How does the lesbian become pregnant? How would the termination of an imposed pregnancy by a self-proclaimed lesbian augur for the possibilities of such an identity project? What promise and hope lies in the non-full-term pregnancy at the close of the novel? These unsettling questions about the possibilities embedded in the hybrid _concepcion_, a monstrous aberration, a volatile alternative that Lucy carries cumulatively problematise the oeuvre of the narrative in _Disgrace_. If the violent rape erases the possibilities of a lesbian trope and identity project in the rainbow nation, then the pregnancy inaugurates an elastic “maybe” akin to Pepetela’s eponymous character in _Mayombe_. Taken from a historicist perspective where apartheid was designed architecturally for the management of racial capitalism, the pregnancy portends the whimsical if ceremonial trappings of a hybridised nationhood. In dramatizing the quirky paternity of the unborn child, un-gendered as yet in the penultimate pages of the narrative, Coetzee extends fractious identity struggles. I subscribe to the observation that Comaroff and Comaroff (2004, p. 191) make: the fractal nature of contemporary political personhood is overlaid and undercut by a politics of difference and identity. Coetzee points out in _White Writing_ that the basic structure of farm and peasant life in a _plaasroman_ is patriarchal, and that the language used is rich with gendered connotations (“the rape of the land”) and the anti-plaasroman _Disgrace_ perpituately inverts, subverts, and converts such gendered structures and phrases.

In one of the subllest commentaries on the contested land question in post-apartheid South Africa, Lurie states, “Petrus will not be content to plough forever his hectare and a half [. . .].” In very unnerving constructions of the black menace, Petrus surreptitiously nudges Lucy out of the _plaas_; she stands freckled and frail in the menacing shadow of this farmhand who begins to erect a homestead on the smallholding while she becomes an unconvincing amateur, an animated parody of the farming life rather than the _boere_ farmer. Petrus insists on taking over Lucy’s land, transforming her from proprietor to nomad. David Lurie utilises this fear of _/ for the land and the racialised notion of the ‘scary’ black man against the ‘innocent’ white women to make the distinction that one is more humane than the other; constructing a binary that forces the non-human Other in this relationship to only think and speak on a superficial level. By all accounts, we cannot ascribe any logic of legibility to ownership in Petrus; neither are we allowed to read Petrus as offering any potential to make the land productive. His tethering of the sheep so that he can slaughter them for an incontinent party locates him as a consumer rather than a producer in the beleaguered post-apartheid reconfiguration. Moreover, Lurie does not quite understand the ways of the land having been ensconced in the academy himself; he fears, on Lucy’s behalf, losing what was originally stolen through the colonial politics of oppression and the subjugation of Black people. Where Lucy comes through as willing to
negotiate new ways of belonging and restructuring the terms of ownership of the smallholding, the quirky narrative surrounding Petrus as a male Black South African and their connection to the pastoral setting reduces the principal and named characters into one-dimensional figurations that maintain different modalities of control across and beyond the dam in *Disgrace*.

If the contest for the land is Coetzee’s attempt to atone for the sins of the fathers, there is yet another platform—languaging—that is suffused with tensions. When David Lurie is locked in a toilet while the three nameless black men take turns to rape and “teach” Lucy a lesson, we perceive the unreliable narrator as immobilised to help his daughter and unable to understand the primus that spurs these assailants:

> He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa. He is helpless, an Aunt Sally, a figure from a cartoon, a missionary in cassock and topi waiting with clasped hands and upcast eyes while the savages jaw away in their own lingo preparatory to plunging him into their boiling cauldron (Coetzee, 1999, p. 95).

This is the ultimate testament of David Lurie’s failure/s. He can express his ideas and reactions to the violation of his white daughter in all the European languages but fails dismally to word the habitus of the assailants in any of their possible languages. Although he is extensively implicated in the structures of modern patriarchy, David fails in the role of pater in all its symbolisations. He has taught in a university linguistics department all his professorial life, yet locked and scalded in this toilet, he cannot fathom what the “savages jaw away in their own lingo” (my italics). It is also quite seminal to recognise that on the farm, both his daughter Lucy and Petrus (the farmhand who hatches a menacing plan to displace and jettison Lucy) resist his authority. His most spectacular fall is when he leaves the professorial lectern to become a helping hand to Bev, a morbid if tasteless specialist in sterilisation and euthanasia (Smit-Marais & Wenzel, 2006, p. 31). In the stylisation of the writer, the “here” is the apogee of “darkest Africa”, a new, post-apartheid cartographic space that allows a recession into anarchy and primal instincts as ineluctably inscribed in the lexicon of savages.

5. Vulgarities of engagement and possibilities of subversion

There are several ways in which *Disgrace* apparently fails to communicate a materialist understanding of South African decolonisation: historical analysis and feminist discursive and political practices are given short shrift in favour of stereotypical, black sexual violence and macabre emplacement of blacks on the land. As a career writer, J.M. Coetzee is quite aware of the literary archive as a site where the creators of dominant mainstream images of women in advertisements, television and film are architects and co-constructors of the discourses on gender and how profoundly such discursive practices are ultimately deployed in the creation and dispersal of popular cultural texts. As a creative writer, he would understand how to deliver an image that seems at once complex and contemporary as well as retroactive and nostalgic to capture the broadest demographic possible in a gendered topos. The image and its variegated meanings carry significant symbolic capital and it is exceedingly difficult to appreciate images of women that at one level seem to address political and economic diversity, freedom of expression and choice, but which also depend on compatibility with traditional “feminine” styles of being a woman and which ignore diversity in terms of age, race or sexuality.

Never mind the fact that at the beginning of *Disgrace*, David is already divorced. We are struck by the declaration in the opening line that he has found peace with his sexual life when all he enacts is a Thursday-ritual drift towards the prostitute of Indian origin, Soraya. In ritualising and routinising the sexual encounters with Soraya, he finds it horrifying when he fails to find Soraya where she should be on one of the occasions. When he finally turns to exploit Melanie Isaacs, we are again petrified by the manner in which David objectifies and thingifies Melanie. As Barnard (2013, p.1) states, the border between rape and consensual sex is shown to be problematic in the relationship between David and his young student, Melanie. Barnard advances an argument on the politics of rape in the novel in the following terms:
Disgrace presents the reader with many very different forms of rape. The rape of Lucy is violent and totally unwanted. It is discussed as rape in the book, albeit only once, and is accepted as such by all reviewers. Whether David actually raped Melanie and how this relates to the charge of sexual harassment is questioned in the novel. Some feminists would argue that sex with a prostitute is also a form of rape. This could place David’s relationship with the prostitute Soraya in a new light. Lucy’s thoughts on sex and men hating women also bring into play the radical feminist idea that all heterosexual sex is rape.

I insist on reading the relationship between David and Melanie as coerced and therefore instantiating rape; Melanie is as stunned as Lucy when she is violated by the three unnamed black assailants. What I find insolent, slurring and offensive to a post-apartheid reader is that J.M. Coetzee “sanitises” Melanie’s rape, making it less violent and tolerable while the experience of Lucy is as raw as it is degenerate. We should equally observe and query the fact that both Melanie and Soraya are muted as women of colour. Beyond this chromatic configuration, eliding their experiences amounts to significant lacunae in their representations as Lurie’s spectacles and receptacles. I am therefore persuaded to concur with Barry (1995, p. 22) who submits that in the fullness of human experience, when women are reduced to their bodies, and in the case of sexual exploitation to sexed bodies, they are treated as lesser, as other, and thereby subordinated. I also insist on reading David’s interpretation of his victim’s participation in the sexual act as a partial, masochistic moment of selective memory: “One moment stands out in recollection, when she hooks a leg behind his buttocks to draw him in closer: as the tendon of her inner thigh tightens against him, he feels a surge of joy and desire” (Coetzee, p. 29). It is this moment of participation that complicates our evaluation of Melanie as victim, yet the point remains this is selective amnesia from an unreliable narrator. Indeed, David is fully aware of the menace that frames his homoerotic and overpowering compulsion: “After it’s over, [Melanie] asks him to leave, and in his car Lurie has “no doubt, she … is trying to cleanse herself of it, of him … running a bath, stepping into the water, eyes closed like a sleepwalker” (Coetzee, 1999, p. 30).

In the midst of a sexual desert in Salem, David becomes the reductio ad absurdum again in turning towards Bev, for he has provided us with the microscopic details of how Bev is simply unattractive, past youth and un-womanly: David Lurie himself felt that it was unimaginable to have sex with Bev, a middle-aged woman of no charm, “with black freckles, close-cropped, wiry hair, and no neck”, hence “never did he dream he would sleep with a Bev” (1999, p. 149), but it seems that this is what he has to “get used to, this and even less than this” (1999, p. 150). Save for the satisfaction of his animal instincts, David lays claim on Bev’s body like the primaeval man who discovers the phallus as an object for the subjection and abjection of women.

This putative repression of the female body is also privileged in the callous manipulation of Lucy by Petrus. Gayatri Spivak (23) reads such repressive socialisation when she observes that Lucy “makes visible the rational kerel of the institution of marriage-rape, social security, property [and] human continuity”. Lucy’s protection is an illusion, an anticipation that seems to emerge from a deep-seated naivety in her understanding of the politics of maleness and political transition. I read a deliberately crafted if surreptitious terrorism in Petrus’ gesture of “protecting” Lucy. First, the name Petrus is etymologically derived from the Greek petra, meaning rock and invoking solidity in frame and structure. These attributes are subverted in the singular black character and personality that J.M. Coetzee offers to name. Secondly, on the day of the rape, Petrus’ presence is intentionally dramatised: he is away before and after the rape on a flimsy narrative excuse and reason. When he returns with an offer to marry Lucy Lurie, the lurid and perverse come to the fore of this gesture to make the victim his third wife. We wonder if this gesture is meant to placate Lucy or protect her since Petrus knows the identity of one of the rapists. Lucy’s says: “I am not sure that Petrus would want to sleep with me, except to drive home his message” (Coetzee, 1999, p. 203). And the message is clear to all readers: Petrus’ offer is a sadistic re-insertion of violent pasts and encounters into the neurophysiological abject body of Lucy. In the obscurity of all these menacing experiences, it is challenging to establish any meaning that Petrus would want to convey by having
marital sex with Lucy: she has already been raped by nameless attackers and now he is willing to have sex with her as a gesture of protection. There is something spectacularly morbid in Petrus’ offer to minoritise Lucy: it is a callous inscription of further trauma grounded on difference and alterity. Lucy seems, however, to accept marriage and sex as part of the bargain in a Sisyphean punishment where she has to live with the scars of rape and still carry in her womb the seed of violence. If Lucy is convinced of the violence inherent in heterosexual sex, which is equtated to killing, then political lesbianism is a logical if fragile choice.

6. In closing
Representational power is enforced through discourse as well as material hierarchical relations. Representation serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects; on the other hand, representation is the selective function of a writer in a specific language. Soraya, Melanie and Lucy as women subjects of patriarchal political hegemony are discursively produced through the performance of certain behaviours and styles that become unstable and elusive allegories of differently “becoming.” The aestheticised and narrativised lived experiences of the women characters in Disgrace represent dominant values and apparently lack the potential to subvert and offer modes of resistance to both the new political hegemony and heteropatriarchy. Lucy’s lesbian zeitgeist is pummelled into an adjunct to a bizarre heterosexual relationship where Pollux recedes into nonentity as Petrus becomes a problematic and reconstructed padre. The possibilities of subversion from within Petrus’ enlarged family and encrypted in Lucy’s embryonic pregnancy further complicate coloured-ness and hybridity as a possible future for post-apartheid South Africa. In the schizoid and transitional political framework of Disgrace, Petrus embodies the possibilities and complicities of manipulative subversion, ostensibly entering into self-serving contractual, conjugal and menacing material relations. The novel’s militancy is ultimately subverted by its own crevices in the ways it engenders memory, spectacle and menace as proxies for nostos, negotiating incommensurables across otherwise intransigent boundaries that are inimical to the diversity of post-apartheid South Africa. In the words of Comaroff and Comaroff (2004), the gravities of difference in South Africa at the dawn of the postcolonial age cannot be underestimated with its archive of historical and contemporary rape crime, violence and woundedness.

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