

Saggi

THE LIBERAL STRANGER IN J. M. COETZEE'S *DISGRACE*LO STRANIERO LIBERALE IN *VERGOGNA* DI J. M. COETZEESara Saei Dibavar¹, Hossein Pirnajmuddin² ORCID: SSD 0000-0003-1883-5498, HP 0000-0001-8349-2626¹ University of Mazandaran (ror: 05fp9g671)² University of Isfahan (ror: 05h9t7759)

ABSTRACT

J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) offers a potent depiction of the human condition within the complex milieu of post-apartheid South Africa, characterized by its diverse ethnicities and shifting interrelations. The novel, through the troubled trajectory of Professor David Lurie, a literary scholar steeped in liberal humanism, critically examines the limitations of such ideals when confronted with lived reality. Lurie's journey from an intellectual figure to a disgraced outcast, and subsequently to a guest and a stranger, highlights the disconnect between his education and the radically transformed (post-apartheid) environment and its occupants (the strangers). Lurie's struggle to navigate these altered social dynamics, and his entanglement with 'liquid fear,' underscores the failings of his liberal education. However, *Disgrace* does not merely present a bleak picture of societal disintegration. Lurie's eventual (uncanny) position as a stranger, stripped of his former status, paradoxically opens a pathway towards a rediscovery of "essential human value," specifically the capacity for 'caring,' suggesting a potential for moral transformation or rebirth.

Keywords: J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*; Liberalism; Liquid Fear; Stranger; Human Condition; Multicultural Environment.

Il romanzo *Vergogna* di J. M. Coetzee (1999) offre una potente rappresentazione della condizione umana nel complesso milieu del Sudafrica post-apartheid, caratterizzato da diversità etnica e da relazioni in continua trasformazione. Attraverso la travagliata parabola del professor David Lurie, uno studioso di letteratura intriso di umanesimo liberale, il romanzo esamina criticamente i limiti di quegli ideali quando messi a confronto con la realtà vissuta. Il percorso di Lurie, da figura intellettuale a emarginato in disgrazia, poi a ospite e a straniero, mette in luce il divario tra la sua formazione e l'ambiente radicalmente trasformato del post-apartheid, e dei suoi nuovi abitanti (gli stranieri). Le difficoltà di Lurie nell'attraversare queste dinamiche sociali alterate e il suo intreccio con la «paura liquida» evidenziano il fallimento della sua educazione liberale. *Vergogna*, comunque, non rappresenta soltanto un desolante quadro di disgregazione sociale. La posizione infine perturbante di Lurie come straniero, spogliato del suo status precedente, apre paradossalmente una strada verso la riscoperta di un «valore umano essenziale», la capacità di 'dare cura', lasciando intravedere la possibilità di una trasformazione morale, o di una rinascita.

Parole chiave: *Vergogna* di J. M. Coetzee; Liberalismo; Paura liquida; Straniero; Condizione umana; Ambiente multiculturale.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Discussing the problem of us vs. them in the first chapter of his book, *Secretary of the Invisible* (2009), Marais asks the following question in his examination of Coetzee's novels: "how does the individual, who is part of a community, respond to the stranger as a stranger: i.e. without exactly positioning this outsider in opposition to the "we" in which s/he is located?" (1-2). Believing in Levinas's assertion that "unconditional hospitality" is efficiently imposed upon and disabled by the exclusionary movements which serve as the pillars of a community, Marais postulates that the stranger/ other is always differentiated from the "self" in any given culture where "protocols of inclusion and exclusion" (2) are always functioning to effectively pigeonhole the stranger and, hence, reaffirm and preserve the community. This would, naturally, form the premises for what Marais calls "conditional hospitality," meaning that the host remains the controlling agent, constantly screening for guest-enemy and us-them of the community. Upon being named and identified, the stranger "is incorporated into community's system of differential relations [as] the primary threat of his or her otherness is reduced" and his or her strangeness is "rendered not present" (3, 4). This strategy has been efficiently used for a long time in dealing with communal situations. However, in the context of the multicultural environment in contemporary times, the very term 'community' has, at best, liquid boundaries. In other words, in the volatile, ever-changing atmosphere of the postmodern world, such a promising binary between the host/we and the guest/them may not even materialize. Zygmunt Bauman calls this condition "postmodern liquidity," a postmodern situation in which human beings have experienced a "passage from the "solid" to a "liquid" phase of modernity" (*Times* 1) in which social structures do not function as they used to or were supposed to. This change – this new political and ethical paradigm – is the result of the drastic change in man's relationship to his environment.

As new problems emerge due to this liquidity, we have to look at them in new ways to entertain and examine the possibility of handling them. A possible solution in bridging gaps in multicultural environments, we are told, might well be the discourse of liberal humanism, where the role of narratives such as the neoliberal novel find importance. The multiplicity of paths in the neoliberal novel, Johansen and Karl propose, is not a "sign of its superfluity or its capitulation to capital" (201). Neoliberal novel is "a thoroughly sociable genre, mapping the worlds in which we live". Indeed, its "sociability under capital" as a response to neo-mobility, "renders the novel such an appropriate venue for the interrogation of what Smith calls "our condition" under neoliberal orthodoxy" (202).¹

The human (troubled) condition in the multicultural environment of the postmodern world is the idea that Coetzee also seems to be addressing in his treatment of the figure of the stranger

¹ Also pertinent to this discussion is Martha Nussbaum's notion that only the novel can do justice to the intricacy/ complexity of ethical questions. She believes that "the novel is itself a moral achievement, and the well-lived life is a work of literary art," hence the claim that "the novel can be a paradigm of moral activity" (148).

in his enigmatic novel, *Disgrace*.² Set in post-apartheid South Africa, *Disgrace* deals with otherness, strangerhood, political correctness, and, more importantly, the idea of human dignity and honor, all of which are pertinent to the discourse of liberalism. Through the medium of his fiction, Coetzee questions the limits and strengths of liberal discourse in dealing with the liquidity of life in contemporary times to judge its failure or success. His novel, we argue, rightly depicts the precarity of the human condition in the neoliberal space where he is supposed to thrive and facilitate “the smooth operation of everyday life – a kind of surface conviviality” (Johansen 298) that underpins the success of everyday life in a multicultural environment. In practice, however, underlying structural limits do not allow for or, at the very least, limit cultural interactions by not facilitating genuine negotiations between strangers. When strangers come together, the liberal attitude – the liberal tolerance – is supposed to help. This is where it fails though! When strangers encounter, there ensues a sense of panic, but such crisis of humanity can be solved through dialog; “fusion of horizons” can occur through such an exchange (Bauman, *Strangers* 18). A dialog that, apparently, is not opening.

This depiction of the ‘stranger’ and the limits of conventional social and political frameworks resonate deeply with Derek Attridge’s argument that literature, unlike philosophy or politics, uniquely stages an ethical event, demanding from the reader a responsiveness to a work’s “singularity, inventiveness, and otherness” (*Ethics* 11). Attridge argues that true ethical engagement requires an openness to the unpredictable and the other, an openness that the very social and political frameworks causing the “liquidity of life” (Bauman) inherently resist. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, therefore, serves as a literary exploration of this very limit, dramatizing how the “conditional hospitality” (Marais) of (neo)liberalism forecloses the possibility of genuine dialog and the ethical encounter that Attridge posits literature can uniquely facilitate.

2. THE SHADOW OF STRANGERHOOD ON LIQUID LIBERALISM

By liberalism I don't mean the creed of any party or any century. I mean a generosity of spirit, a tolerance of others, an attempt to comprehend otherness, a commitment to the rule of law, a high ideal of the worth and dignity of man, a repugnance for authoritarianism and a love of freedom.
(Paton, 1973, as cited in Rubin, 1988)³

In *Stranger Fictions: Trajectories in the Liberal Novel*, Tony Morphet explains how Bauman’s idea of the stranger is a rendition, inside out, of the title of Nadine Gordimer’s second novel, *a World of Strangers* (1958) to “embrace the full ambit of modernity” (53). Though Bauman’s perspec-

² The figure of the stranger abounds in Coetzee’s fiction, especially in novels like *Foe* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*. In the latter, for instance, the very title indicates the uncanny operation of power in terms of relations to ‘strangers’ and the ambivalence inherent in them.

³ “On a visit to Yale University as a Chubb Fellow in 1973, Paton’s definition of liberalism when he founded the Liberal Party of South Africa in 1953” (Rubin).

tive, Morphet notes, is not the only instance of such recontextualisations of the phrase, it is “a particularly acute version of the now common view that the experience of the world looked at from beyond the Enlightenment reveals a set of conditions which had remained hidden within the modern project” (53). Morphet proceeds by examining Paton’s, Gordimer’s, and Coetzee’s approaches to their work and argues that the most important feature rendering Coetzee’s fiction liberal is “the presence in them of “strangers, “ people of “other” consciousnesses,” (57) as defined by Bauman: “neither neighbours nor aliens. Or, rather – confusingly, disturbingly, terrifyingly ... both. Neighbourly aliens. Alien neighbours. In other words *strangers*. That is, socially distant yet physically close. The aliens within physical reach” (*Ethics* 153). According to Morphet, such figures populate Coetzee’s fiction in an attempt to present the enigma of communication: “They are present in the story of each book, and they figure inside the stories of the other characters; but they become present in disconcerting, unpredictable, and, finally, unknowable ways” (57). Following Morphet’s lead, we argue that Coetzee’s obsession with the figure of the stranger is further accentuated in his unsettling account in *Disgrace*, 1999, where he introduces several, not one, figures of alterity to set in motion a relentless critique of liberal humanism by arguing that the liberal discourse, as taught in “abstractions,” is a far cry from the reality of the lived experience in “darkest Africa” (*Disgrace* 112, 95).

Liberal humanism is a philosophical view of life, society, and human beings. As such, it is committed to individualism, liberty, and equal rights and promotes the belief that society is made of people, not social classes, whose freedom is their most important possession. Liberal political theory, hence, “insists on toleration, fair procedures, and respect for individual rights – values that respect people’s freedom to choose their own values” (Sandel 8). Such an approach to man and his capabilities is intended to help materialize his potential as a free subject and the author of meaning/action capable of affecting a change in his condition. His liberty, rights, and values should thus be vigorously defended, hence the importance of human rights as “the ethical face of liberalism” (Schick 326). Its laudable intentions notwithstanding, liberalism has not always been an unalloyed good. Challenges posed to classical liberalism by the end of the nineteenth century highlighted people’s growing awareness of social problems such as poverty, deprivation, and unemployment. The ethos of hard work and talent which was believed to guarantee individual’s success seemed no longer plausible. Social balance, then, was seriously compromised and the general discontent with social injustice exacerbated the situation. The drastic change in the relationship between the individual and the state resulting from social changes necessitated the intervention of the liberals who attempted to resolve the situation by reviving liberalism to ensure that equal opportunities for success of individuals were provided. The extent to which such attempts were useful is, nonetheless, a matter of endless controversy. A notable reason for this, Kate Schick argues, is that “too much attention is paid to the codification of rules and too little to the move from promulgation to enforcement” that is from “an objective, neutral, universal set of

abstract rights” to “concrete historical situations” (322). Acknowledging the positive role human rights have played in world politics in giving “some voice to those suffering abuse and rais[ing] awareness in the process,” Schick criticizes the liberal humanist discourse as having a set of fundamental problems including, though not limited to, “the tendency to focus on observable, surface problems – assuaging our guilt and encouraging us to believe that things really are getting better – without addressing their underpinning structural problems” (324). The “impotence” (326) of liberal rules, then, renders them inefficient in dealing with everyday circumstances. It is such inefficiency that, we argue, has become central to Coetzee’s communication of the problem of interacting with alterity as a fact of South African life “where the collective project of decolonization has given way to the neoliberal redefinition of avaricious self-interest as a public good” (Christensen 317). Engaging with liberal humanism’s tenets of unbiased judgment and tolerance, *Disgrace* challenges individual autonomy, probing its limits and the exercise of careless freedom. To question dominant neoliberal rationalities, the novel starkly contrasts them with actions that violate fundamental human dignity.

3. LIFE AND TIMES OF PROFESSOR DAVID LURIE

J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* owes a great deal of its popularity to its complex, realistic portrayal of the human condition in post-apartheid South Africa. The narrative depicts the individual and his relationship to others in a society conscious of its changes, without passing judgments on him. It lets the reader accompany David Lurie in his quest toward applicable, not dreamed for, reality of his existence in the color-conscious society of his time. A third-person narrator recounts the story in straightforward chronological order with flashbacks interspersed throughout the novel, filling the reader in on all the relevant data.

The narrative is focalized through its protagonist, Lurie, a fifty-two-year-old adjunct professor of communications at Cape Technical University. Through such a method of narration, “the reader is caught in the limitations of Lurie’s view of the world, in the structures of his ‘adequating consciousness’” (Drichel 155–56) and has to accompany him on his excursions. *It is specifically in this early part of the novel — before the end of his academic career and his subsequent withdrawal into a much narrower social sphere — that* the text registers a society in which encounters of all kinds – especially cross-racial and cross-cultural (but also cross-class, cross-gender and cross-generation) – are myriad and inevitable, more so than many other societies due to its colonial history and its engagement with neoliberalism. Through Lurie’s limited consciousness, the novel sharply focuses on these human encounters which, more often than not, fail to result in communication and, hence, keep humans mere ‘strangers.’

The first shot into Lurie’s life is shown to the reader through Lurie’s trip to a brothel known as Windsor Mansions, a rather peculiar ‘temple of consumption’ – to use Bauman’s phrase in a more

expanded sense – where a stranger has made her way into Lurie's life: "Waiting for him at the door of No. 113 is Soraya" (*Disgrace* 1). *Placed at the very start of the narrative, this scene exemplifies how, at this stage, Lurie encounters individuals who are strangers to him along several social axes (gender, class and ethnicity).*

In his discussion of liquid modernity, Bauman talks about 'temples of consumption' as places where consumers are served to fulfill the immediate interest of construction of such places in turning citizens into consumers. These places are public but not civil space. Common examples would be cafés, restaurants, shopping malls, and gyms where there is lots of action going on but no interaction. In fact, interaction would be deterrent to action, so encounters should remain short and *en cadre*! Such a place is separated from the city and the immediate life within it. It is another world/ space standing on its own, a sort of self-enclosed space "well protected against those likely to break this rule – all sorts of intruders, meddlers, spoilsports and other busybodies who would interfere with the consumer's [...] splendid isolation" (Bauman, *Modernity* 98). In a temple of consumption, another mode of life exists. It is a purified, multi-taste space "well supervised, properly surveilled and guarded [...] an island of order" (98).⁴

Lurie's pleasure companion, Soraya is described as possessing exotic qualities; her "copulation" with Lurie is likened to that "of snakes: lengthy, absorbed, but rather abstract, rather dry, even at its hottest" (*Disgrace* 1, 3). Apart from his immediate business, however, there is no genuinely humane connection between them. Their meeting is at best what Lurie calls "a moderate bliss, a moderated bliss" (6), a notable instance of arranged "civility" which "helps strangers interact without lowering their masks" (Bauman, *Modernity* 95) within defined borders. This is why it is terminated once Lurie ventures into Soraya's real life after an accidental encounter with her in the street.

Having been lost in the week which is now "as featureless as a desert" (*Disgrace* 11) and "nothing less than hellish" (Pechey 375) after Soraya's disappearance from his life, this once "man of the city, at home amid a flux of bodies where eros stalks and glances flash like arrows" (*Disgrace* 6) loses control over his apparently well-ordered life and is, hence, thrown into a confusion he cannot set himself free from:

What we all seem to fear, whether suffering from 'dependent depression' or not, whether in the full light of the day or harassed by nocturnal hallucinations, is abandonment, exclusion, being rejected, blackballed, disowned, dropped, stripped of what we are, being refused what we wish to be. We fear being left alone, helpless and hapless [...] We fear to be dumped [...] What we miss most badly is the certainty that all that won't happen – not to us. (Bauman, *Wasted* 128)

⁴ Cf. Marc Augé's notion of "non-places" defined as ambivalent spaces – like hotels, airports, motorways, train stations – which incite no sense of belonging as they are dissociated from the familiar attributes of place. Augé relates the prevalence of such spaces to what he calls supermodernity. Paradoxically, everyone feels at home in such non-places because they are equally alienating to everyone. See Augé. Also comparable in this regard is George Ritzer's McDonaldisation thesis, "A process whereby all businesses and indeed institutions conform to the model of practice established by the fast-food chain giant McDonald's" (Buchanan).

Lurie is an impersonation of liberal education and – remarkably – its failure. “Once a professor of modern languages, he has been, since Classics and Modern Languages were closed down as part of the great rationalization, adjunct professor of communications” (*Disgrace* 3). Lurie is, presently, an “intellectually castrated” (Kossew 157) professor who belongs to the academy “deprived of *grace* by its failure to reproduce the cultural heritage that was placed in its keeping” (Kochin 4; our emphasis).⁵ In this sense, Lurie is already disgraced long before the disgracing affair with his student! The irony depicted by his situation is poignantly remarkable: while human dignity (*grace*) is the most important liberal humanist value a liberal society should be committed to maintain, the South African community in the post-Apartheid era is shown to disgracefully fail to do so.

Modern life in the postmodern consumer society, Bauman claims, has witnessed the “bureaucratic displacement of the educated experts” as a result of which intellectuals have been “deprived of the functions and entitlements” they used to enjoy. The intellectual situation is further exacerbated by the lack of any hope for future regaining of “monopolistic domain of authority – the area of culture in general, ‘high culture’ in particular” – because it is unlikely that the social world would ever again be hospitable to intellectuals in their traditional role as legislators (Bauman, *Legislators* 123). As things stand right now, intellectuals who once believed “they had something of great importance to offer to ailing and *waiting* humanity [...], that they would reshape the life of humans, their relations, their society” are now beaten hands down and have to come to terms with the bitter fact that their glorious days are over (154; emphasis in the original).

To remain in academia, this “liberal-humanist scholar [Lurie] has to teach a form of business rhetoric: one course in Romantic literature is all he is allowed per annum” (Pechey 379). He finds the premises of his new discipline, though, nothing less than preposterous: “Human society has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other” (*Disgrace* 3-4). Liberal humanism, whereby he has been educated, constantly claims to facilitate human relationship through communication based on unbiased judgment, freedom, and human dignity, concepts which found and perpetuate liberal continuity. The idea of communication in modern times, however, proves to be really challenging because the promised liberal continuity does not exist any longer. Just like the disregard for classical education, humane attitudes are no longer esteemed. A remarkable marker of this new approach is Lurie himself: “He has never been much of a teacher; in this transformed and, to his mind, emasculated institution of learning he is more out of place than ever” (4). He has “no cultural legacy to transmit to this

⁵ Note that the very title of the novel puns on the different senses of ‘grace,’ especially its religious sense. (Note in this regard, for instance, the scene, half-parodic, in which Lurie kneels down before the parents of the girl he’s almost raped as an act of penance, one meant to regain ‘grace’.) To touch on the motif of grace in the religious sense again, it is after Lurie is totally disgraced – both by the liberal institution and the newly-empowered blacks in the post-Apartheid era – that, having paid penance (?) and cared for the most abject (disgraced) creatures (dogs), he receives a measure of grace.

generation of students” and is, therefore, “a living fossil, an evolutionary dead end” (Coleman 607).

What aggravates his situation even more is the status of his immediate world in general. It is a highly color-conscious society masquerading as a multicultural environment accounting for multicultural encounters between Lurie and various people who are not necessarily immigrants but of different races and colors, previously silenced and subordinated, but presently risen to prominence in the post-apartheid era. Cross-cultural encounters are thus simply inevitable. The more the reader reads into the text, the more Lurie is revealed as a member of a cosmopolitan metropolis, and a proponent, mostly in words, of liberal attitudes. “Immersed in a falsifying Romantic tradition” (Graham 438) and “strictly hierarchical in his thinking,” Lurie has shielded himself from the outside world by living “in an intellectual world of high literary culture [...] of classical myth and learning, peopled with gods and angels and heroes and devils” (Coleman 607). In this sense, Coetzee’s narrative – picturing Lurie as a scholarly member of the metropolitan lifestyle – casts serious doubt on Lurie’s ability to maintain and utilize liberal discourse. In other words, “in the new post-apartheid flux, the ethical and aesthetic skills he has long honed, skills of distance and disinterested judgement, look old-fashioned. Worse still: they underscore his marginality” (Pechey 382). Lurie finds himself, despite his liberal education, unable to connect, which horrifies him: “The confusing variety of the urban environment is a source of fear (particularly for those among us who have already “lost the familiar ways”, having been cast into a state of acute uncertainty by the destabilizing processes of globalization)” (Bauman, *Times* 89). Paralyzed by his own egoistic delusions, and desperate to re-assert his control, he ventures to embark on an adventure of seduction and ends up forcing himself upon one of his students, Melanie.

Lurie’s desperate need for control – and the fear of losing it to the “anxious flurry of promiscuity” (*Disgrace* 7) he used to experience after divorce and before Soraya – coupled with his constant desire for women makes of him a libertine much like his idol Lord Byron and results in his illegal and inhumane treatment of Melanie. Lurie “doesn’t act on principle but on impulse” the source of which, he claims, “is dark to him” (33). In practice, he fails as a liberal by being stuck in the past. He does not acknowledge that the era of Byronic colonization has been over for a long time. Neither does he refrain from defying what he deems external to legal discourse to which “he reverts ... to protect his own interests” (Kelly 167). Appearing before “a disciplinary board on a charge of sexual harassment” (*Disgrace* 46), he once again fails to recognize and abide by dictates of political correctness as the dominant discourse of the post-apartheid society by which the committee is trying to save him and meets the “inglorious end to [his] career” (44) and is disgraced.

Lurie’s falling out of ‘grace’ with academia, a liberal – non-religious field (in Bourdieu’s definition) – is ironic because the novel is, among other things, about how it is possible to maintain one’s grace (dignity) in a godless, liberal age. Is it not a ‘disgrace’ how a most liberal institution (university) fails to live up to liberal standards? Or is it that liberalism in South Africa is disgrace-

fully a sham? Ironically, then, it is the so-called disgracer who leaves the academy to salvage bits of his grace (dignity).

Through the standoff between Lurie “as an old-fashioned liberal” (Kelly 167) and the disciplinary committee, Coetzee seems to be challenging the liberal discourse of law and human rights in post-apartheid South Africa where the new, contradiction-ridden discourse of political correctness is employed to right the wrong.

In the hybrid space that has come into existence following the South African political upheaval, multivocality abounds, with new post-apartheid rules and various discourses mingle. In this new world, “Coetzee problematizes the question of how people can live together in such a way as to recognize both their fundamental interconnectedness and the singularity and desires of every individual” (Van Heerden 46). The New Rainbow nation’s life within this space of hybridity entails the abolition of hierarchical claims to the innate originality or purity of cultures, abandonment of the old condescending gaze of the dominant toward the dominated, and establishment of a space for negotiations that could lead to new forms/ spaces of cultural interaction.

In such a space, the body is more politicized than ever: “The body here refers to a biopolitical understanding of the body as a container of life activated by the discourse of biopolitics, which tries to keep individual bodies in check through disciplinary systems of panopticon gaze, discipline and punishment” (Saei et al., “Closure” 17) under a neoliberal state which sanctions “an increase in puritanical surveillance and moralistic denunciation” (Attridge, “Bronze” 102). While these systems aim to regulate individual bodies and actions, broader societal dialogues, including those surrounding the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, also contribute to shaping norms and expectations. In such a system, Lurie remains doomed due to his adamancy in not acknowledging his body as one amid so many others, a personal transgression that stands in stark contrast to the emerging societal emphasis on interconnectedness and collective responsibility.

In the post-apartheid period, Truth and Reconciliation Commission was the most important agency established during Mandela’s presidency to review and document the pains inflicted upon African people during apartheid years. Set up in 1995 and led by Archbishop Tutu, the “TRC was designed to centralize and legitimize post-apartheid state power” in an attempt to display South Africa’s new political identity as a defender of human rights as “entwined with a project of modernist rationalization” (Wilson 225) and liberal democracy. As such, human rights were linked to African ideas of restorative justice as an integral part of the strategy to rationally explain how blacks and whites could live together “through reconciliation with, rather than recrimination of, the former oppressor” (Poyner 67). This rationalizing process was, however, doomed to fail. On the one hand, commissioners’ idea of the truth that “would heal suffering, deter future violations and serve as a form of reparation and compensation for victims” (Wilson 36) was reshaped to multiple truths as they became more and more immersed in the process of seeking the truth. On the other hand, the TRC’s inability to meaningfully engage with the cases brought

about a torrent of criticism. Indeed, despite “all their media coverage,” TRC hearings proved to be no more than “a symbolic and ritualized performance”. Furthermore, attempts at “rationalization of truth production created a dissonance between bureaucratic and popular understandings of the past, the rationalization of justice created new relational discontinuities between institutional and informal justice” (227).

These institutional efforts sought to establish a new national identity and provide a framework for reconciliation at a time when “the political transition was beginning to work its way into the fabric of everyday life” (Attwell 190). In this broader context, where “Africanization and neo-liberalism became interchangeable agendas” in academia, Coetzee, in contrast to the TRC’s public-facing rationalizations, seemed more interested in the underlying “social and psychic toxicity that he must have felt could manifest itself at any point” (191), suggesting a literary exploration of the lingering traumas and psychological fissures that institutional mechanisms struggled to fully address.

Numerous critics have focused on the applicability and reliability of legal discourse and human rights in post-apartheid South Africa. Anker, for instance, highlights Coetzee’s questioning of ‘human rights’ in Africa where the “disciplinary committee charged with punishing Lurie for his sexual affair requires him to publicly concede in a confessional statement” because a confession, not true, heartfelt remorse, is suited to “the political environment of South Africa” (243). Likewise, Brouillette focuses on “(TRC) and its role in postapartheid nation building” (130) as an imperfect one and Kossew finds fault with the issue of sincerity of remorse as “too difficult to measure” (159). The disciplinary committee in *Disgrace*, echoing the broader societal pressures, requires Lurie—who remains unrepentant as his Byron— “to issue a statement” and “to acknowledge [his] fault in a public manner and take steps to remedy it” (*Disgrace* 58). This is what Boese claims to be the committee’s failure; it cannot name the injury as anything other than part of a similarly abstract “long history of exploitation” (53). The logic in such criticism notwithstanding, we should not regard post-apartheid South Africa as ‘lawless’; rather, we need to “question the construction of ‘the law’ as a pure, monolithic, a neutral, uncontested space” (Kelly 167). Clearly, Lurie finds the attitude of the members of the committee hypocritical and disgraceful. His refusal, then, is a gesture in defiance of what he finds abjecting, a fact which is supported by his later visit to Melanie’s home to humiliate himself by apologizing to her family.

Lurie’s disgrace and forced resignation result in his relocation upon which he is further afflicted with the sense of Kafkaesque “ontological insecurity” (Conti 471). He leaves his apartment in the city for his daughter’s smallholding “at the end of a winding dirt track some miles outside the town” (*Disgrace* 59). Lucy’s smallholding is indicative of her simple, but organized lifestyle: “five hectares of land, most of it arable [...] and a low, sprawling farmhouse painted yellow [...]. The front boundary is marked by a wire fence [...] the rest of the front is dust and gravel” (59). Though at first sight the smallholding seems to be just an eventless retreat, it soon displays its potential

as “a liminal space [...] a point for a meeting of difference and a locale of hybridity” (Smit-Marais and Wenzel 26), a clash zone in which strangers encounter, interact, and struggle for dominance.

When relocating to this new place, Lurie has effectively removed himself from a place in the center (city) to the margins (smallholding) where he sees his surroundings as “dangerous and incomprehensible” and finds his “authority dissipated and [his] sense of meaning crumbling” (Morphet 57). More importantly, Lurie’s transference, on metaphorical level, can be interpreted as a shift back in time and space – a spatiotemporal shift – through which anachronism is introduced to the plot; he lands on a metaphorical frontier where old, unwritten rules apply, albeit in reversed form. Lurie now inhabits “the new, terrifyingly unmarked temporal frontier of decolonization, living out his life as one of the socially marginalized, obscure to the point of invisibility” (Pechey 377). It is in this “inherently dystopic [,] isolated, alienating and dangerous” (Smit-Marais and Wenzel 28) atmosphere that he comes to witness, in awe and terror, “the perpetual and ubiquitous presence of strangers within sight and reach [...] That presence, impossible to avoid for more than a brief moment, is a never-drying source of anxiety and of an aggression that is usually dormant, yet erupts time and again” (Bauman, *Times* 85).

Upon his arrival, Lurie learns that Lucy’s friend, Helen, has left her and that she now lives alone in the house. Answering his inquiry about her lonely existence, Lucy acknowledges that she is not all alone. There are the dogs and Petrus, Lucy’s “new assistant. In fact, since March, co-proprietor” (*Disgrace* 62). Petrus’s newly gained partnership of the land indicates the liquidation of the master-servant relationship that used to exist between him and Lucy, a fact which Lurie has a hard time processing: “Petrus is no longer, strictly speaking, hired help. *It is hard to say what Petrus is*, strictly speaking. The word that seems to serve best, however, is neighbour” (116; our emphasis). Not long after, Lurie meets Petrus, “the gardener and the dog-man” (64) – as he introduces himself – in person.⁶ It is soon revealed that Lurie and Petrus, Lurie’s *other*, are further “differentiated by cultural and social indicators” (Smith 209). Indeed, as the plot unfolds, Coetzee seems to have benefitted from “entrenched historical differences and antagonisms” to make Petrus “a menacing archive of memories of dispossession and entitlement” (Hove 6). While Petrus does not relate much verbally, “a mere 976 words in his own voice” he is gradually revealed to be “the black doppelganger and menace in the novel, prototype of the unruly coterie of postcolonial administrators” (4). It is through Petrus that Lurie will soon be forced to acknowledge his marginality and loss of control in facing the stranger(s). Their deployment against each other in what is no longer a master and servant relationship will eventually reveal Petrus as “the

⁶ Poyner notes Coetzee’s repeated use of associations between human and animal behavior. “Lurie’s sexual passions are animalistic, predatory; Lucy is treated “like a dog” by the men who rape her (205), and who themselves behave “like dogs in a pack” (159); Petrus, Lucy’s black neighbour, sardonically introduces himself to Lurie as the “dogman” (64), only to reject this position as he gains autonomy within the new South Africa (129), as power is transferred from whites to blacks” (72).

de facto master” and David as “the disempowered intruder into the new order of rural subjugation to which Lucy has consigned herself” (Smith 210).

As aforementioned, Lurie’s encounter with Petrus soon proves to be the much-feared encounter with the stranger, the fear which stems from the inability to establish a sense of trust: “Without trust, the web of human commitments falls apart, making the world a yet more dangerous and fearsome place [...]. Trust is replaced by universal suspicion. All bonds are assumed to be untrustworthy, unreliable, trap-and-ambush-like – until proven otherwise” (Bauman, *Wasted* 92). Trust is consolidated over time. However, Petrus, the stranger, does not allow such a relationship to become solid. He is emblematic of a person Lurie can neither know, nor figure out, yet has to live with:

Strangers stay and *refuse to go away* [...] They are not visitors ... one can bear with, hoping they will be washed out tomorrow [...] They do not wear swords; nor do they seem to hide daggers in their cloaks (though one can never be sure). They are not like the aliens, the outright enemies that prompt one to draw out the sword [...] However they are not like neighbours either. True one cannot avoid being aware of their presence, seeing, hearing and smelling them, even talking to them or being talked to by them on occasion. (Bauman, *Ethics* 152; emphasis in the original)

Indeed, Petrus’s power lies in his unpredictability: “Strangers tend to cause anxiety precisely because of being ‘strange’ – and so, fearsomely unpredictable, unlike the people with whom we interact daily and from whom we believe we know what to expect” (Bauman, *Strangers* 8). Such a disturbingly uncanny presence leads to ever-increasing “liquid fear”:

Strangers tend to appear ever more frightening as they become increasingly alien, unfamiliar and incomprehensible, and as the dialogue and interaction which could eventually have assimilated their ‘otherness’ to one’s own lifeworld fade, or fail to take off in the first place. (*Times* 88)

Following the same avoidance strategy, Petrus manages to maintain his strangeness excruciatingly present. What adds to the gravity of the situation for Lurie and, consequently, empowers Petrus is, ironically (communication skills as part and parcel of a humanistic education), Lurie’s lack of negotiation techniques which has resulted from his distorted outlook on life and alienated him from, and willfully ignorant of, the realities of the society in transition.

Loss of control makes Lurie miserable. As a failed liberal scholar who has already taken a blow by being socially disgraced, he is forced to also acknowledge and live with the fact that he is not in control: “It is a new world they live in, he and Lucy and Petrus. Petrus knows it, and he knows it, and Petrus knows that he knows it” (*Disgrace* 117). However, the real terror is materialized when Lurie and Lucy are brutally attacked, and Lucy is gang-raped: “The home invasion in the Eastern Cape is an entirely unbidden, unwanted exposure that flings Lurie into awareness of his “injurability”, suffering a terrible loss of agency, to which he previously felt immune” (Faber 310).

Interestingly, the assault is planned as a gang raid, a horrific instance of “the exercise of power by those who have it over those who do not” (Kossew 156). Walking back home, Lurie and Lucy

are agitated by the approach of strangers: “Three men are coming toward them on the path, or two men and a boy” (*Disgrace* 91). Upon returning home, they encounter the same men asking for permission to use the phone under the pretext that they need to ask for urgent medical help. A few moments after Lucy’s letting one of the strangers in, the attack has effectively started. Father and daughter are beaten hands down in no time. During the attack, Lurie “physically experiences the full horror of victimization” in “a shocking instance of human brutality to humans and animals alike” (Saei et. al., “Closure” 21): “So it has come, the day of testing. Without warning [... .] In his chest his heart hammers so hard that it too, in its dumb way, must know. How will they stand up to the testing, he and his heart? His child is in the hands of strangers” (*Disgrace* 94). Equally important during the attack, Clarkson notes, is Lurie’s “growing awareness of the limits of his Western, anthropocentric value system” (77). Indeed, his liberal education proves to be of no avail: “He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa. He is helpless” (95). The “enormity” of this gang rape “swallows words; it is an instance of the sublime of terror” (Pechey 381). Nonetheless, an even greater horror awaits Lurie. Following the attack is “the heightened state of bodily abjection: David’s burnt scalp, Lucy’s violated body, and the dead dogs all gather in one space to force David into recognition [of] their ontological, political, and social vulnerability” (Saei et al., “Closure” 21-22): “It happens every day, every hour, every minute [... .] Count yourself lucky to have escaped with your life [...] with[out] a bullet in your head. Count Lucy lucky too. Above all Lucy. A risk to own anything [...] Too many people, too few things” (*Disgrace* 98). Interestingly, it is only after the attack that Lurie is able to verbalize his long-suppressed concern with the potential threat caused by Petrus’s, the stranger’s, cohabitation on the smallholding. He now thinks of Petrus as “a peasant [... .] A plotter and a schemer and no doubt a liar too” (117). More frightening still is the thought of the future: “Petrus will not be content to plough forever his hectare and a half [...] Petrus would like to take over Lucy’s land” (117).

Not educated in liberal humanities like Lurie, Petrus organizes and justifies his actions based on old, apartheid rules. Following the gang-rape, “which serves as a structural parallel” to Lurie’s rape of Melanie, Lurie constantly attributes to Petrus the qualities he himself cherished for so long: those of “the predatory Byron” (Marais, “Imagination” 76, 77). Unlike Lurie, however, Petrus is driven not by desire to have a share of “a woman’s beauty” (*Disgrace* 16) but to assert his dominance and expand his horizon: “Unfathomably anarchic, [Petrus is] driven to atavistic means of appropriating both Lucy’s land and the white body” (Hove 8). Through Petrus, Lurie gets to experience Byronic ruthlessness to the touch. Petrus’s method, one has to agree, is both cunning and effective. Having adapted to rules of living in a practically off-jurisdiction zone, where any legal help, if delivered, is too late, Petrus slyly creeps in to finally claim the land he has started on as the dog-man. Though never directly mentioned, Petrus’s suspected part in the attack becomes a narrative that haunts Lurie in his struggle to weigh the situation in the aftermath of the attack: “The

worst, the darkest reading would be that Petrus engaged three strange men to teach Lucy a lesson, paying them off with the loot ... he does believe that Petrus knew something was in the offing; he does believe Petrus could have warned Lucy" (*Disgrace* 118). Following Lucy's rape, Lurie has to admit his (liberal man's) loss of authority, a fact which is also shown as "the narrative perspective shifts from a voice of relative certainty to a voice that challenges the validity and veracity of David's choices, beliefs, and conceptions of the self" (Wright 105). Furthermore, the post-attack image of Lurie as "badly beaten and burned" strengthens the novel's "imagery of hollowing and deterioration," which is in line with "Lurie's painful transition" from a privileged "male liberal" to a man "who grapples with a new and understandably troubling status" (Barney 516-17).

Before we proceed further, a note on the overall account of Petrus as a figure of violence is necessary. The portrayal of Petrus seems to partake of the clichés of the sly, unfathomable and violent native prevalent in the colonialist discourse. In one sense, he embodies colonial violence reversed or he could be taken as a figure of revenge using the ruses of the apartheid era rulers to take what he considers his. This controversial portrayal – considering the liberal credentials of the author – does not seem to be unbiased. However, considering that this depiction is mostly focalized through Lurie's perspective, one whose limitation is emphasized, complicates issues. Petrus is uncanny, a figure of liminality traversing boundaries: civil/barbarian, master/slave, host/guest, destructive/protective, familiar/stranger.

Events and conversations that follow in the aftermath of the attack guide Lurie even more to see the futility of liberal discourse in practice in South Africa. Perhaps, not only is this society far from a truly liberal one but also, as things stand, in the new configuration of power relations, it is hard to imagine that it will ever become one. First and foremost, Lurie's response to the attack in seeking legal redress is decisively challenged and rejected by Lucy who thinks "guilt and salvation are abstractions" (*Disgrace* 112). Therefore, countering Lurie's appeal that they should seek legal help, she steadfastly persists on keeping her side of the story to herself. "Opposed to the normative conception of silence as surrender," LeBlanc posits, "Lucy can be read as resolutely reticent" (161), as evident in her logical reasoning: "as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely 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" (112). This is an attempt on her side to avoid being pigeonholed and stigmatized by Lurie's "anachronistic" approach through which Lurie "eventually reads her [apparent] passivity as a product of her white liberal guilt" which is "prompted by a desire, born of guilt, to atone for the history of white oppression in South Africa" (Marais, "Imagination" 82, 83) in searching for "some form of private salvation" (*Disgrace* 112).

Lurie and his liberal attitude are finally beaten hands down by what we assume to be Lucy's practical approach to life in post-apartheid South Africa. After rape "Lucy demonstrates a concrete sense of political realism, appreciating the limitations imposed upon her by the intersection of

gender, history and circumstance” (Kissack and Titlestad 66). Unlike Lurie whose “faith in the law marks him out as an old-fashioned liberal,” (Kelly 167) Lucy sets out, despite the pain and suffering she has undergone, on a journey of reconciliation with her immediate environment via “encountering a counter-discourse compelling her to question the authoritative discourse of law and politics that hold sway over the South African society” (Saei et al., “Compromise” 81). Lucy knows that she “is powerless to claim” her legal rights because “the constitution may set out her rights, but it cannot in itself deliver them” (Kelly 162). It should be noted that such powerlessness is not gender-specific. Legal redress would be equally unavailable for Lucy’s white male neighbor. However, being a woman, raped and impregnated, she feels/ understands the full force of the attack and its aftermath. Lucy’s response to her father, who is emblematic of authoritative discourses like liberalism and law, clearly shows her realistic understanding of the situation she is in:

Objectively I am a woman alone [...]. To whom can I turn for protection, for patronage? [...]. Practically speaking, there is only Petrus left. Petrus may not be a big man but he is big enough for someone small like me. And at least I know Petrus. I have no illusions about him. I know what I would be letting myself in for. (*Disgrace* 204)

Ironically, Petrus, the neighboring stranger who has made his presence and his authority all too obvious, can offer protection. And protection is what Lucy needs: “‘I think I am in their territory. They have marked me. They will come back for me’” (158). What she might have feared in the past has been materialized. What was priorly an impending threat is now a fact of life. Despite the extant criticism on Lucy’s passivity, Lucy easily reads into the subtly coded, brutally performed message her black neighbors have for her regarding her person and her land. Petrus is one of the crowd on a land where Lucy, her father, and other white people are outnumbered and, hence, vulnerable. Petrus effectively displays his power and their strangerhood in the aftermath of the attack. Petrus’s ceremony to which they are invited after the rape is an illuminating instance of the newly set disequilibrium. More exactly put, it is part of Petrus’s effective strategy to bring to light the fact that Lurie and Lucy are the strangers there. Indeed, Petrus’s ceremony highlights – once more – the novel’s constant questioning of the idea of strangers. Who are the strangers? Blacks or whites? It seems that strangers are mostly politically conceived: the disempowered, the dispossessed, figures of marginality, even animals? i.e. strangers ontologically conceived.

Upon entrance to the party, Lucy and Lurie cannot help noticing that “they are the only whites” (128). As for Petrus, “he does not play the eager host, does not offer them a drink, but does say, “No more dogs. I am not any more the dog-man”” (129). Still, a more shocking surprise – a deliberate reminder of the rape experience – renders Lurie and Lucy petrified and speechless: “the third of them [the rapists], the dull-faced apprentice, the running-dog” (113) is there. He is, they soon learn, Petrus’s next of kin now and is, therefore, fully protected by Petrus. Leaving the party in horror, Lurie and Lucy engage in another dispute regarding the right course of action, which leads to nothing other than a standoff.

Torn further apart by their different approaches to matters, and Lurie's confusion in finding "Lucy increasingly unfathomable," (Beard 67) Lurie "finds himself in a strained relationship" (Sheils 48) with Lucy, which leads to their further estrangement. Despite Lurie's condemnation of "her action as passive acceptance of victimage," (Kossew 160) Lucy's practical approach to the reality of her existence, and its continuation in the smallholding proves effective. Indeed, "her decision is arguably informed by an awareness of how a public trial might (re)stigmatize her body as shameful" (Hallemeier 120). Her reaction, therefore, parallels Lurie's refusal to be publicly shamed by the committee. Indeed, it is important that Lucy not "undergo another violation on a discursive level since by verbalizing what happened, she will only create another rape scene which would restate the trauma" (Saei et al., "Closure" 23).

Eventually, in order to stop the series of losses she may undergo, Lucy takes up "her pragmatic approach to living in the new South Africa and [...] the price of sharing [or more precisely, handing over] the land" (Kossew 160). She lets Petrus displace her and rob her of her entitlement to land and ownership rights with "a certain degree of willful blindness, both to the terrible past and to the uncertain future" (Reinhard 98). Her down-to-earth approach is clarified in her assertion that she harbors no fantasy regarding the matter and knows what she is about to do: "Petrus [...] is offering an alliance, a deal. I contribute the land, in return for which I am allowed to creep in under his wing. Otherwise, *he wants to remind me, I am without protection, I am fair game*" (*Disgrace* 203; our emphasis). Furthermore, as far as Lucy is concerned, "handing over the title deeds to Petrus is just another exercise in "abstraction" (112) – it will not change what she does with water, earth and living things" (Clarkson 83). She, therefore, gives up the title to have the land. Finally, Lucy has successfully readjusted herself, even though "at the cost of her body, her property, her dignity" (Sheils 48). Though Lucy's "transcendence" may not simply be "exemplified in her potential for compassion and forgiveness," she is able to "create a new life narrative in which she incorporates herself into the new dominant narrative of the country" (Smit-Marais and Wenzel 36) by giving Petrus what he wants: "Not slavery. Subjection. Subjugation" (*Disgrace* 159).

Lucy's enigmatic, yet practical response to her rape ultimately brings Lurie to recognize his (and everyone's) situatedness, not centrality, in post-apartheid South Africa. Disgraced, displaced, and disoriented, Lurie knows that he no longer belongs to academia. Neither is he firmly established, or even welcomed, in the new world he has taken refuge in. Neither alien nor neighbor, but someone in between, Lurie affirms that he has become, to use Bauman's terminology, a stranger of sorts. His encounter with Petrus – the final blow in the series of events after his affair – makes him more clearly conscious of what he has done to Melanie and forces him out of his hyper-individualized, ego-centric lifestyle and he is finally brought to acknowledge his precarious existence. His transformation enables him to seek penance and kneel before Melanie's family and ask for forgiveness, an act of remorse he was both incapable of and unwilling to perform before undergoing this ordeal.

As Poyner suggests, Lurie's process of disillusionment from the "figurehead of white patriarchy" to a mere man, without privileges he was used to, is further highlighted through his increasing identification with Teresa rather than Byron in his to-be-inscribed book *Byron in Italy* and his transformed "interpretation of [...] Lucy's homestead [...] within a Wordsworthian schema" (6), not the arid piece of land he came to settle in. Interestingly, his new outlook on life is well capable of accommodating dogs as creatures he can now care for and bond with. In time, Poyner notes, his initial refutation of animal care as "sentimentalist" gives way to sympathy, letting him form "a close bond" with the dogs under his care" (73). His last act of sacrificing the maimed dog teaches him a last lesson in giving up at "the moment [which] marks a conclusion to his self-interrogation and self-abnegation" (Poyner 74), enabling him to reconcile with life and "the beauty of the ordinary" (74) as an embodied being at peace with the world in which existence is, at best, precarious.

4. CONCLUSION

Disgrace explores the nature of David Lurie's estrangement from his multicultural environment as emblematic of postmodern (liberal) man's alienation from his immediate society where borders are liquidated and relationships are, hence, hard to define. Central to Coetzee's critique of the post-apartheid society is the figure of the stranger in its multifarious forms and significations. As such, Coetzee's *Disgrace* is inhabited with various newly-made-prominent strangers to examine the potential of interaction within the community which used to be extremely stratified, but presently strives to operate according to the doctrines of political correctness. Within the boundaries of such a color-conscious society, Lurie's individualistic and ontologically self-grounded viewpoint toward matters at hand, and his steadfast adherence to serving his own self-interest, adversely affect his relationships with other members of his multicultural community resulting in his taking a blow from its functioning punitive system initiating another phase of forced quest as a member of the previously uniform, hierarchal metropolitan. As such, he who has already turned into a man among the colorful throng becomes a disgraced professor and a marginal figure at the mercy of strangers; he has to reorient himself in a world in which he has himself turned into a stranger, betokening the precarity of all human positions and possessions. This is the first step in his transformation from a deluded member of Metropolis steeped in his egoistic ideology to a person capable of reorienting himself in the new post-apartheid world as neither a citizen nor an outsider. To find his way back in, Lurie has to accept the terms of an ever-changing world and his embodied existence within it; he has to embrace its potential for surprises that may be beyond his understanding by submitting to the necessity for ethical engagement with the other as "a new footing, a new start" (*Disgrace* 218) so that the constant fear of the stranger is kept at bay.

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