

Original Article

# Sex and Violence: Major Concerns in Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* and *Disgrace*

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## Abstract

J. M. Coetzee is a Nobel Prize Winner novelist as well as a witness of colonial and postcolonial South African society. His work encompasses sex and violence as major concerns. Although depicted as central and marginal to postcolonial South Africa, the episodes and evidence of sex and violence with their various aspects and different roles emerge as a universal problem that every society in the world must face. Along with the theme of sex, violence is also considered one of the major themes that haunts nearly all postcolonial writers of South Africa. Coetzee admits that the portrayal of sex and violence is deeply anti-classical, and finds the reason for keeping rape and carnage typically hidden in classical representations. Coetzee maintains this balance by focusing on the victims and trivializing or disfiguring the torturers. J. M. Coetzee is aware of a serious writer and the effects of serious literature upon the reader, society and the nation. His work predicts the exact result of presenting sex and violence, as well as the responsibility of a writer in the postcolonial era. This is why he is against the realistic presentation of torture. Susan Van Zanten Gallagher is of the view that the theme of violence survives in contemporary world and seems to be the major in third world countries. She focuses on the problem of writers from South America and African countries who have to face the difficulty of portraying the incomprehensible act of violence. Regarding future directions of criticism of Coetzee, David Atwell states the obvious possibilities of feminist readings, sexuality, the fear of death, and violent postcoloniality. Atwell's proposed direction paves the way to observe sex and violence as major concerns in J. M. Coetzee's selected novels namely *In the Heart of the Country* and *Disgrace*.

**Keywords:** Postcolonialism, Violence, Sex, Apartheid, Trauma

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## INTRODUCTION

The study of J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* and *Disgrace* from the standpoint of sex and violence explores the predicament of both races struggling for ethical reconstruction and integration in a country that turns all their efforts futile. While dealing with the representation of torture in the South African background, Coetzee's novels manifest this ethical vision. Coetzee is also aware of the unbridgeable reconciliation and integration of races under colonialism and apartheid in South Africa. Coetzee shows a moral vision of reconstruction and always leaves a ray of hope for a new start, forgetting and forgiving the wrongs done in the past. This ethical vision is clearly visible in both of the novels *In the Heart of the Country* and *Disgrace*. The vision of reconstruction and integration that emerges in both novels identifies with the concept of synthesis, where a person seeks to integrate with others. However, such synthesis fails because of a lack of

ethical reciprocity. In *In the Heart of the Country* and *Disgrace*, the lack of reciprocity is marked by the strange reality of sex and violence and the apartheid that created a society of master-servants, governors-governed, and oppressor-oppressed. All these factors have created deformed human relations, measured only in terms of sex and violence.

The truth beyond mere fact underlies Coetzee's ethical and humane vision. His critical self-examination and final forgiveness deal with the historical facts of the shameful legacy of colonialism and apartheid. This is the content of his ethical vision for the future. Coetzee's characters travel and experience the regime of sex and violence. *In the Heart of the Country* is an anti-pastoral novel and *Disgrace* is half campus and half anti-pastoral novel that dramatize the inability to sustain in the absence of the others as well as the impossibility of attaining finality by overcoming the historical fact of colonial racism and apartheid.

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The stories in both novels are products of the plaasroman, or farm novel. Coetzee's unique vision of the world certainly emerges at many points in both of the novels. Both novels present a certain circle of events occupied by sex and violence. Each circle is completed in its reverse form. The characters involved

J. M. Coetzee alludes to rape in *In the Heart of the Country* and *Disgrace* and reveals gender oppression where woman is found imprisoned in the farmhouse, confined to the breast function. Both novels are anti-pastoral, which operates the colonial figuring of the female body and land. In *In the Heart of the Country*, Magda is the farm owner, and in *Disgrace*, Lucy is the landowner. The sterile land and Magda's incapability of being a complete woman show the similarity between her body and the land. The rape of Lucy indicates the loss of her land. Both novels suggest that female bodies are not suitable for the new changed order; Magda, with her feelings of being an incomplete woman, suspiciously lesbian, and sterile, attracts Hendrik to rape her. A similar event occurs in Lucy in the *Disgrace*. Both women protagonists lacking normal sexuality are considered "unowned" and "hunnable" in a patriarchal world, they do not have any male partner, namely a husband, and therefore face the mishap of rape and sexual humiliation. Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* makes an attempt to seek protection by offering her body and keeping Hendrik attracted towards her. She always fears being abandoned by Hendrik. In *Disgrace*, Petrus proposes marriage to Lucy, who accepts merely for her protection in exchange for her land. Both women protagonists are victims of gender violence, being the weaker sex, and are seeking protection that they can get only in so far as they belong to men.

Coetzee speaks of the wrongs done through inter-racial sexual exploitation and violence. In *In the Heart of the Country* and *Disgrace* remind readers of the long history of exploitation in colonial and postcolonial South Africa. Sexual violations in both novels highlight a history tainted by racial injustice. In *In the Heart of the Country* Magda's father's misuse of Anna and in *Disgrace* David Lurie's misuse of Melanie exposes how power operates at the level of gender. Magda's sexual assault by Hendrik can be identified with Lucy's rape. Both novels have a circle of colonial and postcolonial history where white men have sexually captured black women, and the act of rebelling against the wrong use of this act is presented in reverse form with the help of the episode of the black rape of Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* and Lucy's rape by black rapists in *Disgrace*. In both novels, sex is portrayed as a commodity. In *In the Heart of the Country*, Anna exchanges sex for gifts and wealth. In addition, Lucy considers her rape as an exchange for their existence in postcolonial South Africa.

The themes of exploitation of the black in the colonial era, the act of revolt in the decolonial period, and the revenge upon the white in the postcolonial era are clearly apparent in the novels of J. M. Coetzee. In this respect, sex and violence are used

in completing the circle of sex and violence are typically presented in opposing positions. First, the white man exploits the black woman, and then the circle is completed with the black man's sexual revenge on the white woman.

as weapons of exploitation, revolt, and revenge in both the novels. The black natives in *Disgrace* find white people occupying their land, and in revenge, they rob and rape Lucy, a white woman. In *In the Heart of the Country*, Hendrik revolts by raping Magda, and Magda revolts by murdering her father. The act of rebellion against the conventions of the social structure is presented through Magda's act of parricide, murdering her father, and her rape by Hendrik. Lucy's decision to marry Petrus also reads the same. These acts of rebellion are presented through episodes of sex and violence. Magda rebels against the patriarchal figure of father by murdering him. She attempts to compensate for the wrongs done by her father by treating her servants kindly. She faces sexual violence from Hendrik. One can find that Sex and violence are used as weapons to avenge each other.

The issue of existence and identity in the postcolonial world is presented through the theme of male dominance and the expectation of producing a male heir. Polygamy is one of the results of this process. Magda's father's next marriage is an attempt to get a male heir that Magda's mother fails to provide. This male dominance brings Magda's existence into question. Similarly, in *Disgrace*, people like Petrus always expect a male body as their first child, as they consider it the perfect heir and guide to their younger sisters. Coetzee sketches the failed dialectic of recognition in which Petrus continues the cycle that Lucy attempts to halt. Despite this failure, *Disgrace* raises questions about the endless struggle for affirmation and recognition through sex and violence that determines colonial and postcolonial history and encourages readers to think beyond conventional antinomies and imagine the possibilities of being and belonging with differences that are excluded by these dualisms.

Coetzee exposes the deformed family relations in the colonial setup through the transgressions of Magda and David Lurie in *Disgrace*. The transgressive consciousness in *In the Heart of the Country* and *Disgrace* presents the broken structures of family relationships in the settler-colonial context in the light of sex and violence. The conscious absence of the mother figure produces a relationship that is tinged with extramarital sex, lesbianism, and Oedipal implications. Through Magda Coetzee, Gordimer presents the colonial daughter as being oppressed sexually and revolting violently against her masterful white father. In *Disgrace*, Lucy is the colonial daughter who cannot be protected by her father.

The boundaries of legitimate and illegitimate social behavior are presented in the novels through the societal and anthropological taboos of abnormal post-coloniality. Both female protagonists, Magda and

Lucy, cannot enjoy a normal sexual relationship as a common woman can. Sex as a means of regeneration is not achievable by Magda; however, Lucy accidentally becomes pregnant as a result of rape. Both female protagonists exhibit libidinal withdrawal. Coetzee thus presents the position of white women within the patriarchal regime of settlers by presenting the women characters, Magda, Anna, Lucy, Melanie, and Soraya, in the patriarchal imperialist structure of their world. Coetzee exposes the female position as a weaker sex through gender differentiation in the novel. Being considered the weaker sex, their social identity is washed out by either considering them as the means of reproduction or the means of sexual enjoyment.

Coetzee presents the pathos of the master-servant relationship in the colonial family through their sexual and aggressive behavior. He presents an unachievable equivalence in the master-servant relationship. In *In the Heart of the Country*, the arrival of the servant's new bride, Klein Anna, is followed by the arrival of Magda's father's new wife. Magda's father's illicit desire of sex with Klein-Anna is followed by Hendrik's sexual relation with Magda. In *Disgrace*, Lucy's servant, Petrus, becomes the master at the end of the novel. The exogamous relations presented in the novels cannot ensure equal and reciprocal relations between the master and servant as well as between the races. Even after presenting the failure of interracial relationships, Coetzee shows the possibility of easy sexual gratification. Sexual gratification across races is presented through a quasi-incestuous relationship. Magda's domesticating the illicit sexuality by entering into liaison with Hendrik finally results into failure when Hendrik, her servant, rapes her. Lucy after her rape decides to marry Petrus, her servant, and confines herself in the farmhouse. Thus, the racial conflict underlying the master-servant relationship is presented through the presentation of sex and violence from a humanitarian point of view. J. M. Coetzee imbibes that due to the aggressive role of sex and violence humanity is placed at a crossroads, which can result in ultimate destruction of family and society. He leaves the choice to maintain our animal mentality and destroy humanity or to rise above it by embracing our fellow human beings from different cultures and faiths. The problems created by sex and violence, he provides, lessons on lessons on working together for our collective survival based on the belief that the human race is one family. In Coetzee's fiction, he unmasks the false universals of liberal ideology.

### Conclusion:

Coetzee's novels focus mainly on inter-racial conflict and sex. His writing revolves around these issues and reaches a humanitarian context. If we drop the issue of sex and violence from his novels, we cannot get the ultimate result that is achieved by his writing. Coetzee combines the issues of cultural motives such as white men oppressing the black, sexuality in the apartheid order, polygamy, a threat to white women's status, male dominance, marital property transmissions and racial sexual

transgressions. His works also reinvestigate the genre as a whole and provide a pervasive look at Coetzee's treatment of the issue of sex with all its threads and complexities. The settings and characters depicted in J. M. Coetzee's novels are particularly South African. Considering the postcolonial South African context is important for understanding this. However, the issue of sex and violence is not limited to a particular region or country. His work reflects regional as well as universal issues.

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### Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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