
Patriarchal Influence and Identity Control: A Socio-Psychological and Feminist Analysis of J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Abstract

This paper identifies identity control and patriarchal influence in J. M. Coetzee's Disgrace (1999). The narrative reveals the dysfunctional father-daughter relationship in which the misogynistic David's life and personality traits end up defining his daughter Lucy's identity.. This dysfunctional relationship inevitably controls Lucy's life. The conceptual framework of the study is based primarily on Peter Burke's Identity Control Theory; however, Susan Brownmiller's idea of the mass psychology of rape helps pave the path for Lucy's identity to be analyzed through both socio-psychological and feminist lenses of identity. By employing textual analysis as the methodological tool, since the researcher aims to conduct a close reading of the text, this study examines how Lucy's whole identity and her decisions in life are both consciously and unconsciously shaped by her dysfunctional relationship with her father, David. His sexual rendezvous with younger women of color, his unapologetic entitlement, and his inflexibility in the face of personal change—all these factors contribute to the development of Lucy's identity as a person.

Keywords: Disgrace, dysfunctional relationships, identity theory, sexual violence, social image

Introduction

According to Randa Elbih (2016), "Identity Does not Form in a Vacuum". In Coetzee's *Disgrace*, the influence of filial relationships has been highlighted, as the protagonist has an unusual, unconventional relationship with his daughter, and it shapes her identity consequently. In addition to this, the protagonist's behavior outside of his relationship with his daughter also influences her. The focus of this paper is to analyze the protagonist's relationship with his daughter and to trace how this relationship helped develop

his daughter's identity. The protagonist's constant affairs with younger women, his sexual addiction, his need to be in constant control over his partners – all this shaped Lucy's identity. In several instances during the novel, David fetishizes Lucy almost in an erotic/exotic manner, and this fetishization comes from a hierarchical gap between the two. This hierarchy is deeply rooted in gender.

This study aims to identify socio-psychological and feminist tropes to highlight David's actions and choices defined Lucy's social presence and personal development in the context of gender and identity formation. Although identity crisis has already been discussed and the gender perspective has been touched upon, identity formation has not yet been examined through a gender perspective in the existing scholarship. To identify the gaps in research leading to my topic, I have grouped the literature review into two separate categories. The first category focuses on the theory of identity and how it involves identity control, while the second focuses on identity with respect to feminist issues, along with psychology and sociology. As this study aims to trace how the actions and behaviour of the protagonist defined and shaped his daughter's identity, it is pertinent to relate the social and psychological theory of identity with feminism in order to identify the gaps in existing research.

Literature Review

Identity Crisis in Postcolonial Theory

Anqi Liu (2017) emphasized that the lives of more than half of the people around the world have been shaped and defined by the existence, experience, and influence of colonialism. She asserts that the colonizers did not simply take over the lands of people, but they also took over their minds and hearts by inflicting their own culture (and ultimately, their identity) on the colonized. Therefore, the identities of the colonized people even generations after their freedom, are still dishevelled and confused. Liu analyses how even after decolonization the people of the postcolonial countries had a hard time locating their own identities because of the brainwashing they (and their ancestors) went through at the hands of the Whites. While it is quintessential to focus on the displaced and distraught identities of colonized people, it is also essential to analyse how after decolonization, the successors of colonizers defined themselves while living in previously colonized areas. It is important to note that in the post-apartheid Africa, White people no longer had the liberty or superiority that was legally assigned to them previously. However, Liu does not analyse how after decolonization, White people living in Black majority countries still had their god complex intact, even when it was not supported legally.

Ashis Nandy (1983) in his world renowned book relating the consequences of colonialism, analyses the history of India before, during, and after colonialism. His studies assert how postcolonialism affected not merely the Indians but also the Englishmen. From being silent subjects of the Mughal empire (before colonialism) to being the representatives

of the Crown and flipping the cultural, social narrative of the whole country (during colonialism), to finally living as a minority again, in a hybrid country that Nandy even calls something like a backward version of an earlier Europe. This assertion is significant for the present research since it affirms the claim of changes in the identities of colonizers, not merely the colonized, after the freedom of a country is concretized. However, he only analyses postcolonial India in his research and does not study the aftereffects of decolonization on the psyche of the White people living in Post-apartheid Africa.

Jody Metcalfe, in her essay, interviews mixed race individuals from post apartheid South Africa to identify dominant narratives of whiteness and their self constructed identities. She asserts that even after democracy, mixed race individuals (one white parent, one parent of colour) were either treated with an in-betweenness that according to critical race theory placed them in a separate category where they were considered a little more than Black Africans and a little less than White people. The research concluded that despite being born free, these mixed race individuals continued to have lingered legacy of identity crisis rooted in the racialized society. However, since the study focused merely on first generation born free mixed race individuals, claims cannot be made regarding future generations who may have shed the weight of their ancestors' heavily colonized psychology.

In the above reviewed sources, postcolonial identity of White people, especially men, living in Africa has not been analysed. Even after being thrown out of the government, the minority of White people in Africa felt entitled to more respect, dignity, liberty, and superiority. This god-complex was so intricately enmeshed in their identities that even when the Africans had won their independence, the Whites lived among them, unconsciously in the constant complex of superiority.

Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory

In the context of gender, one of the first theories of identity was eluded in Freud's works in which he asserted that women were in fact castrated males, because of which their identity always lacked masculinity. In the book titled, *Freud, A Collection of Critical Essays* (1981), he defined women in relation to men which was contested by many feminists in the later years as well.

Wendy Kaminer (1993) in her intricately extensive study titled *Feminism's Identity Crisis* has hinted towards many feminists over the centuries who have tried to locate a woman's identity outside of her relationships with men. She questions gender roles imposed by society on both men and women, and takes them as the building blocks to form her conclusion. She ends up explaining how even though patriarchy oppresses women and their identity, many women themselves are in fact behind the oppression of other, less privileged, dependent women. Even though she has talked about how women are always associated with the men closest to them, she has not analysed how the actions, behaviour, and overall lifestyle of the men with whom women are associated, affect, and even develop the identities of these

women. This is the gap I will try to fill with David's and Lucy's characters as building blocks.

Áine McGlynn (2010) in her extensive study, *Fathers, Daughters and Masculinity in Crisis in Contemporary Fiction* analyses Coetzee's *Disgrace*, while focusing on the relationship the protagonist has with his daughter. She asserts that it was Lucy who ended up changing David since the novel ultimately 'mourns the loss of masculinity' (McGlynn, 2010, p. 179). In her research she has tried to prove how David went from a promiscuous, irresponsible, misogynistic man to an understanding, supporting father who was considerate of women's issues. She does not, however, mention the ways in which David did not change, since unconsciously, he was still the same man, lusting after girls, even worried about how being a grandfather would influence his sexual appeal to young girls. McGlynn also does not analyze how David's lifestyle affected and influenced his daughter's whole identity. The aim of my paper is to flip McGlynn's idea and trace how the story is more about Lucy's journey being shaped by David's life, not only the other way around.

Elleke Boehmer (2002), in her essay analyses *Disgrace* from the perspective of the protagonist, David. She argues that by the time the novel reaches the banjo-plucking Lurie, he has undergone a 'traditionally feminine', 'emasculating physical abjection' (Boehmer, 2002, p. 137). In her argument she mentions how Lucy's rape completely changed David's perception of life, turning him into an almost androgynous character, willing to go to great lengths for his ravished, helpless daughter, while being helpless himself. She again focuses on David's character development, reimagination, and alteration, ignoring Lucy's character development and identity formation with respect to David's actions and words.

Sara Ahmad's (2000) idea of stranger fetishism also identifies an aspect of this filial relationship. She asserts that this fetishism arises where there is some sort of a hierarchy. This hierarchy is of gender (men oppressing women) in the relationship between David and Lucy. In her book *Strange Encounters*, she has talked about this fetishism in relation to race, culture, colonialism, even gender but not in the incestuous sense as it can be seen in *Disgrace*. My paper identifies how David's almost incestuous feelings toward Lucy influenced her identity altogether.

All the resources reviewed above pave the way for my research to trace the ways in which David's character shaped Lucy's identity. As it has become clear that much work has been done on how the protagonist's lifestyle and character underwent major changes, even emasculation throughout the novel, the character of Lucy, however, remains somewhat unexplored. This is the gap my paper aims to fill. In the light of above argument, this study seeks to examine how does David's character effect the formation and development of Lucy's identity in *Disgrace*, and how her identity and decisions can be understood through Burke's Identity Control Theory and Brownmiller's concept of the mass psychology of rape?

Research Methodology and conceptual Framework

The study employs close reading to trace and identify how the protagonist defines his daughter's identity through his actions both within and outside of his relationship with her; hence, textual analysis is the suitable approach. However, the study, instead of relying on a ready-made model, constructs a conceptual framework, for which Burke's theory of Identity Control serves as the primary lens, with Susan Brownmiller's psychology of rape as a secondary source, creating a socio-psychological and feminist study. Burke & Stets (2009) assert that an individual is constantly striving to maintain a balance between how they perceive their identity and how the people around them view their identity. If this balance is not maintained, the person is prone to alter his/her behaviour until the balance is restored. One can interpret that every individual is viewed or defined in two terms: his/her own perception of identity and the perception of others. "... people choose behaviours, the meanings of which correspond to the meanings in their identity" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 1).

Simply put, it means that people hold a set of meanings (interpretations, assumptions) with respect to each identity in each role. A person exists in many different roles including familial, social, sexual, hierarchical and many others. To identify a person, one needs to understand and define all of the said roles. "Within ICT, an identity is the set of meanings that define who one is in terms of a group or classification (such as being an American or female), in terms of a role (for example, a stockbroker or a truck driver), or in terms of personal attributes (as in being friendly or honest)" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 2).

Moving on to elaborate the theory, it consists of four prime components including the identity standard, the input, the comparator, and the output. In order for the theory to be clarified, one must understand that the perceptions of others about one's identity are actually merely symbolic assumptions or labels, just as our own perceptions of others are our assumptions about them based on their actions and behaviours. "We must learn the identity of the others with whom we would interact. They must be labelled symbolically (named) and thus given an identity. We, too, must be identified or have an identity" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 13). In the context of *Disgrace*, it can be understood in a way that Lucy labelled her father as a rapist, misogynist, man, and she labelled her rapists as tax collectors, avenging history. This is how she defined herself in relation to them as well. Her behaviour with these people is in accordance with these labels.

To elaborate further, let me dive into the four components of the theory. The idea of identity standard is simply the view a person holds of him/herself. It includes the habits, traits, and characteristics they think are essential to their "true self". According to Burke & Stets (2009): "Each identity contains a set of meanings, which may be viewed as defining the characters of the identity. This set of meanings is the identity standard" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 63). Identity standard includes a relatively stable set of meanings that a person associates with his/her identity.

Input, according to the theorists, is a perception that one makes out of other people's indications and signals (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 65-66). Input includes other people's words, behaviour, actions, and gestures towards a person. This input provides signals which are used by the person to change his/her identity in order to maintain the balance between their own perceptions of self and other people's perceptions of the same. "Input, in practice, can consist of other people uttering actual words, behaving in a certain way or making gestures or expressions on the face" (65-66).

The input of others is then sent to the comparator which analyses it in detail. The goal and purpose of this comparator is to identify if the input matches the identity standard. If it does then a person's identity is stable; if, however, the balance is not maintained, the identity remains unstable, and the comparator influences the person to change his/her behavior in order to match the input. "Only when the perception matches the standard have we accomplished our goal, so to speak" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 65). The final component of the theory is called output, which is the result in one's personality after changing oneself according to the input to restore balance between that and the identity standard. In the context of this study, Burke & Stets' theory is important because the theorists specifically point out how parents, especially fathers, influence the identities of their children. "Children come to define themselves in terms of how they think their parents see them" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 195). They further suggest that the closest people around a person have a more influential effect on their identity than others. "Both the individual and society are linked in the concept of identity" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 3), which is why this theory is useful for the purpose of the present study.

The secondary theoretical framework of the study is based on Susan Brownmiller's pioneering work on "The Mass Psychology of Rape", taken from her groundbreaking text entitled, *Against our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (Brownmiller, 1975). Brownmiller grounds her text by asserting that regardless of a plethora of psychoanalytical frameworks available for study in the field of social sciences, the idea (crime, to be exact) of rape has not been analyzed, either for fear of shaking the foundations of patriarchy or for a lack of interest in the female psyche in comparison with the larger systems of the world. Brownmiller desensitizes the readers by laying bare how the first semi-erect hairy human male must have tried to force himself on a female and found there to be resistance as opposed to flat acceptance. Brownmiller's theorization of rape is significant for the present study because it explains Lucy's identity formation as well as alteration with the idea of having a father with rapist tendencies. Moreover, it lays bare David's contradictory actions and dialogues with his own daughter (victim of a gangrape), and other women (prospects for his rape).

Collectively, the conceptual framework provides tools for investigating Lucy's identity in a particular group, and in relation to any specific person in that group – father to his daughter (and vice versa).

Discussion and Analysis

As discussed, Burke's theory defines a person's identity in three terms: in a role, in a group, and in terms of personal attributes. For Lucy, one can assert that her social role is that of a daughter (the daughter of a rapist, or misogynist to be exact), her identity within a group is that of being a White woman surrounded by Black people, and her personal attributes are kindness, compassion (almost to the extent of self-destruction), and acceptance of violence as fate. The first two aspects define Lucy's character and enable the changes that she goes through in her overall identity.

David's promiscuity and his news of rape affected Lucy and her identity. Even before David's very public trial for his rape and harassment, he had been a selfish, misogynistic sex addict who got attached to his sexual partners (both willing and unwilling) to the point of obsession. Surayya, the prostitute he used to visit, is such an example. When she had left him and tried to disappear, David located her, quite illegally, and contacted her unapologetically. He was obsessed with her and was jealous of her husband. Surayya even told him that he was harassing her when he would not let her go. This is who David had always been.

From the above instance, Surayya's fear of being caught can be situated in Brownmiller's idea of rape. She says: "Once the male took title to a specific female body, ... he had to assume the burden of fighting off all other potential attackers, or scare them off by the retaliatory threat of raping *their* women" (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 23). Her husband was unaware of her sexual partners, and her fear of him finding out was intensified by both a threat to her own safety as well as Lucy's (through her relation to David). This explains why David let her go, albeit reluctantly, at the thought of a possible retaliation.

Lucy lives on a farm quite away from him and had had an independent life for years, but one can imagine that while she lived with David, she surely would have witnessed his lifestyle, his sex addiction, and his need to be in complete control and possession of women. Going back to Burke's theory of identity, David was never the father figure that Lucy had expected or wanted him to be. Lucy's idea of who David should have been (input) was not aligned with who David himself was (identity standard), creating an imbalance. When even with this imbalance, David did nothing to change his ways and become the father Lucy had wanted and needed, so she stopped expecting a change in him altogether and detached him from the role of the father. The perfect example of this is that Lucy, when became independent both financially and physically, stopped even referring to David as father but called him by his name. This is the first instance of how David's actions defined Lucy's choices, decisions, and identity.

Moving on to one of the most important scenes in the book. The first time David and Melanie are together, it is consensual even when he is more enthusiastic and desperate for it. The second time, however, he shows up at her house unexpected, wanting to have sex, without giving her a chance to reflect upon the matter and decide for herself. "He had given

her no warning; she is too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself upon her” (Coetzee, 2000, p. 24). The most explicit expression of his forceful action can be observed in Melanie’s reply: “No, not now!” (Coetzee, 2000, p. 25). Since the text is narrated from the perspective of the protagonist, it is no surprise that when the narrator tries to deny the abhorrent act, it even sounds absurd. “Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core” (Coetzee, 2000, p. 25). This is the culmination of David’s obsession with sex, control, and his need to possess women around him.

The news of this “scandal” follows David almost everywhere, and when he goes to spend time with his daughter, it is evident that she is aware of it as well. She mentions that she is aware of his “troubles” (Coetzee, 2000, p. 63). The casualness in Lucy’s demeanor when she talks about knowing what David had been doing shows how she has taken him off the pedestal that most children (especially girls) hold their fathers on. It almost feels as if this is exactly what she had expected of him.

Lucy’s rape and her subsequent decisions are influenced by David’s previous actions and his choices. When David was held accountable for what he had done to Melanie, he tried to vindicate himself, asserting that he got caught not because of Melanie but because of those around her, who coaxed her to speak up. “Melanie would not have taken such a step by herself, he is convinced.... He, the little man in the ill-fitting suit, must be behind it. They must have talked her into it, worn her down, then in the end marched her to the administration offices” (Coetzee, 2000, p. 39). It is interesting that even though he had sensed Melanie’s lack of enthusiastic consent while he was thrusting himself on her, he also knew that she was too weak to report if anything went wrong. This says a lot about David’s character and how he trapped a weak, vulnerable woman, knowing there would not be consequences to his actions. When he is asked why he did what he did, he blamed everything on something as abstract as desire. “I was a servant of Eros: that is what he wants to say, but does he have the effrontery? It was a god who acted through me. What vanity! Yet not a lie, not entirely” (Coetzee, 2000, p. 89).

Later in the novel, when Lucy gets gangraped, David constantly asks her to speak up about it, to go to the authorities and seek justice: “Lucy, my dearest, why don't you want to tell? It was a crime. There is no shame in being the object of a crime. You did not choose to be the object. You are an innocent party” (Coetzee, 2000, p. 111). It is very ironic that when Melanie’s father had reported him, he had made fun of him and called him ‘little’ for reporting such a meaningless, insignificant incident. When the same happened to his own daughter, he did exactly that as well. Brownmiller explains that when at first rape was criminalized, the victims of rape were rescued only if their screams or obvious signs of resistance were heard, “... for the elders reasoned that if the girl had screamed, she would have been rescued” (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 26). Lucy’s lack of the proverbial screams made David anxious because it prohibited him from using his “patriarchal wisdom” (29) to rescue his ravished daughter.

Lucy does not listen to David and refuses to report. According to Burke's theory of identity, one can assert that since David had not worked on himself enough to maintain the balance between his perception of himself and Lucy's expectation of him as a father, that is why Lucy had also stopped considering herself the ideal daughter, obedient and dutiful enough to listen to the sage advice of her father.

Lucy even draws a parallel between her rapists and David when she says, "I wish I could explain. But I can't. Because of who you are and who I am, I can't" (Coetzee, 2000, p. 155).

Further on, she says:

'You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange - when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her — isn't it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife in; exiting afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood doesn't it feel like murder, like getting away with murder?' (158).

This is a *déjà vu* moment because this is exactly what David had done to Melanie, no matter how much he kept himself in denial. This can also be confirmed from Brownmiller's perspective when she identifies men's obsession with power by comparing guns with phalluses, and murder with rape. "To take a life looms more significant than to *make* a life, and the gun in the hand is power" (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 40). This shows that Lucy, as a woman, categorizes David with all other men, shedding off every feeling of filial attachment.

There is an instance in the novel where David asks Lucy if she thinks the rapists might come back. Lucy answers in the affirmative: 'Afraid they are going to come back?' 'Yes' (Coetzee, 2000, p. 156). Even this reaction, the fear of the rapists doing the same thing to her again is prompted by her being unconsciously shaped by David. After Melanie's trial, a student reporter asks David if he regretted anything and he said that he did not. The question that followed explains exactly why Lucy, associating the rapists with her own father, knew that they would come back: 'Are you sorry?' says the girl... 'No, I was enriched by the experience'... 'So would you do it again?' 'I don't think I will have another chance' (Coetzee, 2000, p. 56). David's unapologetic reply shows that if he had forced himself on Melanie, he had probably done it before as well, and had he been left unchecked, he would have done it again. The relationship of David and Lucy has transcended the typical filial bond that a father has with his child. The immense imbalance between the 'input' and the 'identity standard' on both sides has made them indifferent to the roles and duties they both had to each other. By not being the father that Lucy had read about, thought about, imagined, seen, expected – David lost his authority over Lucy. In being the complete opposite of what her father wanted, in showing him a mirror of what he had done, Lucy had made it clear that every decision she had taken (post-rape, mostly), she had done it in defiance of David, impersonating the consequences of his actions. This way, even though Lucy was in the

weaker, vulnerable position with respect to many other people, she was in control with David; she became deliberately the impersonation of all the women he had forced himself upon, compelling him to finally reflect and maybe even change.

Considering Burke's theory of identity, Lucy's identity standard for herself (in the community) was that of a native South African woman; however, the people around her made her realize that their perception of her was that of a White woman living in South Africa. Although she was born and bred there, she was still not the same as them. This imbalance between the input and identity standard of Lucy leads her to accept her role as an outsider, as a strange, unfamiliar, different individual in a group of familiar ones.

The most important example of this is that, after being raped, Lucy does not have Petrus' nephew convicted because she feels that, as a White woman living in a Black majority state, violence is the price she must pay to claim her place among them. "They were the only Whites" (Coetzee, 2000, p. 128). She calls this violence a tax. "They see me as owning something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors" (Coetzee, 2000, p. 158). Burke's theory works perfectly here because Lucy changed herself and her perception of her identity using the input of the people around her (neighbors etc.) and started seeing herself as an outsider as well. Another aspect of this is the fact that David had been a straight White man all his life, having affairs with women of color (mostly), maintaining his sense of entitlement and superiority. It can be assumed that Lucy was paying her father's debt as well as that of her colonizing ancestors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be asserted that Lucy's whole identity, her decisions in life were both consciously and unconsciously shaped by her dysfunctional relationship with David. The protagonist's misogynistic nature, sexual rendezvous with younger women of color, his unapologetic entitlement, and his inflexibility in the face of personal change – all these developed Lucy's identity as a person. The study illustrates that an individual's identity is formed as a result of one's company and the social interactions it entails.

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