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## The politics of rape: Traces of radical feminism in *Disgrace* by J. M. Coetzee

### The politics of rape: Traces of radical feminism in *Disgrace* by J. M. Coetzee

*Disgrace* can be read as a deliberation on rape in all its complexity, articulating and commenting upon many of the positions typical of the radical feminism of the seventies. Some feminists classify prostitution as a form of rape. Prostitution is the ideal form of sex for the main character, David, because it allows him to fantasize that a woman mirrors his wishes. The border between rape and consensual sex is shown to be problematic in the relationship between David and his young student, Melanie. Although some readers find that Melanie was willingly seduced, others consider that she was raped. The charge of sexual harassment is therefore unsatisfactory for both sides and, since David refuses to read the charges brought against him, he effectively silences his accuser. When his daughter, Lucy, equates heterosexual sex with killing and hating women, one can read it as evoking the radical feminist idea that men as a class subordinate women as a class through the threat of rape. Lucy's political lesbianism is a logical response to such misogyny. After being raped, Lucy accepts a subordinate position and this proves the power of rape in controlling women. Like one of the Sabine women, Lucy seems willing to sacrifice herself for peace between black and white in South Africa.

**Keywords:** *Disgrace*, J. M. Coetzee, prostitution, radical feminism, rape.

#### Introduction

In his essay "The Harms of Pornography: Catharine MacKinnon", J. M. Coetzee (*Offense* 61–82) has exhibited a thorough knowledge of the arguments surrounding gender, sex, violence, domination and representation that were the mainstay of the radical feminist discourse of the seventies and eighties. He criticized MacKinnon for a lack of insight into male desire and asked whether it would be possible for a serious work of art to explore male desire (Coetzee, *Offense* 73) without falling into "pornography" as it is defined here: the objectification of women where male dominance is sexualised. If this essay is the theory, then the novel *Disgrace* is the practice. In this novel Coetzee shows that it is possible to explore male desire and rape in a serious work of art without the work becoming pornography as such. While the focalization by the male character makes it possible for the reader to grasp the way male desire justifies itself, the plot (especially the way rape as a theme is explored in many different variations and narrative situations) makes it possible to read the novel as a feminist critique of male desire, power and wilful self-ignorance. Radical feminists believe that male power is at the root of the social construction of gender and that the patriarchal

system must be eradicated (Gamble 302–03). Radical feminism is associated with activists such as Janice Raymond, Sheila Jeffreys, Kate Millett and Andrea Dworkin. While some radical feminist ideas have been accepted, others, such as political lesbianism or prostitution as a form as rape, have been severely attacked, especially by postfeminists.<sup>1</sup>

Rape is generally understood to involve sexual penetration of a person by force and/or without that person's consent (Whisnant). The "and/or" indicates the historic tension between rape as violence and rape as lack of consent, a tension captured brilliantly in David's thoughts after intercourse with Melanie: "Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless" (Coetzee 25).<sup>2</sup> The "not quite that" could imply that David avoided violence and yet the "undesired" shows a lack of consent. Melanie had in fact clearly said "no". *Disgrace* presents the reader with many very different forms of rape. The rape of Lucy is violent and totally unwanted. It is discussed as rape in the book, albeit only once, and is accepted as such by all reviewers. Whether David actually raped Melanie and how this relates to the charge of sexual harassment is questioned in the novel. Some feminists would argue that sex with a prostitute is also a form of rape. This could place David's relationship with the prostitute Soraya in a new light. Lucy's thoughts on sex and men hating women also bring into play the radical feminist idea that all heterosexual sex is rape.

### **Rape and prostitution**

For some feminists, such as Janice Raymond (B6) and Evelina Giobbe (143), the link between prostitution and rape is obvious in that prostitution is rape bought and sold. Sheila Jeffreys (*Prostitution* 259) does not use the word rape, but calls prostitution "commercial sexual violence". She sees this as an essential feature of prostitution, not an occasional occupational hazard. Linking prostitution with rape falls in a group of thought that is associated with the oppression paradigm, in which pornography, prostitution and other commercial sex are "quintessential expression[s] of patriarchal gender relations" (Weitzer 5).

There are many arguments against prostitution, but the main one is that sex involves the whole woman and that when a woman sells sex, she is selling herself and therefore defining herself, or is being defined, as a social subordinate. Kathleen Barry (23–24), for example, writes:

When the human being is reduced to a body, objectified to sexually service another, whether or not there is consent, violation of the human being has taken place. [...] In the fullness of human experience, when women are reduced to their bodies, and in the case of sexual exploitation to sexed bodies, they are treated as lesser, as other, and thereby subordinated.

According to Barry (36), who is a leading neo-abolitionist and the founder of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, the sex that men buy is the “same sex they take in rape”.

Because of this link between prostitution and rape, it is useful to explore David’s thoughts about Soraya in detail. David thinks that Soraya sells her sexual function and he resents the fact that Discreet Escorts, which provides the flat where they meet, should get half the money he pays her. He admits that “they own Soraya too, this part of her, this function” (2). He consistently denies that Soraya is selling her whole self, since he knows she has a private life that she hides from him. When, by accident, he sees her in the street with two children, their relationship changes. Soraya’s life intrudes on his idea of her and in a sense she is more whole to him. Paradoxically he experiences “a growing coolness as she transforms herself into just another woman and him into just another client” (7). Why then did he not experience himself to be a “just another client” before?

The answer is that he believed that the affection he felt for her had been reciprocated and that they had the same temperament. David describes his temperament as intense, but not passionate, abstract and dry (2), and since Soraya gives him the kind of copulation he prefers, he thinks she has the same temperament. He believes that with him she is her real self (3): “No doubt with other men she becomes another woman: *la donna è mobile*. Yet at the level of temperament her affinity with him can surely not be feigned.”

The canzone or ballad “La donna è mobile” is from Verdi’s opera *Rigoletto* and can be translated thus:

[The] Woman is fickle [movable], like a feather in the wind,  
she changes the tone of her voice [i.e., her accents], and her thoughts  
Always a sweet, pretty face,  
in tears or in laughter, [she] is [always] lying”.

David’s self-delusion is clear in this doublethink: all women are always liars, but Soraya, who is a woman, is not lying to him. According to Julia Davidson, a sociologist who analysed the results of interviews with prostitutes’ clients, this is a common illusion among men who visit prostitutes. Davidson (158–59) wrote:

One of the striking features of interview work with clients is just how many of them wish to construct some kind of fiction of mutuality around their encounters with prostitutes. Clients often want to believe that, although the prostitute is a paid actor, in their particular case she enjoys her work and derives sexual and/or emotional satisfaction from her encounter with them [...] Sexual satisfaction often hinges on a paradox wherein the fantasist must simultaneously remain conscious of the fact that he or she controls and authors events and yet conceal this knowledge from him- or herself.

We know that Soraya is compliant since she removed the make-up she is wearing immediately David shows disapproval. He, however, wants to think that Soraya enjoys their type of sex as much as he and does not do it only for the money. He therefore does not think of himself as a client. David is vaguely aware of his doublethink as can be seen from his description of his relationship with Soraya (2): "His sentiments are, he is aware, complacent, even uxorious. Nevertheless he does not cease to hold to them."

The use of "uxorious" implies that he sees himself in the role of a doting husband. His ideal marriage is with a wife that is a prostitute, but for him only and only at certain times. He does not want the prostitute as an object to be used, but as a subject whose desires exactly match his. He wants a woman to do exactly what he wants, but also to want what he wants. It was possible for him to hold on to this illusion while Soraya was limited to her role as prostitute and he only speculated about her private life, but when he saw her with her sons, she became a whole woman with other desires separate from those related to him. The view of prostitution presented in *Disgrace* is even more radical than that of most radical feminists in that the woman is not only subordinated as object, but also as subject. It also exposes the fragility of the illusion of control over what another subject wants. If a man wants a woman to want what he wants, he can only force her to pretend to want his desire and then he has also to deny that pretence.

Not all feminists think of prostitution as necessarily degrading and exploitative. Sex-radical feminists think of prostitutes as offering therapeutic services to those who are undesirable or unable to find sexual satisfaction (Schotten 225) and would emphasize that the sex involved in sex work is not necessarily degrading. David makes a point of saying that he is not as attractive to women as before, implying he needs prostitutes for sexual satisfaction. This is somewhat belied by the ease with which he gets the secretary to sleep with him (9).

It is interesting that, while much has been written about the roles of Lucy and Melanie in *Disgrace*, Soraya has mostly been neglected. This is perhaps a sign of the normalization of prostitution. The sexual exploitation of Melanie and Lucy is clear, but that of Soraya is not. Yet, as I will show later, Lucy's choice is quite similar to Soraya's.

### **Rape and sexual harassment**

There is a general uneasiness about using the word "rape" for David's sexual act(s) with Melanie. Anker (236) for example, uses the phrase "rather aggressively and coercively seduces into a short-lived affair" for the relationship that David has with Melanie. Berner (228) writes about *Disgrace* :

[writers] apparently befuddled by fashionable feminist doctrine, have assumed that his primary theme is sexual because of the two motivating events: the seduction of the student and the rape of Lucy. But we make a mistake to assume, with

contemporary puritans, that Lurie's seduction of a hardly unwilling young woman is somehow equivalent to violent sexual assault, if only because he does not get away with it and the rapists do.

Here we find the common accusation that feminists are the new puritans. When attempting to untangle the complex discussion of rape in the novel, it is important to look carefully at how David reads Melanie, and very important to realize that the reader is not given Melanie's interpretation of events and must therefore recreate it from David's limited point of view.

Melanie is someone the lexically fastidious David reads and interprets. One can see how he looks for words to suit his wishes in the following sentence, where "evasive" becomes the desirable "coquettish" (12): "She lowers her eyes, offering the same evasive and perhaps even coquettish little smile as before."

Melanie is passive the first time they have sex, while David finds the act, and also her passivity, so enjoyable that he "tumbles into blank oblivion" (19). This illustrates how he is losing himself in his desire, how he is acting despite his often repeated knowledge of her age and her uncertainty. Why does she give in to sex with David? The reader is given no clue, apart from a problematic relationship with her boyfriend and her extreme youth.

Their next sexual encounter is described using the vocabulary of conquest and violent subjugation. David is "the intruder who thrusts himself upon her" (24). She "crumbles" (24) and the words he says to her are as "heavy as clubs" (24). While she does not actively resist, apart from saying, "No, not now!" (25), she does "avert" her eyes and turn away from him. In his focalization, David refuses to use the word "rape" for what has happened between them (25). Afterwards he is certain she feels dirty and he also feels unclean, all evidence that what happened could be described with the word "rape". Her absence from class supports a reading that this was a traumatic experience.

Legally speaking, what happened between Melanie and David this second time is rape, as South Africa now defines it, as Patrick Lenta (15) explains:

Under South Africa's Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act of 2007, "sexual violation" is defined to include "abuse of power or authority by A to the extent that B is prohibited from indicating his or her unwillingness or resistance." The fact that for Melanie sex is "undesired to the core" and the description of her behaviour—"she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of a fox close on its neck" (25)—suggests submission to power: this appears to be an act of rape [...]

Their next sexual encounter is ambiguous and one could read the following line as evidence of her unwillingness (29): "If he does not sense in her a fully sexual appetite,

that is only because she is still young." Yet the line following shows an active participation in the sexual act, something which gives David joy (29): "One moment stands out in recollection, when she hooks a leg behind his buttocks to draw him in closer: as the tendon of her inner thigh tightens against him, he feels a surge of joy and desire." It is this moment of participation that complicates the reading of David's relationship with Melanie. Why would she come back to him after he had raped her? Does her return mean that she did not experience the previous sexual act as rape?

Although many feminists would agree that David raped Melanie, it is obvious that she did not report him for rape, but for sexual harassment or an inappropriate consensual relationship. David, however, altered Melanie's marks because of his relationship with her and as such he was guilty of inappropriate behaviour. Sexual harassment is not necessarily a given when a lecturer has a relationship with a student, since consensual relationships are possible between a staff member and a student. Melanie's charge of sexual harassment is a small act of resistance against him.

When Melanie lays a charge of "harassment of students by teachers" (39) against him, David imagines that she did so under the influence of her father and cousin. David, however, refuses to read Melanie's statement in which she specifies the charges she has brought against him. In this way David keeps her silent and passive. The problem of when seduction becomes sexual harassment and if sexual harassment is in fact rape never becomes a topic of discussion in the novel, partly because David focalizes events and such feminist concerns are either simply unknown to him or unthinkable for him. In this he echoes many conservative men who ascribe the most negative intentions to sexual harassment legislation instead of simply examining the rules which often turn out to be very reasonable. Although the committee states that he should know what he is pleading guilty to, David pleads guilty to whatever Melanie asserts in an effort to get the hearing over as soon as possible. David confesses that he did not deny the impulse to become "a servant of Eros" (52). Farodia Rassool's rejoinder that he should confess to the injury he caused Melanie acts as a reminder that he should take into account her view of the matter, something he consistently refuses to do. Even at the risk of losing his job, he prefers his own view of the events to the exclusion of all others. This seems to be the reason for his strange, self-defeating behaviour in front of the committee. Even when the males try to save him from being dismissed, David refuses to issue a statement which will imply that he is showing a spirit of repentance for what he admitted he had done wrong. Since David is also reading himself while formulating his stories about what happened, he sometimes catches himself being melodramatic for thinking the committee wanted him castrated (66).

After living through the experience of being the father of a woman raped, David visits Melanie's father in George, although he is unsure what he wants to say to him. David explains that Melanie lit a fire in him and later he says that when he burns, he

does not sing, since he lacks the lyrical (171). He says all this as though seeking agreement from Melanie's father that a romantic lyrical approach would have been more acceptable. The surname, Isaacs, brings up resonances of the sacrifice of Isaac by his father. Lucy Graham (13) thinks that David blames Melanie for the fire she lit in him, and in this way the offering is blamed for inciting the sacrifice. This she finds outrageous. This could be compared to the oft-repeated claim that women who wear sexually alluring clothes are somehow also responsible for being raped.

The reader is left with numerous questions. Many aspects of disputes surrounding rape can be found in this discussion of Melanie. When is a sexual act rape? What is sexual harassment and why do men refuse to confront it? Why do women return to the men who have raped them? How much of rape is a failure to exercise free will and how much of it is uncontrollable desire? What does blaming the victim entail? Rape, sexual harassment and seduction are presented as problematically as possible.

### **Rape as political**

One of the most interesting conversations between David and Lucy concerns men and sexuality (158):

When it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me anymore. Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. 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?

The words "with someone strange" could mean sex with a stranger or "someone strange", could mean that you do not know the woman well as a person. But this is somewhat contradicted by the words "You are a man, you ought to know", which implies that all men, even men who do not have sex with strangers, know this. David rightly feels insulted by the implication and wonders if it is right for a daughter to speak to a father like this (159). He answers that some men sometimes feel like this (159), which is a typical reaction to the rhetorical mistake of making too big a generalization.

The idea that sex is like killing is very disturbing, but it is not uncommon, as this well-known quotation from Susan Brownmiller (2011), one of the first feminists to write extensively about rape, shows:

Man's discovery that his genitalia could serve as a weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries of prehistoric times, along with the use of fire and the first crude stone-axe. From pre-historic times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear.

While most people would acknowledge that women fear rape more than men, most men would object to the idea that it is a conscious willed process of intimidation and that all men partake in it.

One way to interpret the connection of heterosexual sex with violence is to see rape as a method by which men as a class subordinate women as a class in a patriarchal society. This leads to many beliefs about what is natural and acceptable about sexual interaction, beliefs such as that the male is aggressive and the female passive; that women desire powerful and commanding behaviour from men; that “real” men can have sex with women when and where they want; that sex is a part of male conquest; that women are sexual objects and that men “need” and are entitled to sex (Whisnant). Although one cannot see David as an aggressive macho man, his appeal to the rights of desire (89) is similar to the idea that men are entitled to sex.

Claudia Card uses an interesting analogy to describe how rape intimidates women. She compares rape to terrorism in that, apart from the direct victim, harm is also done to the whole female population which is forced through fear to be compliant in order to avoid rape. This leads to what she calls a protection racket, in that men then offer to protect women from rape and expect payment for their protection in the form of compliance (Card 304). Gayatri Spivak (23) alludes to this when she says that Lucy “makes visible the rational kernel of the institution of marriage-rape, social security, property, human continuity”. This protection is often illusory. It is not difficult to read terrorism and protection into Lucy’s relationship with Petrus. Petrus is conveniently absent the day of the attack and afterwards protects one of the attackers because he is a member of his wife’s family. He then offers to marry Lucy, in effect making her his third wife, and to make her part of his family and so protect her. Lucy’s says: “I am not sure that Petrus would want to sleep with me, except to drive home his message” (203). This leaves it unclear which message Petrus would want to convey by having sex with her. Lucy seems, however, to accept sex as part of the bargain.

If Lucy is convinced of the violence inherent in heterosexual sex, which is a bit like killing (158), then political lesbianism is a logical choice. This would chime with ideas advanced in a pamphlet called “Love Your Enemy? The Debate between Heterosexual Feminism and Political Lesbianism”, in which the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group (5) defines political lesbianism: “We do think [...] that all feminists can and should be lesbians. Our definition of a political lesbian is a woman-identified woman who does not fuck men. It does not mean compulsory sexual activity with women.” Feminists who sleep with men are described by this feminist group (7) as collaborating with the enemy. Sheila Jeffreys (*Unpacking* 160) seems to regard heterosexual expression as inevitably a matter of eroticized inequality, while Andrea Dworkin argues that in order for men to have sexual pleasure with women, they have to hurt, diminish, “break down barriers to our bodies, aggress, be invasive”. Such radical feminist ideas are often dismissed as being against sexual pleasure, being anti-

male or, as Stevi Jackson (123) argues, of conflating the institution of oppressive heterosexuality with heterosexual practice where power is often negotiated and contested.

Like her father, the reader knows very little about Lucy. Since Lucy is generally leftist (see her refusal to play the role of boss to her servant, her gift of land to her black neighbour and her vegetarianism), political lesbianism is perhaps the best explanation for her views. Therefore her decisions not to report the rape, to keep the baby and to submit to being the third wife of Petrus, are even more disturbing and against character. Assembling signifiers around a proper noun implies that the proper noun denotes one person, a unified self. But as David asks himself, what if after such a vicious attack, "one is never oneself again?" (124). Is "Lucy" still "Lucy"? Lucy also emphasizes the unknowability of herself (161): "I am not the person you know. I am a dead person and I do not know yet what will bring me back to life."

The words "dead person" connects with the word "nothing", which Lucy uses to describe what she meant to the rapists (158) and with the phrase used to describe Melanie's attitude during the sexual act: "die within herself for the duration". Mieke Bal (12–13) refers to this with the clinical term of "dissociation" and says that the personhood of the rape victim is so damaged that what she was before, is not what she is now. A political lesbian would not have married a man for protection if it were not for the violence of rape.

In fact Lucy's choice is not that different from that of the prostitute, Soraya. Like Soraya she will submit to unwanted sex because she needs something. Lucy needs protection. Soraya probably needs money, but it is not known what kind of protection that money is supposed to buy or if it is indeed protection she wants. If Lucy's choice to marry Petrus is seen as terrible, then Soraya's choice to work in prostitution is also appalling, and yet her decisions are hardly ever questioned. While David, as the father of a daughter that had been raped, can identify with Melanie's father and apologize to him, he cannot see how his behaviour with prostitutes parallels that of Petrus. The reader, however, can and is invited to do so.

One of the most interesting intertextual clues in *Disgrace* is the reference to the rape of the Sabine women. David wondered as a child what the painting by that name has to do with rape, since the painting shows men on horseback and wailing women in gauze (160). The word "rape" comes from the Latin word *rapere* which means "violent seizure, robbery or taking away by force" (Hoad). The painting, *The Abduction of the Sabine Women* (1633/34), probably that of Nicolas Poussin, was meant to show the abduction of the women, not the sexual attack on them. Livius tells in the *History of Rome* how the Romans invited the Sabine people to a feast and then, upon a signal, abducted the women. The Sabine fathers had refused the Roman men who had asked for wives. What happened after the attack is not clear. Romulus, the warrior founder of Rome, asked the women to give their hearts to the men who had already taken their

bodies. They would have the status of wives and the civil rights of citizenship. Livius (1.9) continues: "These arguments were reinforced by the endearments of their husbands, who excused their conduct by pleading the irresistible force of their passion—a plea effective beyond all others in appealing to a woman's nature."

David, to his cost, found out this was not true when he gave "Eros entered" (52) as his defence to the committee deciding on his guilt for sexual harassment. When the Sabine men and the Romans next fought, the women stepped between the fighting factions and implored them with success to agree to a peace treaty. Note how they are made to blame themselves for the war (Livius 1.13), in the same way women who wear skimpy clothes are blamed for their rape:

"If," they cried, "you are weary of these ties of kindred, these marriage-bonds, then turn your anger upon us; it is we who are the cause of the war, it is we who have wounded and slain our husbands and fathers. Better for us to perish rather than live without one or the other of you, as widows or as orphans."

Here Lucy is like a Sabine woman, who, by being willing to sacrifice herself, brings peace between the different racial groups in South Africa. Rape has long been a metaphor for colonisation. Here white colonialism is followed by a black counter-drive, and yet it is the woman who feels she has to sacrifice herself for peace. It was thus with the founding of Rome and is so in the founding of the new South Africa, the novel seems to imply. The cycle of domination and counter-domination cannot end. Lucy's body becomes the site of the settlement of scores. The Sabine women managed to ensure that peace was established between the Romans and the Sabine and that their children became Roman citizens.

### **Conclusion**

Read politically *Disgrace* deals with the consequences of colonialism in a postcolonial society. It asks how a white person, as inheritor of the advantages of colonialism, should behave in a new situation where power is no longer only with the colonialists.

Read through the lens of gender, one gets the idea that David as a man is just as guilty of rape as Pollux and that Lucy is like Soraya, the prostitute in accepting rape as part of the price of survival. Women, whether white or black, are still the victims of misogyny. David, the white man, cannot see that he has raped Melanie, the dark woman. It is debatable whether political lesbianism is the answer to the radical idea that all men are rapists, and it is not clear whether Lucy is condemned for these views in the novel, but then again, *Disgrace* is a novel that keeps giving hints and clues, inviting more readings and more theories, never giving easy answers, and as impossible to comprehend in all its complexity as repeating "Lucy Lurie" fast. The novel may end, but there is no closure for the reader.

## Notes

1. Radical feminism is part of second-wave feminism. There was of course no movement of radical feminists with a manifesto. There are lots of disagreements among the many writers associated with it. When Coetzee uses feminist thought, he explores the most radical formulations of it, mostly associated with radical feminism. It is beyond the scope of this article to give a critical analysis of radical feminism or how ideas about rape have changed since the 1970s.
2. All further references to the novel *Disgrace* will give only the page number.

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