



Disgrace of Stereotypical Ambivalence: A Postcolonial Perspective on J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Received 11 October 2012; accepted 19 December 2012

Abstract

The study is an attempt to clarify the thematic misgivings J. M. Coetzee's Booker Prize winning novel *Disgrace* has aroused by having a detailed discussion on the protagonist David Lurie, his stereotypical ambivalence and his disgrace, so as to reveal that under Coetzee's lucid and evasive language, he intends to disclose the secret of disgrace for the whites in the new South Africa after the collapse of the apartheid system.

Key words: David Lurie; *Disgrace*; Stereotypical ambivalence

WANG Min, TANG Xiaoyan (2012). Disgrace of Stereotypical Ambivalence: A Postcolonial Perspective on J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 5(3), 49-54. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320120503.1116>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320120503.1116>

INTRODUCTION

The novel *Disgrace*, published in 1999, is J. M. Coetzee's first novel about the post-apartheid South Africa. Unlike his previous novels, which are devoted to the condemnation of the apartheid system, for it has become a thing of the past after the disintegration of white supremacy in 1994, this novel focuses more on the disgrace of the whites in the new South Africa when they have lost their power.

It mainly investigates the consequences of white South African disempowerment on individuals. As is pointed out by Charles Sarvan, *Disgrace* "can be read as a political text, a post-apartheid work that deals with the difficulties

confronting the white community in South Africa and with some of the choices available to them." (Charles, 2004, p. 26). Three types of whites are characterized in the novel: David Lurie, the protagonist, his daughter Lucy and Lucy's neighbor Ettinger.

Lucy is a quite open-minded person. She owns a farm in the countryside of Eastern Cape and lives peacefully with her black neighbors. But the coming of his father to her farm changes her life completely. Three blacks rob the farm and she herself is raped and becomes pregnant. Yet she is forgiving and compromising with the blacks in the end, as she understands their past sufferings under the iron hand of the whites. But Ettinger is a typically stubborn supporter of racial discrimination. As his wife is dead and his children have gone back to Germany, he is the only one left in Africa. He has a strong contempt and disbelief in the blacks. But his days are numbered in South Africa in front of the strong blacks now. While standing between them is the protagonist David Lurie, a typical white South African who though accepts the status quo on the surface, is nostalgic of the apartheid past. He strongly holds the idea of white supremacy either culturally or racially, which is mirrored in his attitudes and actions toward Western literature and the justification of sexuality under it, as well as his attitudes toward the blacks.

Along with the international fame such as the Booker Prize the novel *Disgrace* received, it was greeted with deep misgivings, too, since the first day it came out, especially in South Africa. After the democratic elections of 1994 and blacks' empowerment, people might have expected from this novel at least with a tinge of celebration and optimism as Coetzee's former novels deal with his strong condemnation on the apartheid regime. There is consensus that "Coetzee is the finest of his generation – of many generations" (Morphet, 2004, p. 14), but it is hardly surprising that there have been also annoyance and anger for the book's evasiveness because it is too difficult to see just how Coetzee's work fits in

with and contributes to the understanding of the historical situations in South Africa. For example, commentators are angry about the negative picture drawn in the novel about South Africa when it has made enormous strides in the direction of justice and peace. They could not accept a white woman's rape as penance for what was done in the past (Attridge, 2000, pp. 98-123). Thus:

Feminist indignation filled the popular press, and the political establishment branded the work with the scandal of racism. Even in sophisticated literary discussion, both local and international, the book was greeted with deep misgivings (Morphet, 2004, p. 15).

Yet few critics have touched upon its thematic significance although both acclaim and indignation are abundant in the press. Even if there are some, such articles only confined themselves to a very brief discussion of its thematic significance, and often unconvincingly. This study attempts to clarify the misgivings around this novel by having a more detailed discussion on its thematic significance by focusing on the characterization of the protagonist David Lurie, so as to reveal that under Coetzee's lucid and evasive language, he attempts to point out the path to grace for whites after their disgraceful colonial past.

WHITES' STEREOTYPICAL AMBIVALENCE

Coetzee's *Disgrace* is a contribution to the post-apartheid South African literary discourse. The meaning of *Disgrace* is centered on the way white English-speaking South Africans react to the new situation brought about by the end of the white supremacy known as apartheid. With the fall of apartheid and the all-race elections in 1994 in South Africa, the world of the white South Africans has been turned inside out. Political and social roles have been reversed. Black South Africans have been empowered by the changes and white South Africans have been correspondingly disempowered. However, according to a survey conducted by CSVR in 1996 that

Even if ... very few whites openly admit that they would like to reinstall apartheid, only 56% of all respondents conceded that the former political system was unjust. Many white South Africans still believe that apartheid was merely a good idea, badly carried out, and every third respondent held the view that apartheid has done more good than harm to South Africa (Theissen, 1996, p. 82).

The survey shows that many white South Africans have still to break mentally with the apartheid past, because the regime provided them with more privileges than they could enjoy now. In fact, such an attitude in essence reveals that many white South Africans now still persist in the colonialist ideology of stereotypical ambivalence despite the changed power relations.

The term ambivalence is initially taken by Homi

Bhabha from Freud, who says it occurs when "opposing pairs of instincts are developed to an approximately equal extent" (Childs, 1997, p. 124). Bhabha borrows the term to characterize the psychic identification of the white colonial authority. In Bhabha's opinion, identity forms not from a self-reflection in human nature or a place for the self in a distinction between culture and nature, but in a relation to the other:

[T]he question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy – it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image. The demand of identification – that is, to be for an other – entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness (Bhabha, 1994, p. 45).

In the novel *Disgrace*, the colonizers therefore form their own identity in relation to the other, more specifically, to the blacks. But such an identity is characterized by ambivalence, which involves a process of fear and desire, as Bhabha notes that "the colonizer himself is caught in the ambivalence of paranoid identification, alternating between fantasies of megalomania and persecution" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 61). Megalomania here suggests that the colonizers feel that they are superior either culturally or racially in relation to the blacks, while at the same time there also exists the feeling of persecution, for the fact that the blacks are different poses threat to them because they have no way of getting to know them. Thus, in order to justify their ruling and dominance in the colonized land, they stereotype the blacks to be unchanging, always in the state of disorder, anarchy and license. In the new South Africa, such psychical identification still remains among some whites though they have been disempowered politically, which in *Disgrace* is reflected in the protagonist David Lurie's stereotypical ambivalence. He follows his colonial forefathers' psychic identification by indulging in Western superiority and by stereotyping the blacks at the same time. By doing so, Coetzee portrays a white South African who, with his strong sense of colonial ideology, could only bring disgrace to himself in the changed power relations in the new South Africa.

DAVID LURIE'S STEREOTYPICAL AMBIVALENCE

In *Disgrace*, the white protagonist David Lurie receives Coetzee's elaborate depiction. The mobile third person point of view rests within the utterance of the narrating character Lurie. But, because it is mobile, it simultaneously projects a view of him from the outside. As the narrator unfolds his interior and ulterior experiences, the narrated actions in the present tense have already taken place, and the reader becomes privileged by the text in two aspects. From the mobility in time, we get to know

his interior experience, and through the mobility of point of view, we alternatively know the conditions of life in which he lives. Thus, we are all the time, both inside and outside him. But as to the other characters in the novel, we could only observe them from the perspective of the white protagonist Lurie. Not unlike what readers find in his decanonizing work *Foe*, Coetzee's deliberate positioning of perspective is especially related to his reluctance to speak as a black. We could not find any word from Friday, because, in his opinion, Friday and his kind must have the power of expression and must use it if they are to participate in the shaping of African history (Gitzen, 1993, pp. 3-15). So through the mobility of time and perspective of the novel, we could form the image of a white in South Africa clearly, of his stereotypical ambivalence and the disgrace thus brought about.

David Lurie, a typical white South African who though accepts the status quo on the surface, is nostalgic of the apartheid past and like the people in the survey of CSVSR who believe that apartheid is a "good idea", but "badly carried out". So he continues to practice his own part of the apartheid regime by adhering to the old habits and ideas. In *Disgrace*, from the second page of this novel on, the narrator repeatedly tells us about Lurie's "fixed temperament" and his nostalgia of "the good old days".

That is his temperament. His temperament is not going to change; he is too old for that. His temperament is fixed, set. The skull, followed by the temperament: the two hardest parts of the body (Coetzee, 1999, p. 18).

Furthermore, because the university he stays in has been rationalized, he changes from a professor of modern languages to an adjunct professor of communications. He tells us that people like him are "clerks in a post-religious age" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 4). When Lurie suspects that the black man Petrus has some relation with the rape and robbery of her daughter Lucy and her farm, he tells us that, "In the old days one could have had it out with Petrus. In the old days one could have had it out to the extent of losing one's temper..." (Coetzee, 1999, p. 116).

While "good idea" means it meets the requirements of their white supremacy, "badly carried out" expresses their pity over the disintegration of the apartheid system. This is surely the evidence of their sense of white superiority. In *Disgrace*, sense of white superiority, including that of white race and white culture, is fully illustrated in the protagonist's ideas, words and acts.

As a colonial strategy, the spread of Western literary study has successfully accompanied the growth of colonial empires. Take English literary study as an example. The historical moment, which saw the emergence of English as an academic discipline, also produced the nineteenth-century colonial form of imperialism, as what Gauri Viswanathan has presented in his strong arguments for relating the institutionalization and subsequent valorization of English literary study to a shape and an

ideological content developed in the colonial context (Ashcroft, 1989, p. 3). Furthermore, the political removal of colonial authority in South Africa did not end English as a privileged academic subject for many whites, nor did their ideology of white cultural superiority and the values they incorporated.

Lurie's idea of white supremacy is abundantly reflected in his sense of white cultural superiority. Before rationalization, Lurie was a professor of modern languages, but his devotion seemed to only lie in Western literature, which is seen in his writings and teaching. In the course of his career, he has published three books: the first on opera (*Boito and the Faust Legend: The Genesis of Mefistofele*), the second on vision as eros (*The Vision of Richard of St Victor*), the third on Wordsworth and history (*Wordsworth and the Burden of the Past*). In his teaching this year, he is offering a course in the Romantic poets. Now he wants to compose music: *Byron in Italy*, "a meditation on love between the sexes in the form of a chamber opera" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 4).

Deeply influenced by Western literature, Lurie shamelessly carries out his plan of consistent sexual relations with women by finding excuse from Western literature, especially from Western Romanticism and the Romantic writers.

He is divorced and is at the age of fifty-two. To meet his sexual needs, he slept with a prostitute named Soraya. But this affair saw a quick ending because one day he found that Soraya lives a double life: one as a prostitute and another respectable life with two sons and husband. After that he begins to hunt for another prey and this time his student, Melanie Issacs, becomes his next object. Though he has a fight with his conscience: "*A child! He thinks: No more than a child! What am I doing?*" Yet his heart lurches with desire" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 20). What is more he finds a very good excuse to justify his sensual pleasure, that is, Western literature.

"[W]ith the harmonies of *The Prelude* echoed within him" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 13), and "quiver of Aphrodite, goddess of the foaming waves" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 25), and with Byron as his lead, he put the idea of justified sexuality with his young student into practice.

He suggests that his seduction of Melanie is based on what he believes are his "rights of desire" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 89), rather less romantically interpreted by one of the disciplinary tribunal's panel as "ungovernable impulse" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 52). As one might expect from a specialist in Romantic poetry, David suggests in his defense to the tribunal that he "became a servant of Eros" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 52). Similarly, just before the occasion when he forces his sexual desires on Melanie, despite his acknowledgement that it is "not rape, not quite that but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 25), he uses Romantic language to justify the fact that "nothing will stop him" – asserting that this desire

emanates "from the quiver of Aphrodite, goddess of the foaming waves" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 25). For all these fine words, though, the physical reality is that he is considered, at the very least, to have sexually harassed Melanie.

Thus, despite his own awareness of bad faith and the sense that "he ought to let her go" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 18), he seduces Melanie with the "smooth words" that "[s] he has a duty to share it" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 16). Quoting Blake to Lucy when he visits her after his resignation from his post, he once more makes use of the idea of "unacted desires" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 70) to justify his actions. The text, though, relentlessly emphasizes Melanie's helplessness and youth against his age and experience: she has "hips as slim as a twelve-year-old's" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 19) and he is fully aware of the immorality of what he is doing. Despite his desire to ignore the age gap, he is always aware of Melanie's youth. Even in the act of trying to seduce her (he uses the rather more old-fashioned word, "woo"), he is reminded that "the voice he hears belongs to a cajoling parent, not a lover" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 20). As his ex-wife, Rosalind, bluntly warns him: "You're too old to be meddling with other people's children" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 45). Always, though, despite his claim of being servant to "ungovernable impulse", he is aware that he is abusing his position of authority as Melanie's teacher: "[I]f she is behaving badly, he has behaved worse...he is the one who leads, she the one who follows. Let him not forget that" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 28). Despite being conscious of his shame, his disgrace, even in the act of apologizing to Melanie's father, David is aware of the physical attractions of her even-younger sister, significantly named Desiree. Till now he still firmly believes that he is following the "unacted desires" learned from William Blake.

While Lurie's sexuality reflects his sense of superiority of Western culture, his stereotyped attitudes toward animals and blacks reveal his sense of white racial superiority. Such colonialist ideology had long been rooted among the white colonizers for they thought that the whites were born rulers while the natives should certainly be ruled accordingly. So there could not exist any exchange on an equal footing between these two races even in the 1980s, as Seastian Mallaby shows: "The majority of whites do not speak any of the country's various African languages. They seldom go into a black township. They know blacks as servants or office colleagues, but rarely as friends" (Mallaby, 1992, p. 72). As a white intellectual, Coetzee must have witnessed such scenes frequently and must have deeply realized blacks' inferior positions in those years for he has lived through apartheid himself. Therefore Coetzee always compares blacks' wretched situations with those of animals in his novels.

Apart from *Disgrace*, in Coetzee's other novels, animals and blacks often stay in the same inferior situations in the white colonizers' eyes. Richard A. Barney

has listed some examples: In the novel *Foe*, Susan Barton, who is marooned on an island with an Englishman named Crusoe and his native servant, Friday, confesses that she has "given to Friday's life as little thought as I would have a dog's or any other dumb beast's". In another novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Empire's soldiers throw food to the natives "as if they were indeed animals," and the Magistrate himself jokes with the barbarian "girl", as he calls the young woman with whom he co-habitates, that "people will say I keep two wild animals in my rooms, a fox and a girl" (Barney, 2004, pp. 17-23). Also, from Lurie's attitude toward the animals in *Disgrace*, we could catch a glimpse of his stereotyped views of the blacks.

The first time when Lucy takes him to visit Bev Shaw, the person in charge of the Animal Welfare League, "he is repelled by the odours of cat urine and dog minge and Jeyes Fluid that greet them" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 72). When Bev tells him that she senses he likes animals, he says, "Do I like animals? I eat them, so I suppose I must like them, some parts of them" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 81). Later Lurie uses the same metaphor as his forefathers did, when he cursed Pollux, the black boy, who peered through Lucy's bathroom, peeping at her: "You swine!" "You filthy swine!" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 206). So we could find here the link between Lurie's attitude toward animals and the blacks. Such racial discrimination is not produced by Lurie himself; rather, he has inherited it from the colonialist forefathers, because in order to justify their dominant positions in the colonies the colonizers would take animals and blacks as beings that belonged to the same inferior species. Here Lurie is not a colonizer in the real sense because he no longer belongs to the ruling party now, but his action and thinking tell us that he is still a colonizer in mind. His opinion toward the blacks in the novel serves as a sufficient proof.

The first word he speaks to the black Petrus: "You look after the dogs" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 64) evidently indicates his strong sense of white superiority before the black man. And he is also readily to describe them in the stereotypical way. Although he has no evidence of Petrus's participation in the rape and rob of Lucy, he still forms a cunning impression of him: "A plotter and a schemer and no doubt a liar, too, like peasants everywhere. Honest toil and honest cunning" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 117). The bestial description of the blacks appears again in Lurie's description of Pollux, with such contemptuous words as "piggish eyes" and "flaring nostrils" (92). In Lurie's eyes, only the Westerners could master modern technology. If it happens that the black could handle it skillfully, he will surely think it is not native. So, when Petrus is ploughing his land with a tractor swiftly, he could only have the idea that it is "all very unlike Africa" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 151).

Thus, by depicting Lurie's self-righteous sexuality under the excuse of Western literature and the guidance of Romantic writers, and also through his stereotypical

view of the animals and the black characters in the novel, Coetzee vividly shows how colonial discourse is formed and retained in the long history of South Africa in order to justify the colonizers' control and dominance over the blacks. Bhabha has pointed out that the object of colonial discourse is "to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 70). Though David Lurie is living in the new South Africa where the whites are no longer enjoying the privilege of the colonizers in the past, his psychic identification still remain the same as his forefathers.

DISGRACE OF DAVID LURIE'S STEREOTYPICAL AMBIVALENCE

By stereotype, Bhabha means that colonial discourse depends heavily on the concept of "fixity" in the ideological construction of otherness. It presupposes that the other is always and already fixed as unchangeable, known and predictable. But at the same time, the other is also contradictorily said to be in a state of disorder, anarchy in order to justify the colonizers' domination. Such contradiction in the colonial discourse itself reveals its resistance within. It is only when the power of discourse is in the hand of the colonizers that such resistance could be contained. So while in colonial times, the white colonizers' identity is relatively stable, because they are in the dominant position, and they can project on the blacks any putative qualities they like, such as "an *idée fixe*: despot, heathen, barbarian, chaos, violence" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 101). But with the collapse of whites' power in 1994 in South Africa, they could not enjoy such a priority as they had in the past. The other is no longer the unchanging stereotyped one, and white culture and white race could not receive the same superior treatment as before, which is reflected in David Lurie's sense of castration in *Disgrace*. His loss of authority is not confined to his odd and its sexual activities: he is also intellectually castrated in the "emasculated institution of learning" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 151), the Cape Technical University, where he is an outdated intellectual forced to teach Communications rather than his specialist field of modern languages. So if the whites want to adapt to the new environment, they have to form new sense of identification; otherwise, disgrace will surely be the final lot they could receive in the new South Africa.

For David Lurie, with such fixed sense of white superiority of culture and race inherited from the colonial times, what he receives at last is nothing but disgrace, because he does not fully recognize that he is living in the new South Africa now, and their privilege has gone with the wind. So in the novel, we witness the disgrace of Lurie's stereotypical ambivalence, especially, disgraces

of sexuality and Western languages, as well as disgrace brought about by his stereotypical views of the blacks.

The first sentence of *Disgrace* is of great revelation: "For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 1). The first idea we get from it is that he has to find sexual partners somewhere else because he is divorced. Secondly, he regards sex as a problem and it indeed is a difficult problem later. But one thing he believes is wrong, that is, he has solved it well only "to his mind", the fact is that he does not solve it well. On the contrary it brings him shameful disgrace.

Also from the first sentence, we could see that sex for him is not an intimate relationship with another human being, an individual, but a "problem" to be solved, and the "conquest" of women, even that of a prostitute, is flattering to his vanity. But even the encounter with a prostitute does not fulfill his sense of conquest. For example, he sees Soraya, a prostitute, who is his regular sexual partner for a time, with her two sons, out shopping. Without discreetly withdrawing, and filled with the curiosity to peep into her other life, he walks back to have another look, and Soraya sees him. She is a part-time prostitute and, by all appearances, leads a normal, "respectable" existence, disproving of scantily clad tourists and holding that vagabonds should be rounded up and put to work. Alarmed at this invasion, this threat to her familial, bourgeois life, she withdraws her services. Lurie, rather than letting it go, employs a private detective to track her down, much to her outrage. "You are harassing me in my own house," she tells him (Coetzee, 1999, p. 10). Thus ends his relationship with Soraya.

While if this may not be credited as disgrace for Lurie, his affair with his student Melanie Issacs sends him into a state approaching to disgrace. In spite of his repeated references to Western literary works and Romantic poets for the justification of his sexual affair with Melanie, he is kicked out of the university for that reason. Though on the surface, Lurie resigns his post on his own initiative for he declines to make a confession: "I pleaded guilty, a secular plea. That plea should suffice. Repentance is neither here, nor there" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 58), and the truth is that he has nothing left worthy of his stay: his students do not like his teaching, and he has to resent despise and contempt from people around him. So he has to leave the university disgracefully.

If we say till now Lurie still does not admit his disgrace out of his sexuality, another sexual affair with Bew Shaw makes him realize it. Lurie is a man of cultivated taste, familiar with European culture, and his initial reaction to Bev is one of condescension, if not contempt: he does not like women who make no effort to be attractive; the place where she works smells of cat urine, dog mange, and Jeyes fluid. And the house is as he expected: "rubbishy furniture, a clutter of ornaments...the yammer of a radio,

the cheeping of birds in cages, cats everywhere" (Coetzee, 1999, pp. 72-73). Bev herself is "a dumpy, bustling little woman with black freckles, close-cropped, wiry hair, and no neck" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 72). But just such an ugly little woman in Lurie's eyes, he sleeps with her in her animal clinic, though "[n]ever did he dream he would sleep with a Bev" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 149).

In the novel we witness Lurie's helplessness in saving his daughter from being attacked, and such a failure is clearly displayed in the disgrace of Western languages. So Rita Barnard says the difficult – perhaps impossibly difficult – adjustments that the novel's white characters are forced to make are registered in terms of linguistic competence or failure in the multilingual context of the post-apartheid South Africa (Barnard, 2003, pp. 199-224). At the novel's most critical moment of crisis, when Lurie is locked in the lavatory, unable to protect his daughter from sexual violation, his anguished thoughts turn to his linguistic unpreparedness for such a catastrophe:

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

At this moment Lurie's failure to translate is complete: he is bereft of any terms in which to articulate this experience other than the most cartoonish colonial stereotypes about the incomprehensible otherness of savages. Before too long, even this ridiculous, hopelessly dated vocabulary falls apart, and he is reduced to "hurling out shapeless bellows that have no words behind them" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 96). So, disgrace is completed when Lucy's farm is attacked: Lurie is burned; her daughter is raped and finally made pregnant.

With the development of the novel, Lurie clearly realizes that such tragic experience on him and his daughter results from his self-righteous sexuality under the guidance of Western Romanticism, so he apologizes to Melanie's father: "I am being punished for what happened between myself and your daughter. I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 172).

CONCLUSION

To sum up, Coetzee in *Disgrace* has portrayed a white South African who is disgraced by his own illusive stereotypical ambivalence after the collapse of the

apartheid system. By elaborating on the sexualities of the protagonist as well as her daughter, actually, what Coetzee is doing is to use them as a metaphor for the disempowerment of white South Africans. Lurie's attempted conquest over women is compared as white South African's "rape" of black South Africans, and Lurie's disgrace is surely the symbol of disgrace of white disempowerment. What is more, the apparent "rape" of Lucy by the three black men during the attack on her farm could be regarded as a metaphorical inversion of white domination, too. If we say Lurie himself is responsible for the disgrace of himself and his daughter, which is not totally correct. Certainly the long history of colonial crimes is largely to blame, because it has planted colonialist ideology in Lurie's mind, and has caused so many sufferings for the natives. If the whites had the power to start colonialism in the past, it is the blacks who have the right to say how it should be ended.

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