



Black Peril VS White Peril: A Post Colonial Criticism on J. M. Coetzee's Disgrace

A. Beiranvand^{[a],*}; C. Z. Liena^[a]

^[a] English Department, Media and Language Studies Faculty, Dalarna University, Sweden.

* Corresponding author

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Abstract

In post apartheid South Africa insecurity and rape of women are serious problems. Some Whites consider blacks as chief culprits and their media cover cases of black peril sensationally. However, the essay suggests that rape is an interracial problem and has nothing to do with colour; Moreover, the essay suggests that the sexualisation of women and insecurity is rooted in the colonization era.

Key words: Black Peril; White peril; post apartheid South Africa; Colonization

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INTRODUCTION

In post apartheid South Africa sexual violation of women is rampant. Women are raped daily, and rape has become the primary means of transmitting HIV/AIDS to young women as well as children. Whites blame black men for this problem and claim that the majority of the victims are white women. However, statistics show that most rapes in post apartheid South Africa are interracial (Graham 434-35). According to Sue Armstrong, during the years of the apartheid the threat of both black and white rape were escalating and it was intertwined with the racial injustice of the apartheid system (35). However, in apartheid and post apartheid South Africa, the public black hysteria has its origin in the colonization of South Africa by whites.

As Barry points out: "there is a specific expose of the Eurocentric universalism which takes for granted both the superiority of what is European or Western and the inferiority of what is not" (186). Affected by this idea whites have had a discriminatory attitude towards blacks in South Africa and have continued to propagate negative depiction of black African, that is, some whites have depicted black men as rapists (Graham, 435). Defining Black peril Gareth Cornwell sates:

In the early decades of this century, the phrase 'Black Peril' recurred like a refrain in South African debate about native Question. At certain times, flaring up like an infectious rash, it dominated the columns of the national press. Although it served as the signifier for a range of emotions, ranging from sexual jealousy over the seduction of white women by black men to general apprehension of native rebellion, 'Black Peril' was most commonly understood to refer to the threat of Black rape. (2)

In this essay, black peril suggests the colonizers' fear of 'the other' and is used to refer to the threat of sexual violation of white women, that is, Lucy, the protagonist David Lurie's daughter, by three black men. By contrast, white peril refers to the hidden sexual exploitation of black women, represented in the novel by Melanie, who is David Lurie's student. It worth mention to say, that David Lurie is represented in the novel as a white man and abuses Melanie sexually.

In J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* there are equal cases of black peril and white peril which suggest that it is a mistake to depict only blacks as rapists in post apartheid South Africa. Significantly, white peril is more dangerous than black peril, because it is a surreptitious phenomenon and it involves the abuse of power

Coetzee's *Disgrace* covers black peril and white peril neutrally. This is something which is not observed in post apartheid South Africa, that is, in constructing black peril white media played a key role in post apartheid South Africa. In other words, white media covers cases of black

peril extensively in order to create public black hysteria (Graham, 434-35).

Set in post-apartheid South Africa, David Lurie a professor at Cape Technical University abuses his power to exploit her students, Melanie, sexually. As during the apartheid in which whites take advantage of their power to misuse black women (Armstrong, 35), here in the novel, Lurie misuses his power as a university professor to sexually abuse Melanie. In addition, traces of colonial attitude can be found in Lurie's character. This is suggested regarding his behaviour towards Melanie. In other words, David's treatment of Melanie is similar to the treatment of black women under colonialism by white men (Graham, 473).

As a result of the sexual exploitation of Melanie, David is summoned to the committee of enquiry at the university and loses his job. Then Lurie goes to the Eastern Cape where his daughter owns a smallholding. Here, Lucy is gang-raped by three black South Africans while Lurie is beaten and locked in the lavatory of his daughter's smallholding.

1. WHITE PERIL IN *DISGRACE*

In the only instance of white peril in the novel, David abuses his power as Melanie's teacher to sexually exploit her. The problem begins when he comes across Melanie in the street and invites her to his home. Because he is trusted by Melanie, she accepts his invitation. However, when she wants to leave Lurie's home, he forces her to stay with him at night. He reiterates that there is no choice for her but to stay with him. This is another example which shows how Lurie takes advantage of his job: Once, to sexually exploit Melanie, he needs Melanie's personal details such as home address and telephone number. "On Sunday morning he drives to the empty campus and lets himself into the department office. From the filing cabinet he extracts Melanie Isaac's enrolment card, and copies down her personal details" (18).

Here is another example which shows how David takes advantage of his job: when Melanie does not sit her mid-term exam "he ticks her off as present and enters a mark of seventy" (26). Lurie's abuse of powers can be found in Melanie's father words. Before finding the truth about Melanie and David's sordid relations, Melanie's father calls David and asks him very politely to talk Melanie to change her mind about abandoning her studies:

Professor, I wonder if you can help us. Melanie has been such a good student, and now she says she is going to give it all up. She wants to give up her studies and get a job. It seems such a waste, to spend three years at university and do so well, and then drop out before the end. I wonder if I can ask, Professor, can you have a chat with her, talk some sense into her?... If you talk to her, maybe you can persuade her to think again. She has such a respect for you. (36-37)

This suggests Melanie's father's trust in Lurie. Lurie is so trusted by Melanie's father that he does not imagine that Lurie has exploited his daughter sexually. To him, Lurie is a teacher who can play a positive role in guiding his students. That is why, Melanie's father calls Lurie and asks him to talk to Melanie to change her mind about giving up her studies.

However, after Melanie's father gets to know about his daughter's reason for dropping out, he goes to Lurie's office. Addressing Lurie he says: "You may be educated and all that, but what you have done is not right... We put our children in the hands of you people because we think we can trust you. If we can't trust the university, who can we trust? We never thought we were sending our daughter into a nest of vipers" (38). This is not the first instance of white peril in post apartheid South Africa in which the exploitation of black women involves whites' abuse of power. As Graham points out: "Sadly, Melanie's position in *Disgrace* is not an uncommon one in contemporary South Africa". A South African newspaper recently reported that a [white] deputy principal had impregnated twenty girls at his high school, and that [another white] educator had raped a fourteen-year school [black] girl twice in three months and had infected her with HIV" (435).

As suggested in *Disgrace* white peril has an everlasting effect. The day after their first sexual intercourse, she is absent from her class. After their second encounter Melanie's condition is aggravated and she does not sit her mid-term exam. Also, this time she stays away the whole of the next week" (26). After their intercourse in the subsequent times, Melanie's condition gets worse. Due to her being sexually abused she ends up depressed and decides to give up her studies.

After the sexual exploitation of Melanie, Lurie receives a letter informing him that "a complaint has been lodged against him" (38). Accordingly, the committee of enquiry holds its session and investigates the affair between Lurie and Melanie. As a result, Lurie is expelled from his job. Then he goes to the town of Salem in Eastern Cape to live with his daughter Lucy (59).

2. WHITE PERIL AND ITS ORIGIN IN COLONIZATION

The sexual exploitation of Melanie is the result of David's colonial attitude. That is, David's treatment of Melanie bears close resemblance to the treatment of Black women during colonization by white men. As Graham points out, *Disgrace* depicts a scene in which black women, as the result of the colonization epoch, are regarded as property. This is manifested in David's behaviour when he watches Melanie in a play "claiming her achievements as his own. When they laugh at Melanie's line he cannot resist a flush of pride. Mine! He would like to say them" (438-39).

David also has a history of desiring women of colour, that is, black women, and assumes that he has the authority to avail himself of their bodies without taking responsibility for them or respecting and caring about their feelings (Graham, 437). David's lack of concern for Melanie's feelings is revealed when he sleeps with her against her will and this results in the woman's falling into a deep depression. Coetzee writes: "at four o'clock he is at her flat, she opens the door. He has given no warning. She is too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself upon her...No, not now, she says struggling...But nothing will stop him" (24). It is after this incident that she feels deeply wounded, and as a result, abandons her studies for a week. In the end, as a result of being sexually abused, Melanie is taken over by depression. In the same way many white men, treated black women under colonialism. That is, they sexually exploited black women without offering long-term security or displaying any concern for their feelings (Graham, 444).

Another example of David Lurie's colonial attitude toward Melanie is that David refers to Melanie as the dark one, while he calls Lucy by her first name which literally means light. As Graham observed: "In *Disgrace*, David Lurie translates Melanie's name as the dark one while Lucy's name has associations with light. Playing on the tropes of darkness and light, the name of the two women exposes black peril stereotypes and the residual threat of white peril that prevailed under colonialism and apartheid" (437). In other words, David's treatment of Melanie is a signifier of his colonial attitude.

3. BLACK PERIL IN *DISGRACE*

In the only case of black peril in the novel, three black men invade Lucy's farm, and sexually abuse her while Lurie is locked up in the lavatory and the key is missing (94). The attack has its impact on David. This impact is discussed first in terms of David's view of Lucy's neighbour, Petrus, and second in terms of David's growing awareness of unfitness of English language in South Africa.

First, in the wake of the attack on Lucy's farm, Lurie is suspicious of Lucy's black neighbour, that is, Petrus. Addressing Petrus's wife, Bev Shaw, Lurie says: "It [the attack on Lucy's farm] may not have been Petrus's brainchild, but he certainly did not warn us. He certainly took care not to be in the vicinity" (140). The reason for Lurie's suspicion is that on the one hand, Lucy and Lurie are whites; while on the other hand, Petrus and invaders are blacks. In fact Lurie considers Petrus and the invaders as the other. That is why he believes that Petrus is an accomplice in the attack on Lucy's smallholding.

Second, another consequence of the attack on Lucy's farmland is that Lurie is convinced that English is unsuitable for South Africa. "More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth

of post-apartheid South Africa" (117). In fact, Lurie is comparing English during two eras, one the colonization era and the other, contemporary South Africa. During the colonization period, English was the language of authority. However, in contemporary South Africa, English is no longer the language of authority. Moreover, English reminds black South Africans of colonizers. That is why, Coetzee writes: "Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulations, their articulateness, their articulatedness. Like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud, the language has stiffened" (117).

4. BLACK PERIL AND ITS ORIGIN IN THE COLONIZATION OF SOUTH AFRICA

The sexual exploitation of Lucy is rooted in the colonization of South Africa. In David's Lurie's opinion, Lucy's refusal to report her sexual violation is the price that she pays for the crime of the past. What Lurie means is that during the colonization period, whites committed many offences such as establishing slavery, exploiting black women sexually, taking control of blacks' land by force, and considering them inferior in terms of race and class (Beck, 26-27). Now Lurie believes that Lucy is associating the attack on her farm to those transgressions. In other words, Lurie believes that Lucy considers her sexual violation the result of the whites' mistreatment of blacks during the colonization period. Now she is going to evade reporting her sexual violation lest it be construed as composition for white wrongdoings during that epoch. That is why Lurie says: "Do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?" (112).

Moreover, Lurie himself envisions the attack as the result of the colonization of South Africa. In David Lurie's eyes, a history of wrong was speaking through the invaders. That is, the attack is rooted in the colonization period. As Ann Lungmuir puts it, during the invasion Lurie compares himself to an Aunt Sally, an object of unreasonable and prejudiced attack, which suggests that the attack is rooted in the colonization era. Aunt Sally is also the name of a game which stands for a woman singled out for public ridicule and abuse. By comparing himself to such a figure, Lurie appears to view the attack as the direct result of the white colonization of South Africa (120). As Lungmuir points out:

In attempting to characterize himself as a victim of the New South Africa [by comparing himself to an Aunt Sally], Lurie draws on the very male white hegemony that characterized the old South Africa. Thus in the midst of blacks attack, Lurie reminds us of the legacy of colonization and apartheid. The attack on Lucy Lurie and farm does not signal a new lawlessness in post apartheid South Africa; instead, it is the product of centuries of domination. (121)

In fact, Lurie confesses that there is a connection between the attack and the era of colonization. He believes

that the targeting of a white family by blacks in the darkest part of South Africa was fuelled by white colonizers' domination of blacks during that epoch. Accordingly, he views himself as the victim of retaliation for whites' treatment of blacks during colonization. Therefore, he draws a parallel with a shameful figure of public rebuke and punishment in the guise of "Aunt Sally", a historically familiar term conjuring up the scapegoat image of South Africa's era of colonization.

5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MEDIA COVERAGE OF BLACK PERIL AND WHITE PERIL IN POST APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA, AND IN J. M. COETZEE'S *DISGRACES*

In constructing black peril in post apartheid South Africa, white media has been biased towards whites. In other words, there has been extensive media coverage of black peril. Admitting the sensationalistic media coverage of black peril in post apartheid South Africa, Graham quotes the example of a white woman who was raped by a black man. White media cover this instance of black peril so extensively that she quickly becomes something of the

spokesperson for South Africa on the subject of sexual violence and its consequence (434). The sexual violation of Smith is not the first instance of black peril in post Apartheid South Africa which receives extensive media coverage (434). Referring to white media coverage of sexualisation of Smith, Graham writes that sensationalised media accounts of white women raped by black men are symptoms of the so called black hysteria in Post Apartheid South Africa (435).

In J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, however, media covers both black peril and white peril

neutrally. For example, media covers the sexual exploitation of Melanie thoroughly and it receives a lot of attention. It is due to media coverage that David's previous wife, Rosalind, claims that everyone knows about the latest affair of David (43). Addressing David, she states that in *Argus* there is a report headed "Professor on Sex Charge" (45). The report points out: "[David] is slated to appear before a disciplinary board on a charge of sexual harassment. CTU is keeping tight-lipped about the latest series of scandals including fraudulent scholarship payouts and alleged sex rings operating out of student residences. Lurie (53), author of a book on English nature-poet William Wordsworth, was not available for comment" (46). Also, student newspaper covers this instance of white peril. David's photograph appears in student newspaper "above caption 'Who is the Duncie Now?' It shows him, eyes cast up to the heavens, reaching out a grouping hand towards the camera" (56). Due to media coverage, the lobbies and the surrounding

street of the building where the committee of enquiry held its session are thronged with the people (55).

The media coverage of white peril in *Disgrace* can be interpreted as a sign that times are changing, because in the years of apartheid, due to the abuse of power by a white dominated society, not only did white media not cover cases of white peril, but it was almost impossible to prosecute the cases of white peril (Armstrong, 35).

In *Disgrace* the sexual violation of Lucy by three black men receives media coverage. "He [David], read their story as reported in *Herald*. *Unknown assailants* the men are called" (115). The report points out: "Three unknown assailants have attacked Ms Lucy Lurie and her elderly father on their smallholding outside Salem, making off with clothes, electric goods and a firearm. In a bizarre twist, the robbers also shot and killed six watchdogs before escaping in a 1993 Toyota Corolla(116)." The report also says that Lurie was injured during the attack and was treated at the hospital.

In fact, by neutral media coverage of black peril and white peril, Coetzee's *Disgrace* encourages media not to be biased in covering cases black peril and white peril in post apartheid South Africa.

CONCLUSION

In post apartheid South Africa, rape is a serious problem. Due to centuries of colonization, whites have a discriminatory attitude toward blacks and claim that the majority of rape victims are white women assaulted by black men. Similarly, white media disseminates the negative depiction of black men and gives cases of black peril broad coverage.

However, J.M.Coetzee's *Disgrace* aims to dismantle the cliché that black equals rapist. It suggests that both blacks and whites, not just blacks, are culpable for the problem of rape in post apartheid South Africa. To this goal, the novel depicts black peril versus white peril. In the novel both cases of black peril and white peril receive neutral media coverage, whereby the novel encourages media not to be biased in the media coverage of black peril.

White peril in the novel deals with David Lurie's abuse of his power as a teacher in surreptitious sexual exploitation of his student Melanie. As Melanie's teacher, Lurie is trusted by her. However, he takes advantage of this opportunity by sexualizing her. Lurie's treatment of Melanie has a devastating effect on Melanie's demeanour. She ends up in depression ready to give up her studies.

Black peril in the novel deals with sexual violation of Lucy by three black men, while Lurie is beaten and kept in the bathroom of Lucy's home. Significantly, the novel suggests that white peril is more dangerous than black peril, since it is a stealthy phenomenon, involving the abuse of power. Moreover, *Disgrace* suggests that

both black and white peril are rooted in the colonization. That is, what is defined as white peril is the result of whites' colonial attitude. For example, hints of colonial attitude can be found in Lurie's character; as revealed in Lurie's treatment of Melanie. In other words, the sexual exploitation of Melanie mirrors the sexual exploitation of black women by whites, during the colonization period. In addition, the novel suggests that black peril is the result of oppression and colonization of South Africa by whites. Lurie interprets Lucy's avoidance to admit her sexual violation as the price that she pays for the wrongdoing of her ancestors. Furthermore, Lurie believes that the attack on Lucy's farm originates from white tyranny in South Africa during the colonization epoch.

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