John Maxwell Coetzee's *Disgrace*: A Covert Narrative of the Transition in South Africa

Khadidiatou Diallo
University Gaston Berger, Senegal

Abstract

In John Maxwell Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), some aspects of style are an implicit image of the uncertainty, feeling of discontinuity, and the new trends of violence in the transition period in South Africa. This study of *Disgrace* conjugates Seymour Chatman's analysis of covert narration, and Alain Rabatel's explication of the point of view and narrative perspective, to demonstrate, through narratological and reader-response theories, that the third-person present-tense narrative gives an encoded image of the tense social context in the post-apartheid era. Specifically, this paper shows that the use of present tense, character-oriented perspective, and hybrid use of language are signs of the unbridled violence in the nascent democratic nation, of individuals battling against the demons of the past, to deal with an unstable present, with the hope to negotiate an evanescent future. Through the lenses of feminism, this article discusses the experience and symbolism of rape in the novel.

Keywords: Coetzee, covert narrative, perspective, point of view, transition

More than two decades after its publication, the literary criticism around John Maxwell Coetzee's *Disgrace* has not yet spawned. The reasons for such appraisal and reappraisal of the novel stem from the particularity of the themes, but also from the strained social context which has seen its release. Coetzee, a South African-Australian novelist and recipient of the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature, unfolds the tense period that followed the abolition of the ingrained apartheid system, a period of transition from a traumatic past to a more democratic era. It is in such a context where the rhetoric of reconciliation was chanted by South African officials that the writer chose to foreground sensitive questions such as the rape of white women by black men, and the social violence of blacks towards whites, to a point that "*Disgrace* has given rise to strong and diversified reader responses, especially in South Africa" (Agnevall, 2005, p. 15). Political leaders, like former President Thabo Mbeki, peg the story as controversial, taking it as a disgrace from an author who seems to go against the grain of the national interest, and "to be ruling out the possibility of any civilized reconciliation" (Neau, 2012, p. 89). If it is true that the novel appears as a dark image of South Africa, through the character of David Lurie, parts of the story offer snippets of a "redemptive relation" (Hayes, 2010, p. 202) with the others, mostly hinted at by the character's growing relation with animals. The thematic density and the aesthetic value of the story, not only account for the great interest it aroused in critics and readers but also confirm the idea that *Disgrace* is all but disgraceful as it is "a complex exploration of the collision between private and public worlds; intellect and body; desire and love; and public disgrace or shame and the idea of individual grace or salvation" (Kossew, 2003, p. 155). Indeed, amidst discordant and caustic reactions against the story[1], parts of readers' responses have rightly recognized the narrative value and the humanistic weight at the heart of the writer's work. Coetzee is a master storyteller; the crux of his writing is to imagine ways his country can handle its future while trying to expiate its disgraceful past and deal with the sacrifice its people must pay in the present (Rogez, 2010, p. 100). From the harshness of the themes unfolded, a glimmer of hope sprouts, despite the contradictions, uncertainties, and frustrations of the characters in the transition period.

Such a time in the troubled historical evolution of South Africa is finely depicted in *Disgrace*, through the present tense narrative, "an eternal present that gives the impression of a timeless mental life, a loss of the sense of time, set in a free indirect style from the point of view of the main character," David Lurie (Neau, 2012, p. 89). This argument of Françoise Neau is backed up by Seyed Javad Habibi and Sara Soleimani Karbalei, in a relevant analysis of the novel, put the focus on "timelessness" as "one of the significant functions of the present tense…" in *Disgrace* (2013, p. 204). Indeed, "unlike the majority of his contemporary writers who prefer "live, then tell," Coetzee resorts to "living and telling." (2013, p. 204) Though the two critics accurately interpret the author's preference of the present tense to represent individuals and communities in dire straits in the transition, this research paper deconstructs their position about the meaning of the present tense, which they read as the expression of a "stabilized frame to lead the nation" out of the throes of hatred and violence. Rather, it posits as John Mullan argues that the present tense is a technique replicating "the immediacy of experience," an aesthetic device also framing the story in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *The Master of Petersburg*.

The narrative craft of John Maxwell Coetzee has brought him to combine present-tense and third-person narration, to deliver a representation of the thoughts of characters, a mental discourse that articulates their growing conviction that they must face a violent past, to expiate

[1] Though the public reception of *Disgrace* was negative, reactions from literary critics have been more positive. This is justified by the large amount of research to date on the novel and which showcase the positive impact Coetzee has on his readers.

their guilty mind, should they hope to live the transition to democracy, with serenity. Such a narrative mark makes *Disgrace* "a disturbing book that forces the reader to confront the darker side of life and deal with ethical issues and the baser instincts of humanity" (Daiely, 2010, p. 7). The result is "a covert or effaced narration, where we hear a voice speaking of events and settings, but its owner remains hidden in the discursive shadows" (Chatman, 1978, p. 197). In *Disgrace,* the covert narrator indirectly expresses David Lurie's mental discourse, a narration of the inner condition of the protagonist that heightens the drama undergone by the latter and other members of the white community, who, as the article of Sue Kossew informs, must deal with the collision between private aspirations and public realities. Kossew rightly approaches *Disgrace* as a "novel in which bodies are strongly linked to power, desire and disgrace" (2003, p. 156). Indeed, like the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Babarians* (1980), the body is the source of power (through the rape of Melanie Isaacs) and the expression of powerlessness (suggested in the sexual assault on Lucy and Lurie's own problem to overcome his sexual lust).

The motive behind this topic is its importance as a scope of analysis, mainly because it is part of the abundant critical works on *Disgrace*. Even though much of this wide scholarship have studied the dense esthetic style and thematic value of the book, it is still relevant to explore how the story signifies the transition period. Thus, the present study attempts to investigate how Coetzee's atypical combination of effaced narration in the present tense with the character-oriented point of view, is suggestive of the chaotic and erratic social conditions in South African society. Moreover, the foremost aim of this research is to shed light on the ambivalent meaning of animal imagery and sexual violence, to argue that they are on the one hand signifiers of a relation of power and powerlessness between perpetrators and victims of violence, and on the other hand, an expression of the author's hope for the future, even if its building requires facing past traumas, through expiation, and overcoming instability in the present, by "moulding the consciousness of the transiting generation." (Habibi & Karbalaei, 2013, p. 204) Meanwhile, the research paper attempts to discuss a few questions: how does the combination of third person account and present tense represent the hectic lives of individuals and communities in South Africa's walk to democratic rule? What effect does the narration in the present tense, largely through David Lurie's consciousness, have on the narration of events? To what extent does rape in the story suggest power dynamics inherent in apartheid and postapartheid societies? Is animal metaphor a sign of past interracial violence and/or redemption?

Since the study is entirely confined to a text, the research methodology employed is textual analysis, around two major parts: the first discusses how the third-person present tense narration suggests a turbulent present and an unsteady future for South Africans; the second explores how the story, from a character-oriented perspective, draws the contours of a possible future for racial communities.

Third-Person Present-Tense Narration: The Image of an Erratic Future

In his insightful review of *Disgrace*, John Mullan takes to heart to foreground the narrative originality of the novel, whose events are relayed in a third-person present-tense narration. Mullan rightly indicates that such an option is all but frequent, as novels mostly used first-person narrators to replicate the "immediacy of experience." (2002) This is how the critic explains the reasons behind Coetzee's choice: "it gives to the narrative voice a numbed, helpless quality (…) The present tense, however, makes everything provisional. It edges us closer to the situation of the character while refusing us any actual identification with him." (2002) The process of unfolding the story in *Disgrace* indeed brings us close to white characters

and their experienced predicament in a context marked by skepticism, and a profound feeling of loss.

The use of the atypical[2] narration style is *apropos* as it allows the "vacillating"[3] writer, to suggest the confusing condition of South Africans in the transition period. Despite the ambivalence noted in style and content, *Disgrace* offers a painstaking image of the new democratic nation bending under the yoke of violence and instability. In this society, still bearing the lingering effects of a history of oppression, social roles and norms seem to be reversed, with the enigmatic situation of whites, faced with non-white communities who are motivated by a revengeful mind, and who consider that the shift in political ideology must foster a sharing of economic opportunities. This topsy-turvy situation of the nation staggering on the thorny road to reconciliation is alluded to in the shifting narrative voice, and point of view, noted in the exchanges, narrated in the present tense, between David Lurie and Lucy, but also between the latter and Petrus, the black man working in the farm. The narration of the tragic present and problematic social relationships, markedly affected by an escalation of violence in that historical moment, is conveyed through a distant third narrator disclosing the thoughts of David Lurie in free indirect discourse, with a strong dose of irony. David Lurie suffers to cope with the tension and dearth of the farm, which can be read as an epitome of postapartheid society. For the first time, he steps into an unknown zone, a change in space whispered in the change that has unexpectedly stricken his hitherto secured existence. Amid the audible narrative voice, the reader perceives his tormented mind, a narration of his thoughts that foregrounds the existential problems burdening the protagonist. His first impression of Lucy's lifestyle is delineated in this passage:

> "Do you still have your stall at the market?"
> "Yes, on Saturday mornings. I'll take you along"
> This is how she makes a living: from the kennels, and from selling flowers and garden produce. Nothing could be more simple.
> "Don't the dogs get bored?" He points to one, a tan-coloured bulldog bitch with a cage to herself who, head on paws, watches them morosely, not even bothering to get up (Coetzee, 2008, p. 62).

We have the free indirect thought of David Lurie who is mentally reviewing Lucy's life routine in that remote area. The passage bears typographical marks revealing the direct intervention of the anonymous narrator. The indirect discourse, narrated in a present and perfective tense, implies manipulation of the surface of the text for covert narrative purposes (the shift in narration levels is not easily felt). The indirect discourse allows the reader to have a fully-fledged image of the restlessness gnawing at whites, in the transiting days, through the point of view of David Lurie. Therefore, David Lurie's disenchantment and despair take center stage, through the indirect discourse mode, a covert or effaced representation of his unrest that occupies the middle ground between "non-narration" and the conspicuously audible narration

[2] "Atypical" narration because, unlike what Roland Barthes states in *Writing Degree Zero,* and largely shared by narrative critics such as Jean-Paul Sartre, *Disgrace* is not unfolded in the past tense (commonly conceived as the tense of narration). By narrating the novel in the present tense, the third-person narrator of *Disgrace* makes a vivid expression of the chaos of the "present" life of David Lurie, the focalizer of the novel.

[3] Coetzee has been criticized by scholars for the indecision of his characters, but also for a certain political and stylistic vacillation in his writing. However, as Mathilde Rogez argues, a closer analysis of some aspects of style in his novels, especially the use of italics and repetitions, reveals that vacillation or tentativeness can become a powerful verbal gesture (2010, p. 99).

(the exchange between the two protagonists). He is struggling to cope with the new social context because conscious now that he might well become a demoted citizen in the new South Africa, where the question of revenge, retribution, and possible reconciliation is a serious obstacle to social peace. This ambivalent situation of the character, going through waves of doubts buttresses the view of Vickie Daily, who opines that *Disgrace* is in many ways "a story about the powerful and powerless" (2010, p. 7).

Moreover, the heterogeneous and polyphonic representation of the story in *Disgrace* paints a vivid picture of the erratic and unfettered life of David Lurie. He is the representation of whites in South Africa who are overnight afflicted by the specter of power shifting and sharing, going through waves of doubts and depression. Thus, the combination of the third-person account and the present tense directly renders the strained social situation that befalls whites in the postapartheid era. The tragic and ironical condition of whites is ciphered in this part of the story, where the daughter carelessly reinforces her point about the need for David to bow to the new social realities and accept work from Petrus:

> "You could help with the dogs. (…) Then there is Petrus. Petrus is busy establishing his lands. You could give him a hand."
> "Give Petrus a hand. I like that. I like the historical piquancy. Will he pay me a wage for my labour, do you think?"
> "Ask him. I'm sure he will…" (Coetzee, 2008, pp. 76–78).

Lurie's quest for continuity, in the fragmented trajectory his life has taken, is essentially what drives him to contemplate unthinkable possibilities, such as working for Petrus. The "historical piquancy" he highlights reflects a certain negation of the character who still cannot format his mind and heart to adhere to the new social codes and roles. Indeed, irony, as Jean-Claude Rolland opines, is "a tragic figure of negation"; thus, its use in the above discussion constitutes a telling sign of the straight mind that drives Lurie. Truly, in the new South Africa, "the rules have changed, and he cannot know where he is going, where any of them are going. All kinship and all security is frail." (Mullan, 2002) This analysis of the shift in power and cultural norms is so insightful, as Lurie himself is a bit taken aback by the profound transformations that are settling in. Lurie struggles to unknot the entangled threads of his present life; he is a white man who "was in the role of power" (Daily, 2010, p. 7) because overprotected by the biased judiciary system to the detriment of the powerless members of the discriminated racial groups. It can be argued that it is because of his privileged position that Lurie goes somehow unpunished for the rape of Melanie Isaacs. The tragic irony of his life is that his power shifts to powerlessness as he is "condemned to solitude," (Coetzee, 2008, p. 34) like the hero in Byron's poem he is reciting in class. He is shown desperately trying to accept coexistence with those who were at the periphery of society.

Such a fall of the character from the center to the margin is encoded in the thematic line and the narrative design of the story. This is hinted at in the covert narration of his thoughts that are an indirect discourse of the new realities and "deviations" from the normative moral and social codes that were core principles of the modernist era of Apartheid. The man ponders over the sexual orientation of his daughter Lucy, who is a lesbian, a code of conduct that seems to reflect a certain desacralization and deconstruction of a preconceived conception of gender relationships. This is how his thoughts are disclosed to the reader:

> He pretends he is tired and, after supper, withdraws to his room, where faintly the sounds come to him of Lucy leading her own life: drawers opening and shutting, the

> radio, the murmur of a telephone conversation. Is she calling Johannesburg, speaking to Helen? Is his presence here keeping the two of them apart? Would they dare to share a bed while he was in the house? If the bed creaked in the night, would they be embarrassed? Embarrassed enough to stop? But what does he know about what women do together? (…) And what does he know about these two in particular, Lucy and Helen? (…) The truth is, he does not like to think of his daughter in the throes of passion with another woman, and a plain one at that (Coetzee, 2008, p. 86).

This is all but an overt narration of the anxious thoughts of David Lurie, who seems to be lost and burdened with what he suffers to admit and accept: Lucy, his daughter, his "second salvation, the bride of his youth reborn," (Coetzee, 2008, p. 86) is a lesbian. Indeed, though the passage is an effaced image of the mental discourse of the character, it is opened by the audible voice of the he-narrator describing the action of the protagonist – "he pretends he is tired…" This clear inscription is followed by an indirect representation of his thoughts, implicitly indicated by the set of questions that unwrap the subtle effacement of the narrator expressing the anguish suffered by the man. Whether these are or are not the exact words expressed by the quoted speaker (Chatman, 1978, p. 200), the rhetorical questions in the excerpt are a pronounced image of the preoccupations of a father who cannot figure out the reasons that brought her daughter to "deviate" from mainstream sexual normative codes and be "in the throes of passion with another woman." As Jacqueline Authier-Revuz correctly reasons, the question mark is a written manifestation of doubt, incomprehension, a request for an explanation, a speechless answer of one interlocutor to what has been just said by another[4]. Thus, the interrogative structure adds to the emotional agitation already distressing Lurie, who not only laments about his disrupted existence but also feels dejected by the turn in his daughter's life: "He sighs. Poor Lucy! Poor daughters! What a destiny, what a burden to bear! And sons: they too must have their tribulations, though he knows less about that" (Coetzee, 2008, p. 87). We have here an internal monologue of the character, introduced by the open mention by the third narrator (he sighs). The use of the exclamative signals that this is a direct reproduction of Lurie's mental discourse. As Chatman highlights, "exclamation does not suit the role of effaced or transparent mediator. The logic of covert narration permits only the character to exclaim." (1978, p. 202) The narration of his thoughts has "a greater degree of autonomy, and though ambiguity may persist, the absence of the tag makes it sound more like the characters' speaking or thinking than a narrator's report" (Chatman, 1978, p. 200).

Thus, the third-person narration, together with the present tense, draws a more enchanting image of the tribulations and turmoil of white South Africans who feel entrapped by the immediacy of change and the difficulty to give meaning to the new political code settling in the nascent democracy. The present tense approach is suggestive of a certain timelessness, and therefore habits and factual statements, but also new (transgressive) gender norms, are expressed through this grammatical instance in *Disgrace*.

In this way, the narrative choice to make joint use of the third-person narration and the present tense is a sign of the trouble lived by whites, who overnight realize that their hitherto secured life, built on the backs of marginalized and invisible groups, now hangs by a thin thread. This is disclosed by this part of the mental words of David Lurie, the least inclined to abide by the new order, in the novel:

[4] Jacqueline Authier-Revuz. (1979, p. 78) [Le point d'interrogation] est « la manifestation écrite d'un doute, d'une incompréhension, d'une demande d'explication, réponse muette de l'un des interlocuteurs à ce qui vient d'être dit par l'autre ». Personal translation: "[The question mark] is "the written sign of a doubt, a misunderstanding, a request for explanation; it is one of the interlocutors' speechless answer to what has just been said by another."

> But the questions remain. Does Petrus know who the strangers were? Was I because of some word Petrus let drop that they made Lucy their target rather than, say, Ettinger? Did Petrus know in advance what they were planning? In the old days, one could have it out with Petrus. In the old days, one could have had it out to the extent of losing one's temper and sending him packing and hiring someone else in his place. But though Petrus is paid a wage, Petrus is no longer, strictly speaking, hired help. It is hard to say what Petrus is, strictly speaking. The word that seems to serve best, however, is *neighbour*. Petrus is a neighbour who at present happens to sell his labour, because that is what suits him. He sells his labour under contract, unwritten contract, and that contract makes no provision for dismissal on grounds of suspicion. It is a new world they live in, he and Lucy and Petrus. Petrus knows it, and Petrus knows that he knows it (Coetzee, 2008, p. 117).

The third-person present tense option makes this passage from Lurie's bubbling mind much more vivid. Indeed, this is a free indirect expression attributable to David Lurie, a narrated monologue, as Dorrit Cohn (1978) labels it, that shows the existential problems weighing on the character. The array of questions opening the passage is indicative of the emotional unrest of the character who wonders whether Petrus was in complicity with the group of strangers who sexually assaulted his daughter. His preoccupation becomes more pregnant, as the unanswered questions are immediately followed by an affirmation which is a burning truth bothering him: the days when the like of Petrus would be brutalized into confession have gone by. Lurie is conscious that the black man (an epitome of formerly downgraded communities) can no longer be pegged as inferior, in the new days; he no longer is an invisible subaltern who cannot speak because of a systemic oppression. Petrus has become, "in the new world" they are living in, a "*neighbour*." The italicized aspect of the world not only reflects that direct access to the mind of the character but a dark irony as well, suggesting the disastrous condition of whites in the transition, inferred in the anaphoric repetition of the name Petrus in the mental discourse. Lurie is skeptical about the possibility to envisage an alternative to racist policies.

Thus, the fleeting and frail aspect of whites' lives hovers over the third-person present tense structure of the passage. Though David Lurie is represented struggling to get his head above his erratic existence, Coetzee is unblinking in his conviction that the link with the past must not be broken but rather, it must be reconsidered and serve as motivation to define the offshoots of the vital program (reminiscent of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission), to redefine interpersonal relationships in the nation. This does not dovetail with the position, upheld by Habibi and Karbalei who argue that it is because the link with the past is broken that a chaotic situation "perhaps would prevail there since there is no stabilized frame to lead the nation and mold the consciousness of the transiting generation" (2013, p. 204). However tragic his condition is, events in the story suggest that there is no way for Lurie to accept the wind of change blowing in the country unless he and his community expiate their guilty mind, and expiation is only possible if he recognizes and accounts for the past, vivid and present, more than ever before. This can explain the option to foreground his points of view and perspective in the elucidation of the implications of the country's shift in political ideology.

Mapping The Transition Through a Character-Oriented Perspective

Narrative information and images of the transiting period hover over the fictional borders of *Disgrace*. To meet up with the need to tell more about the hustle and joy of marginalized communities but also the consternation of whites tussling for the upkeeping of the old way, Coetzee's literary craft leads him to choose to regulate and deliver the information through the

lenses of one (…) participant in the story (David Lurie), with the narrator adopting or seeming to adopt what [is called] "vision" or "point of view" (Genette, 1980, p. 161). In other words, next to the third-person voice, the bulk of the information is perceived by the reader through Lurie's "perspective" that is, with "distance", the two chief modalities of that regulation (Genette, 1980, p. 162). The concept of point of view underpinned in Genette's *Narrative Discourse* is further discussed by Alain Rabatel, in his exhaustive work on the textual construction of point of view. For the French scholar, it is almost impossible to elucidate the question of the representation of objects without considering the interactions between the object and the subject (Rabatel, 2009, p. 25). In a narrative work such as *Disgrace*, the possibility for the reader to perceive or experience characters, objects, and events in the story can only happen if the character-transmitter (Lurie) is placed in a position to "perceive" and "make perceive" the reader. This dimension of the narrative perspective that Rabatel calls "pragmatico-argumentative,"[5] (2009, p. 26) explains why *Disgrace* is not a verist reproduction of the South African reality but a *re-presentation* of that reality, filtered by the consciousness of the character-subject, to articulate a point of view, which is, *in fine*, the information that he has on the object (life in the transition period). In other words, the events of the story are essentially *presented* to the reader from the perspective of the protagonist.

As the center of enunciating narrative information, David Lurie's point of view about the social malaise of whites in the nation is relayed in an explicit discourse on the people around him. His intense mental discourse and multiple perceptions of the new realities are conveyed through images disclosing his pathetic life. Indeed, the regulation of information in Coetzee's story is not limited to identifying "who sees" or "who knows," but rather, as Catherine Détrie argues, it interrogates referencing choices, the reference donation mode, and constructs a conscious subject of the consciousness based on perceptive, cognitive, and axiological components. The textual features of Lurie's point of view, through which the reader perceives the tragic events befalling his daughter (with the rape), map out the social and political upheavals in the nation. We have a filtered yet comprehensive picture of the dramatic situation of communities who were living on the backs of nonwhite groups.

Besides, the third-person present-tense approach connotes the indecision of whites who find it hard to give a new direction to their lives, in the transition. Mathilde Rogez, in her exploration of the esthetics of ambivalence and vacillation in *Disgrace*, considers this situation of characters as tentativeness or hesitation (2010, p. 102), much visible in the post-stress traumatic disorder in their troubled life, caused by the rape of Lucy. The connoted rape scene is perceived through the consciousness of David Lurie, who was caught up by one of the assaulters, while his daughter was being violated in another room. Such a narrative position – to use David Lurie as the router transmitting signs and sounds of the assault – makes the pain and humiliation experienced by the young woman more acute in the mind of the reader. This passage well delineates the consciousness of David Lurie, filtering the traumatic incidence:

[5] « Cette dimension pragmatico-argumentative de la vue explique que celle-ci ne soit pas la reproduction vériste du réel, mais une *re-presentation*, une mise en spectacle qui oblige à donner à la vue tout son empan, c'est-à-dire à prendre en compte le fait que toute perception manifeste, d'une façon ou d'une autre, des opinions qui correspondent à des manières de voir » (p. 26). Personal translation. [This pragmatico-argumentative dimension of the point view explains why it is not a verist reproduction of real, but *a re-presentation*, a performance that gives to the view all its span, that is to say take into account the idea that any perception shows, one way or another, positions that signal ways of seeing.]

> "Lucy!" he croaks, and then, louder: "Lucy!"
> *He tries to kick at the door*, but he is not himself, and the space too cramped anyway, the door too old and solid.
>
> So it has come, the day of testing. Without warning, without fanfare, it is here and he is in the middle of it. In his chest his heart hammers so hard that it too, in its dumb way, must know. How will they stand up to the testing, he and his heart?
>
> His child is in the hands of strangers. In a minute, in an hour, it will be too late; whatever is happening to her will be set in stone, will belong to the past. But now it is not too late. Now he must do something. (…) He shivers. A dangerous trio? Why did he not recognize it in time? But they are not harming him, not yet. Is it possible what the house has to offer will be enough for them? Is it possible they will leave Lucy unharmed too? (Coetzee, 2008, p. 95; my italics).

We have here a most pronounced expression of the tragedy befalling David Lurie, at the moment of the assault, as he feels unable to protect his daughter from her abductors. The account of the rape is more enthralling as it is encoded in a hybrid style, with the blend of voices of the he-narrator and the bubbling thoughts of Lurie. The emphasis on the agitation of the man is shown from the outset, especially with the implicit juxtaposition of the two narrative styles: "He tries to kick at the door, but he is not himself, and the space too cramped anyway, the door too old and solid." If the first sequence is an explicit indication of the third-person present narration, the last part is a narrated monologue of Lurie, signaled by the elliptic structure (with the verbal lexicon omitted). After that, we have a direct representation of Lurie's mind speech (Chatman, 1978, p. 202). There is no degree of ambiguity that this is a covert narration of the thoughts, as exposed in the passage. The thoughts are a lament of the character confronted with what they (the whites) have been expecting, since the announcement of the demise of apartheid, which Lurie calls "the day of testing." This is more unbearable for the latter as he does not know how "to stand up to the testing." The narration of his monologue is woven around a set of questions, ending the passage. These graphic markers are part of a host of expressive features (exclamations, expletives, imperatives, repetitive, and similar emphases (Chatman, 1978, p. 202), which are indicative of free indirect speech. Lurie's questions express affliction, vulnerability, uncertainty, and hesitation as to the stance to take. He sadly realizes that the assaulters will vent their age-long anger at Lucy.

In blacks' struggle for visibility and social recognition, white women bear the brunt of lifelong frustrations. Though criticized by political leaders for harping on the hackneyed myth of the black man raping the white woman, Coetzee's representation of Lucy's sexual abuse is, in fact, an encoded expression of his deep concern about the unbridled sexual violence unleashed in the new South Africa. The writer's conviction is articulated in the mind discourse of Lurie who opines that there "must be some niche in the system for women and what happens to them" (Coetzee, 2008, p. 98). Bedeviled with his devastated girl, Lurie has a more positive mind about the fierce reaction of the lesbian community against sexual violation: "no wonder they are so vehement against rape, she, and Helen. Rape, god of chaos and mixture, violators of seclusions. Raping a lesbian worse than raping a virgin: more of a blow" (Coetzee, 2008, p. 105). The ignominy of sexual assault resounds in the emphatic structure of the character's mental discourse that compares rape to the most devastating chaos, desacralizing the secluded feminine intimacy, but also from the insistence on the violation of a lesbian, which is more symbolically humiliating an attack. As it is written by Achmat Dangor in *Bitter Fruit*, rape "is an ancient form of genocide (…) You conquer a nation by bastardizing its children" (2005, p.

204). Under apartheid, the sexual violation was an expression of white power over blacks; it was a *verb* with which white racists communicated with black combatants; rape was a means to create and reproduce multiple systems of domination including racism and colonialism. In the transition period, rape can be conceived as the utmost expression of powerlessness. Indeed, the assault on Lucy is not only a violation of her intimacy and personhood, but it is also empowerment, albeit temporal, of the three rapists who vent lifelong anger on the white woman, whom they consider as the symbol of oppression.

The forced sexual act of David Lurie on his student Melanie Isaacs is as well "an ultimate demonstration of power in a racist and patriarchal society" (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992, p. 14). However, although Melanie seems to consent to Lurie's advances, – "she is too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself upon her," (Coetzee, 2008, p. 24) it should be pointed out that she is the victim of Lurie's domineering behavior, progressively invading the life of the young woman, and violating her intimacy. Therefore, Melanie does not consent to the sexual act but rather remains inert faced with the overwhelming presence and insistence of David Lurie. On the contrary, her "domain"[6] or "the physical, emotional, psychological, and intellectual space [she] lives in" (Frye & Shafer, 1977, p. 338) is violated by her molester. As Vickie Daiely correctly explains, Coetzee shows that "when he takes Melanie's body, he also intrudes her home, her social life. By assaulting Melanie's body, David Lurie's actions foreground "the theme of power and powerlessness as it illustrates that he at first has power over her, then loses his power as a result of his actions" (2010, p. 3).

The shame and disgrace felt by Lucy are much more perceived by the reader through the character-orientated narration of the rape aftermath. Many instances are filtered and shared by Lurie but also by Lucy herself, exposing thus her post-traumatic stress disorder. "Patiently silently, Lucy must work her way back from the darkness to the light," (Coetzee, 2008, p. 107) Lurie opines. However, right after the rape, the woman has withdrawn into silence, a horrible aftereffect of trauma, esthetically whispered in the imitative harmony built around this alliterative thought of the character: "It [rape] will *dawn* on them that over the body of the woman silence is being *drawn* like a blanket" (Coetzee, 2008, p. 110; my italics). Such figurative language wrapping the mental words of David Lurie inspires in the reader a relation between the meaning of the text and the effect of insistence, inscribed in the sound form.

This esthetic dimension of the story in *Disgrace* is further articulated in the thoughts of David Lurie who finally talks her daughter into speaking about the trauma that is progressively becoming the night of her life (pp. 155-6-7). Lucy's father cannot fathom the rationale behind his daughter's refusal to report the case and leave the farm. For Lucy, raping a woman is "pushing the knife in; exiting afterward, leaving the body behind covered in blood…" (Coetzee, 2008, p. 158) As the narrator states, these powerful words of the victim,

> echo in his mind (…) *Covered in blood*. What does she mean? Was he right after all when he dreamt of a bed of blood, a bath of blood? They do rape. The things of the three visitors driving away in the not-to-old Toyota, the back seat piled with household goods, their penises, their weapons, tucked warm and satisfied between their legs - purring is the word that come to him (…) He remembers**,** a child poring over the word *rape* in newspaper reports, trying to puzzle out what exactly it meant, wondering what

[6] Frye, M., & C. Shafer, in "Rape and Respect" (1977, p. 338) employ the concept of "domain" to refer to the violation of private and emotional space by the act of rape.

> the letter p, usually so gentle, was doing in the middle of a word held in such horror that no one would utter it aloud (Coetzee, 2008, p. 159; my italics).

The words from the mind of the character are fraught with satire, translating the hatred and disgust the father feels towards the three assaulters. In the passage, the narratorial representation of the character's thought is signaled by the verbum dicendi "he thinks… he remembers", which are "cues of immediate context," (McHale, 1978, p. 267) but also by the italics that indicate a shift to David's voice, as the typographical devices report his thoughts by reproducing his mind style (Silva, 2012, p.18). Truly, even if the logic of covert narration permits only an italicized inscription of the character's point of view (Chatman, 1978, p. 202) the need is to point out that, in *Disgrace*,

> the "use of italics underlines the eruption of violence, which spreads to the text itself. Unlike repetitions, which only record the character's thoughts, italics work at another level. Because they are a typographical sign and as such are visible on the page, inscribe on and within the body of the text (…); they suggest that the text itself becomes contaminated by violence (Rogez, 2010, p. 104).

Indeed, the systemic violence bred by the policies of separation, incensed by the gloomy moment, comes out in Coetzee's text: written in italics, Lurie's reference to "*covered in blood*" and "*rape,*" indicates a distance between the narrator and the character; when combined with the overall imprecision in the narrative, they contribute to reflecting the fear and skepticism, in the transition era, a situation that fuels the enmity between blacks and whites.

The story in *Disgrace* is informed by conflicting forces, materialized by the brutality of the rape; such brutality is featured in the assaulters' verbal violence against Lucy. The latter's efforts to vent her agony are suggested through her intense discursive sections, signs of her humiliation. Through her point of view, the reader has painstaking perceptions of the rape scene, of the shocking moment, here underlined:

> Lucy was frightened, frightened near to death. Her voice choked she could not breathe, her limb went numb. *This is not happening*. She said to herself, as the men forced her down; *it is just a dream, a nightmare*. While the men, for their part, drank up her fear, revelled in it, did all they could to hurt her, to menace her, to heighten her terror. *Call your dogs!* They said to her. *Go on, call your dogs! No dogs? Then let us show you dogs!* (Coetzee, 2008, p. 160).

Lucy's point of view about the moment of terror she experienced is spotlighted in this polyvocal passage formed by the joint use of the narratorial expression of the thoughts and a direct inscription of the mental words. This option allows a more captivating expression of the terror she felt, as she could not believe what was happening to her. The direct quotation of her mind, structurally indicated by the italics, renders the image of the assault more vivid and insists on the abasement imposed on the young woman. The rapists "did all they could to hurt her, to menace her, to heighten her terror;" through this gradation that gives a hyperbolic allure to her pain, the narrator draws an enchanting image of the torment overwhelming the woman, while the three black men were forcing her down. Feminists have been much prolific about the panic aroused by sexual assault in the victim. Indeed, feminist perspectives on rape have become more elaborated, through the years. First-wave and second-wave feminists refute psychoanalytic theorists' analysis of rape as an act of men dominated by their overwhelming sexual impulses; rather, they recognized rape "as an act of violence, not of sex" (Donat &

D'Emilio, 1992, p. 19). In the 1960s-1070s, new feminists reconceptualized rape and further argued that it is a form of violence that affects the personhood of the assaulted, yet from which the latter can survive. Truly, the most basic challenge that feminists have posed to traditional views of rape lies in the recognition of rape as a crime against the victim herself.

When sexual abuse leads to pregnancy, it puts the abused in the most serious trauma. Lucy, answering her father's request to report the case and not humble herself before history (Coetzee, 2008, p. 160), says this: "I am a dead person and I do not know yet what will bring me back to life. All I know is that I cannot go away (…) Yes, the road I am following may be the wrong one. But if I leave the farm now I will leave defeated, and will taste that defeat for the rest of my life" (Coetzee, 2008, p. 161). These words of her disclose the political allegory of the novel, as they are eloquent of the anxiety of whites, who no longer know where to fit, faced with a blurred future, in that hectic time in the life of the nation. Lucy is dying as an outcome of gender-based violence; likewise, the whites in the interregnum "know that they cannot go away" and cut the filial bond with South Africa, otherwise, they will feel defeated, by "the permanent changes affecting [their] personal situation as well as the country as a whole…" (Rogez, 2010, p. 102).

Despite the apparent violence of the text in *Disgrace*, there are gleams of hope sprouting from the inclement atmosphere in the country. As Dereck Attridge reasons, "while Coetzee's novel may seem to be producing an overpoweringly dark image of South Africa, through the character of David Lurie, the text makes its counter-affirmation of the ethical values" (2004, p. 202). This mention of ethical values is given credence by the decision of the daughter to accept marriage as an alliance, a deal with Petrus. "Disgraceful" and uncertain as the idea may be, she is decided to accept the inevitable redistribution of power and riches, as a primal stage on the road to social justice and reconciliation. She avers: "Yes I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity" (Coetzee, 2008, p. 205). Modulators like "maybe", or "perhaps" punctuate the utterance of the young woman and reflect the frailty of the hope and fear of a future, that seems most ungraspable. Such an ambivalent presentation of her decision to stay on, is further reinforced by "the truncated nominal sentences that are riddled and almost hollowed out by suspension marks," (Rogez, 2010, p. 102) that shows her determination to stay in the farm. However, the elements of uncertainty in her discourse are an implicit reflection of skepticism about the possibility of peaceful cohabitation between racial groups, in a society deeply stricken by an age of iron, and where they are mostly liable, at least in the transition, to have a dog life.

Therefore, such ambivalence, noted in the representation of these characters' discourse and painful experiences, is filtered by the consciousness of David Lurie and Lucy, whose perspectives of the sentiment of angst, discontinuity, and trauma allow the reader of Coetzee to *have a re-presentation* of the implications, disruptions as well as impacts of the abolition of apartheid. The linguistic and symbolical features of their points of view, mostly rendered in mental discursive sections, carefully quoted, or *retold* by the distant narrator, have greatly participated in the construction of the narrative perspectives. Despite the violence of the text, the unrest born from existential problems, Coetzee holds out hope for a reconciliation of individuals and communities. Truly, Coetzee strongly believes in the building of a multiracial, transethnic society, an opinion symbolically envisaged by the rape child that Lucy is, against all odds, willing to have, but also by her unflinching position to take alterity differently, although uncertainty and doubts loom ahead. More than David Lurie, Lucy has the

consciousness that they will have to pay a huge price for that reconciliation to happen, to humble themselves before history, and "live like a dog." However, as whispered in the animal metaphor (with Lurie's growing interest in and commitment to animal life), dog life is what can lead them to reconsider alterity and envisage the future with serenity.

In *Disgrace,* the animal metaphor is used as a signifier of interracial violence. Indeed, David Lurie's intricate position with the dogs in the veterinary clinic can be explored within the historical and political context of the novel. Such a tense context is marked by violations and injustices and the denial of human rights, an arbitrary situation upon individuals and communities who are reduced to the state of animals. Likewise, the counter-violence from the system's victims (the three rapists), turns them into disgraced animals. The novel draws a parallelism between the antipathic relations between individuals in postapartheid South Africa and the killing of dogs.

Moreover, the symbolism of animal images is more eloquent as it suggests the lack of perspective for the whites in the transition period. Indeed, the dogs seem to have no future and that is the reason why they were put to death and incinerated. Such a disgraceful condition of the animals calls to mind that of the whites, epitomized by Lurie and Lucy, who pain to envision better days ahead. The act of giving up his preferred dog shows nascent alterity in the man, as it is "symbolic of relinquishment of "desire" and acceptance of "responsibility for the other" (Zembylas, 2009, p. 225). Through animal imagery, Coetzee showcases what Don Randall takes as an "intensified focus on the animal [that] enables to write in a zone of intersection between sociopolitical and ecological ethics that sharpens the critique of modern political regimes that dominate and exploit fellow beings both human and non-human" (2007, p. 250). Thus, by developing a sympathetic relationship with them, especially the one he is obliged to dispose of through lethal injection (Coetzee, 2008, p. 220), by caring for the existence of the dogs, Lurie develops an ethical consciousness that generates a growing empathy for the other (animal/human) body, which can lead the self to identify with the other, and *in fine* construct more humane relationships.

Admittedly, "John Maxwell Coetzee is a master storyteller trying through his fiction to imagine a way his country can handle its future while trying to expiate its disgraceful past and deal with the sacrifice its people must pay in the present. In the end, the glimmer of hope he sees may be evanescent and under constant threat, but it is there nevertheless."[7] The narrative grace of the prose writer is a major esthetic contribution to washing away the disgraceful past deeds of his people, in his *essential gesture* to imagine a time of grace for the Azanian nation.

Conclusion

The objective of the analysis of John-Maxwell Coetzee's *Disgrace* was to demonstrate that the story is an encoded narrative of South Africa's transition from a statutory regime of racial oppression to a democratic one. The argumentation has conjugated the postulates of Seymour Chatman on covert narration to Alain Rabatel's explications of the point of view and narrative perspective, to conclude that the third-person present-tense narration suggests the alarming situation of individuals and communities, faced with uncertainties and a sense of discontinuity, following their country's unexpected liberation from the prison that apartheid was (Gordimer). The present tense allows more insightful representations of the tribulations and emotional

[7] *The Cleveland Plain Dealer's* praise for the book (https://www.plaindealer.com).

unrest of whites, who pain to imagine a post-apartheid South Africa, and who battle to preserve "the uneasy pleasures of white privilege" (Cooper, 2005, p. 22). The article has showcased the pathetic condition of Coetzee's protagonist, representing the older social order, whose secured life comes overnight to an impasse, as he can hardly cope with the wind of change blowing through the country.

The profound angst felt by Lurie is connoted in his intense monologuing, mental discursive sections that are either covertly narrated by the third-voice narrator or directly quoted in the text. This layered narration is a trait of the polyvocal aspect of the novel, as it expresses David Lurie's confrontation with change, his reluctance to adhere to the new political vision which calls for a reconsideration of interpersonal relationships, and a redistribution of power. The disclosure of the mental discourse of characters, implicitly *re-told* in a present-tense approach, demonstrates profound anxiety in society, as communities find it daunting to appropriate themselves to the normative codes in the transitional period and grasp an evanescent future.

Such a condition is much more highlighted by the character-oriented focalization or point of view, as Alain Rabatel puts it. With David and Lucy filtering the bulk of information about the drama of whites witnessing the officially defunct of apartheid and uneasy privileges, *Disgrace* harps back to the disenchantment of the latter, tottering between efforts to avoid change and the challenging need to amend their straight minds to adhere to the new yet unpredictable social order. By placing Lurie and Lucy in a position to perceive and make perceive, the story allows a *re-creation* of that stressful period for communities in South Africa. Lurie's perspective allows articulating his point of view about the unsettling situation, a point of view mostly conveyed through the revelation of his thoughts about the alternative life imposed on him by political change. Through his mind's eye, the reader fully appreciates his anxiety, enhanced by the language of graphic signs (italics, interrogative, points of suspension), with which the text is fraught.

This graphic image of systemic violence is further developed through the narrative perspective of Lucy, filtered through Lurie. The latter's position about her trauma is another telling representation of the rape scene and the humiliation she had to bear. Lucy calls her tormentors "tax collectors": she and her community must honor the "debt" of years of oppression, to expiate past guilt. Images and textual elements of her post-rape stress are reflected in the tone of her words of pain, and the typographical mentions in the text.

However violent the text is, and notwithstanding the ambivalent stance of characters about the implications of political change, words, and images of hope grapple to sprout out of the textual gloom. The author's hope for a fairer social context is implied in Lucy's decision to come over her agony and build an alliance with Petrus, to envision a possible future for herself and the rape child to be born. Likewise, the optimism of Coetzee is hinted at in David Lurie's disposition to amend his temperament and transform his "dog life" into a "*life for the dogs*", an animal metaphor symbolizing the vital need for him and his community to re-imagine alterity and thus become more human. Though lean yet simmering with feeling,[8] *Disgrace* is Coetzee's "endeavor to grasp the consciousness of his time and place."[9]

[8] Paul Levy (October 26, 1999), in The Wall Street Journal, praises J. Maxwell Coetzee and *Disgrace* (https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB940892119143957157).

[9] Inspired by one of Nadine Gordimer's famous citations about writing, from Nadine Gordimer: a life in quotes. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/14/nadine-gordimer-a-life-in-quotes).

References

Agnevall, P. (January 2005). The narrative technique in John Maxwell Coetzee's *Disgrace*. Special Project, ENC001.

Attridge, D. (2004). *J. M. Coetzee and the ethics of reading: Literature in the event.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Authier-Revuz, J. (1979). Parler avec des signes de ponctuation » ou: de la typographie à l'énonciation. *Documentation et Recherche en linguistique allemande contemporaine*. *21,* 76–87.

Chatman, S. (1978). *Story and discourse: narrative structure in fiction and film*. New York: Cornell University Press.

Coetzee, J. M. (2008). *Disgrace*. (4th ed.). New York: Penguin Books.

Coetzee, J. M. (1980). *Waiting for the Barbarians*. New York: Penguin

Cohn, D. (1978). *Transparent Minds*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Cooper, P. (Winter 2005). Metamorphosis and sexuality: reading the strange passions of disgrace. *Research in African Literatures, 36*(4), 22–39. https://doi.org/10.1353/ral.2005.0160

Daiely, V. (2010). Review of *disgrace*. *A review and commentary on Disgrace by J. M. Coetzee. EFF, 2,* 7–8.

Dangor, A. (2005). *Bitter fruit*. London: Paperbacks.

Detrie, C. (1999). Alain Rabatel, *La construction textuelle du point de vue* ». *Cahiers de Praxématique, 32*. http://dx.doi.org/10.4000/praxematique.2866

Donat, P., & D'Emilio, J. (1992). A feminist redefinition of rape and sexual assault: historical foundations and change. *Journal of Social Issues, 48*(1), 9–22. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1992.tb01154.x

Frye, M., & C., Shafer. (1977). Rape and respect. *Feminism and Philosophy*, M. Vetterling-Braggin, F. Elliston and J. English (Eds.), Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 333–346.

Genette, G. (1983). *Narrative discourse*, *an essay in method*. New York: Cornell University Press.

Habibi S. J., & Karbalaei, S. S. (2013). Always, already: present tense in John Maxwell Coetzee's *Disgrace*. *The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, *18*(4), 203–213.

Hayes, P. (2010). *John Maxwell Coetzee and the novel: writing and politics after Beckett*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Heimneh, S. S. (August 2014). Coetzee's postmodern bodies: disgrace between human and animal bodies. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 4*(8), 1569–1575. https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.4.8.1569-1575

Kossew, S. (2003). The politics of shame and redemption in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace. Research in African Literatures*, *34*(2), 155–162. https://doi.org/10.1353/ral.2003.0036

McHale, B. (1978). Free indirect discourse: A survey of recent accounts. *PTL 3*(2), 249–87.

Mullan, J. (June 2002). Review of *Disgrace* (2008). Present and correct. The Guardian: Book Review of Disgrace. Retrieved September 26, 2022, from https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/jun/01/featuresreviews.guardianreview

Neau, F. (2012). The masse and powerlessness. *Recherches en Psychanalyse*, *1*(13), 88–96. Retrieved September 26, 2022 from https://www.cairn.info/revue-recherches-en-psychanalyse-2012-1-page-88.htm

Rabatel, A. (2009). Perspective et point de vue. *Communication*, 85, 25–35. https://doi.org/10.3917/commu.085.0023

Randall, D. (2007). The community of sentient beings: J. M. Coetzee‟s ecology in Disgrace and Elizabeth Costello, *ESC* 33, *1*(2), 209–225. https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.0.0054

Rogez, M. (2010). "I am making a start; or, if not that, making a gesture": J. M. Coetzee's aesthetics of tentativeness. *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, *32*(2), 99–110. https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.8437

Silva, C. (2012). The representation of thought. '*Circe': from James Joyce's Ulysses to Sean Walsh's Bloom*." Faculdade de Letras da UFMG 2008. Retrieved September 26, 2022 from http://www.bibliotecadigital.ufmg.br/dspace/bitstream/1843/ECAP7J6H3T/1/text.pdf

Zembylas, M. (2009). Bearing witness to the ethics and politics of suffering: J. M. Coetzee's Disgrace, inconsolable mourning, and the task of educators. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, *28,* 223–237. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-008-9108-0

Corresponding author: Khadidiatou Diallo
Email: khadidiatou.diallo@ugb.edu.sn