

**Positing The Feminist “Self” In The Fractured Identities Of Race In J.M. Coetzee’s**

***Disgrace* And Nadine Gordimer’s *July’s People***

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After such knowledge, what forgiveness?

T.S.Eliot

Feminism has moved away from the stereotypes and it has sought to mend fences between the cultures and initiate a dialogue of reproachment across all levels to act as a binder among ethnical divisions. This paper is an attempt to postulate the ideological divisions among two women characters who have been put under the test coupled with the loaded identities of culture and race. Gender can be defined in many different ways and the concept is widely used but Harriet Bradley gives us an applicable definition from her book *Fractured identities* which focuses on the relation between women and men as, “Gender refers to the varied and complex arrangements between men and women, encompassing the organisation of reproduction, the sexual divisions of labour and cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity” (205).

Nadine Gordimer and J.M.Coetzee are white writers who were hounded by the then black Government which believed that they are agents of hate willing to mask their subversive politics. Lucy is the protagonist in *Disgrace*. She has made a conscious decision to leave the city and settle in the country side of South Africa. Lucy likes the serene atmosphere of the rural South Africa and lives a peaceful life with a farm owned by her.

The socio - politico milieu of South Africa emerges in favour of blacks and they have been freed from the clutches of Apartheid. Lucy does not feel the tumult of the raging black phenomenon and is quite happy to lead a quiet life among his black labourers. Lucy treats them well and accepts their culture without any stigma attached to it. The disgraced Lucy's father David visits her and immediately senses the whiff of violence hanging in the air rather ominously. David warns Lucy to back off from the farm and could sense that his black labourer Petrus is dangerous and waiting for his chance to avenge white supremacy. Lucy feels that they are part of the ethos present in the rural South Africa and they can't be shunted away. Lucy's "Self" is free of any ideologies and her consciousness is not inhibited with racial thoughts.

David, a western male with the prejudiced "Self" rebels against Petrus, who is leading a pack of black labourers who are eager to reclaim their lost hold on the South African Landscape. The prediction of David came true with Lucy being raped by the black labourers with their identity remains to be established. Lucy perceives this horrific act as an equaliser and resolves to settle it with herself and remains unruffled with the evolving political climate. David is shocked to witness her daughter's attitude to a calamity of this magnitude:

I don't believe you get the point, David. Petrus is not offering me a church wedding followed by a honeymoon on the wild coast. He is offering an alliance, a deal. I contribute the land, in return for which I am allowed to creep under his wing. Otherwise, he wants to remind me, I am without protection, I am fair game. (123)

Lucy's "Self" transcends the boundaries of race and realises that it's her turn to humble herself before the black resurgence with poise. She refuses to abort her child which may not know its father for the rapists were too many to identify them. Lucy "marries" Petrus and joins with his endless list of Concubines and reinvents her identity as a subversive creature rather than a dominant white soul. In the post-apartheid society of South Africa, power relations are reversed and the whites have become the minorities. Edward Said opines in *Culture And Imperialism*, "A new...appalling tribalism is fracturing societies, separating people, promoting greed, bloody conflict, and uninteresting assertions of minor ethnic or group particularity" (21).

Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* was also banned by the then South African Government for negatively portraying the South African discourse to the world community. *July's People* opens with the white South African Couples Bam Smales and Maureen seeking shelter in a shack provided to them by their black servant July. Maureen and her husband were left with no choice except to flee from the civil war torn Johannesburg. Maureen feels disgusted with this role reversal of the Coloniser - Colonised stratum where she is caricatured as seeking alms from her former employee rather a Black Slave. Bam and Maureen Smales discredited the policies of Apartheid and treated the black servants well and vouched for their welfare. Everything went well for Maureen as long as she lived in a posh bungalow coupled with the swimming pool and a faithful servant July to comply with their orders to do their daily chores in the house. Maureen felt that her liberal ideology is only skin deep. With the black people teeming around her neck she felt terrified and exhausted. Maureen is not judgmental yet her "Self" is not evolving to the changing political landscape of South Africa.

Maureen is shocked to see July owning the keys of their truck Bakkie which symbolises power. In their backyard at Johannesburg, July was not even allowed to sit behind the wheels and was ordered to clean it regularly. July does not take this power symbol in to equation and served their masters as he had done previously in Bam's household. Maureen's liberal values go for a toss when placed under extreme pressure. Maureen wilts down in the course of the novel and the reader is able to strike a note of sympathy for she supports the cause of black equality but she is not able to reconcile her "Self" with the changing power discourse in the South African politics. Nicholas Visser exposes Maureen's unwitting collusion with apartheid, "The Smaleses are to be sure, limited, and those limitations are explored at length; nevertheless, the novel does not in any straightforward way condemn the Smaleses. What it does, and does unrelentingly, is expose the contradictions inherent in the lives of such people" (63).

*July's People* ends abruptly where Maureen runs up to the helicopter wading through a dangerously over flowing river. There is no indication in the text about the occupants of the helicopter whether they are black revolutionaries or soldiers who have come to 'rescue' her from the black settlement. The two women characters Lucy and Maureen are confronted with Apartheid in their lives. Lucy believes in a "progressive" approach and embraces a journey of darkness with no regrets but Maureen falls terribly short of her liberal ideology and realises that she cannot transcend her power constructs which is inscribed latently in her bones and the symbol of helicopter offers her a hope to regain her coloniser "Self". Maureen's three children Victor, Gina, Royce, are the products of new civilisation in the South African ethos. Gina represents the hope of the new political order. She learns Fangalo, the black South African Lingua Franca.

Gina metamorphoses herself in to an African girl training her “Self” in the African languages and food, “For Gina what had not before been seen in this village was new to the world” (140). Lucy and Maureen demonstrate through their journey that regaining one’s self is a tediously lonely affair and seeking a universal balm for human civilisation would result in a catastrophe. Lucy realises that the cycle of violence should stop at some point in history and she does not mind sacrificing her interests. Lucy believes that salvation is an individual process and is able to reconcile her with the mainstream black politics. She believes that generations of hatred cannot be wiped off in a single day rather it requires time and persistence from us.

Maureen is good at heart and she does not hold any grudge against the black community and they treat their black servants well in their house hold, and she takes pride in calling herself as an liberal, unfortunately when the power equation reverses in South Africa, she cannot adjust herself in the backyards of the black people and even a simple act of their black servant owning up their truck key infuriate her. Lucy was able to transcend the hatred and attain peace with herself. Though Maureen’s intentions are noble yet her “Self” resists the transformation from “Coloniser to Colonised” from “Powerful to Powerlessness”. Lucy and Maureen are part of our psyche and it’s upon us to transcend the binary power constructs and undergo the subjective journey for redemption.

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