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BINARY OPPOSITIONS IN J.M. COETZEE'S DISGRACE: A POST-APARTHEID PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: -

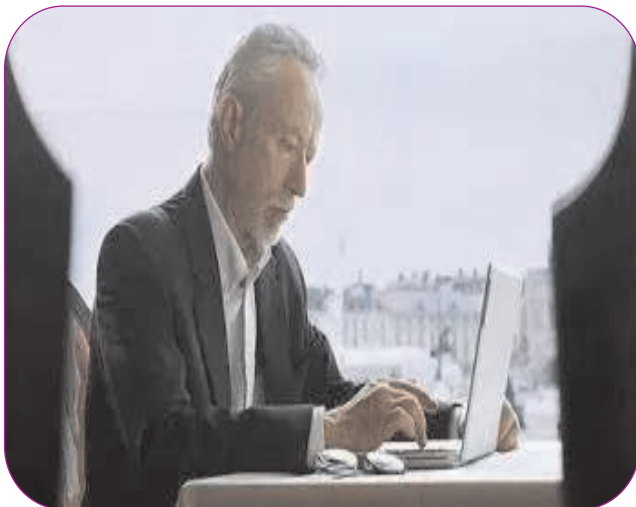
Human life is a circumlocution of binary divisions which may be contradictory or complementary. When a writer creates a text, there is a world view which is the local and the global at the same time because there are multiple ideological indicators in the narrative for the reader to uncover. The writer's cultural conditioning and the construct of the language code viz-a-viz the universality of themes, the appeal for aesthetic beauty and proliferation of meanings are other factors which contribute in creating the conceptual connections in the narrative. This is what creates the categorization into binary oppositions which a writer exercises with reference to his own philosophy and his perception for mankind, culture, language and ethnicity at large. Coetzee also creates a realm of such binary oppositions in the furores of post-apartheid in his novel *Disgrace*. The paper attempts to explore these binary oppositions embedded in culture. To encompass this task, a structural analysis of the relationships between signs through the opposition of concepts extending itself to relevant ontology is also done.

KEYWORDS: Binary Oppositions, Semiotics, *Disgrace*, Post-Apartheid South Africa.

I. INTRODUCTION

*"Cintaam aparimeyam ca pralayantam upashritah
Kamopabhoga-parama etaavaditi niscitaah //
Aashaapaasha shatair buddhah kaama-krodha-paraayanaah
Ihante kaamabhogarthm anayaayen-aartha-sancayaan //"*

(Bhagwad-Gita, Ch.16, 11-12)



The knowledge traditions of India unfold a dichotomy ever existing among human beings — the divine and the demonic; the oppressor and the oppressed; the tyrants and the exploited. The Bhagwad-Gita says that the demonic consider the gratification of the senses as the highest goal of life; overcome by lust, greed and anger, they strive to accumulate wealth illicitly for this purpose of gratification. Such tyrants actually live a life overwhelmed with unlimited fear and anxieties, which in turn propel them to whip the masses with cruelty and inhuman treatment.

Such dichotomies and oppositions when embedded in the framework of a text play an extremely

major role in the disclosure of meaning. According to Hawkes (1977), our primary concepts of 'meaning' present themselves to us through the opposition we feel to exist between the basic 'semes' or semantic units. Thus 'day' is clear primarily by our sense of its opposition to 'night', and 'up' with its opposition to 'down' (88). He further argues that Greimas begins with the fundamental notion of binary opposition as the fundamental human conceptual mode. A narrative sequence embodies this mode by the employment of two actants whose association must be either oppositional or its reverse, and on the surface level this association, will, therefore engender elementary actions of disjunction and conjunction, separation and union, struggle and reconciliation.(50)

The present paper attempts to explore these binary oppositions embedded in the culture in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* as Coetzee also creates a realm of such binary oppositions in the furores of post-apartheid in his novel.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND:

The roots of binary oppositions can be traced in Ferdinand de Saussure, a literary scholar and a renowned linguist from Geneva (Switzerland). In *Structuralism and Semiotics* (1977), he emphasizes that contrast or opposition is capable of generating meaning (23). Therefore, one has to hunt for that meaning. For Saussure, binary oppositions can be defined as the means by which units of language have value or meaning; each unit is defined against what is not. He further argues that the individuality of all elements of a language, including its words, their component speech sounds, and the concepts the words signify, are not uncovered by positive qualities, but by differences, or a network of relationships, consisting of distinctions and oppositions from other speech sounds, other words and other signified that attain only within a particular linguistic system. Roland Barthes and Claude Levi-Strauss, two French literary theorists, developed the proposition of binary opposition as an element of a late twentieth century theory of meaning called structuralism. They proposed the idea that reality must inevitably remain "out there", i.e. that reality can only prevail in the form of ideas, i.e. that one can get no closer to reality except in the form of an idea. They also suggested that, because of this, much of the meaning one assigns to things must be culturally created. They further perceived that meaning can never reside entirely within a thing in itself, but only from a complex appreciation of a thing's opposite: what they called, its binary opposite. It is pertinent to mention here that, Derrida also presents his views on binary oppositions but being a post-structuralist, his ideas contradict with that of Saussure, who is a structuralist. However, binary opposition for Saussure, occur naturally in the human mind and these are constantly changing/dynamic. Derrida sees these as subjective.

Hawkes (1977) says:

Jacobson sees characteristic modes metaphor and metonymy as the of binary opposed polarities which between them underpin the twofold process of selection and combination by which linguistic signs are formed. (77)

These binary oppositions stand at the heart of perception and cognition also, creating society's principles of what is good and what is bad, or what is ethical and what is non-ethical. Human beings persist to construct these binary oppositions in their minds because they have a tendency to assign values to each of the pairs, creating a type of veiled hierarchy within society. This process of assigning values to these pairs that works as signs comes under semiotics. Everything is a sign. It is here that the discipline of semiotics enters, which studies the world of signs, making one familiar with the intervening role signs play in constructing social realities. Daniel Chandler (2002), also argues this point in his book, *Semiotics, the Basics*, wherein he asserts that there is no external reality beyond sign systems. He further shares his opinion that "through investigating semiotic perspectives, one may come to know that meaning is not transmitted to us and it is not contained in the word or in books, but we actually create it through our signification and interpretation of signs" (10-11). It is pertinent to mention here that meaning through signs does not emerge in isolation. Signs occur in groups. When a story is told/written, it has a combination of signs occurring in various living groups embedded in the narrative. Therefore, in order to interpret a text properly, the sign receiver has to read signs with reference to appropriate codes which are determined by various contextual cues provided, in which they operate. Besides, each code is

historically as well as socio-culturally situated. Therefore, the interpretation of a text is likely to change, as interpretive codes evolve. This is the reason why the interpretation of the same text may differ from culture to culture.

III BINARY OPPOSITIONS IN DISGRACE:

Like many of the Coetzee's novels, *Disgrace* takes place in his native South Africa, a country that for many years was under the system of forced racial segregation known as Apartheid. Colonization is significant with regard to change in ideology of the masses which resulted in the system of apartheid. 'Apartheid' can be defined as an Afrikaans term which means 'separation', which became a policy in South Africa initiated by the Nationalist Government after 1948. It literally means 'apartness' (the state of being apart), 'separation' or 'separateness', and in the South African context, it means racial segregation, a practice, a discourse which segregates the blacks from the whites. The whites were considered as superior to the black South Africans on the basis of race and color. Under Apartheid, blacks were not even considered to be legal citizens of South Africa. They are aliens in their own native country and they were forced to attend separate schools, go to separate hospitals, and receive separate public services.

Disgrace is a post-apartheid novel. Post-apartheid South Africa was by no means idyllic, however. Violence increased significantly in the country. Incidents of carjacking escalated and many commercial farmers either emigrated or gave up farming because of violence committed against them. From 1989 to 1994 the murder rate doubled and a young South African woman could be expected to be raped twice in her life time on an average. In *Disgrace*, J.M. Coetzee enters intimately into the mind of a twice-divorced academic, David Lurie, as he wrestles with the impediments that societal standards place on the fulfillment of his sexual desires. Fired from his position in Cape Town because of sexual misconduct with a student, the professor goes to live with his daughter, Lucy. Lurie, a specialist in Romantic literature, is catapulted into a rural South Africa much different from the scenes described in *Wordsworth*. Crime, poverty, and rape fill the landscape of Salem. David's already disgraced state of mind is further aggravated when Lucy is attacked on her farm, raped, her house looted and his own head set on fire. Through Lucy's rape, Coetzee has highlighted with clinical precision the devastating after effects of losing the power. In the post-apartheid South Africa the blacks have started turning hostile. It is because the decolonization is not an easy process. Being "violent", "difficult", and "ugly", decolonization takes its toll. In such a situation, one can either act or respond as Lucy does thereby accepting the inevitability of change. Lucy willfully gives up all the choices open before her and decides to stay back on her small holding against all odds—a decision that is absolutely unacceptable to David.

The binary oppositions like the masculine/ feminine; black/white; powerful/powerless have been the burning issues in African society and Coetzee's *Disgrace* deals with the same. The binary oppositions in the novel are as follows:

1. City life/Country life: If the first six chapters narrate the story of David Lurie's life in Cape Town, the ensuing twelve chapters (i.e. from seven to eighteen) deal with his story on his daughter's land-holding near the town of Salem in the Eastern Cape in South Africa. Chapter 7 marks a new phase in David's life. A former university professor from Cape Town now comes to live on his daughter's farm in the Eastern Cape, which is a cold countryside. The narrator describes the Lucy's farmhouse as follows:

His daughter's smallholding is at end of a winding dirt track some miles outside the town: five hectares of land, most of it arable, a wind-pump, stables and outbuildings, and a low, sprawling farmhouse painted yellow, with a galvanized-iron roof and a covered stoep. The front boundary is marked by a wire fence and clumps of nasturtiums and geraniums; the rest of the front is dust and gravel. (59)

2. Ethical/Unethical Practices: Another binary opposition that novel shows is of ethical and unethical practices. David is 52 years old and he is twice divorced. It is very unethical on his part to have a sexual relationship with his student who is half of his age. In chapter 5, David meets Rosalind, his former second wife. She does not approve of what he has done. Rosalind's response in this context is noteworthy:

Don't blame her! Whose side are you on—Of course I blame her! I blame you and I blame her. The whole thing is disgraceful from beginning to end. Disgraceful and vulgar too. And I am not sorry for saying so. (45)

Another instance of this binary opposition is in chapter 10. This chapter describes the mercy killing of animals by giving them local anesthesia is shown, which is unethical in the eyes of David and ethical according to Bev. In this chapter, David's experience at Ms. Bev's animal clinic is described. When David inquires about the treatment of animals in her clinic, she tells him that they will be subjected to mercy killing with the help of lethal. That is the treatment she gives to bad cases of suffering animals: it is euthanasia.

3. Black/ White: In Chapter 1,2 and 3, David's relationship with Soraya and Melanie comes under binary oppositions of Black/White. David Lurie is a white man and Soraya and Melanie both are blacks. He thinks himself to be superior than the blacks because in South Africa, blacks always considered as inferior to the whites. David's intimacy, firstly with Soraya and then with Melanie, becomes the example of binary oppositions. In chapter 3, David goes to Melanie's flat and forces himself in and makes love to her inspite of her unwillingness. Chapter 6 is a very important chapter because it narrates how David, being arrogant or self-righteous and unresponsive to the efforts of his own colleagues to protect him, loses his job as Professor in Cape Town University.

Chapter 11 is a very important chapter because it relates the incident of Lucy's rape by three black men. It happens on a Wednesday afternoon. Lucy and David have gone for a walk, when they reach home, they find three men waiting for them. They want to use Lucy's telephone because a woman is suffering from labour pains and they want to telephone as there is no phone in their hamlet, Erasmuskraal. Lucy opens the back door, telling the tall and handsome man to come in. Suddenly, the second man also enters forcefully, pushing David aside. Suspecting some mishap, David shouts for Petrus, but there is no Petrus. When David also enters, he is hit on his head and dragged across the kitchen door and he is not able to stand up. Now he is pushed into the lavatory and its door is locked. He croaks for Lucy. He battens the door in vain. He begs the men hitting him to take everything but to spare his daughter. Then the second man comes again, pushes David into the lavatory and splashes methylated spirits on David and throws a burning match stick so that David's body catches fire. He calls Lucy. There is no response, but he hears his car being started. At last, Lucy comes, opens the lavatory door, rushes out and watching the dead dogs, feels sorrowful. When he asks about Lucy's situation, she doesn't reply. Then David muses:

It happens every day, every minute, he tells himself, in every quarter of the country. Count yourself lucky to have escaped with your life. Count yourself lucky not to be a prisoner in the car at this moment, speeding away, or at the bottom of a donga with a bullet in your head. Count Lucy lucky too. Above all Lucy. (98)

In this country, he thinks that there is a risk to own anything, a car, a pair of shoes, a packet of cigarettes and women too. This chapter records the implicit and explicit rivalry between the whites and the blacks in South Africa, a nightmarish legacy of Apartheid. This chapter, as mentioned above, is a crucial one as it narrates the mishap at Lucy's house i.e., rape and burglary.

4. Private/Public Life: This is another binary opposition seen in the novel. David Lurie is living two different lives: private and public life. In his private life, he is twice divorced and every Thursday afternoon, in order to satisfy his physical needs, he visits a prostitute named Soraya. He is having affairs and sexual relations with so many women. But in his public life, he is a Professor at the University of Cape Town and living a well reputed life.

5. Role Reversals/Shifts: Another type of binary opposition is of role reversals. In chapter 7, when David goes to live with his daughter Lucy in Salem, she introduces him with Petrus. Petrus helps Lucy on her farm and also with the dogs. On being asked by David about his work he says:

'I look after the dogs and I work in the garden. Yes'. Petrus gives a broad smile. 'I am the gardener and the dog-man.' He reflects for a moment. 'The dog-man,' he repeats, savouring the phrase. (64)

At the end of the novel, when Lucy decides to live on her farm under the protection of Petrus. She is prepared to give her land as bride-money, but wants to keep the house for herself. No one, including Petrus,

should enter her house without her permission. Lucy is firm in her mind and tells him to go and inform Petrus about her decision. David says that she will have to live like a dog and she says "Yes, like a dog" (205). Consider the following instance from the novel:

... 'Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start 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.'
 'Like a dog.'
 'Yes, like a dog.' (205)

6. Masculine/feminine: The very first chapter of the novel *Disgrace* deals with the binary oppositions of the Masculine/ Feminine. David Lurie, a white man, lives in Cape Town, South Africa. He has been a professor in the Cape Technical University (formerly Cape Town University College), teaching a course on the Romantic poets and Communication Skills (Nos.101 and 201). He is fifty-two, twice divorced. His first wife Evelina (Evie) is a Dutch woman, now living in Holland with her second husband. His second wife, Rosalind, lives in Cape Town alone. To satisfy his sexual needs, he keeps in touch with a married woman, Soraya, almost in a business way and meets her every Thursday afternoon. Soraya is a beautiful woman and earns extra money in this way secretly to meet her family expenditure.

The narrator makes the following observations about David's life:

He himself has no son. His childhood was spent in a family of women. As mother, aunts, sisters fell away, they were replaced in due course by mistresses, wives, and a daughter. The company of women made him a lover of women and, to an extent, a womanizer..... He existed in an anxious flurry of promiscuity. He had affairs with the wives of colleagues; he picked up tourists in bars on the waterfront or at the Club Italia: he slept with whores. (7)

Chapter 2 is also very rich in the treatment of binary oppositions of Masculine/Feminine in which David's affair with his student Melanie is shown. Without the Thursday meetings with Soraya, David's life becomes boring and he spends more time in the University library. One Friday evening, when he is walking home through the old college gardens, he notices one of his girl students, Melanie Isaacs. She is an average student; but she is attractive. He accosts her and invites her for a drink. It starts raining. She does not belong to Cape Town and is from George, a suburban town. She shares a flat across the road. She accepts and comes to his house. He offers her biscuits and cheese and plays Mozart's clarinet quintet music. He slowly draws her into conversation first about Romantic poetry, next about love.

'You're very lovely', he says...He touches her again. 'Stay. Spend the night with me.'
 Across the rim of the cup she regards him steadily. 'Why—'
 'Because you ought to.'
 'Why ought I to—'
 'Why—Because a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is a part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it.' (16)

His plan is to capture the girl, but he fails. In Chapter 3, David's love-making with his student Melanie is shown which is again an important example of binary oppositions. Chapter 4 narrates the progress of action further. David has sex one more time with Melanie in his daughter's bedroom. She asks him questions whether womanising is his habit and about his wives. Chapter 17 also describes the physical intimacy between David and Bev Shaw.

7. Power/ Powerless: David's sexual relationships with Soraya and Melanie are the instances of binary oppositions of power and powerless. Being a white man, David thinks himself to be powerful and feel that he can choose any black woman he want because this is his right. But in post-apartheid South Africa, there is a change in power. Blacks have become powerful. This is clearly shown in the novel through Lucy's rape. Lucy is a white woman and she is raped by three black men. Consider the following lines from the text:

'It was so personal', she says. 'It was done with such personal hatred. That was what stunned me more than anything. The rest wasexpected. But why did they hate me so—had never set eyes on them.'

..... 'It was history speaking through them,' he offers at last. 'A history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps. It may have seemed personal, but it wasn't it came down from the ancestors.'(156)

8. Complacency/Violence: Another binary opposition is of complacency and violence. All the female characters in the novel remain silent to their violence. When David Lurie makes love to Melanie, she is not responsive. She is very much unwilling to this relationship. She does not tell anyone about that and his boyfriend helps her in coming out of that. David's daughter Lucy is raped by three black men, but she also doesn't want to report the crime. In chapter 13, when two young policemen come for investigation, Lucy does not make any mention about the rape.

IV CONCLUSION:

Keeping in view the analysis of the text, one can notice how different binary oppositions help in the transmission of meaning in giving a realistic picture to the narrative by portraying different scenes, episodes, characters, dialogues and above all, the moving human situation obtaining in Post-Apartheid South Africa, focusing on the problems of sexual harassment, rape, burglary and the hostility of blacks against whites in post-apartheid South Africa. This novel also displays some vestiges of apartheid in terms of David Lurie's sexual harassment with his black student Melanie.

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