

# Marginalization in John Maxwell Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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**ABSTRACT:** Today in many countries that experience colonization, marginalization can be seen as not only a phenomenon after colonization but also it is recognized as both historical continuity and change. Life after independence in many ways is characterized by the persistence of many of the effects of colonization. Subaltern and marginality are the two important postcolonial subjects; which are mostly concerned with women and their limitations, they can be used in different aspects of human life and mostly in postcolonial contexts. Reasons of being in margin and its consequences which affect the forming of characters and their way of life in the society are discussed in this paper. The perception and description of experience as marginal is a consequence of the structure of various kinds of dominant discourses such as patriarchy, imperialism and ethno-centrism. And also for better understanding of subjects subaltern is highlighted in postcolonial context.

**Keywords:** Colonization, Marginalization, Subaltern, imperialism, postcolonialism.

## INTRODUCTION

The novels and non-fiction of Nobel-laureate J. M. Coetzee are characterized by an intense and extreme indirect involvement with the political, intellectual, aesthetic and philosophical issues. That he was the 2003 Nobel Laureate in Literature and the first novelist to win the Booker Prize twice, with *Life & Times of Michael K* in 1983 and *Disgrace* in 1999, as well as having the South African and international literary prizes conferred upon him. These things have guaranteed Coetzee's reputation as one of the most important and prominent writers living today. He is also one of South Africa's most controversial men for his disagreement with governments. He was awarded the Order of Mapungubwe in Gold by the ANC-led government in 2005 for his exceptional works in the field of literature and for putting South Africa on the world stage.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this paper the role of subaltern in Coetzee's *Disgrace* is discussed and analyzed, which is certainly related to the people who are seen as marginalized one and Other by ruling class. Othering is a dialectical process because both the colonizing and colonized other affect each other. The history of the subaltern classes was just as complex as the history of the dominant classes in *Disgrace* although the history of dominant classes is seen as official history; the history of subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic, since they are always subject to the activity of ruling groups. Clearly marginalized citizens and people have less access to the means by which they may control their own representation, and less access to cultural and social institutions.

According to critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, and Edward Said, who study different aspects of postcolonial subjects, subaltern, and marginality, the paper focuses on the concepts of subaltern and its related subjects. Furthermore, it examines Coetzee's other works, novels, essays, letters, biographies, and so on to find some definitions for the concepts of marginality and other to confirm the hypothesis based on Coetzee's own opinion on the subaltern in postcolonial frameworks.

Spivak praises South African writer Coetzee's *Disgrace* as an exemplary postcolonial text because Coetzee gives the subaltern a voice of their own. She uses it in a more specific sense, and argues that subaltern is not just a classy word for oppressed, and for Other. In postcolonial terms, everything that has been limited or has no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern. Spivak achieved a certain degree of fame and importance for her 1985 article "Can the Subaltern Speak?". In her essay, subaltern is shown as a young woman who is not understood without the support of patriarchal authorities; and it is concluded that they actually cannot speak. Her point was not that the subaltern does not cry out in various ways, but that speaking is "a transaction between speaker and listener" (Landry and MacLean 289). Subaltern's talk, in other words, does not achieve the dialogic level of utterance. She cites the work of the subaltern studies group as an example of how this critical work can be practiced, not to give the subaltern voice, but to clear the space to allow it to speak.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The era of European colonialism was more than five centuries. During this period different colonial powers appeared and patterns of colonialism changed. Colonialism developed a system of knowledge that objectified the colonized. An important consequence was to harden and make ethnic and religious distinctions more noticeable. Colonialism created mutations of the modern state. In Africa, this has been described variously. In contrast to the history of colonization, decolonization came fast across Asia, the Middle East, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. It gives a form of independence to the developing world. Colonies became nation-states despite the form being ill-suited to most postcolonial societies.

### ***Marginalization and its Theories***

Generally the term marginalization describes the obvious actions or tendencies of human societies because of which it is perceived as being without function and it is also removed or excluded from the common systems of protection; therefore, limiting their opportunities and means for survival. Marginalization has a lot of aspects in sociological, economic, political, and postcolonial debates. It may show and manifest itself in different forms which are varying from genocide or ethnic-cleansing and other similar acts and activities, to more basic economic and social hardships.

The forms of marginalization may vary generally that linked to the level of development of cultures and economics of society. For example, it would generally be true, that there would exist more marginalized groups in the third world, and developing nations, than in the developed. Indeed, there can be a distinction for one who is within this context. In the third world, people who live under poor and impoverished conditions, that being far from the protection are often left to die due to hunger, disease, and war. Women, within the first world and low-income drug addicts, can add to these minorities as being the most marginalized. In the context of the term marginalization, some terms of a socio-political nature can be better defined. For example, war is the large scale social violence, aiming to marginalize a perceived enemy. Marginalization lies at the core and center of all social conflicting issues, which are themselves described by varying terms for their aspects and forms.

The perception and description of experience as marginal is a consequence of the binaristic structure of various kinds of dominant discourses, such as patriarchy, imperialism and ethno-centrism. Although the term carries a deceptive and misleading geometric implication, marginal groups do not necessarily support the notion of a fixed center. Structures of power that are described in terms of center and margin operate in a complex, and widespread way. The marginal therefore indicates a positionality that is best defined in terms of the limitations of a subject's access to power.

However, marginality as a noun is related to the verb 'to marginalize' and in this sense provides something for those involved in resistance by its assumption that power is a function of centrality. This means that such resistance can become a process of replacing the center rather than deconstructing the binary structure of center and margin, which is a primary feature of postcolonial discourse. Unintentionally, marginality strengthens centrality because it is the center that creates the condition of marginality. In simple terms it can be said that imperialism marginalizes the colonized people. Imperialism cannot be reduced to a structure that leaves some particular races on the margin. It is continuous, procession, and is working through individuals. It reproduces itself within the idea of the marginal. Therefore, despite it is a term to indicate various forms of oppression, the use of the term always involves the risk that it supports the structure that established the marginality of certain groups in the first place.

Marginalization is seen as a deviation from the norm. It has been defined as "the process of falling into a marginal position" (Crane 623), where patterns of consumption and use of time differ from the average. Marginalization is also defined in relation to the average and may mean unemployment, poverty, loneliness or cultural marginalization. It has linked with lack of the essential resources which are relating to a normal way of life. In relation to the dominant

normality, different individuals and different groups have different ways of coping. Marginalization in this case means the inability of persons or groups to use various societal power resources, which in turn may lead to different processes of exclusion and marginalization.

A lot of previous studies have shown that marginalization has a background of measurable risk factors such as unemployment, lack of education, the male sex, lack of family and social support, and living in rent houses. However, the definition and analysis of marginalization on the basis of material is problematic. One cannot talk of actual marginalization, because it is impossible to form a picture of the marginalization process on the basis of quantitative material. However, the risk factors indicating marginalization allow people to draw conclusions about the links between marginalization and an unstable work history.

Edward Said desired to see the whole rather than the part, to see connectedness and especially with other parts rather than fragments and smaller parts. Seeing the whole rather than the part allowed the marginalization to continue undisturbed. Said resisted what he saw as the threat of his own potential marginalization. He did not like any apparent cultural relativism, such as Homi K. Bhabha's argument for cultural rights.

Although there is an argument about the political dangers of being consigned to the periphery and its impulse, it can miss the point that in institutional terms this so-called specialism only got there by making their particular intervention and claiming that separate space in the first place. Developing a specialist area does not necessarily lead to marginalization. Minority studies were not marginalizing something that had been mainstream—they were articulating areas that had been hitherto virtually invisible. Bhabha has an argument about how hybridity involves the act of political intervention and negotiation so as to create a third place: "new sites are always being opened up, and you keep referring those new sites to old principles, then you are not actually able to participate in them fully," he describes very well the political framework behind the institutional interventions of minority studies (1990: 216). In reality, if one looks at the examples Said gives about African American studies, gay studies, and women's studies from the perspective of literature departments, these are all areas that have had tremendous impact upon the mainstream. Indeed, the widespread influence of the postcolonial is a sign that it has become the very reverse of ghettoized or marginalized.

The pressures in society, on its constituent individuals, and the pressures of class, caste, and religious differences are also noteworthy, and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) speaks of the plight of individuals and of their indifferent acceptance of fate: "Thus will men lie on their backs, talking about the fall of man, never making an effort to get up" (1863: 487). Society, then, is either one of natural selection, where only the fittest survive, or where mankind moves forward together, in a civil manner. An interesting aspect of society is the idea of conformity, and the relation between the conformist and non-conformist groups in a social situation which means the dominant group and the marginalized one.

Today groups that are marginalized in most parts of the world in developed economics or otherwise are those coming from ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities, and also homosexuals, and even against drug addicts and AIDS patients. In less-developed economies, women may tend to be marginalized, as also physically and mentally challenged. In nations such as India and South Africa, there is also the problem of the marginalization of tribes, and other backward castes and communities.

There are various forms of marginalization; they may be blatant or subtle. Examples of subtle forms of marginalization appeared in various industry, or discrimination against candidates for employment on the basis of religion, origin, sexuality or sexual orientation, or on medical grounds. The blatant forms are targeting groups for violence or harsh criticism.

In African context, Africa seems to be a civilization that is coming apart in reality. The victimization of Muslims within African society, the responses leading to violence, the marginalization of backward classes and tribes, and the economic marginalization of large sections of society are contributed. In Africa; therefore, the problem of marginalization is very real. Muslims also face some marginalization, as do people of various other minorities. It can be seen with women and women's rights, especially and definitely in smaller cities and towns, and villages. Discrimination exists against women at every level, from female infanticide to widow remarriage, and so on. In Disgrace, these things are shown very cleverly and excellent.

The role of media during the past years has been more than the stereotypes, to make them seem the norm, or normal. The role that media plays is in raising awareness of social issues and prevalent factors that cause the marginalization of the various groups, and to re-educate the masses on the concept of marginalization. Marginalization is such that it becomes more and more problematic. From social justice at an individual level, to international law, every part must contribute against marginalization, for it occurs at every level by choice, or without choice.

The effects of marginalization are enormous. Those who are marginalized generally suffer from a crisis of identity that often portrayed as the bad guy and this perhaps leads to a rise in social militancy or delinquency in terms

of religions, ethnic and linguistic groups, people suffering from medical problems, sexual orientation such as homosexuals. While women and the physically handicapped, or mentally challenged, are simply quiet and defeated to the acceptance without choice of whatever is offered to them.

### ***Marginalization in Disgrace***

After Lucy's rape, her depression indicates her mistrust in the judicial system to ease the unfortunate circumstances of her rape and her serious and violent change in personality reflects her absolute fear of public humiliation. She refuses to accept her father from all aspects of her life and becomes reluctant to reveal any further details about her rape:

He tells himself that he must be patient that Lucy is still living in the shadow of attack that times needs to pass before she will be herself. But what if he is wrong? What if, after an attack like that, one is never oneself again? What if an attack like that turns one into a different and darker person altogether? (Disgrace 124)

Coetzee describes Lucy's shift from the nurturing dog lover to a woman terrified to sleep in her own bed. The view of Lucy severely changes into a weak and uncertain woman who is extremely upset and shocked by what she is forced to overcome. Her sudden distance from her father, a once influential and supporting figure for her, allows the audience to experience the effects of her traumatic situation. The trust that is incorporated within this type of sacred relationship is now broken because of the dominating power of males and their sexual desires. Carine M. Mardorossian (1957- ) mentions that "Coetzee takes a horrific scene of violence and urges readers to view it not as the black hole of analysis, but as an opportunity to overhaul normative approaches to rape, justice, and human relationships" (73). Similarly to David, Lucy's reaction to her rape draws a connection between the predator and the prey figures throughout Coetzee's novel. Both characters are hesitant and uncertain to reveal their personal experiences: "The reason is that as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter [...]. It is my business, mine alone" (Disgrace 112). Like David, she realizes that nothing will change her rape, and she will be forced to live with its consequences. Instead, she chooses to live with what has happened and save her reputation. Additionally, although Lucy was once able to sympathize with David's actions with Melanie, she now judges him for mistreating his power as a young college student's professor:

Hatred... When it comes to me and sex, David nothing surprises me anymore. Maybe for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange—when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her—isn't it a bit like killing? (Disgrace 158)

Lucy describes men as evil creatures who abuse the laws of nature by forcing themselves upon women. She describes her sexual experiences as one resembling and showing the act of murder. This indicates that a piece of her body died in her room where she was raped by Pollux, Petrus' brother-in-law, and because of this experience, she will never be the same person. Lucy introduces to David a new perspective of his sexual desires.

Lurie's alienation from his identity as a professor is best exemplified by his reorientation towards two major pillars of the intellectual life: language and theory. Language is a theme which arises immediately in Disgrace. Lurie, who was once a professor in the classics and modern languages department, is relegated to teaching communication skills and advanced communication skills now. This seems to draw into question his own communication skills, as well as foreshadow the further marginalization he will experience from his intellectual life. At Lurie's hearing, both the power and limitations of language are highlighted by the debate over Lurie's shame. If he only confesses that he was wrong, the committee can help him keep his job and the university save face. When he is only willing to admit guilt, the committee is angered and frustrated, and he is doomed to lose his job and his reputation. He says: "I have said the words for you, now you want more, you want me to demonstrate their sincerity. That is preposterous" (Disgrace 55). While the reader may respect Lurie's refusal to play the game the committee is asking him to, his argument and decision also make clear that his action is not completely done for morality.

A second main pillar of intellectual life and identity is theory. In the beginning, Lurie makes references that give a false impression of his faith in the abstract, in theory and philosophy. In his repeated statements or defenses of why he pursued Melanie, he claims that Eros took over and he was not in control. He seems more at ease with this abstract explanation than one which holds him personally responsible. While trying to convince Melanie to spend the night, he claims that "a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it," taking it out of the realm of Melanie, and into the realm of the abstract, and by this way of thinking he practically marginalizes Melanie and actually all women (Disgrace 16).

**Edward Said explains that there is a hierarchy of races and civilization:**

It is necessary then, to accept as a principle and point of departure the fact that there is a hierarchy of races and civilizations, and that we belong to the superior race and civilization, still recognizing that, while superiority confers rights, it imposes strict obligations in return. The basic legitimation of conquest over native people is the conviction of our superiority [...]. Our dignity rests on that quality, and it underlies our right direct the rest of humanity. Material power is nothing but a means to an end. (1993: 17).

Melanie as an example of African women placed in the margin and also as subaltern by accepting the colonizer's culture as the best model. Lucy pushes back against her father's intellectual habits, and this is shown through comments such as, "there is no higher life. This is the only life there is" (Disgrace 74). When Lurie makes her report the rape, she says: "guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don't act in terms of abstractions" (Disgrace 112). Although Lurie is clearly upset by his daughter's refusal to engage with philosophies and abstract ideas, he also begins to learn from her and her practical approach. In the case of the rape, there is nothing that Lurie can do to change the fact that he could not protect his daughter and then no theory will change the things that really happened.

Land ownership has always been the great political and strategic support of European colonizers. A 1913 law conceding eighty seven percent of South African land to the white minority was revoked in 1995 by the bill of land rights. Consequently, an initializing of the power shift occurs. At the beginning of the novel, Lucy is a landowner, and farmer, while Petrus is a former sharecropper, and landless farmer: "Petrus is my new assistant. In fact, since March, co-proprietor" (Disgrace 62). Due to changes in government policy, Petrus knows that a postcolonial and post-apartheid era has begun. He celebrates this reversal of fortune by a big party: "Because of the land transfer, I would guess. It goes through officially on the first of the next month. It's a big day for him" (Disgrace 124). Because of these Lucy's status corrupts and becomes marginalized.

An overturning of power in sex is another sign of downfall. At the beginning, David finds Soraya entirely satisfactory or at least, an unquestioning and silent object for every week. All of a sudden and without notice, the object transforms itself into a subject. The Negro prostitute shrills to him: "You are harassing me in my own house. I demand you will never phone me here again, never" (Disgrace 10). The reaction of Melanie is not noticeable since she destroys the college professor and dislocates him. Even though the displacement of a white man is an echo of the displacement of thousands of Negroes in colonial times, it is a reversed metonym of one of the most important features in postcolonial literatures. It is now the white who will be gradually destroyed by dislocation, non-identity and non-authenticity. Further, there seems to be a parallel between the violence of the predatory father to twenty-year-old Melanie and his daughter's rape in front of his eyes. In colonial and apartheid times native South African has to suffer from injustice and the indignity of compromise in order to stay alive. In the postcolonial era, whites have no choice. While Lucy feels that she has to come to this situation if she wants to be able to continue her chosen life, David still tries to deceive him that moral principles may bring orderliness to human nature.

David Lurie is broken down, more than other characters such as gardener Michael K. in Coetzee's other novels, almost to nothing before he finds measure of redemption in his forced acceptance of the realities of his existence. Coetzee brings this feature through a subtle comparison with animals. David imagines himself shuddered by prostitutes: "They shudder too, as one shudders at a cockroach in a washbasin in the middle of the night" (Disgrace 8). When he falls in disgrace and goes to his daughter's farm, she tells him: "This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals" (Disgrace 74). After the rape episode and its aftermath, David almost reduces himself to animal existence since he has "become tired, friable, eaten from the inside as if by termites," while feeling "like a fly-casing in a spider web" (Disgrace 107). By reversing of fortune and Negroes' right, the pessimistic attitudes of Lucy's last discourse have produced:

'How humiliating ,' he says finally. 'Such high hopes and to end like this.'

'Yes, I agree, it is humiliating [...] 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! (Disgrace 205).

Disgrace, therefore, portrays the struggle and guilt of once dominant groups of society to cope with a changing world order in general and a politically in the special case of South Africa. With regard to maleness, patriarchy seems to be widespread. Even though he underwrites a defense, he is condemned completely. His deep sexual disappointment is clearly a symbol of weakening of patriarchy, which for many years represented the ruthlessness of European colonialism. His ex-wife, Rosalind, assures him in a cold and severe manner that his behavior is indefensible, and no sympathy and help would be appearing from anywhere. Patriarchy has always been self-sufficient, arrogant and above questioning: "I need counseling? [...] To fix me? To cure me? To cure me of inappropriate desires?" (Disgrace 43). The white man's guilt is so thorough that it is very difficult for David to understand his daughter in looking at a future on the farm, as an ex-landowner, and a sharecropper, under the protection of her former Negro servant.

## CONCLUSION

In Coetzee's works, especially *Disgrace*, most of the women characters are marginalized twice or it is better to say they are considered as double colonized. Double colonization and also subaltern are the themes that are mostly obvious in *Disgrace*'s characters; Lucy, Lurie's daughter, is a person who suffers a lot for being at the margin. She has been situated in marginality and also subalternity first by the corrupted imperial system and second by the patriarchal and male-dominated society.

*Disgrace* shows the history of black women and also whites and the implication of subaltern as the racial and far reaching since the political position of women is defined very different from male structured society. Coetzee shows Lucy who actually lost her life and future, and he depicts that Lucy's participations are oriented toward social activity of the working class relating to the local area of empowerment and the issue of gender is presented within imperialism and racialism. Women are separated from the authority of the society and male community. At the same time, they endure and tolerate ultimately such disrespect in society by being marginalized and female.

In *Disgrace*, Coetzee's emphasis on the representation of the other is emphasized to show the oppression of the men and women. Silence is an appropriate expression for the colonized who knows what makes Lucy and all women characters remain silent. Coetzee attempts to show the subject and the object, the colonizer and the colonized, which prove both European colonialism and also male dominance for women..

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