

The Decline of Orientalism: Love is the Best Way of Advancing Decolonization

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Abstract: As an excellent post-colonial novel published by Coetzee in 1999, *Disgrace* describes the South Africa after colonialism has receded and apartheid has been abolished. This novel shows the decline of the white subject, which is represented by the hero Lurie, from the center to the periphery, symbolizing the failure of colonial domination and the “Orientalist” ideology. However, the brutal event that happened to Lurie’s daughter Lucy, who was raped multiply by some blacks, is a repetition of colonial violence, and this is precisely what this novel makes us think about: decolonization should not be the repetition of the colonizers’ logic, simply reversing the statuses and replacing the Western hegemony with another hegemony on the basis of the same logic. In the end of the novel, Lucy was willing to raise her child, whose birth was the result of a rape, with love to prove the possibility of reconciliation. This shows that in the post-colonial period, love is the best way of facilitating harmonious coexistence and advancing decolonization.

1. Introduction

In the Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech of 1987, Coetzee expressed that the loss of freedom in each generation of South Africa was attributed to their failure in love[1]. What Coetzee lamented was his country’s inability to establish love across color and ethnicity. This “unfree” South Africa enacted a new constitution seven years later, abolishing apartheid and electing Mandela as president. However, the aftermath of colonization still exists, and the “new” South Africa after the abolition of apartheid still faces many problems.

Disgrace is an excellent post-colonial novel published by Coetzee in 1999, which describes South Africa after colonialism has receded and apartheid has been abolished. It tells the story of a 52-year-old white man, David Lurie, a professor of modern languages at the Cape Technical University, who seduced his black student, Melanie. He was then fired from the university due to his refusal to express contrition in public. After losing his teaching position, Lurie went to live with his daughter Lucy in the countryside, where they were attacked by three black men and Lucy was raped multiply. Afterward, Lucy refused to accuse the three criminals, believing that if she wanted to continue living there, this was the price she had to pay. Lucy’s neighbor, the black man Petrus, was involved in the rape to take over her land. Lucy was pregnant due to the rape, and Lurie urged her to have the abortion and move to Holland, but she refused. Lucy made a surprising decision to reconcile with the perpetrators and live with Petrus, accepting a life with no dignity, and no rights,

“like a dog”[2].

Coetzee’s attitude towards post-apartheid South Africa is extremely pessimistic -- colonial rule no longer worked, but the readers were still presented with a picture of violence, moral decay, cruelty, and chaos. The book aims to deconstruct the ideology of colonialism, question the Eurocentric power relations of the world, and criticize the colonial domination and, more importantly, the postcolonial situation. It is in line with Said’s “Orientalism”, presenting the decline of the thought of “Orientalism” in the west.

What is “Orientalism”? Said explained that “It is an elaboration not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of ‘interests’ which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains; it is, rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world; it is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power.”[3]

Obviously, according to Said’s definition, “Orientalism” includes at least two meanings, the first of which refers to a way of thinking based on the ontological and epistemological differences between the Orient and the Occident. In this respect, the East and the West, two geographical places located in the separate hemispheres of the earth, have also been in a state of antagonism in many other respects due to their huge and unbridgeable disparities in politics, economy, linguistics and culture. The second refers to the long-term domination and discourse oppression of the powerful West over the weak East, and the relationship between the West and the East is purely influencing and being influenced, constraining and being constrained, giving and being given. Therefore, based on this unequal relation, the so-called “Orientalism” is essentially a kind of Westerners’ ignorance, prejudice, and curiosity towards the East or the Third World.

Sense of identity and the relationship between the subject and the object are the main issues explored in postcolonial literature. In *Disgrace*, the traditional relationship between the “subject” and the “object” in colonialism is subverted, and “Orientalism” gradually declines. Sometimes, the relationship between the subject and object is even reversed. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the declining Orientalism and the ensuing social problems in *Disgrace*, and to suggest that decolonization cannot repeat the logic of the colonizers, simply reversing the statuses and replacing the Western hegemony with another hegemony based on the same logic. In the post-colonial period, love is the best means of promoting harmonious coexistence and advancing decolonization.

2. The Decline of the White Subject

During the apartheid period, whites and their culture were superior. English, the language of the colonizers, replaced the language of the local blacks and became the official language. The classics of English literature, an important vehicle of colonial culture, occupied an important position in university education. Lurie, a professor of modern languages, is the author of three monographs on literary studies. When the novel began, he was teaching Wordsworth’s *Prelude* to his students and was also working on an opera about Byron. Although he lived in post-apartheid South Africa, his lifestyle and views were no different from those of European whites. As for lifestyle, he modeled himself on Byron and Wordsworth, seeking sensual satisfaction; as for ideology, he inherited the racist thought of the whites, enjoying an innate sense of superiority over the blacks. Lurie has subconsciously placed European culture at the center, completely ignoring the existence of indigenous African culture. Although living in South Africa, he never mentioned any African cultural tradition.

English represented colonial power and discourse in a particular environment, but with the abolition of apartheid in South Africa, it lost its original authority. What can express the thoughts and feelings of local people in post-colonial South Africa are precisely the original languages -- "Sotho" and "Xhosa", and even the football commentary alternated between them[4]. But Lurie did not understand a word of it. "He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa." [4] The languages he knew were totally useless when his daughter was raped and needed to ask the police for help. In addition, the university where Lurie worked underwent a great rationalization -- Classics and Modern Languages was closed down and he was transferred to Communications. Although he dutifully prepared for the class, taught the students, and corrected their assignments, students remained uninterested in his English literature courses. This shows the decline of colonial culture and the rise of post-colonial culture, subverting the philology reconstructed by the colonial West, and making it return back to normal. The marginalization of once-classical English literature made white South African intellectuals like Lurie feel increasingly out of place and rather "castrated", because they cannot adapt to post-apartheid life, and were nostalgic for the old institutions, consciously incapable of shaking off the Orientalist ideology developed by the white colonizers over the centuries.

In this radically changed world, the life that Lurie used to enjoy no longer existed, and his subject status had declined. He cannot get used to the new social order, which brought him a sense of absence. To deal with it, he resorted to the sexual relationship, looking for some spiritual support in order to realize the privilege of the white class in his imagination, and to achieve his lingering "Orientalism" complex. He constantly went after women. First, he dated a prostitute, and then he went on to seduce his student, Melanie. At the disciplinary board hearing, Lurie admitted all of the guilt he was charged with, but refused to express contrition, which would mean his compromise with the new discourse order, mean his renunciation of his superior status, and mean the complete failure of Orientalism. He said: "Recantation, selfcriticism, public apology. I'm old-fashioned, I would prefer simply to be put against a wall and shot. Have done with it." Lurie paid a painful price for defending so-called "white privilege" -- he was fired, losing his teaching position, and thus losing his social status.

He left Cape Town and went to live with his daughter Lucy in the countryside, where white and black, the "subject" and the "object" of Orientalism, collided more violently with each other. Previously, Lurie had only indulged in his desires, ignoring the harm he had done to others. However, after Lucy was raped, he began to realize his paranoia and ridiculousness. Lucy was determined to stay, submitting to Petrus's so-called "protection" and losing everything that made her a white subject. What Lucy lost was not only her basic dignity as a human being, but also her identification with the privileged white Europeans, and their Orientalist ideology. Lucy described their situation as, "No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity." As for Lurie, the great white professor, he said that he has "become a dog-man: a dog undertaker; a dog psychopomp; a harijan." Lurie, though irritated, could do nothing about it, and he clearly knew that both his and his daughter's fates and future were in Petrus's hands. What the author seeks to show here is the decline of the colonizer's identity and the rise of black identity in the post-colonial era. The colonizers suddenly found that their superior statuses were replaced by those who were formerly colonized. As Lurie put it, the post-colonial era has "the historical piquancy". He, a grand white professor, can only "stretch out beside her on the bare concrete", and as Lurie himself murmurs "Abandoned, are we?"

As a well-educated person, Lurie gradually recognized his former prejudices. He began to change, which can be seen in his reaction to Melanie and her sister. After the first seduction of Melanie, he thought, "No more than a child! What am I doing?", but still did it next time. However, when going to Melanie's house to apologize to her parents, although he was still lustful towards

Melanie's sister, he contained himself, and later even got down on his knees in front of Melanie's mother and sister to apologize for what he had done.

Both Lucy's misfortune and the decline of Lurie's social status suggest that the power of "object" is growing stronger and the "center status" of white colonizers gradually disappeared. In this post-apartheid society, the original Western colonists and their descendants were relegated to the margins of society, and the whites were isolated, persecuted, and oppressed, losing their privileges and becoming the minority. Spivak believed that the marginalized are those who have lost their voice [5]. In *Disgrace*, the white protagonists lose their voice and are powerless to resist their oppressors, the black landowners, and they are the newly marginalized people. The decline of the white subject, from the center to the periphery, is Coetzee's brilliant irony of Eurocentrism, symbolizing the failure of colonial domination and the "Orientalist" ideology.

3. The Identity Swap of the Colonizer and the Colonized

However, what Coetzee wants to convey in *Disgrace* is much more than that. The relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is paradoxical and symbiotic. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee reveals in detail the problems between the various races in the transforming era of South Africa, and shows the decline of the white rulers and the rise of the blacks. At the same time, Coetzee shows deep concern about the consequences of colonialism in South Africa for the colonized people, the colonizers themselves, and their descendants, and expresses considerable dismay at various problems that emerged in this transition period.

Lurie, as a white man who could not adapt to the South African reform, looked down on blacks at heart. As the postcolonial critic A. Nandy pointed out: "This colonialism colonizes minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within the colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once for all." Due to decades of colonial rule in South Africa, racist ideas had infiltrated into the subconscious of whites, which advocate that whites were the superior race, born with the biological nature to create a superior civilization, while blacks were the inferior race, and were destined to be ruled and educated by the senior race. Therefore, whites and blacks were in a dichotomous relationship, with whites always being in the center of power and discourse, and blacks appearing as a backward and ignorant "object" in the social margins. This led to mutual suspicion, and even hatred between different races.

In the novel, Lurie was prejudiced against blacks, and the blacks, represented by Petrus, rejected and hated whites even more. Lucy, Lurie's daughter, unfortunately fell victim to the racial hatred, and chose to hold her tongue after being raped, whose silence was just like that of the colonized who were ravaged by colonial rule. This novel is not a one-sided indictment of white Orientalism or black violence, but to expose the legacy of colonial history, to criticize the greed and inhumane domination, no matter which race is the ruler. Petrus was Lucy's assistant at the beginning of the story, but later he revealed his ambition, more like the colonizer in colonial history, making Lucy an unconditional victim. After the abolition of apartheid, the builders of the new nation had a "post-colonial logic" that can be understood as "colonialism of a special type" because it was "the logic of a desire to no longer be colonized, politically or culturally, but a logic which, at every turn, risks repeating what it seeks to reverse: the colonizer's repression of local social and cultural formations." [6] Thus, the brutal event that happened to Lucy is a repetition of colonial violence, and the anger it provoked should be directed at all forms of colonization and exploitation in human society, instead of at a particular race. This is precisely what this novel makes us think about: decolonization should not repeat the logic of the colonizers, simply reversing the statuses and replacing the Western hegemony with another hegemony based on the same logic.

4. The Effect of Love

In *Disgrace*, when teaching Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Lurie explained the difference between the "intrude" and "enroach upon", saying that "The question is not, how can we keep the imagination pure, protected from the onslaughts of reality? The question has to be, Can we find a way for the two to coexist?" So how does Coetzee address this kind of "colonialist inversion"? Lucy, a victim, a woman, an "object", and also an "oriental", became a postcolonial revolutionary motive, facilitating the reconciliation through her love. Lucy's compromise with Petrus did not indicate her identification with the order he represented. We can see her as a symbol of the reconciliation of different discourses: past and present, modern and primitive, powerful and weak, colonizer and colonized, black and white. Multiple discursive contradictions are concentrated in her. At the end of the novel, the author cruelly made her give birth to the child she conceived when she was raped by black men, and even made Lucy willingly become Petrus's concubine. When talking to Lurie about the unborn child she said that "Love will grow -- one can trust Mother Nature for that. I am determined to be a good mother". Lucy attempted to change the long-held ideological beliefs, erasing the traumas both of the past and present, letting everything start again. She believed that love can save everything and that there is a common and free future for humanity, where there is no mutual hatred and no oppression. Her child to be born will belong to it. Lucy was willing to raise the child with love to prove the possibility of reconciliation.

5. Conclusion

In *Disgrace*, orientalism, or we can say the superior of the West, gradually declined with the abolition of apartheid in South Africa, and the gap between whites and blacks caused by colonialism was bridged through a child, through love, which profoundly embodies the novel's moral -- the forgiveness and integration between the colonialists and the colonized, between the whites and blacks. In the post-colonial period, love is the best way of facilitating harmonious coexistence and advancing decolonization.

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