

**Education and Society**  
(शिक्षण आणि समाज)

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# **Education and Society**

Since 1977

The Quarterly dedicated to Education through Social Development and  
Social Development through Education

May 2023

(Special Issue-1I/ Volume-III)



**INDIAN INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION**

**128/2, J. P. Naik Path, Kothrud, Pune - 411 038**

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**Lucy the Farmer and Lucy the Mother: An Ecofeminist  
Critique of J. M. Coetzee's Disgrace, with Special Reference to the  
Character of Lucy (1999)**

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**Abstract:**

Disgrace written by J. M. Coetzee was published in 1999 and it won the Booker Prize in the same year. More than that what makes Disgrace to stand apart of Coetzee's literary canon is the fact that it is his mostly read, critically appreciated and 'criticised' novel. Based in the transition period of South Africa the novel is deeply and organically rooted in the contemporary socio-political scenario there. The central character of the novel Prof. Luri has attracted plenty of critical attention. However along with Luri, the present paper will explore the character of Lucy, Luri's daughter, in the light of Ecofeminism. Coetzee's characters are too multi-dimensional to be caught in one or two labels. So this paper will be a humble attempt of appreciating the motherly and environmental side of Lucy's character with required reference to other dimensions of her character.

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**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, Apartheid System, Collective Responsibility Oppression, Control, Gender, Rape

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Agriculture is our wisest pursuit, because it will in the end contribute most to real wealth, good morals, and happiness.  
– **Thomas Jefferson**

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Honoured by 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature, John Maxwell Coetzee is an African and Australian novelist, linguist and translator. The selected novel, Disgrace is Coetzee's second novel to win a Booker. This around 200 pages novel catches a very important moment and movement in the history of South Africa. The South Africa depicted in the novel is revolutionarily entering Post Apartheid system abolishing the mechanism that promoted slavery. The transition is good but not without a bitter side to it. The novel depicts that bitter side of the transition. The characters are black and white. The changing dynamics in their relations and transitions have been depicted subtly and honestly. The use of land and the central conflict of the novel, the rape of Lucy invite Ecofeminism a better perspective to explore the character of Lucy who has a different bunch of values and maxims to decode the happenings in her life and the country at large.

The two central characters are white people trying to cope with and to get

established in the changing power dynamics of South Africa. The novel is woven in a strong fabric of opposites. The focalization is situated outside the popular and common hierarchies. Prof. Luri in his reluctance to accept the change happening in the country reflects white supremacy and patriarchy. Lucy on the other hand accepts the collective responsibility and decides not to run away from her land and not to abort her child. The two major settings in the novel represent another dichotomy- the urban and the rural. Cape Town is a city where Luri has spent fifty-two years of his life. Salem in Eastern Cape is a village to which Luri goes after resigning his post of Professor in the University as a result of the case of sexual harassment of a young student in the university. Lucy has bought land in Eastern Cape and is farming there. She is trying to establish in the community with black majority.

Professor Luri is a womanizer and he can't help it. Having failed in two marriages and cutting from a weekly visit to a prostitute named Soraya, Luri turns to a twenty-year-old student Melanie in his class. Luri forces Melanie to enter into a sexual affair. She files a complaint against Luri. Luri accepts the blunder but refuses to repent publically. As a result of this, he is asked to resign from his job. He decides to go to Salem where his daughter Lucy is living. Lucy, with her own savings and her father's financial aid has bought five hectares of land there and grows vegetables and flowers on it. Petrus is her assistant and the dog-man who takes care of Lucy's kennelled dogs. Lucy is lesbian. She has her own values which may not align with the organized faiths and value systems. Her approach towards the world and life is based on her own understandings and calculations. When Luri comes to live with Lucy, she refuses to be guided and directed by Luri. She conveys him several times that she is no more his little daughter and so he should let her take her decisions on her own.

The power dynamics are changing in the country. The apartheid system looking down at black people and affirming white domination is being destroyed. However, before the establishment of democracy in the country, the reverse actions of black people are harming the lives of the Whites. Lucy falls prey to it. She and Luri are robbed, their car is stolen, their dogs are shot dead and Lucy is gang raped by three black men. Despite Luri's insistence Lucy does not file a complaint against the black men. Luri tries to make Lucy understand that she does not have a future in Salem so she should leave the land and get settled in some city or even another country. Lucy denies doing so. She conceives pregnancy from the rape. Luri again suggests her to abort the baby but Lucy rejects the suggestion. Petrus who has now bought a piece of land from Lucy, proposes to marry her for her protection and Lucy accepts the proposal.

Lucy's attitude and her decisions seem instinctive and perhaps wrong but if we reconsider them from Ecofeminist perspective, they give a better and greater interpretation of the novel. Ecofeminism, also called ecological feminism, is an intersection of two critical perspectives- ecology and feminism. The earlier tries to explore the relation between the human beings and the environment they live in. The latter is a bunch of political, social, economic and other ideologies that claim equal

rights for women and their empowerment. Hence, Ecofeminism studies the intersection between environment exploitation and gender oppression. It enquires into subjugation of both women and nature and connection between these two oppressions. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines Ecofeminism as "A philosophical theory and movement which combines ecological concerns with feminist ones, regarding both as resulting from male domination of society." The character of Lucy reflects both of these concerns. She is trying to practice farming as her profession despite her higher education from one of the renowned institutions in the country good enough to help her make an alluring and wealthy career in the corporate sector. In addition to this, she is trying to be an independent and self-reliant person in a true sense. In an extremely critical situation, she has guts to listen to her own conscience and act accordingly. Accepting Pitrus' marriage proposal is not a weakness but an exquisitely brave decision.

Patrick Murphy (1999) in his research article affirms the interconnectedness between the two theories amalgamating in Ecofeminism. He says,

To be a feminist, one must be an ecologist, because the domination and oppression of women and nature are inextricably intertwined. To be an ecologist, one must be a feminist, since without addressing gender oppression and the patriarchal ideology that generates the sexual metaphors of masculine domination of nature, one cannot effectively challenge the world views that threaten the stable evolution of the biosphere in human beings participate and perish. (146)

Ecofeminism emerged and developed during 1970s and 1980s. By the end of 1980s it started to branch out into two perspectives. One is radical ecofeminism and another is cultural ecofeminism. The earlier one denied the analogy between women and nature on the ground that the analogy actually degrades women and promotes their suppression. On the other hand, cultural ecofeminism tried to re-establish the connection and analogy between women and nature. They celebrated women's intimate relationship with the nature reflecting their roles of a nurturer and provider as well as their biology including menstruation, pregnancy etc. These are seen as privileges and not disadvantages. The major characters and accordingly their actions can be interpreted in this light.

Luri comes up a round character by the end of the novel. His initial womanizer nature changes in a very subtle way. The shift in his personality is parallel to the shift in the setting. In Cape Town where he worked as a university professor, he lured and forced a young beautiful girl named Melanie into a sexual relationship. While communicating with Melanie Luri says, "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"(16). This reflects a shade of commodification of a woman's body. Here, Luri is not philosophising but demanding and in a way claiming her body. Melanie's official complaint results into Luri's resignation. In Salem his character gets another dimension. He is father of a self-reliant and independent daughter. We tend to compare both and here Lucy shines brighter. Ecofeminism helps to understand the timber of her light.

Luri himself is stunned to watch the person Lucy has become and he admits that he has a very little to do with it. He speculates, "Dogs and a gun; bread in the oven and a crop in the earth. Curious that he and her mother, cityfolks, intellectuals, should have produced this throwback, this sturdy young settler...perhaps history has the largest share" (60-61). He acknowledges her individuality in the following observation,

As a child Lucy had been quiet and self-effacing, observing him but never as far as he knew, judging him. Now in her middle twenties, she has begun to separate. The dogs, the gardening, the astrology books, the asexual clothes: in each he recognizes a statement of independence, considered, purposeful. The turn away from men too. Making her own life. Coming out of his shadow. Good! He approves! (88-89)

Along with farming the five-hectare land, Lucy runs a dogs' shelter on her own expenses. It hardly makes any money for her but it seems to be giving her satisfaction. This compassionate attitude towards nature, her land and the dogs attract ecofeminist admiration. She also has a very social nature. She helps others and communicates friendly with everyone. Everyone in the market, where she sells her vegetables and flowers, knows her by name. Lucy has created a world for her in Salem. Her belief in the community and her sense of belonging is not disturbed by the socio-political upheavals happening in the country. It twists and turns but does not perish.

The climax of the novel is Lucy's rape by three black men. She is robbed, her car is stolen and her kennelled dogs are shot dead. The anti-climax is Lucy's refusal to file a complaint against the rapists. She files a complaint for her stolen car only. Luri and the reader do not understand Lucy's stand. The robbery happens as a part of equal wealth distribution movement in the country where the black demand the right on the wealth that the whites have been enjoying for years. Lucy understands it. What shocks her more is the hatred involved in the act of rape. It was not a sexual gratification that the black men were seeking but revenge for what they have been bearing for eras. Lucy takes the collective responsibility and does not file a complaint against the rapists. She conceives delivery from the rape. Luri tells her to abort the child, leave the land and get settled in some city but again Lucy does not take the advice. She wants to beget the child.

Petrus is Lucy's assistant and a dog-man. He buys a piece of Lucy's land. He is almost of Luri's age. He already has married twice. The youngest among the rapists, Pollux, is Petrus' relative. That means indirectly Petrus accepts what happened with Lucy and does not detest it. He enquires regarding the car but does not console Lucy for what happened to her. When he comes to know that Lucy is pregnant, he proposes to marry Lucy. Lucy accepts the proposal in order to assure her safety and security and that of her child. Petrus wants to marry Lucy not to protect her or out of gratitude but in order to acquire her land. Here we can see that Lucy's body and her land are treated in a similar way. She is raped to define domination on her and her lands are acquired to establish power. However, Lucy does not respond radically but sensitively. Her forgiveness, her sense of responsibility and sense of belonging are inexplicable. She

wants to promote and practice constructive solutions and not destructive ones. She hopes for a better future with her child.

Hence, ecofeminism provides a better perspective to analyse the novel. Otherwise, the actions of the characters are not in alignment with the expected behavioural pattern. Lucy provides a totally and truly fresh mindset to reconsider the happenings in the newly born post-apartheid South Africa

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