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Exploring Intertextuality in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Abstract

J. M. Coetzee is a writer who lived and worked in South Africa under the apartheid rule until 1990. He used his works to unveil the transition in the political world. He has found a new way of creating the South African world, rejecting all conventional modes. A creative writing is always a rewriting which highlights the trace of various texts, sometimes consciously and often unknowingly. These texts can be historical, political, social or any other which advocates the idea of intertextuality. Therefore, every work is a reflection of the author's past experiences and readings. John Maxwell Coetzee has woven his novel 'Disgrace' in the frame of intertextuality, where the English romantic movement had been projected in the context of politically changed South Africa. Creative works by any author are no longer seen as only his imaginative creation. All works are considered as the products of prior works in any field of knowledge. In the process of understanding any text, it is believed that our knowledge is structured and dynamic in nature. It is mainly derived from our concept of the world through the use of language which comprises all genres. Readers of the world are integrated into single world humanity. Similarly, all texts, whether literary or non-literary, are 'intertextual'.

Keywords- Apartheid, Intertextuality, Criticism, Linguistics, Communication

The word intertextuality is derived from a Latin word 'intertexto' which means mingle while weaving. This term gained popularity in the glossary of literary criticism when Julia Kristeva, Bulgarian, French semiotic theorist, coined the term 'intertextualite' in her essay "The Bounded Text" for the first time in 1960. The Merriam Webster Online dictionary has defined this term as a complex interrelationship between a text and other texts taken as basic to the creation or interpretation of the text. In reality, intertextuality is not a new phenomenon; rather it is as aged as literature itself. Philosophers from Plato to Aristotle, have expressed themselves on the idea of intertextuality. Other writers like John Keats, whose work *The Fall of Hyperion* was influenced by Virgil's *Aeneid*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* relates closely with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Even T.S. Eliot's most talked about work *The Waste Land* owes largely to many other classics from which Eliot has

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extracted the mythical background of this work. Therefore intertextuality advocates the notion that ‘art imitates art’.

The concept of intertextuality has been discussed by many contemporary theorists who interpreted it in their own modes. Allen Graham, one of the famous critics, has talked about this concept in the introduction to his book. He considers all writers to be readers also so it is inevitable to spare his work from any kind of influence. The claim of originality fades away with these influences, which advocates the idea of intertextuality. Graham writes:

Texts, whether they be literary or non-literary, are viewed by modern theorist as lacking in any kind of independent meaning. They are what the theorist call intertextual. The act of reading... plunges us into a network of textual relations. To interpret a text, to discover its meaning, or meanings, is to trace those relations. Reading thus becomes a process of moving between the texts. (1)

But a substantial definition of this term has been by M.H. Abraham. He believes,

intertextuality is a creative means used to signify the multiple ways in which any literary text echoes, or are inescapably linked to, other text, whether by open or covert citations and allusions, or by the assimilation of the feature of an earlier text by a later text, or simply by participation in a common stock of literary codes and conventions. (200)

There are many critics and thinkers who have interpreted intertextuality in a completely different dimension. For instance, Brenda Marshall, intertextuality is a body of tangled relationship which describes as “the multiple writings, cultural, literary and psychological that comes together at any moment in a particular text” (122).

This paper attempts to explore Julia Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. Coetzee, in his works, refers and alludes to many other writings which gives impressions of intertextuality. The meaning of the text is understood, in Julia’s view, as a temporary re-arrangement of elements with socially pre-existent meaning. Intertextuality encompasses in itself a parody, pastiche and other imitating genres. Kristeva’s framework of intertextuality allows for a multidirectional room for the discussion and creation of meaning. In one of her well known essay ‘The Bounded Text’, she argues that authors do not create their text from their own mind, but rather compile them from pre-existent texts: “... a permutation of texts, intertextuality in the space of a given text, in which several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize each other” (36).

J.M. Coetzee is a well known South African novelist. In his works he has discussed various issues of writing, authority, power and race. Every work has been set in a specific milieu. In 1994, the end of White supremacy enlightens a ray of hope for the marginalized in Africa. ‘Disgrace’ is the Booker Prize winning novel which is set in a crucial period when South Africa broke away from the shackles of racial discrimination. It mainly revolves around “disgrace” of whites in the new changed South Africa as they have lost their powers.

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Coetzee has very well used intertextuality to weave the altered milieu of South Africa with Eastern and Western literature. David Lurie, who is the chief protagonist of the novel, is a typical representative of white South African and has unwillingly accepted this new South Africa. He is working as a professor in the communication department at the Cape Town University College. Earlier he was a professor of modern languages, “this year he is offering a course in the romantic poets. For the rest, he teaches Communication 101, Communication Skills, and Communication 201” (DIS 3). David Lurie is not satisfied at all with his work, as earlier he was teaching modern English, but now the social order has compelled him to teach Communication in which he lacks interest. He is unhappy and discontented with extraction of humanities from the new education system yet he does not retaliate and accepts his job of teaching communication, assigned to him by the changed social order.

David Lurie is an intertextual figure with Lord Byron as He is represented as a Casanova. He has weekly appointments with a prostitute. He believes in European description life and considers Byron as his master, and therefore believes in freedom of life. His good looks help him in his sexual relations with many women, “With his height, his good bones, his olive skin, his flowing hair, he could always count on a degree of magnetism. If he looked at any woman in a certain way, with certain intent, she would return his look, he could rely on that” (DIS 7). His urge for these enjoyments increases and eventually this nature brings him ‘disgrace’ and downfall. In his search for sexual satisfaction he gets involved with a part-time prostitute Soraya and every Thursday he takes a temporary escape from his respectable job to satisfy his sexual urge.

Melanie Isaacs is another character which reflects intertextuality through Byron’s Teresa Guiccioli. She is a student in his romantic English course, still younger to his daughter. David Lurie’s discontent in personal life, as all three marriages fails, and professional life makes him find escape in these sexual relations with strangers, prostitute, and office secretary and now even his student. As Melanie was too young to be vocal about her resistance in involving with David, he continued to satisfy his desires. When he seduces her he feels she is unwilling, yet he does not have any sense of guilt, rather he says:

...not rape, not quiet that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were far away. (DIS 25)

But this novel is set in a post-apartheid South Africa where the hierarchy system has changed drastically. Earlier it was easy to have control over modesty of a black girl by any white professor, but for David, in the changed Africa things turn out to be different. His evil intensions are unveiled to everyone by Melaine’s lover. He warns him of public disgrace and dire consequences. Eventually Melaine files a complaint of sexual harassment against him, which has been possible only in the altered social order of Africa.

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It is interesting to note that Coetzee draws a parallel his protagonist and romantic poet Byron throughout the novel. If Byron was notorious for his licentious life, David is equally notorious for his sexual relations. He discuss with Melaine the character of Byron and the consequences he suffered for his licentious nature, and himself repeats history, facing disgrace and isolation.

Another trace of intetextuality is seen when Coetzee makes David teach Byron's poem 'Lara' to his students and justifies the evil of Lucifer. As Lucifer was thrown out by God for his evil act of seduction, similarly David was also thrown out from his prestigious position of a professor. David defines Lucifer's character as: "His madness was not of the head but heart". (DIS 33) He asks his students not to condemn Lucifer but understand his heart and independent spirit. But this idea of David does not change Melaine's mind and she goes ahead with her complaint.

Though the judgment committee assured David that the matter will be confidential yet it was in the air. A Rape Awareness week was organized in the campus as a reaction to this. David's disgrace was aggravated as pamphlets were printed and posted with inscription "YOUR DAYS ARE OVER, CASANOVA". (DIS 43) He was asked by the committee to make a public confession and a written apology for his guilt, which he refuses to accept and as a consequence he was dismissed from his position of the University professor. This decision was only possible in post-apartheid Africa, where everyone stood out in support of a black girl.

David Lurie's daughter Lucy is also an intertextual character, as she has a resemblance with Wordsworth's Lucy. Much like the poet's Lucy, David's Lucy also closely attached to nature as she lives in a farm in the countryside. David sees her daughter as "bare toes grip the red earth, leaving clear prints. A solid woman embedded in her new life". (DIS 62). She leads a simple life with her animals and black natives in her farm.

In *Disgrace*, Coetzee has depicted the Romantic Movement in context with the changed milieu of South Africa. He has described the controversial issue of power and how things turned upside down giving away authority in hands of the marginalized. David Lurie, the protagonist of the novel bears temperamental commitment to romantics like William Wordsworth and Lord Byron. But by the end of the novels he develops a new understanding of the shifting powers in post-apartheid South Africa.

Through this novel J.M. Coetzee encourages his readers to participate in the meaning making process and understand the pleasure of intertextual reading, mingling text and context. David Lurie, who is an intertextual character with western romantic poets, realizes his position in the newly created social order of South Africa.

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