

## DECONSTRUCTING APARTHEID AND POST-APARTHEID: A READING OF COETZEE'S *DISGRACE* IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 DISEASE

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes how in J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*, hybridity and Covid-19 deconstruct South African society. In the novel, it appears that cultural hybridity dismantles racial hierarchy. In South African society, Covid-19 deconstructs racial and healthcare system established by Apartheid as dominant. Both hybridity and Covid-19 dismantle western cultural and racial supremacy to establish a society of equality. Racial and cultural equality as brought by hybridity and Covid-19 are viewed as images of cohesion in South Africa. Through racial intermixing and infection, black and white people in South Africa live in equal treatment. For that reason, this study argues that cultural hybridity and Covid-19's are deconstructive weapons. Cultural hybridity deconstructs South African Apartheid system and Covid-19 overturns Post-Apartheid society into confined and fair society.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, economy, hybridity, Post-Apartheid, western education.

### DÉCONSTRUIRE POST-APARTHEID: UNE LECTURE DU ROMAN *DISGRACE* DE COETZEE DANS LE CONTEXT DE LA MALADIE COVID-19

**Résumé:** Cette étude montre la manière dont *Disgrace* de J.M. Coetzee et la maladie de Covid-19 déconstruisent la société Sud Africaine. Dans le roman *Disgrace*, l'hybridité culturelle démantèle la hiérarchie raciale. Dans la société Sud-africaine actuelle, la Covid-19 chamboule la manière de vivre. L'hybridité et la Covid-19 démantèlent l'hégémonie raciale en établissant une égalité dans la manière de vivre sans tenir compte d'une race. L'égalité raciale et culturelle apportées par l'hybridité et la Covid-19 est vue comme une image de cohésion sociale en Afrique du Sud. Pour cela, cette étude démontre que l'hybridité et la Covid-19 sont deux outils de déconstruction. L'hybridité culturelle a déconstruit le système Apartheid et la Covid-19 a transformé la société postapartheid en une société équitable et confinée.

**Mots-clés:** Covid-19, économie, éducation occidentale, hybridité, Post-Apartheid.

### Introduction

Since December 2019, a disease known as Covid-19 appeared in the world. Knowing its negative impact on the world's healthcare and economic systems, on the one hand and on race relations on the other hand, many researchers investigate it as a disease that menaces human existence at a higher speed. L. Mdpe et al.'s declaration, basing on the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 31<sup>st</sup> 2021, that there were "globally 693,224 confirmed cases" (2020, p.2) attests to this menace. This high number of infected and potentially dead persons is also undoubtedly across race and culture boundaries. As Whites and Blacks are locked in by protection measures, everyone realizes that no sentiment/politic/system of racial or cultural superiority is valid in the face of the disease. The outbreak of the Coronavirus disease has, thus, opened the conditions to put into question social norms and habits everywhere,

including South Africa's politic of racial discrimination that J. M. Coetzee addresses in *Disgrace* (1999). Coetzee is a prominent South African writer, whose work centers on "the question of the ethical in a highly politicized environment" (S. Gikandi, 2003, p.721). In *Disgrace* he deals with cultural hybridity as a weapon to deconstruct the Apartheid system in South Africa. With the outbreak of the Covid-19 disease, this racial deconstruction becomes significant because it makes no distinction between infected cases and victims. But the intercultural and racial collaboration, undertaken by Lucy, daughter of white university professor Mr David Lurie and the black fellows in the country, is combined with the effects of the pandemic to blur the politic of racial barrier. In spite of the disaster caused by the disease, this disappearance of racial differentiation takes a significant importance for the researcher and observer of South African racial situation.

In this paper, our interest is, thus, to examine the impact of the Covid-19 epidemic in relation to the collaborative actions between Lucy, the white daughter and her black fellow countrymen, with the final objective to show how these two phenomena deconstruct racial order in the South African society. More specifically, we will show how the hybrid initiatives undertaken by both Lucy and black South Africans on the one hand, and the effects of the Coronavirus disease on the other hand, coordinate into creating of a racially equitable society. Answering to the question about the strategies used by both white and black people in South Africa to deconstruct apartheid system in order to construct a post-apartheid society, the study uses postcolonial criticism as basis of analysis. As Ashcroft *et al.* (2007, p. 6) writes, post-colonial criticism consists of dismantling «imperial power». With this theory, the study shows that Coetzee's *Disgrace* uses cultural and racial hybridity as weapon to break from Apartheid to a racially-fair society. In the same way, the high rate of infection caused by the covid-19 disease, and the confinement measures have resulted in de-structuring the white racial and cultural order.

Thus, hybridity and Covid-19 are perceived as tools that dismantle any society. How do cultural hybridity and Covid-19 deconstruct successively Apartheid and Post-Apartheid societies? If cultural hybridity had previously deconstructed Apartheid society to form Post-Apartheid, then Covid-19 has dismantled that of Post-Apartheid.

The work is organized in two main parts. The first part entitled "Hybridity and the Formation of Post-Apartheid Society" falls in two sections. The title of the first section is "Cultural Hybridity and the Birth of Post-Apartheid Society". It consists in demonstrating that cultural hybridity deconstructs South African Apartheid system to construct post-apartheid society. The second section which is entitled "Racial hybridity and Social Cohesion" shows that white and black people make use of interracial marriage to break from apartheid rules, androcentric post-apartheid society. The second part is entitled: "Covid-19: Deconstructing post-Apartheid". The first section of this part which is "Covid-19: Dismantling White Cultural Supremacy" analyses Covid-19 as a deconstructive weapon that breaks western healthcare and economic systems from their hegemonic position. The second section entitled "Covid-19 and Racial Equality" shows the disease as a deconstructive weapon that brings white race to an equal foot with black race.

### **I. Hybridity and the Formation of Post-Apartheid Society**

This part consists in demonstrating how hybridity brings newness in the South African society portrayed by Coetzee. When defining hybridity H. K. Bhabha (1994, p.7) argues that "the borderline work of culture demands an encounter with

'newness' that is not part of the continuum of the past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation". Looking from the concept of hybridity of H.K. Bhabha, the study at first analyses Coetzee's portrayal of hybrid product as white and black people's act of dismantling apartheid system for the rebirth of a fair and equal South African society. Then, the analysis redirects attention on analyzing hybridity as the strategy used by both white and black people to deconstruct the apartheid system in order to live in social cohesion.

### ***1.1. Cultural Hybridity and the Birth of Post-Apartheid Society***

The focus of this section is to show that both white and black people in South Africa use cultural hybridity as an instrument to turn the racial Apartheid system into a racial fair society. School education is considered as the starting point of hybridity in the novel. In post-apartheid society, both white and black people are being educated in the same cultural institution in the country. In this way, post-apartheid society reflects a fair society. To begin with, Cape Town University is the symbol of Western education. In the university, all the students are black but they are taught by Professor David Lurie, the white father of Lucy, the main protagonist. Among these students, we have Melanie, a dark young lady and her black boyfriends, as the text states below:

On Monday Melanie reappears in the class; and beside her, leaning back in his seat in pockets, with an air of cocky ease, is the boy in black, the boyfriend [...]. 'We continue with Byron,' David Lurie says, plunging into his notes. 'As we saw last week, notoriety and scandal affected not only Byron's life but the way in which his poems were received by the public. Byron the man found himself confronted with his own poetic creations – with Harold, Manfred, even Don Juan.'

Coetzee, (2000, p.31)

White professor David Lurie and the South African children among whom Melanie and her boyfriend's are in the same western cultural institution for education. By being in the same university for western culture, the white professor David Lurie and the black students of South Africa dismantle the institutionalization of segregation established by the system of Apartheid. The policy of racial segregation in South Africa is to "separate section in public facilities" (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1998, p. 14), by pursuing education under the same university, both David Lurie and Melanie and her university boyfriend break South African apartheid rules to construct a post-apartheid society. Since apartheid is held by the policy of segregation, the fact of transgressing this policy attests to the will of the people to challenge the racist system.

In addition to the common development in Cape Town University, we have cultural appropriation undertaken by black people in Cape Town University. In the above-mentioned passage from J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, the black students of the university are discussing western culture with their white professor. What is at stake in the cultural discussion is black students' use of mimicry to appropriate western culture. If it is culture that makes westerners superior, by appropriation this culture, the black students move from the position of margin to the centre. As B. Ashcroft *et al.* (2002, p. 113) puts it: "the binarism of centre and margin is itself dismantled by the complementary processes of appropriation." Through the process of education, Melanie and her black counterparts dismantle the binarism of the margin they

occupied and the centre that David Lurie holds in South Africa. If the binarism of margin and centre is a segregation that accounts for apartheid in South African society, the students' education in western culture is a cultural appropriation that aims to build a post-Apartheid South Africa for the black students and their white professor. Above all, the university-wide committee against discrimination reveals cultural hybridity undertaken by white and black people in South Africa to deconstruct the law of segregation and build a post-apartheid South African society. The narrator presents the members of the committee against discrimination as follows:

Aram Hakim, sleek and youthful, emerges and usher David Lurie in the Vice-Rector's office. There are already two persons in the room: Elain Winter, chair of his department, and Farodia Rassool from Social Science who chairs the university-wide committee on discrimination[...] 'Very well. We are talking about a complaint laid by Ms Melanie Isaacs. Also about' – he glances at Elaine Winter – 'some pre-existing irregularities that seem to involve Ms Isaacs. Elaine?' Elaine Winter takes her cue. She has never liked him; she regards him as a hangover from the past, the sooner cleared away the better [...] two of them he knows: Farodia Rassool and Desmond Swart, Dean of Engineering. The third, according to the papers in front of him, teaches in the Business School.

Coetzee (2000, p.40)

What is at stake in bringing forth the members of the university-wide committee is its composition of black people who are university professors. Through school education, the black people have appropriated western culture and some of them have become university professors like Professor David Lurie. If the white professor David Lurie and the Cape Technical University formerly called Cape Town University College in South Africa symbolize white supremacy, the presence of black people as university professors can be interpreted as an intention to dismantle such white supremacy. Black people appropriate western culture to be dominant like westerners. The fact that black people have become university professor like David Lurie shows that not only Africans can learn from all humankind but also, as K. A. Appiah (1992, p. 37) writes, "race is at best a poor indicator of capacity". In this condition, cultural appropriation has helped black people build a South African society where black are equal to white people.

### ***1.2 Racial hybridity and Social Cohesion***

N. M. Gyulay, (201, p.636) argues that H.K. Bhabha coins hybridity to signify "the intermixing of cultures that has occurred as a result of colonialism". Culture as mentioned in the statement of H.K. Bhabha takes into account both knowledge and race. For critics like C.E. Walker race is a "social construction, not a biological datum" (2001, p. 47). As such, racial hybridity in this section takes the connotation of this intermixing of cultures. As for Social cohesion, it stands for both psychic and social peace and harmony. As the British psychoanalyst B. Russell (2005, p. 23) writes: "The original mechanism of social cohesion, as it is still to be found among the most primitive races, was one which operated through individual psychology without the need of anything that could be called government." Thus, any social cohesion is conditioned by the psychic peace of the individual.

In *Disgrace*, Lucy's marriage in the black community of Petrus reflects social cohesion. Lucy instructs her father as follows: "Go back to Petrus ...Propose the

following. Say I accept his protection. Say he can put out whatever story he likes about our relationship and I won't contradict him. If he wants me to be known as his third-wife, so be it" (Coetzee, 2000, p.204). These words of Lucy to her father sound as her acceptance of the proposal to be married to the community of her rapist Pollux. The author writes: "A woman must be married" (Coetzee, 2000, p.202). From Lucy's acceptance to Petrus' proposal of marriage, it can be considered that despite the difference of their races, the white Lucy and the black Petrus can be married.

The marriage between Lucy and Petrus breaks barriers between White and Black in terms of marriage. As Petrus shows interest in marrying Lucy, David Lurie feels shocked. He expresses his shock by abusing Pollux in the following terms: "A dangerous child. A young thug. A jackal boy" (Coetzee, 2000, p.202). Lurie keeps on saying the entire black community of Petrus "This is not something I want to hear. This is not how we do things ... *We Westerners*" (Coetzee, 2000, p.202). The reaction of David Lurie vis-à-vis the interracial marriage is an expression of the law against miscegenation in South African society. But the interracial marriage of Lucy and Petrus not only breaks such a law of segregation but also it allows them to live in cohesion. Due to the marriage between Lucy and Petrus's community, Lucy receives the protection of Petrus.

If the interracial marriage is an act of both Lucy and Petrus to deconstruct white supremacy for social cohesion, their future mulatto baby stands for the eagerness of both different races to break from Apartheid ruling. Though Lucy's race is white and Petrus and his community are black, the two accept to give birth to a mulatto. To David Lurie's thought for which Lucy and her GP "took care of the pregnancy" (Coetzee, 2000, p.197), Lucy replies: "I am not having an abortion" (Coetzee, 2000, p.198). For David Lurie, his daughter Lucy should avoid the pregnancy. In this context, David Lurie's words can be taken for discourse against miscegenation; it is therefore a discourse in favour/in defence of the Apartheid system. But his daughter Lucy decides to keep the pregnancy. She completely refuses to abort the mulatto as her father wants/asks her to do. Lucy's words are therefore a discourse that promotes racial mixing; in other words, Lucy is a defender of hybridity, a posture which is instrumental in reaching a post-Apartheid society.

The mulatto consolidates the cohesion between Lucy and the black community of Petrus. This is voiced by Lucy in the following terms: "The child becomes his too. The child becomes part of his family. As for the land, say I will sign the land over to him as long as the house remains mine. I will become a tenant on his land" (Coetzee, 1999, p.204). The passage, as voiced by Lucy, shows that the mulatto brings her and the black community of Petrus to be united at several levels. In the first place, the mulatto brings both Lucy and Petrus community to be a family. This is what Lucy expresses when she mentions that the child belongs to Petrus too. In the second place, the mulatto brings Lucy and Petrus to accept to share properties. They share the land and the house together. In this context, it can be said that by deciding to conceive a mulatto, Lucy and Petrus deconstruct the apartheid law against miscegenation in order to construct a peaceful post-Apartheid society, where there is no racial barrier. In this vein, R.J.C. Young (1995, p.21) writes that hybridity "reverses the structures of domination". It has helped Lucy, the white woman and Petrus, the black to dismantle the apartheid system, and then to construct a post-apartheid society, where both black and white people live in equality and cohesion.

## 2. Covid-19, the Disease of Racial Deconstruction in South Africa

The focal point of this section is to present the Covid-19 disease as an instrument that deconstructs white supremacy in multiracial South Africa. The study shows that like the cultural and racial hybridity, created by the actions of key white and black actors *Disgrace*, the Covid-19 disease dismantles the superiority of western healthcare and economic systems. Despite the fact that western healthcare system is well equipped, white people are confined like black people; and the economic system is severely scrambled by the Covid-19 pandemic. The analysis, thus, shows that black and white people are equally in the face of the disease.

### 2.1. Covid-19: Dismantling White Cultural and Racial Supremacy

What is meant by white culture in this section is western healthcare and economic systems in South Africa. With the advent of the Apartheid system, the healthcare and economic systems are dominant in South Africa. They are considered to be super-powerful in caring for people's health while the traditional practices for health care are rejected as primitive. But as the Covid-19 breaks out, western healthcare system shows its limit in healing the population. Referring to the Covid-19, A.A. Milibari (2020, p.3) writes that: "There is no precise treatment for this disease". From this statement of A.A. Milibari, it can be said that, if with the politic of the Apartheid in South Africa the traditional medical practices are said to be limited in caring for man's health, the out-break of the Covid-19 disease has strengthened western healthcare system either. The modern medical system shows its limit in healing people from the disease of Covid-19. The western healthcare system, which is said to be dominant with the advent of the Apartheid system, is brought to its limit faced with the Covid-19. Despite the fact that western medical institutions are well equipped, these hospitals find no treatment against the disease of the Covid-19. In this context, both the traditional and western healthcare systems are equal in terms of efficiency against the disease. If in *Disgrace*, education has permitted black people to be equal to David Lurie in the assimilation of western culture, with the Covid-19 the incapacity of western healthcare system undermines the hegemony of this white culture. From this point of view, the two key situations, which are cultural hybridity and the covid-19 disease, can be considered as situations that dismantle western cultural supremacy.

Next to the healthcare system is the western economic system, which is dismantled by the disease of Covid-19. This is presented by K. Nikisha *et al.* (2020, p.128) when they write: "Covid-19-related lockdowns and economic shutdowns." South African country is indeed concerned with the economic shutdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. In this way, one can understand that western people migrate to South Africa to institutionalize their economic system as dominant one and the traditional economic system known as barter as primitive one. Then Covid-19 shuts down the hegemony of this imported economic system. This brings the imported economic system to be limited as the traditional barter system is said to be limited with the advent of the Apartheid. Coetzee's fiction shows the advent of western monetary system in South Africa with the phenomenon of apartheid. To reveal that, the South African novelist writes: "Saturday is looming, market day. 'Should we run the stall? David Lurie asks Lucy. She shrugs. 'You decide,' she says (Coetzee, 2000, p. 27). From this passage, the writer J.M. Coetzee presents the imported monetary system as the economic system in South Africa. Though South Africa is an African country, the writer does not depict barter, the traditional economic system, as the economic

system of the population. This shows that it is western economic system which is dominant in the country of South Africa. But as K. Nikisha et al. observe, this imported economic system that the system of Apartheid has made dominant is now shut down by the Covid-19 epidemic. The Covid-19 has thus reversed the dominant position of western economic norms in the same way as cultural hybridity in *Disgrace* has reversed/overturned the dominant position of western culture. The reversal of the dominant position of western culture by the Covid-19 is highlighted by A.A. Milibari(2020, p.1) when he writes that: “Covid-19 epidemic is the major global health disaster today and the supreme challenge to the universe”. From A.A. Milibari’s statement, it is clear that Covid-19 renders problematic the hegemony of the established system by westerners among which the economic system. The fact of being shut down by the Covid-19 like any economic system as presented by K. Nikisha et al. and A.A. Milibari, western economic system can be said to be brought at an equal foot with South African traditional system barter in term of being limited. In this condition, the Covid-19 can be considered as the major event that has come counterbalance the predominance of western cultural system, just the mixing of culture and race challenges the system of racial discrimination set up by the policy of Apartheid. The Covid-19 disease is thus a deconstructive tool in the same way that cultural hybridity in J.M. Coetzee *Disgrace* is deconstructive weapon. The disease plays a deconstructive function similar to cultural hybridity.

## 2.2. *The Covid-19 and Racial Equality*

Like racial hybridity in *Disgrace*, the Covid-19 dismantles the supremacy of white race in South Africa. Faced with the disease, both white and black people are infected and confined. Sometimes Whites are more infected by Blacks, as L. Mdpi et al. attest in the following statement:

Today, 31st of March 2020, based on the WHO reports, we have globally 693,224 confirmed cases and 33,106 deaths, distributed as follows: Western Pacific Region 103,775 cases and 3649 deaths, European Region 392,757 cases and 29,962 deaths, South East Asia Region 4084 cases and 158 deaths, Eastern Mediterranean Region 46,329 cases and 2813 deaths, Region of the Americas 142,081 cases and 2457 deaths and in the Africa region 3486 cases and 60 deaths.

L. Mdpi et al. (2020, p.2)

South Africa, being part of African continent, is concerned with the rate of death that the report of the World Health Organization indicates. From the different reports, it appears that African people are less infected and killed by the disease. Thus, it can be asserted that in Africa and precisely in South Africa white people can be the most infected and killed race by Covid-19. A race brought by apartheid policy to be superior than black race is incapable of proving its superiority faced with the infection of Covid-19. In this line of reflection, Covid-19 dismantles the hegemony of white race. Such kind of breaking white race supremacy is what is common to racial hybridity in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. Petrus and his community seed their black race in the womb of Lucy. Lucy bears pregnancy from the black community of Petrus. This is voiced by Lucy as follows: “I am pregnant ... from that day” (Coetzee, 2000, p.197). The pregnancy is seeded in Lucy’s womb by Petrus’ friend Pollux. By seeding the black race in Lucy’s womb, the black community taints the purity of white race. With this mixing of color, the white race which was reputed as pure during the Apartheid time loses its purity and becomes like the black race. White race is at an

equal foot with black race. This racial equality is perceived through the mulatto born by Lucy. In the mulatto neither white nor black race is dominant. Rather, the two races are equal. It is in this context of refection that racial hybridity in *Disgrace* is said to break the hegemony of white race. While black people pass through racial hybridity to dismantle the purity or hegemony of white race in *Disgrace*, the Covid-19 disease undercuts the superiority of the white race through infection and confinement. Undoubtedly, both Covid-19 and racial hybridity are deconstructive weapons that dismantle white supremacy to construct post-apartheid society.

### Conclusion

The investigations of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the Covid have helped uncover both hybridity and Covid-19 as deconstructive weapons that deconstruct post-apartheid in South African society. The hegemony of white culture and race in South Africa is deconstructed by both hybridity in *Disgrace* and the Covid-19 deconstructs post-Apartheid society. In *Disgrace*, in order to dismantle apartheid rules and live in equality and cohesion, black people appropriate western education and marry white women. To achieve that, the study refers to black people's education in Cape Town University and the interracial marriage of Lucy with the Petrus's black community. In the actual society of South Africa, the Covid-19 disease shows the limits of white race and healthcare system by infecting and killing white people in a high rate. White race, which is dominant under the Apartheid system and somehow continues its dominance in post-apartheid period, is dismantled by the Covid-19 disease. The works produced on Covid-19 have helped prove the assumption of such white supremacy in South African country. Hybridity as portrayed in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the Covid-19 are clearly deconstructive strategies that allow South Africa to start getting rid of racial inequality in post-apartheid society.

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