

The collapse of patriarchy in the novels of J.M. Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer

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Abstract

The collapse of Apartheid in South Africa did not just mean the end of white minority rule but a slide in male power and the rise of matriarchy. Both J. M. Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer not only warn of the impending collapse of patriarchy but the consequences if it is replaced by phallogentrism. Many thought the nation's literature would nose-dive or be indeterminate. However, through startling refreshing resurgence, South African literature highlights inevitable change in narrative, the role reversal and the rise of black power.

Introduction

The South African society under Apartheid was a rigid political enclave where massive dehumanization of blacks was the order of the day. Critical works spanning the period focused on the black-white relations and the unjust rule of the South African minority government. There were even worries about what South African literature would be after Apartheid: All that is history now as South African themselves have proved that there could be more to their art at the end of Apartheid. The oppressive system left blacks at the receiving end as told by both Gordimer and Coetzee. But in their Post-apartheid narratives, there are role reversals, where whites take the position once occupied by blacks. The thrust of this paper is that while both writers see the collapse of patriarchy as inevitable in view of the prevailing scenario, they

are uncomfortable with the rise of female power as exemplified by the new characters.

Disgrace is the story of David Lurie, the 52-year-old twice divorced professor of modern languages who has been demoted to adjunct professor of communications in former Cape Town University College now Cape Technical University. He derives his sexual satisfaction in a married bourgeois prostitute weekly and when she calls off the show, David invades her privacy and is rebuffed. He takes up “hostess service” where he finds the call girls unsatisfying. By chance, he runs into Melanie Isaacs, a young girl in his Byron class. David admits being “mildly smitten” and the brief affair costs him his job when he fails to apologize for his behaviour.

David’s residence with his lesbian daughter Lucy, and her rape by a gang of black men take the novel to its feverish pitch. David’s intermittent affairs with the wives of colleagues, his affair with Bev, his daughter’s friend make him the most distasteful character in the post-apartheid South African literature. His moving condescension, his inability to see his faults, make amends or apologize contributes to his undoing. He lives in the past glory of white superego and he is unable to come to terms with the changing times. What can we make of his explanations over the rape of Lucy, Lucy’s compromise, his affair with Melanie and the opinion of the disciplinary committee over his evasive answers?

Does David know he is descending the ladder? Can we truly admit his contriteness when he says he is answering the call of Eros? His demotion from a substantive Professor to Adjunct Professor of Communications should have been a lesson that he is condescending in his acts. But David does not see this, even when he is reduced to the status of dog attendant. The decision by Lucy

to keep the pregnancy of a gang-rape is pathetic as it is pathological. But to condescend to marry Petrus is like full decimation. David confronts her in a very strong language, irrespective of his own lack of focus and locus, and Lucy's answer could draw some tears:

“Yes, I agree it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. 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”

“Yes, like a dog”. (205)

David perhaps does not realize that Lucy's condescension is her inability to cling to any pole in a drowning session. Her mother is not within reach and her father who is not a shining example has no moral to teach and no offer to make except his uninspiring life that will trail the last part of his existence. David begins the smash in a whirlwind that will consume his daughter. Although Lucy does not openly tell him this, her action is implied. Without deference to him during conversations, she reveals the depth of her soul towards him. Lucy speaks to her father in a note when he insists, she must go away after the rape thus:

Dear David, you have not been listening to me. I am not the person you know. I am a dead person and I do not know yet what will bring me back to life. All I know is that I cannot go away. You do not see this, and I do not know what more I can do to make

you see. It is as if you have chosen deliberately to sit in a corner where the rays of the sun do not shine. I think of you as one of the chimpanzees, the one with his paws over his eyes... (161)

Lucy cannot find solace in her Dutch mother, Evelina Evie, either. After her divorce from David, she returns to Holland and later remarries. Since Lucy could not get along with her stepfather, she returns to South Africa. Surrounded by an unfriendly climate and a gang rape to cope with for the rest of her life, Lucy feels she has nowhere else to run to. The turn of political events in South Africa have not made her an ideal white personality anymore, than her father's resignation from his teaching profession. Lucy reaches the nadir in her gang rape but comes to the precipice in her father who through his despicable acts throws her into the lagoon.

Lucy needs a confidant fast but not one she can find in her father. After the rape, their relationship is like that of two strangers after an uncommon experience. David's efforts to play the father and console his daughter are not reciprocated by the expected Lucy's flight into his protective wings:

"My child, my child" he says, holding out his arms to her. When she does not come, he puts aside his blanket, stands up, and takes her in his arms. In his embrace she is stiff as a pole, yielding nothing". (99)

Since she sees him as one of the chimpanzees that raped her, Lucy may be harbouring equally the fear that given the necessary condition and opportunity, David will not have the least scruples entering her. Thus, she offers to yield no emotions, no other

opportunity for anyone to gain entry into her heart as the rapists have broken her fences in all flanks, leaving her in a rapist wilderness.

Riding on the crest of realism, David does show little or no sympathy, thus justifying Lucy's fear and misgivings. In the last lap of her letter to David she tells him "I know you mean well, but you are not the guide I need, not at this time" (161). Gordimer's *July's People* foreground a post-apartheid bloody revolution which fails to happen in South Africa. It is the story of the white employers, Smales Bam and Maureen and their black servant, July. While comparing the two books-*July's People* and *Disgrace*, Obi Iwuanyanwu posits that:

Coetzee's *Disgrace* brings up the South African story to a head. In many ways, it mimics Gordimer's *July's People* whereas Gordimer describes the revolt leading up to the collapse of apartheid; Coetzee describes the dilemma of power shift. The tumultuous rage that announces its conceptual stirrings in *July's People* reaches uncontrollable peak in *Disgrace*. If *July's People* showcases the making of the human beast, *Disgrace* illustrates the triumph of bestiality.

None to Accompany Me by Gordimer is on the same theme. Vera Stark, the sensuous and civil rights lawyer matures and throws off her handsome husband Bennet, into the streets from the only family house they have which she acquired from her first marriage. Her only reason, she tells her daughter, is "Because I cannot live with someone who can't live without me" (310). Vera

goes into spiteful affairs with Otto Abarbanel, the Australian as she did with her first husband, this time without a formal divorce but a separation at the end of the novel.

But there are other similarities between *Disgrace* and *None to Accompany Me*. Lucy, David's daughter is a lesbian just as Annie, Vera's medical doctor daughter. While that of Lucy is a matter of guess for her father, David; Annie brings her lover Lou home and they make love together while her parents occupy the adjoining room. Similarly, Ivan calls his grandmother by name just as Lucy calls her father David. Thus, morality and parental authority are at loose ends in both families.

If Coetzee is implying the collapse of patriarchy in the two families, Gordimer is strongly suggesting rebellion and the rise of matriarchy in her novels as signified in *Vera*, *Mpho* and *Sibongile*. While the men now take the passengers seat, the women are seen to be firmly in control of the wheels.

But Vera's condescension runs outside the main shift of matriarchy. She easily finds herself drawn into emotional pull even with her children and grandchild in a way suggestive of incest. Like with other men, it is the same, "Vera had never before felt- it was more than drawn to-involved in the being of a man to whom she knew no sexual pull". (123). It is this pull that brings her closer to her colleague, Zeph Rapulana. Gordimer adds "it was as if, in the common place nature of their continuing contact through the foundation, they belonged together as a single sex, a reconciliation of all each had experienced, he as a man, she as a woman". (123)

Vera allows herself to be probed deeply by her sixteen-year-old grandson in a cheap parental sexual philanthropy. Adam seizes the opportunity to learn about what should concern him at an older age. His grandmother's sexual life is not a place to learn

about escapades but a route to update himself with the principles of a decent life. Gordimer explains what the sexual license means and the window it showcases:

Father and son. No end to consequences. The consequence is that the seventeen-year-old boy has become one of Vera's confidants. He knows there is something about herself she conceals, making other confessions round about it. He does that kind of thing himself to protect himself from adults. In recognition- another kind of recognition-of this she lets him drive without a valid license, and both of them as friends, are concealing this from Ben. (276)

The penchant to replicate lovers, friends or confidants or push older ones behind is the hallmark of Vera's eclectic life. Once she does, once a man sexually pulls and enters her life, the old relationship or marriage is over. It is how she ends her first marriage and Ben comes on board. It is also how Otto replaces Ben until she sends him wandering in the streets. The combined pull relatively moribund in the case of Otto but his reactivation by Adam end her relationship with Ben. Given to wavering sexual colonialism, Vera's morality reaches that of Moll Flanders by Daniel Defoe, an affair that can find validity in self justification. Marriage and its tenets mean nothing to women like Vera once they can explain their sexual shifts or have an opportunity to change the direction of their libido.

That Vera condescends in the case of Adam partly explains her inability to infuse good moral upbringing at the time her daughter needs it most. Shortly before Annie collapses into

lesbian marriage, she watches instead of rebuking or salvaging her from the mire. Unable to do this, she could have confided in her husband to rescue their daughter. Her only regret is that her daughter will miss the sweetness of the penis, the sensation associated with the penetration of a woman.

Vera also admits being unfaithful to her husband. Common sense dictates she should have avoided being drawn to open admittance. Open confession appears like a license for her daughter to do the same or as a point of reference:

Yes. I love men. I mean exactly what I am saying: how can there be love-making without the penis. I don't care what subtleties of feeling you achieve with all those caresses and when you caress the other partner you are really caressing yourself, aren't you, because you are producing in her, you say, exactly what you yourself experience-after all that, you end up without that marvelous entry, that astonishing phenomenon of a man's body that transforms itself and that you can take in. You can't tell me there's anything like it. The pleasure, the orgasm-yes, you may produce them just as well, you 'll say, between two women. But with the penis inside you, it's not just the pleasure. It's the being no longer alone. You exchange the burdens of self. You are another creature. (158-159)

Should the reader then see Vera's sermon as a sexual credo for gay partners or not as an act to rouse her daughter to rectitude? Her reasoning falls short of parental expectation, even in extreme western liberalism. Unknown to her, Annie might have been flying a kite as she confirms it when she asks, "Tell me. We disgust you-Lou and I" (159). Vera slides further in expectation and the reader nears exasperation when she answers, "No- I don't disapprove, I don't consider what you do is wrong. It is just the penis. I have to say it. I regret for you-no penis" (160).

By condescending to humor an erring daughter, Vera fails to make a distinction between sexual satisfaction in a conventional marriage and that found in an aberration. For her, if this satisfaction can be found in a dog, humans should so condescend.

Vera's sexual liberalism finds company in the plight of Mpho. Sibongile is disappointed that Vera does not warn them that Mpho is having a close relationship with Oupa after introducing them and knowing Oupa is married. Ever ready to allow opposite sexes play out themselves, Vera ducks at every charge of indiscretion. She does not supervise over the private lives of the staff in the foundation, she argues. Vera consents to an abortion without fuss but her other concern deserves further comment. She desperately wants to know if Oupa is in love, is wrapped up in the chemistry of sexual profusion and maybe see the sensation it produces in him. "So you love her. You think you were in love with her" (175). Oupa quickly fences off her intrusion, "I don't know. How can I be in love, I 've got a wife" (175)?

Gordimer benches the ideal male chauvinists and promotes the females. Ben's job takes a subordinate position to that of his wife, Vera, just as Didymus looks on as Sibongile's profile rises. As Vera flagellates towards Otto and Ben's Libido blunts, Sally's

political blades sharpens and Didy takes a complacent position. Gordimer hints on the possible consequences in the rise of matriarchy- “when Didymus did make the approaches of love-making-Sibongile felt no response” (133). Didy’s status is unable to excite” Sally’s sexuality and her new matriarchal role. She is no longer the Sally he used to know. She is not fighting her nature, she has toward above him. The best Didy can get is a subordinate position as Ben does. If Didy ever thinks Sally can initiate a sexual act the way she used to do, he is wrong. Didy has to reconcile himself with the new status or his marriage will fail.

Obi Iwuanyanwu sees the interstice between the rise of women in *July’s People* of Gordimer and *Disgrace* of Coetzee in the new political structure as a process of change and as the resultant collapse of white dominance. To him:

What both Coetzee and Gordimer are describing is the process of cold-blooded divestiture of arbitrary white dominance. Lucy, Maureen, and the Smales children understand and accept the coming of change. Bam Smales and David Lurie could not accept change as a fact and that creates a new tension in white family relations. Maureen antagonizes her husband, Bam, and runs away. Lucy antagonizes her father, Lurie, and he moves out of the farm. (5)

Iwuanyanwu’s submission authenticates further what Lucy and Maureen’s matriarchal fall means; the turn of sexual condescension if we have to go back to the story. Lucy accepts Petrus as husband and Maureen poses sexually for July. The Smales earlier generosity is what Maureen extends. As a servant,

July lives above his peers. Living in a comfortable room and a bath with hot and cold running water, receives two weeks paid vacation a year and is allowed the luxury to bring his girl friend into his room, July is not like other black servants working for whites.

When July is ill, Maureen brings him a “tray of light food she had prepared herself” (166). Gordimer says Maureen so acts because of her “belief in the absolute nature of intimate relationships between human beings” (64). But despite her efforts to bridge the gap with her actions through her condescension with her husband, Bam, July is incapable of erecting a permanent bridge across the gulf. But her action in posing sexually naked will perpetually send July away from her service as Sheila Roberts observes:

Maureen’s final fording of the river in pursuit of the helicopter has been interpreted mythologically as some sort of crossing of the Rubicon, or as a trope of rebirth... But I would posit that the moment of her posing sexually for July is also Rubiconal. Even if circumstances should change, she can never again revert to her old stable self as July’s employer (82)

For Kirsten Holst Peterson, Maureen’s running away from the trap from the condition which her condescension has created is an impossibility:

I can only interpret the ending as her running away from her painful confrontation; with July and from the necessity of making major psychological

adjustments to the changed situation. She does of course, have nowhere to run to.
(173)

If Maureen has nowhere to run to, then two options are open to her: turn and accept to live the rest of her life in shame or plunge to her death. Two unenviable options which attract no pity because they are self inflicted. Gordimer last word to whites is that the term after apartheid can be renegotiated but not under an extreme condescension. Both Coetzee and Gordimer are united in this. The question which faces the reader at the end of *July's People*, *None to Accountancy Me* and *Disgrace* is, should South African whites not find a better point to meet blacks at the new dispensation?

Conclusion

Coetzee and Gordimer are on the path of history, the pathway of man's exploration of his world and the leech that characterize his historical existence. At no time is his journey permanent they say, and at no time will he not make mistakes. Only justice will codify his world and give him peace at every epoch.

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