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Critiquing Characters Dysfunctional Attitude and Activity: Freudian *id*, *ego* and *superego* in Coetzee's *DISGRACE*

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Abstract

In this paper, an endeavor has been made to excavate the root factors of character's dysfunctional attitude and behavior in J.M. Coetzee's novel Disgrace. With this purview the central character of the novel has been taken for investigation. The central character of the novel, David Lurie is a man of 52 years old, holds some idiosyncratic views of his life. He is seen as mechanical and superficial towards maintaining relationships. David is virtually inadaptable towards familial as well as sexual relations. He refuses to show the token penitence asked by the University where he works. He comes to experience a deeper sense of disgrace as the title of the novel signifies. To understand the major causes of his failure in maintaining familial ties, abandonment of his profession and place, a psychoanalytical approach has been made to elucidate these traumatic situations of the character. To unravel David's mental anxieties, disturbances, impulsive activities, psychoanalytical interpretations of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) have been applied whose theory of the psyche often is referred today as classical psychoanalysis. In doing so, it is expected that core facts of such types of attitude and behavior of the character will be comprehensible. There are some psychological reasons behind his promiscuous behavior and abandonment of the familial tie of the above. To develop a greater understanding and appreciation of the character of David the psychoanalytical method is essential. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory of personality argued that human behavior was the result of the interaction of three component parts of the mind: the id, ego, and superego. Pamela Thurschwell opines that Psychoanalysis provides both a theory of the history of the individual mind- its early development, its frustrations and desires (which include sexual, or what Freud calls libidinal, desires) - and a set of specific therapeutic techniques for recalling, interpreting and coming to terms with that individual history. After the investigation of the character in the above light definitely it will lend a meaningful, coherent resolution of the above.

Keywords: psychoanalysis, passion, promiscuity, primitiveness, psychology.

Prologue: “*The heart of Freud’s concern is the ego, which he sees battling with three forces: the id, the super-ego, and the outside world*”- Peter Gay.

South African writer, J.M. Coetzee’s 1999 novel *Disgrace* is rather a document of anxieties and impulses. It forces the readers to visualize the gloomy part of life and deal with moral issues and the baser but primitive instincts of human beings. The protagonist David Lurie is twice divorced, a wayward college professor of modern language in Cape Town. He is serving out his time teaching "Communication Skills" and "one special-field course a year, irrespective of enrollment" now that his university has been "rationalized." In the beginning line of *Disgrace* David refers to sex as a “problem that he has solved rather well”. The terms ‘solved’ and ‘problem’ suggests he views sex as an activity alongside eating, sleeping, etc almost as if it is mechanical and not linked to any kind of emotion. He cannot sustain a durable relationship, uses prostitutes and has been promiscuous throughout his adult life. He treats and views women as objects who are to be used for his pleasure. Due to this profligate attitude and behavior he faces a cataclysmic life throughout; reveals the troubled relationship of the protagonist with other characters of the novel. David is a man who tries his best, but he also makes a lot of mistakes along the way. He is a stubborn, strong-headed guy. In the opening part of the novel, David Lurie is seen as at ease with his life and thoughts, nevertheless he is alone. In the concluding half of the story David’s life has faced topsy-turvy twists which are totally unexpected, yet he puts an effort to embrace all that has come to him. Things are again proved to be contradictory to David but why this happens to him?

*Nicht Kunst and Wissenschaft allein,
Geduld will be idem werke sein!*

(Art and science alone won’t do a little patience is needed too! – Sigmund Freud)

Discussion: “...psycho-analysis provides...radical questioning, this conjectural interrogation, this appeal to what is not given from the outset as cause of an effect, that it has a role in the renewal of criticism.”

Psychoanalytical criticism is grounded on Freudian theories of psychology. Freud asserted that people's behavior is affected by their unconscious. Freud believed that our unconscious is influenced by childhood events. Freud organized these events into developmental stages involving relationships with parents and drives of desire and pleasure where children focus “...on different parts of the body...starting with the mouth...shifting to the oral, anal, and phallic phases...” These stages reflect base levels of desire, but they also involve fear of loss (loss of genitals, loss of affection from parents, loss of life) and repression: “...the expunging from consciousness of these unhappy psychological events”. In this light if we peep into the life of David, his upbringing, it reveals he was rearing up to his adulthood only by the female family members. In name of male relations he had hardly anyone- “He himself has no son. His childhood was spent in a family of women. As mother, aunts, sisters fell away, they were replaced in due course by mistresses, wives, a daughter. The company of women made of him a lover of women and, to an extent, a

womanizer...That was how he lived; for years, for decades, that was the backbone of his life.” This is in fact one of the reasons of his inconsistencies in his familial life. The lack of male member in his family when he was a child resists him from developing any sort of bond towards men. Even when he became father that was again of a girl child. Therefore it is proved that he feels comfortable only with female companionship, either they are his own relatives or his mistresses. The novelist has depicted the central character David Lurie with robust health, healthy mind and a prestigious profession, “He is in good health, his mind is clear. By profession he is, or has been scholar, a scholarship still engages, intermittently the core of him. He lives within his income, within his temperament, within his emotional means.” Then why is he so troubled? Why is he unable to live normally like hundreds of other men in a smooth familial bond after having a wife and a daughter? He himself questions of his circumstance- “Is he happy?” He remembers the “chorus of *Oedipus*: Call no man happy until he is dead.” The essence of his tumultuous life, the inconsistencies of his relationships, thoughts and behaviors, the cause of his physical excitements, all these can be conceivable through the psychological framework of interpretation.

“In the theory of psychoanalysis, we have no hesitation in assuming that the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle.”- Freud

David throughout his life tries to ponder over the volatility of his thoughts, he analyses several time of his failure as a skilled professor; both as a husband and a father but he never gets the reply to it. Clumsily, at times he feels if he attains the marital pleasure without living with his wife then there is no basis of maintaining families like the rest of the folk, “It surprises him that ninety minutes a week of a woman’s company are enough to make him happy, who used to think he needed a wife, a home, a marriage. His needs turn out to be quite light, after all, light and fleeting, like those of a butterfly...like the hum of traffic that lulls the city-dwellers to sleep,...” This can be said as an expression of a primitive man; the primitiveness which is dormant inside the interior of David. It is as if the repression of the *id*, in Freudian terms which reveals in the dialogue of David perhaps without realizing what it implicates: “...the notion that human beings are motivated, even driven, by desires, fears, needs, and conflicts of which they are unaware...” (Freud). According to Freud human mind is essentially dual in nature, operating both consciously and unconsciously. To a great extent David is engrossed in this specific pleasure principle. Though at times he is aware of his flirtatious sort of character he can’t let it go, he is incapable to eradicate this crudeness, “His temperament is not going to change”. In several circumstances, though he establishes relationship with various women with different ages, it is without any excitement and love- “his sentiments are, he is aware, complacent, even uxorious. Nevertheless he does not cease to hold to them.” Though he has frequented to various women yet with no compassion at all, but he does this as he performed such other daily activities. It is proved every human being is bounded by the laws of society but he cannot resist the baser raw feelings which are innate in every human being. David is the instance of this. He is a modern man with modern beliefs because he lives in an advanced society. In spite of his intellectuality, abundance of knowledge, cognizant of social norms, he cannot give up those instincts. This is what the

pressure of *id*, the ‘insatiable and pleasure seeking’ principle in David which does not allow him to conform to the rules of society. According to Freud-

“numerous acts of willful forgetting or inexplicable mistakes are recounted from his personal experience. None of such actions can be truly accidental or uncaused...”

In the beginning segment of the novel, up to chapter-7, David is portrayed as a man motivated only by his pleasure principles. It is not that he does not realize his mean activities and try to reform. At certain times he tries to avoid his lifestyle and correct himself by- “spends more time in the university library, reading all he can...He enjoys the late-afternoon quiet of the reading room, enjoys the walk home afterwards: the brisk winter air, the damp gleaming streets.” David is alert that the impulsive activity he has undergone is totally unscrupulous. He realizes that it is beyond his dignity and old age. He wants to teach rather well, to lend his students the reservoir of knowledge he has on literature- Wordsworth, Byron and whole of the Romantics. Regrettably, the time and space has changed, the society he lives do not require the so-called disjointed knowledge of the English Literature. So, he has been entrusted with the subject of ‘Communicative Skills’ to teach his students. He is ready to perform his task of teaching the subject although sardonically: “they look through him when he speaks, forget his name” This shows Freudian *superego* is at work. This has become the part and parcel of his life, the society where David belongs to. He has already learnt to internalize the norms and mores of the society. As David is not insane he tries to stoop before the laws formed by the society although unsuccessfully: “He pauses. Blank incomprehension. He has gone too far too fast. How to bring them to him?” He has given his best to become cheerful, contented with the life he has, he has his status. He has tried to forfeit everyone from his mind, all the women once he had in association, Ema Bovary, Soraya, etc. He has started to concentrate on his profession and make his life go on but human predicament is always predestined: “He reads aloud:

*“He stood a stranger in this breathing world,
An erring spirit from another hurled;
A thing of dark imaginings, that shaped
By choice the perils he by chance escaped.”*

He unable to free from his *id*, once again entraps by the corporal *drives*, the basic instinct of human being. This time beyond anyone’s expectation, he has been obsessed by the beauty of a female. She is none other than his student. Much junior to him to the extent of thirty years, Melanie Issacs: “But the girl he has brought home is not just thirty years his junior: she is a student, his student, under his tutelage.” This is the worst that could happen to David; he is so absorbed by the physical beauty of the girl that he thinks, “Why? Because 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.”

David’s *superego* has ceased to work on him; he is fanatical about his pleasures, the elemental instincts which a civilized society never allows: “On the living-room floor, to the sound of rain pattering against the windows, he makes love to her.” He has at the threshold

of Hell, if *ego* will let him off then he will be at the hub of Hell. After the copulation with Melanie, his reckoning power has stopped working. David once again immersed in the love-making process; hankers after the spryness and forgets about the society. With this starts his real tribulations and finds himself amidst immeasurable problems, "The report is on page three: 'Professor on sex charge', it is headed. He skims the first lines is slated to appear before a disciplinary board on a charge of sexual harassment". He has lost his reputation, embarrassed; even commanded by the authority of University to apologize in front of the Melane's parents as well as the authorities of University. He is brought up on disciplinary charges that result in his dismissal: "The notification-...3.1 addresses victimization or harassment of students by teachers." David thinks that whatever he has done is not erroneous, he is not accountable of anything, "He does not feel nervous. On the contrary, he feels quite sure of himself." His *ego* will not let him to give up; he has his own rights as a human being. His feelings for Melane are very true: "A quick shudder of lust tugs him." David justifies his careless actions by thinking that he is "indeed a gentleman of a definite kind with impulsive little adventures" He would not realize that the statements he made like in the case of Melanie where he says that something unpredictable happened to him. David says that "Melanie struck up fire in him". These statements are inappropriate to a father who had entrusted the University with the welfare of his daughter only for her to be taken advantage of by her professor. At any cost, he is not ready to 'apologies' even at the cost of his occupation, the only means of earning his bread and butter. The *ego* finally wins and David has lost everything, his secured place, dignity and position. He is sent numerous messages: "YOUR DAYS ARE OVER, CASANOVA". David is preoccupied with his intention that he is not going to bend down, so he searches out for a new direction. Leaving aside whatever he has in Cape Town, he decides to move to his daughter's place in Eastern Cape Town. According to Freud the *id*, *ego*, and *superego* always keep on directing a man. This is the essence of the attitudes and activities as showed by different persons and these shape up our personalities. Freud puts the fact in the following way-

"The theory of the drives is, so to speak, our mythology. The drives are mythic in essence, magnificent in their elusiveness. We can't ignore them for a moment in our work- yet, at the same time, we are never sure we are never actually seeing them clearly; and that of course, would in no way rob the drives of their mythic power, or their importance."

Of course the proportion differs from person to person. David, instead of losing his psychological strength moves towards the place of his daughter, Lucy. He seeks to start up his life fresh and anew, "What is he going to do with his time?" The place is a countryside where people dwell with their crudeness. Lucy the only daughter of David resides here with her own vivacity and values: "now here she is, flowered dress, bare feet and all, in a house full of the smell of baking, no longer a child playing at farming but a solid countrywoman, a boervrou". She welcomes her father with all affection and admiration in spite of the fact that she is remotely related to David. At the outset things are going on quite right; David's traumatized life has got as if the right track. He has tried to put his past life into oblivion,

that he has 'lived'; the *superego* has commanded him to do so. Everything seems to be excellent with David and he has given his best to adapt his new life with his daughter. He has showered his compassion and pamperings upon his daughter whom he has not met for a long time. Here it is seen though David tries to work through his own *superego* but only for some whims. He sees Bev, the neighbor of Lucy: "He has not taken to Bev Shaw, a dumpy, bustling little woman with black freckles, close-cropped wiry hair, and no neck." Bev is physically not good looking, but the baser instinct has urged David to overlook her physical beauty and to contemplate in fulfilling his unquenchable thrust. The repressed desire, the *id* of David has again comes to the fore: "He spreads out the blankets on the floor, the grey... Never did he dream he would sleep with a Bev". On the other hand, David is seen as thoughtful on the sexual life of his daughter, he is tentative about the inclinations of his daughter. David has come to know that Lucy inhabits with a girl called Helen since long: "And what does he know about these two in particular, Lucy and Helen?" At this juncture, the life of David in Lucy's place seems perfectly good. The twist in the plot has come and everything seems turn upside down when their happy days have been shattered by an unanticipated incident. Lucy has been raped by some local boys to whom David tries to counter attack but without any positive result. He is terribly hurt and thrown acid by the gang. The partial family which he tries to establish with Lucy has proved to be temporary. At this context reveals the difference in temperament between the father and daughter. The father is conscious about the security of his daughter, whereas the daughter is adamant that she is not going to change herself and her place. Even she prefers not to be bothered by anyone, not even by her father that she is perfectly alright: "No, you keep misreading me. Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don't act in terms of abstractions. Until you make the effort to see that I can't help you." It so happens due to the differences in the composition of *id*, *ego*, and *superego* in human beings. Lucy further asked her father not to meddle in her life that is her own: "...once she was only a little tadpole in her mother's body, and now here she is, solid in her existence, more solid than he has ever been."

David has some other interests in his life. To understand his mentality in an explicit way, it is necessary to probe deep into his mind and activities. In his life, David made several attempts to identify himself with Byron. He so often indulges in performing a play on Byron, one of the great Romantics. He finds relieved while speaks about Byron or directing his play. In perusing it reveals Byron is none other than the projection of David's own mind. He feels as if there is much resemblance between Byron and himself. There is a reason behind this. Byron is known to the world as one of the foremost Romantic Poets who along with Shelly and Keats formed the second generation of the Romantic poets. Behind this, personally Byron had abundance of lovers and mistresses who most of the time engrossed in flirtatious activities "had the last big love-affair of his life". David also tries to be a Byronic hero by adopting his hero's character traits. For instance, Bryon would not sustain an affair. He developed a clear distinction between sex and love such that he would get bored with the attractive women. David too pointed out that his fate was that he would not sustain a marriage. This is proven by the fact that he had two marriages that failed and several affairs all through the novel. Olsen acknowledges that Bryon felt real love for his sister

Augusta with whom they had a child out of a scandal; he felt some attachment towards her. David too unremittingly develops a desire for Melanie as part of his scandal and also felt connected to her through their wrongdoings. Later to escape from these scandals and rumors Byron had to leave his place, "He went to Italy to escape a scandal, and settled there." He died very young, "thirty-six". The psychoanalytic critics expressed that the reason behind his wayward flirtatious life is hidden behind his childhood. Byron was thus influenced by the childhood impacts which mould his character to his adulthood. Thus David in empathizing Byron in fact he sympathize himself. He too feels the disastrousness of life without any decisive cause. In one thing there is a difference between David and Byron as David feels, that is, Byron had chosen to escape from the gossips to attain a peaceful and secured life. On the other hand, David resolves that he will confront the challenge, neither escapade nor to feel shame.

One may feel disgust about the character of David that how could an old man of 50s as well as a dignified professor indulge in such unethical activities. Instead of settling down with his family, dotting upon his profession he is rather thoughtful only with his bodily pleasures. He has not felt guilty of spoiling a student morally and physically who is attending his classes to gain some knowledge. On the contrary what sort of knowledge he has disseminated among the students in the University where he teaches? He is totally uninhibited to the penalties which he would face not only from his authority but also from the society. David is neither an insane nor a psycho in medical terms; he is well aware of his position. He knows that amidst the huge populace of Cape Town is all alone. Yet he never feels depressed about that as he can do everything for himself, right from cooking, housekeeping and all that the others do for themselves. The core factors of his troubles are then no more the clashes among *id*, *superego* and *ego*. This is the consequence of his ups and downs of life. Tina Chanter announces about the ego and superego that:

"...renunciation, so apparently necessary for "civilized" life, sheds light on the ongoing struggle that, characterizes men's attempt to overcome the oedipal complex, a struggle that, to the extent that the superego inherits that conflict, comes to be embodied in the relationship between ego and superego, and is thus played out in terms of the moral development of the individual."

While David talks to Rosalind, his ex-wife or to Mr. Issacs, the father of Melane he becomes fully conscious of his speech. He is rational about his sayings: "The whole thing is disgraceful from beginning to end. Disgraceful and vulgar too. And I'm not sorry for saying so." He says he never feel sorry about his deeds; that what he had done was due to his urge. That he stresses on the *id*, the desire, the wish which a man of flesh and blood feel for. He confronts the ravages with a cool mind that is done in his apartment. Nevertheless in Lucy's place he is struggling to change himself, as if he has transformed from an ugly duckling to a beautiful swan. Assisting Lucy in her drudgeries; selling articles in the Saturday market when she falls sick. David is much concern for her future, her hardships, and the struggles she does for her land and property: "Lucy's potatoes, tumbled out into a bushel basket, have been washed clean. Koos and Miems's are still speckled with earth." When she is raped

David is too concern for her health, her security in that area. As a father he insists her to return to his place. She instantly declines his proposal and thus once again he becomes alone:

“Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.”

Epilogue: In the surface level, David is a character that is too concern with fleshy desires. He is dynamic in fulfilling his insatiable thrust. He has a dignified profession, a professor in Cape Town. Ironically instead of concentrating his lectures, he speculates about the time he spends with his mistresses. He is not an alien landed from a mysterious territory but belongs to our society. A modern man in a modern society but he is adamant not to conform to the laws and regulations of the society he lives in. In his glossary there is no space for ethics and values. David has answers to all his deeds which society has censored as unethical. Although he is a head-strong man yet later he has broken down to almost nothing. His exclamation proves his situation, “Like a dog!” The novelist, J.M. Coetzee aptly portrays the character of David not as a perfect hero but with human frailties who is common in our milieu. The reasons of such traits in human being only could be perceived through psychoanalytical study. Thus through Freudian psychoanalysis the dysfunctional attitude and perplexing behavior of David become much distinct. According to a Freudian critic-

“Ego, bolstered by superego, has regulated the id”.

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