

Politics of confession: A political reading of Coetzee's *Disgrace*

¹* Naveed Ahmad

* * Mrs. Amtul Hadia

Abstract:

The use of religious models in political arena has been a vital tool in the hands of politicians in order to achieve secular objectives, unattainable otherwise. In current research several Confessional features are discussed, with particular emphasis on political confession where a religious practice (confession) is maneuvered to support political acrobats in South African post-apartheid politics. The research evaluates the authenticity of confessional model introduced in South African Truth and reconciliation commission (TRC); a post-apartheid political practice. Current research gauges the relationship of confession and forgiveness in South African context in the light of Coetzee's *Disgrace*. The authenticity of contrition is discussed which is the pivotal element in this whole process. This paper evaluates TRC in reference to justice and the grant of amnesty to the violators of gross human rights, how justice is abrogated in order to bring reconciliation. The way TRC attached reconciliation to forgiveness was wrong in its very roots.

The fiction of dignity helps to define humanity and the status of humanity helps to define human rights. There is thus a real sense in which an affront to our dignity strikes at our rights. Yet when, outraged at such affront, we stand on our rights and demand redress, we would do well to remember how insubstantial the dignity is on which those rights are based.

(Coetzee 17)

Coetzee objected the authenticity of post-apartheid political system through *Disgrace* where the actions and reactions of the protagonist contend with newly introduced Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The procedures and very basic phenomenon of the commission is challenged by

¹Lecturer, COMSATS Institute of Information Technology, G.T Road Wah, Pakistan.
naveedahmad.iiui@gmail.com

not only Coetzee but many other post-apartheid novelists. The university proceedings of Prof. Lurie's case present similarity with TRC's proceedings where individual's contrition was enough for his exoneration from the crimes he committed. Prof. Lurie too was suggested by his colleagues to show repentance in order to get relaxation from the punishment. The futility of TRC is proved through protagonist's objections on the demands of university committee members. Coetzee wants to convey his readers the depth of confessional process and its effectiveness in societal perspective: an institution that is religious becomes political, in order to govern secular lives of individuals, which cannot be justified with reasons whatever.

In order to understand the situation described above, one must be familiar with the forms of confession and its importance for the followers in Christianity.

Religious Confession:

Earlier form of confession in Christianity was very different than today's confessional mode; that confession was public one and penitent had to undergo many ordeals to redeem his soul from guilt. Michel Foucault discussed in *The Politics of Truth* the two different periods and manners of confessional history in Christianity. The mode discussed above had public humiliation of penitent and even after the period of punishment, criminal had to be away from certain Christian rites. As Foucault puts it, "prove their suffering, show their shame, make manifest their humility and exhibit their modesty" (173). It was a status, which a penitent had to adopt in order to get exoneration, redemption or purification of the soul. The second and modern form of confession works more toward the inner cleansing it is not public spectacle of humiliation of criminal but it occurs, only when an individual himself feels the stink of his crime. In order to get spiritual cleansing he goes to a priest, prostrates in front of him as an image of God and repents on his misdeeds to get salvation. Confession cannot only be restricted to theological arena because later on a public form of confession evolved in literary paradigm as mentioned by Anne Hartman. Starting from *Augustine's confessions* there emerged a series of confessional writings i.e. *Tolstoy's confession*, *Saint Patrick's confession*, St. Augustine's confession and many

confessions of other religious figures. In the secular world, accepting crimes of oneself to other human being or in court of law is also a form of confession whether it is due to judicial pressure or as a result of inner conflict.

Secular Confession:

Confession of a crime had never been a simple phenomenon, it can relieve a criminal from the guilt of his own conscience but from societal perspective, even a true confession cannot change the intensity of a crime committed by confessee. Persecution process looks for witnesses or confession but that confession cannot lead to absolution, for; justice only searches the true nature of crime and evaluates the appropriate punishment. From religious angle, God may forgive a true confessee but he will be a criminal to society and state as well, for which forgiveness can only be rewarded by the individual who was afflicted by that crime. Theological efficacy of confession can relief a criminal's conscience from guilt but the damage provided to the individual will remain the same, until effected person forgive him or the criminal get punishment. The question of forensic truth again causes complexity in the problem discussed and generates dubious remarks on viability of the process of confession. No judicial system has any instrument to measure the level of truth uttered by an individual, facial expression or body language do not stand as proof to the speech analysis.

Politics of Confession:

Confession also worked to support the political motives; either progressive or destructive motives. Confession can sometimes be propagated in its higher level to promote a sense of responsibility and as a voice of conscience. Along with all sublime confessional teachings, it also performs a malicious function in the hands of politicians; Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, which awarded indemnity to the criminals of gross human rights violations. Therefore, in Post-Apartheid South Africa 'confession' had become a tool in the hands of criminals and felonious individuals. During TRC hearings, perpetrators were demanded to confess their crime, in order to get amnesty. Once the mother of a young man, who

was killed during apartheid, criticized the confessional practice, in this manner, “This thing called reconciliation...if I am understanding it correctly...if it mean this perpetrator, this man who has killed Christopher Piet (her son), if it means he becomes human again, this man, so that I, so that all of us, get our humanity back... then I agree, then I support it” (Krog 142).

Disgrace explores the political function of confession during TRC trials where amnesty was promised with a true confession. Archbishop Desmond Tutu used Christianized language to describe TRC and the specific religious terminologies tended to lower down the aggression of the victims. “The practices of the commission...drew heavily on Christian concepts of confession and forgiveness” (Lund 110). Tutu used religious practices to achieve political motives in post-apartheid South Africa, as, Diala observed the function, “Tutu's religious metaphor had linked the processes of confession, forgiveness and reconciliation into one another, emphasizing that these were not concepts just applicable to the realm of religion, and spiritual affairs, but that they were equally relevant to the domain of practical politics” (Diala 67). TRC's proceedings proved to be futile because it was impossible to judge a true repentance; Coetzee discussed the same issue through his protagonist David Lurie's university trial meetings.

Forgiveness:

Forgiveness is undoubtedly an appreciable practice, which shows high moral standards and seeks a great change of mind on the part of victims. Forgiveness is not only valuable to offender but it leads a victim towards consolation and also redeems him from nurturing grudges and revengeful thoughts. On the other hand, it creates a sense of respect in the heart of offender for that victim. However, problem is “What is forgiveness?” “Is it only for weaker ones to forgive?” Forgiveness is, when a victim has capability to take revenge and cause injuries to offender. If a victim has no support from law enforcing agencies or the state institutions themselves cause offence, then forgiveness loses its true function, neither is it a change of heart on the part of victim nor it creates value of forgiveness in offender's mind. *Disgrace* too

exhibits the chances of forgiveness for David Lurie if he had expressed his remorse on the incident and had said few sentences to present his remorse.

This individual debate moves to the crimes inflicted by one group of human being to the others, one nation against the other and then the politics of morality intervenes to support the wrong doer with a lot of references from history, religion and social reformatory values to cheat victim's emotions. Whenever change of power takes place emotions of revenge are common spectacle as it happens in revolutionary phase of nations. In politics, such circumstances come into practice whenever a colonial power is overcome by miserable colonized. So there is a fear of revenge from the victims depending upon the opportunities at the hand of the victim but if the state provides justice, the chain of providing harms by other fellow beings can be ended. Then the victim will agree on reconciliation because reconciliation and forgiveness are not synonymous to each other. "It is possible to reconcile with an opponent without actually forgiving the individual. Likewise, it is possible to forgive another without ever formally reconciling" (Worthington 18).

Ideas in question are the crimes committed by one nation to the other, one group of people to others and one country to other country. In the modern world, these crimes are not only in war but also in peace where offending nations use their power of 'representation' to cause gross human rights violations as legitimized practices. In last two centuries, this filthy politics had been practiced by many powerful nations and among such countries South Africa is a prominent one, where colonizers not only massacred the self-respect of the natives but they also looted and plundered the resources of the country. The politics of colonization can easily be understood by the saying of Desmond Tutu "When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said, 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land."

The post-apartheid era in South Africa started with mutual collaboration of old adversaries in building new South Africa. This collaboration was neither the desire of ANC nor NP leadership was willing to share the power of South African politics; it was only the result of mutual

shortcomings. In such a multiracial rule, both parties had to come in terms with each other; ANC was to opt amnesty program for the gross human rights violators during apartheid. To provide amnesty and reparations Nelson Mandela formed Truth and Reconciliation Commission under the supervision of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The function of TRC is highly appreciated by political thinkers of one kind but there are people who criticized the performance of TRC.

TRC and South African Fiction:

Many literary works, mostly written by J.M.Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, Athol Fugard, Miriam Tlali and Zakes Mda, have presented history of South Africa. These writers aimed their masterpieces to narrate political situation of Apartheid and Post-apartheid period in explicit manner. In some cases, these writings can be termed as confessional writings; written by White South Africans who felt the anguish of The Black South African community and wanted it to be known to the whole world. Such writers attempted to console the victims of Apartheid regime too. J. M. Coetzee is a prominent member of this literary constellation, who being white liberal, criticised the discrimination and oppression faced by Black South Africans. *Disgrace* shows the period of transition from authoritarian rule to democratic system of government. The novel also represents the transfer of power and its results, as Fanon mentioned, “The last shall be first and the first last” (Fanon 36). According to Fanon, the process of decolonization is often a catastrophic where the anger and retaliation of the colonized comes forward to form a chaotic situation of the state.

Post-Apartheid South Africa and *Disgrace*:

Coetzee represents this concept of power transfer in second crime of the novel when three Black South Africans raped Lucy and burnt David Lurie. David Lurie who was once perpetrator became victim and started feeling the same pain, which the family of his student Melanie had undergone. The story of *Disgrace* is about a university professor; David Lurie who is charged of sexual harassment to his student; Melanie. The performance of the trial committee censures the procedures of Truth and Reconciliation Commission

(TRC), which had every relaxation to save the criminals of human rights violations. The process and demands put in front of protagonist resemble as the part of TRC; which had been a hot issue in those days.

Hearing of the committee held in camera recording, which was no less than a television program, although Prof. Lurie committed the crime but he was not in the pursuit of safe passage, even when he was offered, he rejected it rationally. When Farodia Rassool asks him “Would you be prepared to undergo counselling?” , his answer is void of evasiveness, “I am a grown man. I am not receptive to being counselled. I am beyond the reach of counselling” (Coetzee 49). In those days, many of the criminals were recommended counselling who abused their authorities to increase racial segregation. On average, every Black African women had been raped twice in her life and TRC provided a safe way out to those criminals in the name of counseling which Coetzee challenges in *Disgrace*. Although, David Lurie committed the crime but Coetzee voices himself through Lurie to argue that the TRC was illegitimate. The character of David Lurie is not evasive one; he admits his guilt and appears to be ready for the punishment.

Coetzee’s *Disgrace* has been a continuous source of attraction because of its insidious critique about TRC. The structure and procedure of TRC was not likely to be the source of contentment for the victims of apartheid injustices. The commission had relaxations for the people who had committed crimes and wanted to escape from charges on these bases. At one point Hakim tells him to be easy and not to take this issue on his nerves, only because, he knew that there are many ways to protect his game-mate. Although David Lurie accepts the charges and guilt but Dr. Rassool had objection on his attitude of acceptance because he did not expressed any feeling of remorse or lamentation, but on the other way there is no gauge to measure, whether the person is truly lamenting or just uttering a rote lesson. Here again TRC becomes inadequate in providing justice and the trade between perpetrators and commission had already been decided. Committee on amnesty proved to be such generous that almost 95% of perpetrators got exoneration of delicts

committed by them. Coetzee challenged the political system of post-apartheid period by his protagonist David Lurie's objections during his trial.

Only stubbornness of David Lurie deprived him from exoneration, otherwise he had many ways to secure his job. When we talk about transparency of such proceedings, justice is the backbone of consolation to the victims, and it is up to victim whether he forgives or not. In front of justice, there is no place of forgiveness based on confession but the commission stressed upon confession of criminals and announced open exoneration for people doing confessions. Coetzee's protagonist David Lurie raises the same objection when he answers Dr Farodia in this way; "Frankly, what you want from me is not a response but a confession. Well, I make no confession. I put forward a plea, as is my right" (Coetzee 51). Secondly, if they intend to get a confession in religious terminology, confession is not a public matter while the TRC considered it to be. In Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the process of confession had become a tool in the hands of political veterans.

Crime, confession, amnesty and forgiveness are the key issues discussed in *Disgrace*, which will be studied through the consequences of amorality. The said novel depicts the story of transitory period in South Africa where newly developed democracy started to sprout its buds. Although new constitution gave rights to Black South African on equal basis but the right to demand justice for past oppression and politically motivated crimes was suppressed under the voice of TRC. Although it had been appreciable, at international forum but the way, TRC worked was not satisfactory to the liberal human beings and Coetzee explicitly manifested the politics of post-Apartheid South Africa through his fiction.

Confession and TRC:

Among different other elements of TRC, religious groups intended to give it a religious dimension as well, and supported their program with confessional practice as Richard A. Wilson mentions, "The religious redemptive vision of reconciliation stressed public confession by victims, and it created meaning for suffering through a narrative of sacrifice for liberation" (22). Confession in theology leads to forgiveness, which was the ultimate

political aim. Desmond Tutu organized the language of the TRC in such a manner that it directed towards religious aspects of reconciliation and forgiveness, as Wilson mentioned, "The dominant formulation of the term linked reconciliation with notions of confession, forgiveness, sacrifice, redemption and liberation" (98). Confession is a matter between the man and God. Jane Poyner writes about *Disgrace*, "Thus the "trial" scene functions, firstly, as a catalyst that sets in motion a process of self-reflection and self-abnegation on Lurie's part, who rejects confession in the public sphere yet nevertheless unconsciously strives for self-forgiveness in the private" (149). Dominic Head has pointed out the function of TRC in this manner, "Confession then becomes a tool for the regulated society to imprison individual consciousness, and is thus emptied of its true purpose" (77). According to Dominic Head, the demand of confession was not even religiously rooted because the authorities tried to exert their own manner of confession. Such demand itself proves to be illogical when judicial system has no tools to measure the sincerity of the confessor. Michel Foucault objected the practice of confession in this way, "Their aim is not, I think, to decipher a hidden truth in the depth of the individual. Their aim is something else" (Foucault 200). For him, confession demands self-correctness and person's ability to face the truth of his actions. At one instance, Foucault mentioned the confessional description of a Cyprian correspondent who defined confession as, "prove their suffering, show their shame, make manifest their humility and exhibit their modesty" (Foucault 208). The confessional practice involves the fears, which compel the confessee to mold his statement in order to avoid maximum loss. According to Gudjonsson these are fear of legal sanctions, concern about one's reputation, not wanting to admit to oneself what one has done, not wanting one's family and friends to know about the crime and the fear of retaliation (115-116).

When a crime is inflicted to other human beings, confessor (priest) has no authority to emancipate the criminal from judicial proceedings, although a priest has authority to reward absolution but it cannot affect judicial procedures. So here, religious absolution and social forgiveness change their

routes depending upon their idiosyncratic importance. Religious absolution is for the purity of soul and socially developed judicial systems are for the development individual integrity, freedom, happiness and peace. “Confession is not merely the act of telling one’s story. Confession is the process of seeing through the story and exploring under and around the story” (Klenck 143). In secular confession, the honesty of narration and true lamentation cannot be authenticated because the confession can occur in order to achieve social approval or political appraisal. The confessions, Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) dealt were political confession where perpetrators of apartheid confessed to get amnesty and that confession was void of contrition as well. Even the confessee could easily mold the story to decrease the intensity of his past crimes.

According to Jacques Derrida, when Desmond Tutu was named the chairperson of TRC he furnished the language with Christian doctrines of repentance and forgiveness. He politicized the religious terminologies in order to prove their legitimacy among South Africans. The confession, which leads to forgiveness, is not a public matter, in theology a confession in front of a priest leads to divine forgiveness. However, when the crime occurs in society, social justice system too is responsible for the consolation of the victim. In such cases, forgiveness is the property of the individual who had been victimized, state institutions cannot render forgiveness on their behalf. Derrida mentions in his book *On Cosmopolitan and Forgiveness*,

In principal, therefore, always in order to follow a vein of Abrahamic tradition, forgiveness must engage two singularities: the guilty (‘the perpetrators’ as they say in South Africa) and the victim. As soon as the third party intervenes, one can again speak of amnesty, reconciliation and reparations, etc. but certainly not of pure forgiveness in the strict sense. (42)

What can be forgiven is the issue, which Derrida discussed in his book *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* in accordance with South African Truth and Reconciliation commission which emphasized on forgiveness. For Derrida, “Forgiveness is not, it should not be, normative, normalizing. It

should remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality” (32). Derrida states that the process of forgiveness is not an easy-going process, it is a possibility out of impossible. Jeffry G. Murphy considers forgiveness as a process of changing heart, overcoming the vindictive feelings,

As an example of reconciliation without forgiveness, consider the example of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. (Note that it is not called the Truth and Forgiveness Commission.) In order to negotiate a viable transition from apartheid to democratic government with full black participation, all parties had to agree that there would in most cases be no punishment for evil acts that occurred under the previous government. (15)

The quasi-legal hearings, lead the audience towards a predetermined decision, against which victims had no right to contend. Forgiveness depends upon the angriness of the victims; it is not the State to decide forgiveness on the part of victim. The commission that aimed to create reconciliation was itself flawed and had no acceptability among many of the victims. According to Jacques Derrida forgiveness is only when the victim has right not to forgive, in his book *On Cosmopolitan and Forgiveness* he mentions the fact, “One cannot, or should not, forgive; there is only forgiveness, if there is any, where there is the unforgivable. That is to say that forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself”(33). However, in Commission’s proceedings there was no right of the victim if he does not want to forgive, so if it was victim centred then individual who had faced injustices would have some right. Mahmood Mamdani has criticised TRC, “Any victim, who is so acknowledged, would give up the right to prosecute perpetrators in the courts of law” (33). New democratic government suppressed the individual access to justice and tried to comfort them with loud slogans of reconciliation and unity. In all through the novel voice of protagonist works against the commission report and its proceedings. The process suppressed legal proceedings and demanded a complete disclosure of the victimization, which worked therapeutically instead

of justice. Even if TRC aimed at confession, it was in front of Priest, pastor or public, the authority to award forgiveness lies in the hands of confessors who judge the honesty of contrition.

Conclusion:

Coetzee demonstrates post-apartheid South African politics inappropriate in its function and constituents. ANC aimed to establish coexisting atmosphere where transgressor and victims of the past could live peacefully, although Mandela was bound to provide amnesty to the transgressor of apartheid but he wanted to console the victims as well in order to compensate their painful memories (Bois-Pedain, 2007, p.18). In order to provide rehabilitation to the victims of politically motivated crimes Mandela formed TRC, and embellished the language by using theological diction in order to reduce the agitation of Black South African victims. The Truth and Reconciliation program was facilitated by the institution of confession, which monopolized the religious sentiments of South African in order to attain a particular political aim. In South African context religion worked as a tool in the hands of politicians so that they could provide amnesty to those who had political control and support from international world too. The scale of exoneration for the transgressor of gross human rights violators happens to be the institution of confession, which Coetzee condemns in university trial of David Lurie. Coetzee symbolizes the proceedings of TRC in *Disgrace* during the trial episode of David Lurie, the responses of Lurie are mostly objections on the procedures of the commission. Coetzee utilizes the representation of confession in the political context where confession fails to provide the exalted function it promises i.e. it comes from the heart of the criminal not in order to attain exoneration. In theological terms, confession is a matter between God and the man where God knows about the inner situation of man but in South African context, this process is linked with relaxation from severe worldly punishment. In this all process, the truth of contrition is not a demand; just a pretention can work for exoneration. Confession is a process where the honesty of the confessor cannot be judged only through the words he utter.

Lurie's response to Dr Rassool is justified that they have no capacity to judge the honesty of contrition, because it is a matter related to inner self of man which is not approachable by other fellow beings. The institution of confession comes up with varied forms depending on the context of the whole process of admitting faults and representing transgressor's remorse, which the protagonist refutes because he avoids pretention. Coetzee rejects the political mode of confession, which has nothing to do with change of heart or contrition. On the other side, religious confession is limited to priest where transgressor's aim is not to avoid punishment but a real remorse; an inner change which does not lead to a bargain. During second meeting when he refuses to be represented by some lawyer, he is asked about the options of counselling through some priest. In Lurie's view, counselling can only work in certain age but when things become the part of somebody's life, he no more remains receptive to counselling. A man who practices one thing throughout his life with firm philosophical understandings cannot change his attitude in opposite frame. The members of the committee demanded a presentation of remorse or heart beating which perhaps can satisfy public spectacle but has nothing to do with transformation of the criminal. When Lurie remains determined to avoid confessional statement, Mathabane calls Lurie and tells him a confession statement that has demandable wording in order to grant him relaxation. Hence such type of confession is not justifiable, it can be a political cheat with victims of apartheid but has nothing to do with the building of coexisting atmosphere. According to Coetzee TRC aimed to manage amnesty for all those who had been involved in crimes against Black South Africans, it emphasized on avoidance of judicial activity which could lead to the satisfaction of victims.

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