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Unveiling the Gaze: Patriarchal Power and Female Resistance in Disgrace

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Abstract: This paper examines the mechanisms of the male gaze in J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace, situating its female characters within intersecting structures of power, surveillance, and resistance. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power and Jacques Lacan's theory of the gaze, this study argues that Soraya, Melanie, and Bev Shaw occupy distinct positions within patriarchal visual regimes. Soraya is exoticized and disciplined through an orientalist gaze that renders her a fetishized object; Melanie is ensnared in a web of male desire that simultaneously constructs and erases her agency; and Bev Shaw disrupts the gaze by embracing an aesthetic of desexualized visibility, resisting conventional femininity. Each character, in turn, enacts subversive strategies— withdrawal, silence, and counter-surveillance-that unsettle patriarchal authority. By foregrounding the interplay between gaze, power, and female subjectivity, this paper expands feminist readings of Disgrace, highlighting the novel's interrogation of gendered oppression and agency in post-apartheid South Africa.

Keywords: Coetzee; Disgrace; Gendered Representation; Male Gaze; Resistance

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1.Introduction

J.M. Coetzee is widely recognized for his moral inquiries and sophisticated narrative techniques. His works critically engage with race, colonial legacies, and power structures in South Africa, with Disgrace standing as a pivotal exploration of gender, race, and authority in post-apartheid society. Awarded the 1999 Booker Prize, the novel interrogates shifting power dynamics and moral ambiguities, situating Coetzee as a global literary figure whose work transcends national and historical boundaries.

While Disgrace has been extensively analyzed through the lenses of race, power, and morality, the representation of female subjectivity remains an area of ongoing debate. The novel's three central female characters-Soraya, Melanie, and Bev Shaw-are entangled in a network of patriarchal surveillance and control, each negotiating distinct forms of objectification and agency. Their experiences illuminate the persistence of gendered oppression in post-apartheid South Africa while also revealing strategies of resistance.

Gaze theory provides a crucial framework for understanding these dynamics. Drawing on Foucauldian notions of disciplinary power and Lacanian psychoanalysis, this paper examines how Disgrace constructs a patriarchal surveillance system through its protagonist, David Lurie. Soraya, positioned within an economy of male desire, experiences both eroticization and surveillance as a sex worker. Melanie, as Lurie's student, is rendered an object of his gaze, with her silence and withdrawal exposing the power asymmetry in their relationship. Bev Shaw, while less overtly subjected to Lurie's erotic gaze, remains

marginalized within the broader socio-structural hierarchy, her unconventional femininity both subverting and reinforcing patriarchal norms.

Crucially, these women do not remain passive within these power structures. Soraya asserts control by reclaiming her privacy and severing ties with Lurie. Melanie's silence and eventual departure function as acts of passive defiance, challenging Lurie's authority. Bev Shaw, through her care for injured animals, constructs an alternative ethical paradigm that resists traditional forms of patriarchal validation. Their distinct modes of resistance, though varying in form, collectively illustrate the complexities of female agency under patriarchal domination.

By unveiling the mechanisms of patriarchal surveillance in Disgrace, this paper deepens feminist interpretations of Coetzee's work. The first section establishes the theoretical framework, situating the analysis within Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, Lacan's notion of the gaze, and bell hooks' oppositional gaze. The second section, Findings and Discussions, conducts a close textual analysis of Soraya, Melanie, and Bev Shaw, scrutinizing how each character negotiates oppression and resistance under patriarchal surveillance. The final section concludes by synthesizing the theoretical and analytical insights, highlighting the novel's contribution to feminist critiques of gaze and power in post-apartheid South Africa. Through this analysis, this study contributes to broader discussions on gendered power relations, agency, and resilience in Coetzee's literary corpus.

1.2 Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to systematically identify and expose how the male gaze in Coetzee's Disgrace operates through discourse, disciplinary practices, and institutionalized surveillance to regulate the female body and subjectivity, thereby constructing a gendered field of oppression. A further aim is to comparatively analyze the distinct positions of Soraya, Melanie, and Bev Shaw within this gaze regime, tracing and interpreting how their diverse strategies—ranging from compliance and silence to counter-gaze and ethical care—generate forms of everyday resistance and agency within specific contexts. Finally, by situating the textual analysis within Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, Jacques Lacan's concept of the gaze, and bell hooks' notion of the oppositional gaze, the study seeks to evaluate how Coetzee's narrative in the post-apartheid context illuminates the intersecting mechanisms of gender, race, and power, thereby contributing fresh theoretical and critical insights into female subjectivity, modes of resistance, and gaze criticism in postcolonial literature.

2.Theoretical Framework

The concept of the gaze, central to visual culture studies, extends beyond the mere act of looking to encompass mechanisms of power and the construction of subjectivity. Michel Foucault (2002) argues that the gaze functions as an instrument of surveillance and discipline, compelling individuals to internalize power structures and engage in self-regulation. In Discipline and Punish (Foucoult, 1975), he introduces the Panopticon as a model of modern disciplinary power, emphasizing that:

"The Panopticon was destined to spread throughout society. It makes power more economic and effective. It does this to develop the economy, spread education, and improve public morality, not to save society. The Panopticon represents the subordination of bodies that increases the utility of power while dispensing with the need for a prince" (Foucoult, 1975).

Here, Foucault underscores how surveillance ceases to be a direct act of repression and instead becomes an omnipresent mechanism that structures behavior. Under constant observation, individuals unconsciously regulate their own actions, demonstrating how power operates without the need for overt coercion.

Expanding on this, Foucault's The Birth of the Clinic (2002) introduces the "medical gaze," wherein physicians, by observing, classifying, and documenting patients, integrate individuals into a system of knowledge and power. This fusion of power and knowledge, he argues, does not merely facilitate the treatment of disease but establishes a discourse that categorizes and regulates subjects. Within patriarchal structures, this gaze extends beyond institutional settings, shaping gendered dynamics of power. Women, traditionally positioned as objects of the gaze, become defined and controlled through societal norms that dictate their visibility and subjugation.

Gaze and Subjectivity

While Foucault's analysis focuses on the disciplinary aspects of the gaze, Jacques Lacan introduces a psychoanalytic dimension that reveals its role in shaping subjectivity. In The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis (2018), Lacan

argues that the gaze is intricately linked to desire. Since the subject's desire is fundamentally the desire of the Other, the gaze structures how individuals perceive themselves in relation to external forces.

Two key Lacanian concepts—dompte-regard (taming the gaze) and trompe-l'œil (optical illusion)—highlight how the gaze mediates subjectivity. Dompte-regard immerses the observer into a visual field, fostering identification, whereas trompe-l'œil produces perceptual deception, intensifying the subject's engagement. These mechanisms resonate with Lacan's notion of objet petit a, the unattainable object of desire that signifies the subject's inherent lack. In the context of visual representation, the subject, upon perceiving an idealized image, projects their desires onto it, reinforcing their sense of lack.

This framework provides insight into the gendered dynamics of the gaze. Women in patriarchal societies often function as objet petit a, positioned as the site of male desire while simultaneously being denied full subjectivity. In Disgrace, Soraya, Melanie, and Bev Shaw each navigate this dynamic, occupying positions where they are both observed and, to varying extents, resist their objectification. By engaging with Lacanian theory, we can analyze how these women negotiate visibility, power, and agency within the novel's patriarchal structures.

The Oppositional Gaze and the Potential for Resistance

The oppositional gaze, rooted in black feminist thought and conceptualized by Bell Hooks (2008), serves as a critical tool for resisting hegemonic visual culture and reclaiming subjectivity. It challenges dominant ideological structures that have historically marginalized black women, allowing them to interrogate and deconstruct power relations embedded in representation. By rejecting passive spectatorship, the oppositional gaze transforms looking into an act of resistance, redefining subjectivity beyond imposed norms. Central to its function is the disruption of the traditional gendered and racialized dynamics of looking. Rejecting the phallocentric framework that positions women as passive objects, the oppositional gaze enables marginalized individuals to refuse identification with dominant visual paradigms. This rejection not only dismantles oppressive ways of seeing but also affirms alternative modes of self-representation, creating a space for subjectivity and empowerment. Beyond its critique of visual structures, the oppositional gaze operates as a broader mechanism of self-definition and cultural transformation. By resisting imposed narratives, women reclaim their subjectivity and participate in reshaping discourse. This act of seeing differently becomes both a political intervention and a means of asserting presence, challenging exclusionary ideologies while envisioning new possibilities for representation and empowerment.

Foucault's theory of power emphasizes that power is not merely repressive but rather permeates social structures, shaping individuals through discourse, discipline, and governance. However, he also argues that power relations always contain the potential for resistance, whereby individuals may counter established power structures by refusing to be seen, deliberately misusing rules, or engaging in what he terms "counter-conduct."

In Discipline and Punish (1975), Foucault employs the Panopticon prison model to illustrate how modern power operates through ubiquitous surveillance, leading individuals to internalize self-discipline. However, those under surveillance are not entirely passive; they may undermine power by deliberately evading observation, obscuring their identities, or minimizing their visibility. This strategy of "refusing to be seen" thus becomes a crucial means of resisting disciplinary power.

Additionally, individuals may subvert power by deliberately misusing rules, appearing to comply while resisting, or strategically exploiting regulations to disrupt the disciplinary system. This form of resistance is evident across various domains, including authoritarian regimes, healthcare systems, and legal institutions. For instance, prisoners may manipulate bureaucratic legal procedures to challenge prison authorities, while queer activism often employs exaggerated performances of gender norms to expose their inherent contradictions. Such tactical resistance not only contests existing norms but also reveals that power is neither absolute nor immutable; rather, it can be appropriated and subverted.

Foucault further develops the possibilities of resistance in Security, Territory, Population (2007), where he introduces the concept of "counter-conduct," referring to individuals' rejection of dominant social norms and the construction of alternative ways of living as a form of resistance against governmental power. Examples include rejecting institutionalized marriage, withdrawing from mainstream medical systems, or establishing autonomous communities to create spaces outside the control of hegemonic power. Unlike direct revolutionary or violent opposition, this decentralized mode of resistance is more

pervasive, emphasizing the dissolution of power's influence through everyday practices.

In the context of Disgrace, the female characters' resistance can be understood through the lens of counter-conduct. Soraya, for instance, reclaims her autonomy by withdrawing from Lurie's intrusive gaze, refusing to participate in his fantasy. Melanie, though subjected to gendered oppression, disrupts Lurie's narrative control through her silence and refusal to conform to his expectations. Bev Shaw, rather than engaging in direct confrontation, constructs an alternative ethical framework based on care, positioning herself outside traditional patriarchal and capitalist systems. Each of these acts, in their own way, mirrors Foucault's notion of counter-conduct—forms of subtle but persistent resistance that challenge dominant modes of power.

Thus, while the disciplinary gaze in Disgrace operates as a mechanism of patriarchal control, the female characters' resistance—whether through oppositional looking, silence, withdrawal, or the creation of alternative value systems—demonstrates that power is never absolute. Instead, through everyday acts of defiance, they carve out spaces of agency and subjectivity within an oppressive framework.

This theoretical framework integrates Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power, Lacan's insights into subjectivity, and hooks' concept of the oppositional gaze to examine how Disgrace critiques patriarchal hierarchies. By situating the female characters within this framework, we can explore how they navigate and resist the gaze, challenging male-dominated structures of power and asserting their own forms of agency. Ultimately, this analysis highlights how Coetzee's novel not only exposes the mechanisms of oppression but also reveals the multifaceted ways in which women negotiate subjectivity within—and against—systems of control.

3.Findings and Discussions

3.1 Findings

The findings indicate that Coetzee's Disgrace constructs a complex network of patriarchal surveillance and desire through David Lurie's gaze, positioning Soraya, Melanie, and Bev Shaw in distinct yet interconnected forms of objectification. Soraya is exoticized and commodified, but her eventual withdrawal and oppositional gaze reclaim her autonomy. Melanie is initially entrapped within Lurie's narrative of desire, yet her silence, refusal to engage, and eventual denunciation transform her into an active agent challenging institutional and patriarchal authority. Bev Shaw resists categorization altogether, subverting conventional ideals of femininity and introducing an "ethical gaze" grounded in care and responsibility rather than consumption. Together, these women reveal that although the male gaze functions as a disciplinary mechanism, its authority is neither total nor uncontested. Through compliance as strategy, silence as defiance, and counter-gazes rooted in ethics, they enact multifaceted forms of resistance, thereby destabilizing dominant power relations and reconfiguring the possibilities of female subjectivity in post-apartheid South Africa .

3.2 Discussions

The Objectified Body and the Orientalist Gaze

In Disgrace, Soraya, a South African Muslim woman engaged in sex work, is explicitly classified as "Exotic" by Discreet Escorts. This label not only underscores her commodification within the sex trade but also reflects the construction of identity through the white male gaze. Although Lurie expresses "complete satisfaction" with Soraya, this satisfaction is contingent upon his ability to mold her into an object of his desire through acts of gazing, fantasizing, and exerting control. The Soraya he perceives is thus a projection, fundamentally distinct from her actual self. His reliance on her presence as a means of alleviating the monotony of his life is evident in the narrator's remark: "Without the Thursday interludes, the week is as featureless as a desert" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 9)." This analogy highlights Soraya's instrumentalization, reducing her to an object that fills the void in Lurie's otherwise barren existence, rather than recognizing her as an autonomous individual.

The Orientalist Gaze and the Commodification of Soraya

Soraya's exoticized image is accentuated in the opening chapter of the novel. Lurie's description of her appearance is imbued with Orientalist undertones: "She has honey-colored skin, long black hair, and dark, liquid eyes" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 3). These features not only endow her with an air of mystery but also render her a visual object meant for gaze and consumption. As Edward Said argues in Orientalism (1977), Eastern women are frequently constructed within Western discourse as mysterious

and submissive objects. This construction closely aligns with Lurie's mode of looking at Soraya, reinforcing a dynamic in which she is reduced to an aestheticized and consumable presence rather than recognized as an autonomous subject.

The act of gazing is not neutral; it is an assertion of dominance. As Michel Foucault (1975) posits, subjects under constant observation internalize the gaze, leading to self-regulation. Under Lurie's scrutiny, Soraya passively conforms to his expectations, demonstrating the dynamics of discipline and control. Lurie's authority over Soraya is evident in his ability to dictate her physical appearance: "Not liking the stickiness of the makeup, he asked her to wipe it off. She obeyed and has never worn it since" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 5). This moment exemplifies how male dominance is exercised through the gaze. Lurie's preferences not only regulate Soraya's outward presentation but also shape her behavioral patterns, reinforcing her subordinate position within their relationship. At its core, the male gaze functions as a mechanism of control, not only reducing women to objects of male desire but also legitimizing and perpetuating patriarchal authority. As Laura Mulvey (2013) argues in Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, the male gaze structures female representation in ways that render women passive and subservient to male fantasies, thereby sustaining asymmetrical gender power dynamics. Within this framework, Soraya is not merely objectified but also deprived of subjectivity, as Lurie's control over her appearance signifies a broader assertion of dominance over her body. This depiction underscores how power relations are inscribed and reinforced through the act of gazing, positioning women as subjects to be shaped and regulated by male authority.

Compliance as a Strategy of Resistance

Soraya's mild temperament and apparent compliance lead Lurie to mistakenly believe in the existence of an emotional connection between them. He assumes that this sentiment is reciprocated to some extent: "To some degree, he believes, this affection is reciprocated. Affection may not be love, but it is at least its cousin. Given their unpromising beginnings, they have been lucky, the two of them: he to have found her, she to have found him" (Coetzee, 1999). However, this supposed "luck" is merely Lurie's self-delusion. He fails to recognize that Soraya's compliance is not necessarily genuine acceptance but rather a strategic performance that allows her to navigate a system where power is asymmetrically distributed. Her apparent submission recalls James C. Scott's (2004) concept of "public and hidden transcripts", which differentiates between outward performances of obedience and covert forms of resistance. In this framework, Soraya's willingness to comply with Lurie's requests may be read not as internalized subordination but as a survival tactic—an effort to maintain control over her own circumstances while avoiding direct confrontation.

Her compliance, therefore, is not absolute. She resists male control not through overt rebellion but by setting boundaries and severing ties. When Lurie attempts to intrude into her private life and break established boundaries, she decisively terminates their relationship, refusing to be incorporated into his sphere of control. This rejection is not merely an individual decision but an act of "counter-conduct", as Foucault (2007) conceptualizes it—a subtle yet effective mode of resistance that refuses to conform to hegemonic expectations.

The Oppositional Gaze: Reclaiming Subjectivity

A pivotal moment occurs when Lurie encounters Soraya on St. George's Street with her two sons. Unconsciously, he follows them: "Then one Saturday morning everything changes... It is Soraya, unmistakably, flanked by two children, two boys" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 7). As their gazes meet through the glass, Soraya's look is no longer passive: "For an instant, through the glass, Soraya's eyes meet his" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 7)." This moment marks a critical shift in power dynamics. Her gaze is not merely the result of an accidental encounter but an assertion of awareness and refusal. At that moment, she ceases to be a passive object of observation and instead asserts her subjectivity, drawing clear boundaries and rejecting further scrutiny.

Bell Hooks (2008) conceptualizes the oppositional gaze as a direct challenge to dominant power structures. In this context, Soraya's gaze functions as an act of resistance—it disrupts Lurie's sense of control, denies his fantasy, and reclaims her autonomy. Her gaze not only fractures the power dynamics of observation but also asserts her agency in defining her own identity. Unlike earlier moments in the novel, where she is subjected to Lurie's gaze, here she actively returns the gaze, destabilizing his authority.

Soraya's assertion of subjectivity extends beyond this moment of visual resistance. Ultimately, she reconstructs her autonomy by completely severing ties with Lurie. Her refusal to engage further with him marks a decisive break from his influence,

challenging the structures that sought to define her solely through the lens of white male desire. As Hamid Dabashi (2020) argues, the colonial gaze is not merely an act of looking but a mechanism of power control, and those being observed can resist this control by returning the gaze. Soraya's glance challenges Lurie, transforming her from a passive object of observation into an active subject who disrupts the power dynamics of the gaze.

Soraya's resistance demonstrates that even within constrained social structures, marginalized individuals can challenge power relations through subtle yet effective means. Her gaze not only resists the white male gaze but also symbolizes the reshaping of female subjectivity within intricate social dynamics. By applying Dabashi's concept of "the colonial gaze and resistance", we can more comprehensively understand how Soraya reconstructs her subjectivity amid the dual oppression of male and colonial gazes. Her rejection of Lurie, her act of looking back, and her refusal to remain within his sphere of influence collectively embody a form of resistance that reclaims agency and redefines power relations.

The Predicament of Gaze Under Male Desire

After these events, David attempts to seduce one of his students, Melanie Isaacs. The situation eventually escalates into sexual violence, leading to David's dismissal from the university due to the scandal involving Melanie.

David Lurie's gaze upon Melanie Isaacs is not merely an act of looking but an exercise of power, reflecting both the structural dominance of men within patriarchal hierarchies and the asymmetries of class relations. While on the surface, gazing appears to be a mundane, everyday act, it is, in fact, a mechanism through which power is enacted and legitimized. As Foucault (2016) emphasizes in Discipline and Punish, modern power is not solely imposed from above by legal institutions but is diffused through micro-mechanisms-discipline, surveillance, and behavioral norms —that shape individuals into compliant subjects. Within the university system, Lurie wields authority not only as a male but also as a professor, positioning Melanie as a vulnerable figure within this disciplinary structure. His gaze upon her is thus not simply an expression of desire but a manifestation of institutionalized power.

Gaze and Misinterpretation: The Romanticization of Coercion

Lurie deliberately misreads Melanie's body language, interpreting it as an affirmation of his own desires and using this misinterpretation to justify his transgressions. However, Melanie's silence, resistance, and eventual accusation signify a struggle for female subjectivity. She refuses to be reduced to a passive object of the male gaze.

Although Melanie Isaacs is not explicitly positioned as an object of display like Soraya, she nonetheless functions as a vessel for Lurie's desire. While the means of pursuit differ—monetary transaction for Soraya and poetic seduction for Melanie—the underlying objective remains the same: the possession of the female body. Lurie's relentless attempts to lure Melanie demonstrate a strategic exertion of power, veiled under the guise of artistic and intellectual engagement. His invocation of Shakespeare's sonnet—"From fairest creatures we desire increase, that thereby beauty's rose might never die" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 16)—ostensibly elevates Melanie to an idealized status, yet as Beauvoir argues in The Second Sex (2014), the glorification of women as muses or divine figures serves only as another form of objectification, denying them subjectivity. Lurie reinforces this idea when he asserts: "A woman's beauty does not belong to her alone—it is part of the bounty she brings into the world." (Coetzee, 1999, p. 16) This statement reflects the patriarchal assumption that female beauty is a public commodity rather than an intrinsic personal attribute. From their initial encounter, Lurie's gaze inscribes Melanie within a framework of visual consumption, positioning her as an object of male desire:

"Her hair is damp from the rain. He gazes at her, clearly captivated. She lowers her eyes, offering that same evasive yet perhaps slightly coquettish smile." (Coetzee, 1999, p. 6)

Here, the description of Melanie's smile as "coquettish" reveals Lurie's interpretative bias—his tendency to misread neutral or indifferent gestures as invitations, thereby constructing a self-serving narrative that justifies his pursuit. This process aligns with what Laura Mulvey describes in Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema (2013) as the active/male and passive/female binary, wherein "the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (2013). Within this paradigm, women are not perceived as autonomous beings but rather as spectacles designed for male visual pleasure, reinforcing patriarchal structures of dominance. The narrative technique of Disgrace—which frequently employs free indirect discourse—further complicates the reader's perception by immersing us in Lurie's distorted gaze. For example,

in the following passage:

"She smiles back, bobbing her head, her smile sly rather than shy. She is small and thin, with close-cropped black hair, wide, almost Chinese, cheekbones, large, dark eyes. Her outfits are always striking. Today she wears a maroon miniskirt with mustard-colored sweater and black tights; the gold baubles on her belt match the gold balls of her earrings." (Coetzee, 1999, p. 9)

The detailed description of Melanie's appearance—her clothing, accessories, and body—is not an objective portrayal but rather Lurie's perspective, framing her within a discourse of eroticization. This process aligns with Mulvey's argument that women in visual culture are coded for "strong visual impact" and exist within a paradigm of "to-be-looked-at-ness" (2013), a process that denies their subjectivity while enabling the male viewer's active role in shaping the narrative.

Silence as Resistance: The Politics of Non-Compliance

Melanie's silence serves not only as an indication of victimization but also as an act of resistance. Rather than responding to Lurie's coercive pursuit, she chooses withdrawal—skipping class, ignoring phone calls, and refusing to reply to messages. This refusal to engage with Lurie's discourse can be understood through Judith Butler's (2011) argument in Bodies That Matter: discourse is both constitutive and normative, meaning that refusing to respond signifies a rejection of the performative force of the other's speech, constituting a form of "deconstructive" resistance.

Moreover, Melanie's eventual denunciation of Lurie is not merely an exposure of his misconduct but a reclaiming of her right to speech. Butler's concept of speakability is particularly relevant here—the ability to speak and be heard is determined by social power structures. By formally accusing Lurie, Melanie transitions from a passive victim to an active accuser, compelling Lurie to confront his loss of power.

Theatrical Performance as Reclamation of Subjectivity

Melanie's participation in the student theatrical performance plays a crucial role in both her academic progress and personal development. As a key milestone in her education, the performance signifies her perseverance in completing her studies despite the trauma she has experienced. Within this space, she demonstrates increased confidence and agency, marking a shift in her self-perception. No longer the passive, silent student seen through Lurie's gaze, she emerges as an individual capable of shaping her own identity. This transformation is evident not only on a psychological level but also in her performance itself:

"Melanie has kept her part as Gloria, the novice hairdresser... She is altogether more sure of herself than before—in fact, good in the part, positively gifted." (Coetzee, 1999, p. 91)

This passage explicitly illustrates Melanie's evolution—she is no longer a passive object of observation but an assertive performer shaping her own presence on stage. Her transformation aligns with Judith Butler's (2011)argument in Gender Trouble that gender identity is continuously constructed and reconstituted through social performances. Melanie's command over her theatrical role signifies not only her control over her stage presence but also her broader reclamation of agency. Meanwhile, Lurie attempts to maintain his gaze upon Melanie, yet his vision is rendered powerless: "The auditorium of the student union is in darkness. Unnoticed, he takes a seat in the back row..." (Coetzee, 1999, p. 93)

The darkness not only conceals Lurie's presence but also symbolizes the erosion of his power to define Melanie through his gaze. Unlike earlier moments when his perspective shaped her image, she now determines how she is viewed and understood through the structured performance of the public stage. On stage, she is no longer Lurie's object of desire but an independent artistic creator.

Nevertheless, Lurie's attempt to voyeuristically observe Melanie's performance suggests his lingering desire for control. Yet, this act of secret surveillance ultimately fails—Melanie's boyfriend detects his presence and warns him to leave. This moment marks a pivotal shift: once women become aware of and reject the male gaze, it loses its authority and legitimacy (Mulvey, 2013). Lurie's secretive observation, instead of reinforcing his dominance, reduces him to a powerless, marginalized spectator lurking in the shadows.

Furthermore, as John Stuart Mill (1966) emphasizes, women's autonomy is intrinsically linked to their ability to define themselves beyond patriarchal constraints. The theatrical stage provides Melanie with such a space, where she is no longer confined within Lurie's narrative but actively rearticulates her identity through performance. This aligns with Butler's (2011)

argument that subjectivity is constituted through performative acts, suggesting that Melanie's theatrical role is not merely an artistic endeavor but an embodied assertion of selfhood. By stepping into a role of her own choosing, she challenges the structures that previously sought to confine her, demonstrating that agency can be reclaimed through acts of self-representation.

The Collapse of the Male Gaze

Lurie's gaze, initially an instrument of control, ultimately collapses as Melanie reclaims her self-representation. Through silence, denunciation, and theatrical performance, she transitions from an object of male desire into an autonomous subject, disrupting the patriarchal script that sought to define her. Her ability to control her narrative—both in her refusal to conform to Lurie's expectations and in her theatrical role—suggests the potential for female agency within oppressive structures.

However, Disgrace does not present a simplistic narrative of empowerment. While Melanie's resistance disrupts Lurie's authority, the novel also reveals the enduring challenges faced by women in reclaiming their subjectivity within a patriarchal system. Ultimately, her story underscores the tensions between subjugation and resistance, silence and speech, objectification, and self-representation—tensions that remain unresolved but deeply illuminating in the novel's critique of power.

Subverting the Male Gaze – A Radical Female Figure

Bev Shaw presents a female figure that fundamentally disrupts conventional representations of women in Disgrace. Unlike Soraya and Melanie, who are initially framed within Lurie's aestheticized and objectifying gaze, Bev neither conforms to traditional standards of female attractiveness nor submits to the male gaze's disciplining power. Instead, she engages in what Bell Hooks (2008) terms an "oppositional gaze"—a gaze that actively resists hegemonic structures of gendered and racialized power. While hooks' concept primarily addresses Black women's resistance to white patriarchal dominance, it can be productively extended to Bev's character, as she refuses to be subsumed into Lurie's habitual mode of visual and sexual possession. Through her pragmatic approach to both sexuality and care work, Bev disrupts Lurie's assumptions about female desirability and passivity, positioning herself as one of the novel's most autonomous female figures.

Lurie's descriptions of Bev underscore his inability to aestheticize her in the same way he does Soraya or Melanie. He notes her lack of conventional femininity, remarking:

"She is lying under the blanket with only her head sticking out. Even in the dimness there is nothing charming in the sight. Slipping off his underpants, he gets in beside her, runs his hands down her body. She has no breasts to speak of. Sturdy, almost waistless, like a squat little tub." (Coetzee, 1999)

His physical assessment reflects his ingrained male gaze, which attempts to categorize and evaluate women based on their visual appeal. However, unlike the women Lurie has previously pursued, Bev does not exist within this framework of desire. Her sexual encounter with Lurie is not framed in terms of romance or seduction but rather as a pragmatic act, one that she initiates without deference to his aesthetic preferences. Her lack of concern for conforming to Lurie's expectations unsettles him, marking a shift in power dynamics.

While Lurie initially attempts to assimilate Bev into his habitual framework of sexual conquest, she refuses to become a passive object of observation. Instead, she asserts her subjectivity through her work at the animal clinic, where she takes on the responsibility of caring for abandoned and suffering animals. This role transcends traditional gender expectations, as her engagement with life and death decisions disrupts the conventional association of women with passive caregiving. As Carol J. Adams (2018) argues in The Sexual Politics of Meat, the treatment of animals and the objectification of women are deeply intertwined within patriarchal structures. In contrast to Lurie's objectifying gaze, which seeks to possess and consume, Bev's engagement with animals is one of ethical responsibility rather than control. Her actions introduce what might be termed an "ethical gaze"—one that is desexualized, rooted in care rather than domination.

This ethical gaze not only defines Bev's own subjectivity but also serves as a catalyst for Lurie's transformation. Initially, Lurie approaches his work at the clinic with detachment, yet under Bev's guidance, he begins to engage with the suffering of animals in a way that forces him to confront his own moral limitations. Bev's refusal to conform to Lurie's expectations—whether as a sexual object or as a traditional caregiver—forces him to recognize a mode of relationality that is not predicated on possession or power. Her gaze, unlike Lurie's, is not about consumption but about recognition and responsibility.

Ultimately, Bev Shaw emerges as the novel's most ethically autonomous female figure. While her physical appearance and sexuality do not conform to patriarchal ideals, she subverts these structures not by rejecting intimacy altogether but by redefining its terms. She does not allow herself to be passively consumed by Lurie's gaze but instead asserts control over her own narrative. Unlike Melanie, whose silence serves as resistance, or Soraya, who commodifies her own body within the structures of patriarchal exchange, Bev actively destabilizes the power dynamics of the gaze itself. Her subjectivity is not constructed through desirability but through action—through her work, her choices, and her refusal to be defined by male desire.

In this sense, Bev represents a radical challenge to the novel's broader meditation on power, sexuality, and autonomy. While Lurie's gaze attempts to categorize, possess, and define, Bev's counter-gaze resists such reductions, asserting a form of female agency that transcends both aesthetic and patriarchal constraints. Through her pragmatic approach to sexuality and her ethical engagement with care, Bev reconfigures the terms of subjectivity, positioning herself not as an object of desire but as an autonomous moral agent.

Conclusion

Coetzee's Disgrace interrogates the complexities of post-apartheid South African society through its portrayal of female characters, who navigate the intersections of patriarchal, racial, and sociopolitical oppression. While they remain subjects of the male gaze, they also exhibit resilience and subjectivity in varying degrees. Through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Foucauldian discourse theory, and bell hooks' critique of the gaze, this study demonstrates that women's subjugation is not immutable but can be contested through counter-gazes, discursive reconstruction, and acts of self-determination. Although Coetzee refrains from prescribing definitive solutions, his narrative compels a critical reevaluation of power structures, gendered discourse, and the precarious position of women in postcolonial societies.

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