

Linking Misery and Identity: Exploring Coetzee's Novel *Disgrace* from the Perspective of Relative Deprivation Theory

Waqar Ahmad

PhD Research Scholar (English), University of Malakand, KP – Pakistan

waqarahmadeng75@gmail.com

Aziz Ahmad (Corresponding author)

Associate Professor of English, University of Malakand, KP – Pakistan

azizahmad@uom.edu.pk

Abstract

This study explores Coetzee's novel Disgrace (1999) for identity issues and relative deprivation within the framework of Tedd Gurr's (1970) theory of social deprivation and identity by applying the qualitative method. The application of the relative deprivation theory of identity by Ted Gurr is foundational, pertaining to the primary text; the theory postulates that an individual's identity is shaped by the social environment or society. In other words, social rootlessness, alienation and deprivation are responsible for the make-up of an individual's identity. Tedd Gur thinks that, when frustration is too sustained then it yields dangerous repercussions resulting in violence and extremist activities (Al-Hourani, 2012); Zahir et.al, 2019). It finds out that different characters of the novel, like David Laurie, undergo broader socio-political circumstances, and social deprivation and alienation to eventually become an outcast in the post-apartheid South Africa. In the novel, the central character David Laurie faces and struggles with the problems of social deprivation, rootlessness, alienation and disgrace at an individual level and in the backdrop of post-apartheid South Africa. The study undertaken is closely significant for themes of disgrace, social alienation, degradation, shame and the interwoven complex web of personal and collective identity.

Keywords: Relative deprivation; Disgrace; Alienation; socio-political circumstances; individual identities; personal and collective identity

Introduction

The novel *Disgrace* (1999) by Coetzee, which has won many laurels like the Booker Prize 1999 and the Commonwealth Prize 2000, is set in the backdrop of the rapidly changing post-apartheid era of South Africa. The timing and setting of the novel are marked by the interplay of racial, social and political dynamics. One may not be wrong to call it a specimen of world literature because it is one of the top 100 books of the contemporary era. The book epitomizes artistic excellence in terms of its content and subject matter. It forces the readers to come face to face with the stark realities of life and deal with ethical issues and the baser instincts of humanity (Daily, 2010). The novel ponders over the farthest reaches of what it means to be human (The Guardian, 2015). The novel has been explored from different perspectives, but it has not been explored with respect to Tedd Gurr's theory of relative deprivation and identity. Gurr (as cited by Ahmad, 1998) argues that the less privileged group of people develops a realization of relative deprivation. Gurr (1970) elaborated on all the social and psychological determinants of relative deprivation theory. Gurr believes that the basic source of human violence is the frustration-aggression mechanism. He further argues that sustained frustration yields very dangerous repercussions, resulting in violence and extremist activities (Shah & Faqir, p.47). Anwar et al. (2022) say that those who are emotionally abused and are neglected usually rest on their emotional and psychological pain; they talk about their anxiety and loneliness. White domination of the black natives, during the apartheid era, deprived them of the necessities of life, and they were brutally treated by their white masters. The dominant tinge of the discussion in the novel is post-apartheid South

Africa, which is characterized by the themes of incest, crime, bloodshed, poverty, and racism (Yadav, 2020).

The protagonist, David Laurie, is a white supremacist professor in South Africa who has a history of disgrace in terms of many aspects of life. He is twice divorced, and due to his corrupt past, his identity is stigmatized. In the novel, David Laurie faces many disgraces. His first disgrace is reflected in Soraya, a prostitute and the other with one of his student's Melaine Issac. David tries to solve the problem of sex with her. Melaine, being too young, was confused as to how to solve the problem. It is Melanie Issac's sexual abuse at the hands of David Laurie, which later became the cause of Laurie's dismissal from the university. In the last segment of the novel, the readers are told about David Laurie's living in the countryside with his daughter in her farmhouse. One day, three natives broke into their farmhouse, killing their dogs and dishonoring them both. Laurie was locked up in a bathroom, and Lucie was left at their mercy. They robbed everything and above all they gang raped Laurie's daughter. Being a father, it was the duty of David Laurie to protect his daughter, but unfortunately, he failed to protect her from the intruders. This is, of course, the worst form of disgrace which Laurie faces at her daughter's farmhouse. The plot of the novel revolves around a mentally paranoid former professor, David Laurie, who is disgraced at different levels, like his expulsion from the university after his sexual encounters with one of his students contribute to both his individual and professional academic disgrace and deprivation. David Laurie's self-imposed exile to his daughter's farmhouse brings him directly on the threshold of post-apartheid dynamics of alienation, identity crises, race and power paradigms. The undertaken study uses Tedd Gurr's theory of relative deprivation and identity for pondering over how the central character, David and other secondary characters face and respond to new social realities and shifts in power dynamics, including identity transformation.

Research Objective

To critique the impacts of social deprivation on identity in Coetzee's novel, *Disgrace*

Research Question

How does social deprivation lead to social identity crises in Coetzee's novel, *Disgrace*?

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

As qualitative research is based on non-numerical data, which may be text or audio, visual of any kind, it enables the researcher to thoroughly investigate the issue in the text. As this study aims to explore and bring to light the reciprocal relationship between social deprivation and identity in the context of the novel *Disgrace* (1999), it uses the qualitative method for deeper insight regarding a research problem and generates new avenues for research (Bhandari, 2020). The study uses Greenham's (2019) close reading technique, as has been used in such studies (Anwar et.al., 2023).

As the current study is based on a qualitative approach to pondering over the themes related to social deprivation and identity issues in Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* (1999), it is guided by Gurr's (1971) theory of relative deprivation and identity.

Literature Review

Schaefer (2008) explains it as "a negative discrepancy between legitimate expectation and legitimate actualities" (p.69). Deprivation is fundamentally the denial of the basic human necessities. Deprivation can be of various types, like religious, social, economic, professional, territorial and whatnot. Deprivation emerges from or is the outcome of societal stratification. Any type of stratification in which some segments of society are ignored while

others are provided with the material necessities of life. According to Shah and Faqir (2019), discrimination in terms of development creates disequilibrium in a society. Tedd Gur argues that, when frustration is too sustained then it yields very dangerous repercussions resulting in violence and extremist activities. During the apartheid era, or white domination, the black natives were deprived of the necessities of life and were brutally treated by their white masters.

According to Yadav and Yadav (2020) state the dominant tinge of the discussion in the novel is post-apartheid South Africa, which is characterized by the themes of incest, crime, bloodshed, poverty and racism. Al-Hourani states that when a state neglects a particular society, it results in a deprivation gap, which is the outcome of state coercive institutions. Such circumstances lead to antagonistic and extreme behavior of society. The forceful and coercive response of the state to this behavior results in revolution. Al-Hourani (2012) believes that any relatively deprived individual will first try to exhibit normal behavior to change his/her status. But if he/she fails to achieve his/her objective, he/she will inevitably attempt to behave in non-normative actions. Similarly, if a group faces relative deprivation, all its members will first start their response from non-normative group action (Kawakami & Dion, 1995).

Brownlee (2013) argues about basic human rights and opposes social deprivation. According to Brownlee, social deprivation is not just a low standard of living or poverty; it is the lack of the very necessities of life, which are required for human interaction and social acceptance. According to him, protection of human beings against social deprivation is necessary, be it social, economic, civil or political rights. One of the most important types of deprivation is existential deprivation. Existential deprivation is the base of all other types of deprivation, and basically, social, political, economic, identity, sexual, racial and professional deprivation leads to existential deprivation.

Bolmsjö et al. (2019) define existential deprivation as any individual who thinks of himself as being alienated and cut off from society and the rest of the world. Similarly, a person whose life is empty of emotion and feelings is abandoned. Existential deprivation has deep and direct impacts on an individual's identity. One may not be wrong to say that deprivation of any kind has a great role in shaping one's identity. We may not be able to properly probe anyone's identity without keeping in view his/her deprivation. In the novel, we have many characters who are all deprived in one way or the other. All of them have the dark aspects of their lives, like the bright. "Darkness and destruction are as much part of human life as depression, anxiety, and joy are" (Gunst & Vanhooren, 2017, p.2). Societal stratification and the unjust distribution of wealth between individuals and different strata of society cause deprivation and unrest in society. Deprivation is the root cause of identity disfiguration and societal chaos. Susan Olzak and Suzanne Shanahan say that the low wages, poor housing conditions and the non-availability of jobs to black Americans significantly increase the rate of violence and riots (Olzak & Shanahan, 1996).

According to de la Sablonnier and Tougas (2008), relative deprivation is the outcome of too many abrupt negative changes in society. Le Roux and Oyedemi (2021) pose a question about whether, in free apartheid and multiracial South Africa, the colonial legacy and identities still exist. Inequality between different identities and social groups causes deprivation among the members of the depressed and poverty-stricken group members which in turn causes bloody conflicts and violence. This point is developed by Amartya Sen, who argues that there is a very close and direct connection between violence and poverty/deprivation; it must be studied together with important factors like identity, nationality, race, culture and ethnicity (Sen, 2008).

The novel *Disgrace* by Coetzee, through the major character David Lurie, exhibits the deep-rooted ideology and legacy of the colonial apartheid past. The undertaken study focuses on the relation between deprivation and identity while using Tedd Gurr's theory of relative deprivation and identity. The focus of the study will be on the protagonist David Lurie and all other characters who are deprived in one way or the other. The researcher will try to analyze and bring to light the reciprocal relationship between identity and relative deprivation. Moreover, it will also focus on different types of deprivation that the characters face during the novel *Disgrace* by Coetzee.

Discussion

Disgrace (1999) is the account of David Laurie's journey from prosperity to adversity in the changing socio-political landscape of South Africa. Tedd Gurr's (1971) theory of relative deprivation and identity is very relevant and fundamental for character analysis of the novel, as the novel deals with the two extremes, the haves (privileged) and the have-nots (the underprivileged). The central character, David Lurie, along with many other characters, undergoes deprivation of one kind or another, like social deprivation, individual alienation and deprivation of identities. According to Tedd Gurr's theory of relative deprivation, an individual identity is the product of the environment; similarly, social alienation and deprivation are the key foundational components of relatively deprived identity (Kawakami & Dion, 1999).

The protagonist of the novel, David Laurie, is introduced to the readers as a sexually deprived person in the very opening lines of the novel. For instance, he is introduced to the readers as a 52-year-old professor who is twice divorced (Coetzee, 1999). David Laurie's deprivation of his entitled wives later becomes the cause of his many more deprivations. David Lurie's sexual deprivation makes him a rapist, and he starts sleeping with prostitutes and his students. In the absence of his wives, he is used to spending time and having sex with other girls, hence, a sexually deprived professor is earning the identity of a rapist for himself all because of his deprivation. Thus, it can be said that, in David Laurie's case, the main determinant of identity is deprivation. Unlike David Laurie, we have the prostitute Soraya, who is sleeping with David.

The narrative of the novel implicitly tells the readers about her financial deprivation. Though she is depicted as a married Muslim woman who has a family, including children and a husband but financially she was unable to meet her expenses, due to which she slept with people for money and favors. As is evident from the text, one morning, David calls Soraya, and she replies that she does not know him. During the apartheid era in South Africa, there was a clear-cut demarcation on a racial and ethnic basis. The white settlers who were the masters and colonizers of South Africa looked down upon the black native people. The black people were denied their basic human rights and privileges. The novel is set in post-apartheid South Africa, which is marked as an era of great social and political transformation. The writer in the narrative of the novel, through his protagonist David and other native black characters, exhibits that, still in the post-apartheid era, there is a deep-rooted legacy of colonial mentality, deprivation and hatred among different nationalities in South Africa. David Laurie, being an old professor Emeritus, retains the colonial mentality, which he exhibits from time to time in the novel in post-apartheid South Africa. Being a sexually deprived person, he makes sexual advances on native black females like Soraya and Mellaine Issac. In the novel *Disgrace*, the protagonist David Laurie is disgraced first because of his sexual deprivation. It was his sexual deprivation which made him a rapist. According to Skeat, Grace means pardon and kindness (Skeat, 1961; Walter et.al, 1961).

Likewise, Skeat defines disgrace as the antonym of grace, which means bad luck or bad fortune (Walter et al., 1961). In the absence of his wives, when Soraya was available to him, he was in grace. There was a part-time partner with him who assisted him in solving the problem of sex. David Laurie's first disgrace was the day when he was stopped by Soraya from making further sexual advances. After David was disgraced by Soraya, he did not put an end to his unbridled sexual desires. During the narrative, he successfully starts affairs with his student Melaine Issacs; basically, it was his sexual deprivation which compelled him to obey his sexual drives. He states that he was a follower of Eros (Coetzee, 1999).

After Soraya Melaine Issac falls into his trap. There might be many reasons for it, but the two main reasons for her sexual exploitation are her native color, in other words, she was exploited because she was a native South African and second, the deep-rooted colonial mentality and sexual deprivation of David Lurie. Like Soraya, Melanie Issac too became a sexual tool in the hands of David Lurie. This is reflected in the text, he takes her to his house where he makes love with her (Coetzee, 1999). Tedd Gurr argues that the less privileged group of people develops a realization of relative deprivation (Ahmad, 1998, pp.68-72; Shehzad, pp126, 127). David was underprivileged in terms of sex, due to which he was having a realization of sexual deprivation. It was his realization of sexual deprivation due to which he became an unethical and indiscriminate rapist. It was his seduction and rapist behavior which compelled Melaine Issac to ask him do you sleep and have sex with your other students (Coetzee, 1999, Ch. 4).

Later, the readers are told in the narrative that it was David Lurie's sexual abuse and seduction of his student Melaine Issac which became the main cause of David's disgrace and professional deprivation and shame. David Laurie faces the music and undergoes the state of relative deprivation in the story. He was a respected professor at the university but once he was exposed his services at the university were suspended and he was expelled from the university. David Laurie's identity as a professor and academician was due to his services in the university. All the things grounded with his identity vanished all at once, the time he was exposed and dismissed. The event/tragedy shook the deep-rooted colonial legacy of his mind in the newly transforming post-apartheid South Africa. After his exposure, he was deprived of his social status and reputation. The gravity of his guilt was magnanimous, and he was not worthy of clemency and pardon. This is evident from the text, he lives with us, but he is not from us he is a barbarous monster (Coetzee, 1999). Later, David expected leniency and sympathy, but he was denied both. There is no sympathy or mercy for you, and in the present age, everyone is against you (Coetzee, 1999).

In the novel *Disgrace*, all the characters from the marginalized segments of society are relatively deprived in different ways. As an example, Lucy, who is the daughter of David Laurie, lives in the countryside among the natives. It is very difficult for her to cope with the changing social and political situation. Being a female white lady who lives among natives in the countryside far from her family and community is indeed a type of deprivation. It was the history of her white supremacist ancestors which has made her identity of superiority and self-esteem. She is facing the stark realities of a changing era. The narrative of the novel *Disgrace* critiques the clash between individual trauma and major changes in post-apartheid South Africa. David Laurie, after being disgraced and deprived of his social status, identity and profession, decided to go to his daughter's residence, which is situated in the town of Salem, Grahamstown-Kenton Road, Eastern Cape. The character of David Lurie is replete with relative deprivation and identity issues. Once he was a renowned professor with respect, dignity, authority and self-esteem pertinent to the post of professor, but all at once he lost everything. At the start of the novel, he is depicted simply as a sexually deprived person, but

later, he becomes professionally and socially deprived, even though he has lost his very identity as Professor Emeritus. After his loss of identity and professional deprivation, he is left with nothing valuable, which is why he leaves the place for good and goes straight to his daughter Lucy, who was living in the town of Salem. On reaching there, his daughter Lucie greeted him warmly. He found the place in a dirty and shabby condition, which was not fit for his senses. He is astonished to find that she is living alone, as it is evident from the novel's text that Helen has gone to Johannesburg, and after her departure, Lucy has been living alone since April (Coetzee, 1999).

David had already lost everything, and now he was an asylum seeker or refugee in his daughter's farmhouse far away from the intimate world. His very presence was a shame in society, and he knew the reality of the situation, which left him with no other option but to retreat to Lucy's countryside farmhouse, where he was away and hidden from judgmental society. During David meeting with his daughter Lucy, he tells her, he is not on a long visit, he is a refugee seeker for an indefinite time (Coetzee, 1999, Ch. 7). Like David Lucie, too, was deprived in many ways like she was alone without family and for her protection she relied on her dogs and rifles. As it is evident from the narrative of the text, for deterrence I have dogs and a rifle (Coetzee, 1999, Ch. 7). David Lurie's identity was grounded in white supremacy and the privileges which the white masters enjoyed in the apartheid South Africa. It was his brought up which made him believe in white supremacy although there was no space and value of his grounded ideology in the post-apartheid South Africa. Citizenship deprivation is still considered as a colonial legacy of a stratified structure (Shahid, & Turner, 2022).

In the socially and politically transformed South Africa where there was no space left for racial supremacy David being a white old fellow retained the colonial mentality as it is exhibited in the text, Bev is a ridiculous name which reminds me of animals (Coetzee, 1999). Even though David has been punished and deprived of his former identity and profession, still he acts according to his old colonial legacy. As I have already mentioned, due to the past lingering colonial legacy and upbringing of David and his daughter, it was a challenge to adapt themselves to the new realities in the post-apartheid era. In the apartheid era, the natives remained suppressed and even they were even denied the rights of citizenship. Like David and his daughter Lucie, the natives, too, had colonial imprints on their minds. Their past is replete with suppression, cruelty, torture and inhuman punishments which were perpetrated on them by their former colonial masters. They remained deprived throughout the apartheid era. Tedd Gurr argues that the less privileged group of people develops a realization of relative deprivation (Ahmad, 1998). Due to their social, political, economic and human rights deprivation during the apartheid era, they became antagonistic against the white supremacists. Tedd Gur thinks that, when frustration is too sustained then it yields very dangerous repercussions resulting in violence and extremist activities (Shah & Faqir, p.47).

The assault, robbing and the eventual rape of Lucie may be attributed to the life-long deprivation of the native South Africans. The unknown three native black men rob Lucie's house, taking away all the valuables, burning David Lurie's hair and rapping Lucie. One may not be wrong to say that this act of violence was the result of the lifelong suppression and deprivation of the native black population. South Africa is notorious as an apartheid country, which is known for racial discrimination and segregation. Hatred of black people is evident from the text. South Africa is a country where Dogs are kept to guard against black men (Coetzee, 1999, Ch. 13). During the post-apartheid era, there was great transformation in the socio-political spheres of life. Like socio-political shifts, there was a shift in identities, too. For instance, David was expelled from the university on the accusations of a native black girl,

Melaine Issac. In the apartheid era, no such accusations of the natives against white supremacists were considered.

Similarly, in the apartheid era, whiteness of skin was considered a privilege, and no one, especially the natives, could dare to challenge their authority or interfere in their privacy. But in post-apartheid era the white were even robbed, dishonored and raped at the hands of the native black men. The narrative of the novel is replete with deprivation and relative identities. The identities of different characters in the novel are not fixed but are relative and change with time in each situation. David's deprivation and fall from the position of university professor to a mere assistant of Bev Shaw in euthanizing the animals. This is reflected in the text, he saves the dignity of the dead animals, and he is the only person fit for this stupid job (Coetzee, 1999). David Lurie was an alienated person; at Lucie farmhouse he was cut off from the civilized world and was facing existential deprivation. Bolmsjö et al. (2018) define Existential deprivation as a state of mind in which a person lacks emotions, is feelingless and is alienated from society. Lucie is planning to marry Petrus, a native black man who was already married and has worked with her as a laborer. But now he is no more than just labor; he is a partner of Lucie and has even purchased a tractor for his lands. David after the rape of his daughter realizes the gravity of his guilt and visits Melaine Issac's house where he apologizes to Mr. Issac. He also tells him the story of his fall and disgrace. David enters the room where Desiree and Mrs. Issac were already present; he sits on his knees, sitting on the floor before them (Coetzee, 1999). All the characters and events of the novel are replete with deprivation of different forms and identity transformation, as discussed.

Conclusion

Based on the above discussion, it is concluded that deprivation plays a key role in framing identities. The novel, replete with great socio-political changes, is set in post-apartheid South Africa, an era. It is concluded that, like the broader abrupt societal changes in South Africa, identity too is relative and is not fixed. The relatedness of identity is after relative deprivation. David's deprivation of sex leads to his further deprivations, like professional and identity deprivation. David's journey/shift of identity from a professor to a rapist is because of his deprivation. Similarly, the shift in Lucie's mode and temperament towards black people, particularly Petrus and her approval of marrying him are determined by relative deprivation. Likewise, the violent assault of the three black natives on Lucie's farmhouse is also because of their deprivation and the deep-rooted anti-white supremacist sentiments.

References

- Al-Hourani, M. (2012). Social Exclusion and Popular Revolutions: An Understanding in the Light of a Modified Model of Relative Deprivation Theory. *Jordan Journal of Social Sciences*, 5(2).
- Anwar, M., Khan, R. N., & Qureshi, A. W. (2023). Issues and Challenges in the Pandemic of Coronavirus: A Critical Analysis of Covid-19: A Global Novel in a Global Village. *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 1699-1710.
- Anwar, M., Muhammad, K., Ahmad, W., & Zaib, K. (2022). LAYERS AND IMPACTS OF CHILD ABUSE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE AFTERLIVES. *Pakistan Journal of Society, Education and Language (PJSEL)*, 8(2), 519-524.
- Bandari, P. (2020). *Qualitative research*. Scribbr.
- Bolmsjö, I., Tengland, P. A., & Rämgård, M. (2019). Existential loneliness: An attempt at an analysis of the concept and the phenomenon. *Nursing ethics*, 26(5), 1310-1325.

- Brownlee, K. (2013). A human right against social deprivation. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 63(251), 199-222.
- Coetzee, J. M. (1999). *Disgrace*. Penguin Books.
- De la Sablonnière, R., & Tougas, F. (2008). Relative deprivation and social identity in times of dramatic social change: the case of nurses 1. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 38(9), 2293-2314.
- Gunst, E., & Vanhooren, S. (2018). The destructive pattern: An experiential and existential theory-building case study. *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies*, 17(1), 1-18.
- Gurr, T. R. (2015). *Why men rebel*. Routledge.
- Indelible apartheid: Intergenerational post-colonial narratives of colonial-born coloured females about hair, race and identity in South Africa. *Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, 28(2), 150–165. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2021.1980702>
- Kawakami, K., & Dion, K. L. (1995). Social exclusion and popular revolutions: An understanding in the light of a modified model of relative deprivation theory. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 5(4), 377–389.
- Olzak, S., & Shanahan, S. (1996). Deprivation and race riots: An extension of Spilerman's analysis. *Social Forces*, 74(3), 931-961.
- Schaefer, R. T., & Schaefer, R. T. (2004). *Racial and ethnic groups* (Vol. 1). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Sen, A. (2008). Violence, identity and poverty. *Journal of peace research*, 45(1), 5-15.
- Shah, M. Z., & Faqir, K. (2019). Rise of Militancy in Tribal Areas: An Application of Relative Deprivation Theory. *PAKISTAN Bi-annual Research Journal*, 55(1).
- Shahid, R., & Turner, J. (2022). Deprivation of citizenship as colonial violence: Deracination and dispossession in Assam. *International political sociology*, 16(2), olac009.
- Shehzad, A. (2011). The Issue of Ethnicity in Pakistan: Historical Background. *Pakistan Vision*, 12(2).
- Skeat, W. W. (1961). *An etymological dictionary of the English language*. Oxford University Press.
- Yadav, M. K., & Yadav, M. S. (2020). Role of major themes in the novel disgrace by jm coetzee: The emerged aspects of society in the post-apartheid south Africa. *International Journal of Advanced Science and Technology*, 29, 2681-2701.

