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CONTENTS

1	SOCIAL REALISM IN THE SELECTED NOVELS OF CHETAN BHAGAT M.Kalyan Kumar.....	1
2	RELIGIOUS FEMINISM M. Jenita	4
3	NINA- RISING LIKE A PHOENIX -A STUDY OF MANJU KAPUR'S THE IMMIGRANT R.P.Jeswill.....	6
4	JOURNEY OF A WOMAN TOWARDS SELF-LIBERATION IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S "THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD" R. Joy Sharon.....	9
5	CRY, THE PEACOCK: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE K.Sowmiya Sheril.....	11
6	ANTI – SEMITISM: AS A SOCIAL EVIL IN LITERATURE A DISCUSSION OF PHILIP ROTH'S THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA V. Kala.....	14
7	REPRESENTATION OF INDIA IN ARAVIND ADIGA'S THE WHITE TIGER Dr G Kalvikkarasi.....	17
8	I REVOLT, THEREFORE I AM: PANGS OF PAIN IN KAMALA DAS' "PUNISHMENT IN KINDERGARTEN" K.Kamalaveni.....	20
9	RACISM IN TONI MORRISON'S THE BLUEST EYE J. Karpagavalli	21
10	HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN INDIA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO CHETAN BHAGAT'S FIVE POINT SOMEONE S. Karthik & D. Nivas Chakkravarthy.....	25
11	SELF TRAUMA FOR SOCIETAL UPLIFTMENT IN PETER CAREY'S THE CHEMISTRY OF TEARS G.Karthika & Dr.T.Alagarasan.....	28
12	MALE CHAUVINISM IN THORNTON WILDER'S THE MATCHMAKER Dr. B. Kathiresan & M.Sathyaraj.....	31
13	IDENTITY CRISIS OF THE TRANSGENDERIN MAHESH DATTANI'S SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE Dr. B. Kathiresan & P. Xavier.....	33
14	WOMEN AND SOCIAL EVILS IN INDIAN CULTURE: AN INSIGHT INTO SWARNAKUMARI DEBI'S THE UPROOTED VINE E.Kavipriya.....	35

15	WOMEN AND SOCIAL EVILS IN INDIAN CULTURE: AN INSIGHT INTO SWARNAKUMARI DEBI'S THE UPROOTED VINE E.Kavipriya	39	31	VICTIMS OF PATRIARCHAL TRADITION IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD Dr. K. Mangayarkarasi	88
16	APPREHENDING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NUANCES Dr.V.Kavitha	43	32	VOICES OF FEMINISM IN SHASHIDESH PANDE'S THE ROOTS AND SHADOWS Manjusha M.P.	92
17	SILENCE PLAYS IN THE LIFE OF WOMEN – AN ANALYSIS FROM SHASHI DESHPANDE'S THAT LONG SILENCE J.KirubaSharmila	46	33	STRANGERS TO OURSELVES: FAMILY, MONEY, AND SOCIETY IN D.H.LAWRENCE'S 'THE ROCKING-HORSE WINNER' Mrs.V.Mareeswari	93
18	DIASPORIC SENSIBILITY AND CULTURAL CONFLICT IN JHUMPALAHIRI'S THE NAMESAKE J.Kirubarani	49	34	ALIENATION IN MARGARET LAURENCE'S THE STONE ANGEL L. Megar Nisha	95
19	DISCOURSE OF AGONY AND PROTEST: A READING OF BAMA'S KARUKKU R. Lakshmi	54	35	ALIENATION AND IDENTIFY CRISIS IN ROBOT CORMIER'S I AM THE CHEESE P. Moby Samuel	97
20	THE FEMININE ANGUISH AND DEPRESSION IN CRY, THE PEACOCK M. Lalitha	57	36	ROOTS OF THE ROOTLESS: A PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLORATION L.Monica Lilly	99
21	ESTRANGEMENT AND DISLOCATION OF THE PROTAGONIST ELVIS OKE IN CHRIS ABANI'S GRACELAND A. Leela Thomas	60	37	CHETAN BHAGAT'S PORTRAYAL OF EDUCATION SYSTEM IN INDIA WITH REFERENCE TO HIS HALF GIRLFRIEND Dr.M.Moovendhan	101
22	LANGUAGE AND POWER IN LITERATURE Merly Rajanayagam.J.	63	38	THE VOICE OF THE DOWNTRODDEN, IN ARAVINDADIGA'S THE WHITE TIGER Mrs. Indragandhi .S.	104
23	ALIENATION OF IMMIGRANT IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S NOVEL "WIFE" M. Ananthi	66	39	BLACK FEMININE QUEST FOR SURVIVAL IN TONI MORRISON'S THE BLUEST EYE AND SULA Mrs.N.Brindha	105
24	FATHER –SON CONFLICT IN ARTHUR MILLER'S ALL MY SONS Dr. M.Ananthi	69	40	IMAGE OF INDIAN WOMEN WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO BHARATI MUKHERJEE A.Nafees Sultana & Dr.L.Baskaran	108
25	DIGITAL LITERATURE – A CONTEMPORARY APPROACH TO LITERATURE M.Mohamed Habeeb	71	41	THE PROBLEM OF ALIENATION AND QUEST FOR IDENTITY OF THE PROTAGONISTS IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF ARUN JOSHI A.P.Nandhini	112
26	BEAUTIFUL GIRLS' AND LADIES' M.Radha	74	42	THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS: A STUDY OF FEMININE SENSIBILITY BY SHASHI DESHPANDE P.Hemalatha	115
27	LITERARY POLITICS OF MARGINALITY Dr. Magara R. Makori & Dr.R. Mani	76	43	A WOMAN'S PRIDE AND FREEDOM IN MARGARET LAURENCE'S THE STONE ANGEL P.Sathya	117
28	ICONOGRAPHY OF REPRESENTATION AND RESISTANCE IN POST COLONIAL LITERATURE FROM INDIAN SCENERIO M.R.Maheswari	77	44	THE VALUE OF SUFFERING IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S NECTAR IN A SIEVE Ms.P.Sowmiya	119
29	FEMINISM R.Maheswari	82			
30	AN ATTITUDINAL DIFFERENCE IN UNDERSTANDING ROMANTICISM R.Malathi	85			

45	WOMEN AS PROTAGONISTS IN ANITA NAIR'S LADIES COUPÉ P.Pavithra Nandhini & Dr.K.Anuradha	121
46	LITERATURE AND GLOBALIZATION B.P.Pereira	124
47	RELOCATING POWER, VIOLENCE AND RESISTANCE IN COETZEE'S DISGRACE Dr. Prasenjit Panda	127
48	WOMEN WRITERS AND IMAGES OF WOMEN IN THEIR WRITINGS S.Pratheeba	131
49	ENMITY BETWEEN HINDU AND MUSLIM IN MAHESH DATTANI'S FINAL SOLUTION S. Prathikumar & S. Jasmine	135
50	REPRESENTATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA IN ANITA DESAI'S VOICE IN THE CITY P. Preethi	138
51	EMANCIPATION OF SELF IN PAULE MARSHALL'S BROWN GIRL BROWNSTONES G. Princely Grace	140
52	ENTRAPMENTS AT HOME AND ABROAD IN ANITA DESAI'S FASTING, FEASTING TR. Sundari	143
53	A LOOK BACK ON A CONCEPT: REPRESENTING AND RE-PRESENTING RECONFIGURED IDENTITIES OF DIASPORA K.Manjula	148
54	SENSE OF EXPATRIATION AND ALIENATION IN POSSESSION Kamala Markandaya	151
55	STRUGGLE OF SUBALTERN IN BLACK LITERATURE WITH REFERENCE TO ALICE WALKER'S "THE COLOR PURPLE" S. Maragatham	153

RELOCATING POWER, VIOLENCE AND RESISTANCE IN COETZEE'S DISGRACE

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Colonialism as a psychological process cannot but endorse the principle of isomorphic oppressions which restates for the era of the psychological man the ancient wisdom implied in the New Testament and also perhaps in the Sauptik Parva of the Mahabharata: "Do not do unto others what you would that they do not do unto you, lest you do unto yourself what you do unto others."

(Ashis Nandy, preface, *Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*)

J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*, confronts the reader with the barren realities of the South Africa regarding its history, culture, socio-political complexities and ironies and comments powerfully on the failure of human love and sympathy as a consequence of colonialism. Coetzee discusses the impact of apartheid and its gruesomeness on the human psyche at the individual as well as community level. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee tries to reveal the changing power structure in Africa when Nelson Mandela comes out from the prison and thus ushers a new beginning of a new history. Africa which had witnessed the white's supremacy over the "other"-Black, patiently endured the brutal treatment from the white for such a long time, now has started to write its own history from the very bottom line. Now the disgrace which was earlier a metaphor of existence for the black, suddenly becomes a reality for the whites. Kailash C Baral in the introduction to *J.M. Coetzee Critical Perspectives* (2008) states thus:

J.M. Coetzee (1940), the South African novelist and Nobel laureate, among the contemporary novelists is perhaps the only one who is rigorously engaged in exploring the ontological and other issues crucial to the fictional discourse. This engagement is primarily for marking his "authorial position", choosing his own voice of articulation and, in particular, locating himself in the complex historical past and in the fractured social present of post-apartheid South Africa. (12)

The novel opens with a story about Lurie, a 52 year-old and twice-divorced professor of modern languages in Cape Technical University. As a professor, Lurie is very casual towards his job and he is always looking for an unusual way (sex) to prove his energy and privilege. Lurie represents himself as the superior White class always

seeking domination over the inferior Black community. His relationships with several women have been governed by his strong sense of domination. As Coetzee says that: "that was how he lived; for years, for decades, that was the backbone of his life." Lurie's sexual relationship with Soraya fails to satisfy him because she is too active: "Bucking and clawing, she works herself into a froth of excitement that in the end only repels him" (Coetzee, 1999, p.9). After that one encounter, Lurie avoids abruptly, leaving her feel puzzled, hurt and angry. The reason is that Lurie does not want mutual intercourse at all, as Charles Sarvan points out: "Lurie does not desire mutuality but domination, hence his relationships with women who are much younger—and passive" (Sarvan, 2004, p.27) And then he seduces one of his female students Melanie who is happens to be black and makes love with her. It was more than a physical violation rather than a mutual sex. Although he himself observes that this seduction of Melanie is "not rape, not quite like that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core,"(25) he arrives at Melanie's flat and "thrusts himself upon her" (24), and in which she neither resists nor participates in the sex that follows this invasion. Indeed, Lurie observes that "she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration"(25). Subsequently, he describes himself —kneeling over her, peeling off her clothes, while her arms flop like the arms of a dead person" (.89.) The scandal comes out. It is found by Melanie's boyfriend and parents, which arouses a great upheaval in the college. Lurie is accused by the college, but he refuses to confess in the hearing defence. So he becomes discredited in the college and decides to leave. Lurie is in many ways an archetypal symbol for white South African generation that grew up with in apartheid time. Since Lurie is also a part of the South Africa's long history of racial oppression, racial discrimination and white supremacy, he does not want to change in the world which is changing its centre and where he has to live. Hence, he refuses to give a confession, just as Chapman said: "The white are endowed with a special racial identity." (Chapman, 2001, p.87) He decides better to live with his daughter Lucy's small farm as a refugee than to confess his guilt as he never thinks it as a mistake. But the world shatters for

Lourie as one day Lucy was robbed and raped by three black men on the farm without any warning. Her home was robbed and Lurie was burnt. But Lucy decides to keep it a secret than to report to the police. As a white offspring of the ex-colonizers, Lucy becomes the victim of colonialist policies. It is the colonizers themselves that deserve the chain reaction of their past sin. The violence against Lucy or Lourie is an expression of protest and assertion of power which had been robbed away by the White for long time. Lucy's rape is not only a contravention upon human body but also is a metaphor of revenge and protest against the historical hatred, racial discrimination between different races, caused by the colonizers. Lucy's rape can also be interpreted as the Bhabaian mimicry of the white supremacy. As Lourie rapes Melaine, the black also rapes Lucy. Lucy's secret is Lurie's "disgrace". As the daughter of colonialists, Lucy has to bear the heavy burden of the past sin in the postcolonial society. But where he and Lucy differ is that Lurie, just as in his refusal to apologize for his victimization of Melanie, does not truly see his fault in history; Lucy does, so much so that she even offers her body to it in penance. When one of her rapists returns and is revealed to be a relative of her neighbour Petrus, Lurie wants to report it to the police. Lucy stays him.

Don't shout at me, David. This is my life. I am the one who has to live here...As for Petrus, he is not some hired labourer whom I can sack because in my opinion he is mixed up with the wrong people. That's all gone, gone with the wind. (133)

She wants to atone for the colonialists' sin silently and starts on a long journey to her expiation for the past guilt done by the colonialists. Lucy speaks out:

It was so personal...it was done with such personal hatred. That was what stunned me more than anything. The rest was...expected. But why did they hate me so?... I had never set eyes on them...I think they have done it before...At least the two older ones. I think they are rapists first and foremost. Stealing things is just incidental. A side-line. I think they do rape...I think I am in their territory. They have marked me. They will come back for me. ... (156)

The reason that Lurie chooses to work in the animal welfare league at last is to atone for the colonial guilt subconsciously. It has proved that colonialists do not only bring disaster to the colonized, but also it brings misfortunes to themselves and their offspring and perhaps that is graver than before as we find it in *Disgrace*.

Lucy is a sign of hope for the coexistence and amalgamation or in broader aspect a source of Bhaba's

hybridity. The sin of the white's past and the disgrace of apartheid's will be remunerated by the white's compliance. And in the apartheid-free South Africa, white women are the scapegoat for redemption and reconciliation for the past colonial evils. The white protagonist David Lurie, with his strong colonialist ideology, projects his dominance over the women characters and his racial superiority over the blacks and most of the cases in his person life, he generally sees the "Black women" as a source of "enriching". But now to his disgrace, he is mimicked by the blacks, either in the way of rape or by means of the English language and farming skills. Land ownership has always been the great political and strategic support of European colonizers. A 1913 law conceding eighty seven percent of South African land to the white minority was revoked in 1995 by the bill of land rights. Consequently, an initializing of the power shift occurs. At the beginning of the novel, Lucy is a landowner, and farmer, while Petrus is a former sharecropper, and landless farmer: "Petrus is my new assistant. In fact, since March, co-proprietor" (62). Due to changes in government policy, Petrus knows that a postcolonial and post-apartheid era has begun. He celebrates this reversal of fortune by throwing a big party: "Because of the land transfer, I would guess. It goes through officially on the first of the next month. It's a big day for him" (124). Because of these Lucy's status changes from "subject" to "other" and finally marginalized. What Coetzee wants to show us is not the revenge or changing power structure in the Africa rather the disgrace which fell on the Whites. As a product of the white colonialists, Lucy tries to forget her "disgrace" and decides to accept it. She has made up her mind to give birth the child who results from the gang-rape on the farm, and continue to stay on the farm. To Lucy, she is has to pay for the past deed of the ancestors. She first lived with her mother in Holland and then came to South Africa. She is different from her ancestors as unlike them she decides to become a worker in the African land. She is longing for a quiet, independent life and an amalgamation with the African field. To Lucy, though there is something of civilization in it, she is a symbol of redemption and reconciliation to the black and the white. For "life", Lucy chooses to remain and marry to the black Petrus. She accepts Petrus' "advice" to become his third "wife" on condition of contributing her land to him.

But isn't there way of looking at it, David...they see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying? Perhaps that is what they tell themselves. (158)

It has upset many critics, especially female critics, who see Lucy's mute subjugation "as involving the subjection of the female body, as part of a long history of female exploitation of which the narrative itself takes note" (Boehmer 344). It ignores the value that the novel places on non-verbal reconciliation, which is exemplified most poignantly in the dignity that is bestowed upon the dying dogs under Bev Shaw's care. In an interview with David Atwell, Coetzee states his case straightforwardly:

Let me put it baldly: in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body. It is not possible, not for logical reasons, not for ethical reasons (I would not assert the ethical superiority of pain over pleasure), but for political reasons, for reasons of power. And let me again be unambiguous: it is not that one grants the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body takes this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable. (Doubling the Point 248)

Coetzee indicates a reconciliation and amalgamation through the violation upon the body and the loss of dignity of women in the weak society. Lucy feels shameful for her choice, but she finds a hope in her disgrace:

Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept, to start at ground level with nothing. Not with nothing but with nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity. (205)

To understand Lucy's decision better, we may look what Suresh Raval in his essay 'Coetzee's Disgrace' contends: While Lurie does not think he is personally liable for apartheid's evils, Lucy recognizes that the apartheid was a catastrophic social, economic, and cultural undertaking that caused immense human suffering. She sees that contemporary South African society is enmeshed in a play of wills and brutally competing forms of subjection. (151)

Although, there would be much criticism against Lucy's subjugation, but it is a reality as Lucy knows that "Petrus has a vision of the future in which people like Lucy have no place." (118) However, the whites did not want to accept the reality as it was a disgrace on the image of democratic South Africa. Lucy knows that if she has to survive in South Africa she has to renounce the privilege as white. In her own words:

Petrus is not offering a church wedding followed by a honeymoon on the Wild Coast. He is offering an alliance, a deal. *I contribute the land, in return for which I*

am allowed to creep in under his wing. (Italics are mine) Otherwise, he wants to remind me I am without protection, I am fair game. (203)

Lucy loses her originally independent identity after the reconciliation with Petrus. She will rewrite her existence against Petrus and her unborn child, whose blood is mixture of both black and white. The child belongs to the black pedigree- the earth symbolising hope, coexistence and amalgamation. The white Lucy would become the "wife" of black Petrus and become a member of the black family, which would ensure her existence and would give her a sense of security in the postcolonial society. As a representative of the black colonized, Petrus promises to bring up the child because he wants to take back what belongs to him originally. The violence on the farm is caused by the colonialists. Finally, Coetzee draws a picture of Lucy to bear the child, signifying the amalgamation and reconciliation between the colonizers and the colonized, the black and the white.

Therefore, the novel ends with a scene that Lurie is helping Bev in the animal welfare league. They comfort the dogs, touch and speak to them in their final minutes, giving them "what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love." (188) Coetzee uses "him" instead of "it", indicating the dog. And Coetzee also uses the dog to allude to Lurie. In giving himself up, Lurie finds his own identity, an identity which is not based on any binary rather it is based on amalgamation, forgiveness and reconciliation and thus the racism of the human race and all other colonialist policies are abolished. Lurie's realization can be compared to the final lines from Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*: "for ourselves and for humanity...we must make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavour to create a new man" (239) David performs a sacrificial gesture by "giving up" the dog, thereby reaffirming his ethical responsibility and human values.

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