

Analysis of the Narrative Strategies in Coetzee's Disgrace

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Abstract: J. M. Coetzee is one of the most representative contemporary writers in South Africa who has been influenced by the two cultures of South Africa and Europe. He has witnessed the decline of South Africa's colonial rule and the establishment of democratic regime, so his feelings for South Africa are complex, which influence the style and attitude of his writing. Therefore, in his literary works there exists a double-sided feature, which is complementary and contradictory. The background of Disgrace is the new South Africa after the abolition of apartheid. Coetzee shows us, in an almost apathetic style, a country that is still full of humiliation, violence and hatred, revealing the profound influence and harm caused by the apartheid system. The novel adopts a unique narrative perspective to make the narrative angle of the external narrator coincide with the vision of the novel's characters, which narrows the distance between the readers and the novel. This paper analyzes the narrative strategies of Disgrace and further explores the literary value of Coetzee's novels.

Keywords: Coetzee, Disgrace, narrative strategy, apartheid.

1. INTRODUCTION TO COETZEE'S LIFE AND HIS LITERARY STATUS

John Maxwell Coetzee is a South African novelist and recipient of the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature. He received education in Cape Town in his early life. After receiving his Bachelor of Arts with Honors in English in 1960 and his Bachelor of Arts with Honors in Mathematics in 1961, he relocated to the United Kingdom in 1962 and worked as a computer programmer in London. Coetzee went to the University of Texas in the United States and received his doctorate in 1969. Between 1984 and 2003 he also taught frequently in the United States: at the State University of New York, Johns Hopkins University, Harvard University, Stanford University, and the University of Chicago. He relocated to Australia in 2002 and lives in Adelaide. He became an Australian citizen in 2006. Coetzee married in 1963 and divorced in 1980. His son Nicolas died at the age of 23 in an accident, which dealt a heavy blow to him. He is a vegetarian and atheist. Coetzee is taciturn, extremely serious, lives a regular ascetic life and is proud of being away from fame. He was awarded the Booker Prize for Disgrace in 1999, therefore he became the first writer to win the price twice. In 2003, Coetzee won the Nobel

Prize for Literature for his unique creation and outstanding literary nature and became the second Nobel Prize winner in South Africa. He is widely recognized as one of the most important white writers in South Africa.

Since its publication in 1999, *Disgrace* has received extensive attention from ordinary readers and critics and has aroused heated discussion and debate in South Africa. Some critics believe that the novel is too pessimistic and irresponsible for the future of South Africa, while others consider it pathological and even some fiercely argue that the whole book is full of nonsense. But the more time goes by, the more approbation the work gets, and the more its value is recognized by most people. In *Disgrace*, the revelation of the human nature and exploration of the pains in the human process is of universal significance.

Before the year of 2003, there was the only book *Disgrace* published by Yilin Press in China. But at that time, the book received little response and was not given enough attention. After Coetzee won the Nobel Prize for Literature, *Disgrace* was once out of stock and the introduction of Coetzee's works has experienced a spurt of growth. The publication of these novels makes it possible to comment more on Coetzee's works, and also enables Chinese readers to have a more comprehensive understanding of Coetzee.

Compared with China, the study of Coetzee literature in other countries is relatively earlier and deeper. Coetzee's novels are discussed in the major periodicals, magazines and book reviews and have been extensively studied. The study of Coetzee's novels began in the 1980s, and the novels like *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* have earned him a great reputation and attracted widespread attention from many literary critics.

2. BACKGROUND OF DISGRACE

The Dutch arrived in South Africa in the middle of seventeenth Century, and they plundered the land and property, gradually making South Africa become a European colony and beginning 300 years of colonial rule over South Africa. Racial struggles in South Africa had continued and were in a very fierce state. Black people were regarded as inferior, poor, stupid and ignorant. For whites, they were noble races blessed by God and had the rights to own lands, while blacks were considered the worst races and they were synonymous with sin, poverty and ignorance. Therefore, whites imposed ruthless colonial rule on black people and occupied the majority of black indigenous lands and wealth. Blacks became cheap labors and suffered from serious suppression and discrimination. In order to maintain the noble status of whites and limit black people's political rights, living areas, work and education rights, apartheid was implemented, which made South Africa the only country that had passed legislation to enforce apartheid. Under such brutal discrimination and colonial rule, blacks fought fiercely. Due to the troubles home and abroad, the cruel apartheid system finally collapsed in the late 1980s. In 1994, Mandela led the ANC to victory in the multiracial general election and became president, marking the end of the apartheid system and the arrival of a new era, which actually does not have any positive effect on racial harmony. After the long oppression and discrimination, the black people's hatred of whites does not vanish with the disappearance of apartheid, and the

contradictions of racism remain prominent. The novel *Disgrace*, through various details, reveals a variety of problems occurring between the old and the new times on the land of South Africa and among the various people in South Africa. It shows deep concern and considerable frustration for colonialism in South Africa for the consequences of the colonial people and the colonists themselves and their descendants.

3. NARRATIVE STRATEGIES OF DISGRACE

Disgrace has a certain degree of practical significance, and the achievement in art cannot be neglected. Using simple narrative plot and structure, Coetzee arouses readers' thinking through the strong contrast between the story and the real society.

3.1 Analysis of narrative perspective

Narrative perspective describes the position of the narrator, that is, the character of the storyteller, in relation to the story being told. It can be thought of as a camera mounted on the narrator's shoulder that can also look back inside the narrator's mind. Third-person perspective is used in *Disgrace*, in which the perspectives of the narrator and Lurie always coincide, in other words, the writer describes the people and things from the perspective of Lurie, and for readers, what we observe and perceive is the same as Lurie's, the distance between readers and Lurie is the shortest. Readers have a certain understanding and observation of others, which is transmitted to readers through Lurie's psychological activities. For example, readers have no way of knowing Lucy's inner world, but the extensive conversation and interaction between Lurie and Lucy enable us to have a certain understanding of Lucy through the observation of words and deeds in these interactions. The reason why this effect is produced is because the narrator has perfect control over the perspective. Lurie has been always the focus of the narrator. Through the analysis of Lurie's inner heart, the readers are given a profound understanding of Lurie's inner racism and a clear and comprehensive insights into his ideological transformation.

Silence has become the most distinctive narrative strategy in *Disgrace*. Lurie is a representative figure living during the old and new periods of colonial rule in South Africa, and he inherits many colonial thoughts, with a strong sense of pride and superiority of colonial rule. In his mind, blacks still represent the dirty and ugly, but he ignored the reality of the replacement of ruling power. Facing Melanie's accusation, he chose to keep silent. For him, public repentance and apology meant a compromise to the new ruling class, which was a greater disgrace to the colonists. For Lurie, to resign means to defend his own dignity and arrogance and maintain his own white class attributes. When Lucy was raped, Lurie thought he was greatly disgraced, and even the white ruler he represented was greatly humiliated, but his fierce reaction did not receive the approval of his daughter. In Lucy's view, this was "the price one has to pay for staying on." And then, Lurie's psychological defense began to gradually collapse. He could not get rid of the scandal and was unable to protect his daughter. Lurie's psychological activities gradually changed from "I am not prepared to be reformed" to "Do I have to change", finally, he helped to deal with the abandoned dogs in the clinic and accepted the untouchable living

status. Lurie, under the constant blows of real life, lost the former status, gradually lost the soil of his pride and arrogance. He has to adapt to the social development and respond to this series of changes with silence. The author describes the psychological activities of Lurie in a strange tone through the third person narrative perspective. After Lucy was raped, they almost had no real communication, so what the author most describes is Lurie's psychological activities, which lead the readers into the role, narrow the distance between the readers and the protagonist, so that the readers and the protagonist resonate.

3.2 Analysis of the discourse patterns

The dialogues have a very important role in promoting the development of the storyline, making the characters stereoscopic and plump, filling the blanks in the plot, and playing a very important part in the ups and downs of the whole plot. The most striking feature of *Disgrace* is the use of a large number of free indirect speech and direct speech. Free indirect speech is between indirect speech and direct speech, in which the narrator narrates the feelings, thoughts, and language of a character from the perspective of the character. However, it does not include a leading sentence, and retains the language component that embodies the subjective consciousness of the character. Therefore, it contains the two voices of the narrator and the characters, presenting the characteristics of blending and confrontation, highlighting the narrative tension and the theme of the novel. When the detective told Lurie the detailed information about Soraya's real name, address and telephone number, he telephoned Soraya at nine in the morning to avoid the husband and children. Soraya pretended not to recognize him and there is the sentences:

Demand. She means command. Her shrillness surprises him: there has been no intimation of it before. But then, what should a predator expect when he intrudes into the vixen's nest, into the home of her cubs.

This paragraph is not labelled with quotation marks in the novel, and it seems to be added by the narrator. This paragraph seems to satirize Lurie using the tone similar to God, but it also appears to be Lurie's inner activities, self-evaluation and self-irony. It is difficult for readers to get accurate and clear boundaries, as if it were a wonderful feeling that the two curves emitted by a focus return to the same focus after their rotation.

In *Disgrace*, there are a large number of direct speech in the form of dialogues. Directness and vividness of direct speech play an important role in shaping the character through the specific discourse of the characters and this form of dialogue can also directly represent the various relationships between people. All the dialogues in *Disgrace* are between the protagonist Lurie and other characters: Lurie and Melanie, Lurie and members of the university-wide committee on discrimination, Lurie and Lucy, and Lurie and Petrus and so on. Although this form of discourse is slightly unitary, the characters seem to be divorced from the author's control and can restore the state of their own existence, and the consciousness of the narrative subject and the speaker can be truly reflected, thus the complement of the discourse information can be realized, and the true sense of the narrative subject can be further enhanced. At the same time, readers can grasp the ideas and feelings revealed by the author by fully understanding the

utterances. In *Disgrace*, the dialogues between Lurie and his daughter take up a lot of space. Lucy has always expressed her dissatisfaction with Lurie's cross-border patriarchy. This dissatisfaction can no longer be concealed after Lucy was raped. Lucy's resistance to Lurie mingled with silence. Lurie, as the perspective figure, makes Lucy a person who is being spoken, and the readers can only observe Lucy through Lurie's perspective. A large number of dialogues between father and daughter fill this perspective gap, which makes Lucy's resistance and rejection more deeply embedded in readers' minds. Under the guidance of the narrator, readers can enter the dialogues, reflect on the implied meaning in them, and make an additional self explanation of the dialogues between the father and his daughter.

3.3 Unique narrative structure

Disgrace is composed of two narrative clues, one is the personal experience and encounter of the protagonist Lurie, a white university professor, and the other is the reappearance of the conditions of South Africa before and after the abolition of apartheid in the novel. The dual narrative structure of the text can make full use of the limited narrative space to convey a variety of information to be read, giving readers more "decoding" fun, thus enhancing the vitality and stereoscopic sense of the work. While providing readers with two independent and relevant texts, this structure arrangement makes readers not only explore the fate of the characters in the microscopic place, but also make them examine the social reality in the macroscopic place and reflect the dark side of the history and society hidden behind the personal experience. The novel subverts the narrative structure of the traditional literature and highlights the other narrative ethics, which is the innovation of the novel.

A series of life events experienced by the protagonist Lurie is the main line of the story, forming the surface text of the novel. The first six chapters are the first half of the story and describe Lurie's dreary campus life and sex life, which has laid a solid foundation for the transformation of the personality of Lurie and the subversive changes of his outlook on life and the world. Chapters from 7 to 24 are the climax of the plot. The rape is the focus of the narrative, and the axis of the novel conflict. While the text is showing Lurie's various experiences, its inner spiritual distress and efforts to find spiritual salvation are vividly reflected on paper through its stream-of-conscious narrative. As descendants of the white colonists, the experiences of Lurie and Lucy have historical factors. The novel does not specifically describe the characteristics of racism until Lucy was raped. The emergence of the word "savages" began to reveal the issue of racial discrimination hidden in Lurie's heart. The author uses a lot of dialogues and psychological description in the novel to put the potential South African post-colonial background in every corner of the story. Although there is no obvious introduction, it runs through the whole text, achieving better expression effects.

4. CONCLUSION

The novel *Disgrace* is full of individualistic feelings. Under the influence of the New South Africa background, Coetzee is no doubt dissatisfied with the present situation of South Africa, which is mixed with the helplessness and deep condemnation of the present situation of South

Africa. As a descendant of the colonial rulers, Coetzee's feelings about South Africa are contradictory and complex. On the one hand, it is a positive exploration of South Africa's future. On the other hand, it is the helplessness and regret that Lurie has to face, which implies the profound concerns about the future of South Africa. History cannot be covered, nor can it be avoided. Whether for the white or black people, facing the history is the only way of healing the harm which has been brought by history itself. What Coetzee has done is to expose South Africa's harm in colonial rule to the sun, to make South Africans face up to their own problems, and to show the readers the situation of South Africa in a near brutal way. He reminds the people of South Africa to remain vigilant in the change of regime, learn to go out of the shadows, and forgive and avoid repeating the same mistakes. At the end of the novel, the author suggests that ethnic conflicts in South Africa are still continuing. This kind of realistic shock has caused readers to have deep concerns about the future of South Africa.

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