

# Nationhood and Justice in J.M.Coetzee's *Disgrace*

**Mahdi Teimouri**

Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, Khayyam University  
Motahari Sq., Rafiee Blvd., Imam Ali Expy., Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi, Iran  
Email: m.teimouri@khayyam.ac.ir

**Abstract** Coetzee's *Disgrace* is a controversial novel as it rakes over a past haunted by memories of rape, racism and the fight for land ownership. By depicting the lingering instances of injustice, *Disgrace* seems to be holding fast to the memories of a troubling past that cannot be easily erased or ignored. This unwillingness to let go of the past is problematic because it keeps interfering with the remedial process of nation-building pursued by the TRC and implemented under the aegis of the Constitution after the collapse of apartheid. The publication of the novel seems ill-timed, as the nation is going through a healing process. My argument in this paper is concerned with the way the novel challenges the conciliatory efforts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) by undermining the idea of nationness and restorative justice. The novel, I would like to argue, seems to present two opposing views about nationness and justice: one ethical, the other non-ethical. These opposing discourses are reflected in the beliefs and the attitudes of the two main characters, Lucy and David Lurie. My purpose is to show that *Disgrace* tends to valorize an ethically-informed approach to the question of nationness and justice. By an ethical approach, I mean the rejection of totalizing and impersonal views which is often reflected in the construction of nation and the implementation of justice. The paper is divided into sections devoted to the exploration of ethical and non-ethical views represented by the ideas of Homi Bhabha, Emmanuel Levinas and Zygmunt Bauman.

**Key words** Homi Bhabha; Emmanuel Levinas; Zygmunt Bauman; the performative; the saying

**Author** Mahdi Teimouri, Ph. D, is Assistant Professor of English literature at Khayyam University. His academic interests include postcolonial and postmodern studies. He is also keen on reading literary texts using ethical perspectives.

## Introduction

Written after the second democratic election *Disgrace* depicts a nation troubled with rankling issues. I would like to show that this novel is inextricably bound up with a vision of national discourse and the dispensation of justice which is at variance with the mission of post-apartheid administration whose goal was to foster unity and oneness. What loomed over the dream of national solidarity was a gloomy past haunted by injustice and inequality. By dredging up the memories of such a painful past, *Disgrace* seems to lucidly frustrate the common efforts toward the realization of such a goal pursued by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the African National Congress (ANC).

Since its publication, *Disgrace* has drawn critical attention to itself. Critical views about the novel ranges from favorable to disparaging ones. Without a doubt, part of the notoriety of the novel is related to its alleged undermining of nationalism in the wake of the overthrow of the white South African regime. This has resulted in the scathing criticism of the novel by the ANC due to its reflection of a society where the “views of the white characters in *Disgrace* may be equated with those of the white South Africans in general” implying that the black rapists represent the majority of black people in South Africa (Graham 435). *Disgrace* thus deliberately drags up memories that have been suppressed in the reconciliatory efforts of the TRC and the Constitution which sought to consolidate national unity and reconciliation. The novel owes its ill-fame to raising issues as contentious as the rape of a black girl at the hands of a white middle class man and the gang-rape of a white woman by black men. The novel was published in a time when South Africa, a fledgling nation, was striving to resign herself to a scandalous past through a general amnesty encouraging people to forgive and forget. The other debatable point about this novel is the reaction of the two main characters to the incidents in the story. David’s refusal to repent for abusing his female student is as flabbergasting as Lucy’s inanity to relinquish the possession of the land to Petrus whose complicity in the attack on the smallholding seems irrefutable.

Lucy’s way of handling the situation entails not only personal but also socio-political implications that allow *Disgrace* to incorporate its moral undertones into broader historio-cultural issues. These issues mainly bring to the fore the problematics of conceiving nation and administering justice. My purpose here is to open up a discussion on these two concerns of the novel from an ethical standpoint. By ethical I mean a non-totalizing approach which regards justice and nationhood not in universal and foundational terms but in light of the singularity and exception

of the other. To this end, I would like to focus on the two major characters of the novel that in my opinion represent the opposite poles of ethical versus totalizing perspectives. In their approaches to the administration of justice and the conception of nation, David and Lucy have diametrically opposed views about the ordeals they experience. This paper is an attempt to explain their differences by drawing on Levinas's account of the relationship between the self and the other through the distinction he has made between the saying and the said. In short, for Levinas, the saying represents the interpersonal and the said the impersonal and universal aspect of the relationship between the self and the other. Next, Bhabha's view about the national culture which is embodied in the tension between the pedagogical and the performative will be explored. Then, I will present my discussion on the idea of justice using Bauman's argument in this area. In the end, through an analogical perspective, and based on the reading of the novel, I would like to conclude that Bhabha's performative is comparable to Levinas's saying as the former is inclusive of contingency, difference and moral responsibility.

### **The Question of Nation in *Disgrace***

In his paper, "Negotiating Foundations: Nation, Homeland and Land in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*," Gilbert Yeoh (2004) argues that *Disgrace* contests the national discourse that the TRC and the Constitution propagate by substituting the idea of nation with homeland. He asserts that the subtext of *Disgrace* is *Odyssey* in which the homecoming of Ulysses is identifiable with the reclamation of land by Petrus and the rapists. In his argument he maintains that *Disgrace* contrasts the regaining of South Africa as homeland by the blacks with an idea of nation relying on "national reconciliation through the tools of forgiveness and amnesty" as recommended by the Constitution and TRC (6). By pitting the discourse of nationness which presupposes a neutral sense of belongingness against the intruding discourse of homeland played out in the rivalry between white South African pastoral and black epic, *Disgrace* reveals the underlying competitive narratives that lurk in the discourse of South African nationalism. While Yeoh's reading strives to demonstrate that *Disgrace* exposes the falsity of whites' "claim to South Africa as homeland" by criticizing "the foundational discourse of white South Africans as duplicitous rhetoric" (1), Patrick Hayes (2010) believes that *Disgrace* adopts a noncommittal stance by including two divergent political positions without giving pre-eminence to neither of them. Hayes contends that there are two political divisions in *Disgrace*: the politics of difference and the politics of recognition. He identifies the same divergent political divisions in the South African Constitution which shows a

simultaneous commitment to “democratic values” i.e. politics of equal dignity and to “the achievement of social justice” i.e. politics of difference (195). Hayes clarifies that the aim of the constitution is to create reconciliation between the incompatible political approaches. In the novel, David with his liberal humanism and universalism represents the politics of equal dignity and Lucy, the politics of difference. However, much to everyone’s disappointment, *Disgrace* displays the profound mistrust of the compromise between the two political trends. As Hayes argues this is attributable to the playfulness of the text in constructing a right image of the nation. This playfulness is realized through the “neither wholly serious nor entirely parodic” (Hayes 214) quality of *Disgrace*’s storyline as a political allegory in which Lurie and Lucy switch positions after the rape scene. Lurie’s seriousness gives way to a comical gesture and foolishness of behavior and Lucy’s “witty playfulness” is replaced by an “unassailably serious character” (Hayes 207). In the end Hayes concludes that *Disgrace* is absolutely reticent about “the claims for representational authority, objectivity and shared humanity that underpin the classic novel’s image making”, the outcome of which is “to open its readers to the complex political demands placed upon the nation’s future” (216).

Hayes’s discussion about the duality of political visions is similar to my argument about the two discourses of nationness represented by David’s and Lucy’s outlooks. Their attitudes are analogous to Bhabha’s view about “the Janus-faced discourse of the nation” (Bhabha, “Introduction” 3). Bhabha’s formulation deviates from totalizing conceptions of nationality by adopting a poststructuralist perspective through which nations like narrations are torn between a static and dynamic status. The classical image of nation stems from a mentality that was imbued with the desire to form totality through exclusionary procedures. Benedict Anderson’s definition of nation as “an imagined political community—imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6) with its emphasis on “deep horizontal comradeship” (7) and “homogeneous, empty time” (24) is a good case in point. For Anderson, it was the novel and the newspaper that contributed to a homogeneous and horizontal imagining of the community in the eighteenth century, a period which embraces the inception of the nation-state. Anderson’s argument presupposes the need to view nations as free-standing and monolithic entities. Though Anderson’s argument tends to reject any *a priori* and originary conception of nation, it lacks the potency to account for the current cultural hybridity that constitutes today’s nation-states especially the postcolonial ones.

It is for this reason that Bhabha speaks about the redefinition that is happening to the “very concepts of homogeneous national cultures” which intimates the

existence of “overwhelming evidence of a more transnational and translational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities” (Bhabha, *Location* 5). Though Bhabha has acknowledged his debt to Anderson’s work which “significantly paved the way for” (“Introduction” 1) his book, *Nation and Narration* (1990), he attempts to cast a revisionary look at Anderson’s discussion about the emergence of nations. In the following pages, I will try to demonstrate the way *Disgrace* promotes a form of the discourse of nationalism which contradicts the vision of a unified nation endorsed by the post-apartheid administration. Bhabha’s conception of nation as a hybrid cultural product is of note here as his theorization of national culture is not premised on the binary structuring of inside/outside. The image of the nation as an enclosed impenetrable totality does not hold water in Bhabha’s opinion.

In the introduction to *Nation and Narration*, Bhabha speaks about the ambivalent role of the margin of the nation-space and argues that the nation is “one of the major structures of ideological ambivalence within the cultural representation of modernity” (4). Nations, as Bhabha observes, are like narrations which are limitless and uncontainable. Seen from a poststructuralist point of view, the image of a unitary nationness is as unrealizable and elusive as the idea of a achieving a unified meaning by soldering the signifier with the signified. There is always an excess or slippage that thwarts the completion of signification. Thus nations are always in the making and this turns the totality of the national culture into what Bhabha calls “the locality” of the national culture which is “neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself nor . . . as [an] ‘other’ in relation to what is outside or beyond it” (“Introduction” 4). Boundaries in the locality of national cultures do not represent the limit but engender an “in-between space through which the meanings of cultural and political authorities are negotiated” (Bhabha, “Introduction” 4). Based on the logic of such a non-exclusionary view of the nation, ‘the other’, the outsider or the stranger are all indispensable presences within the nation. The inside becomes inseparable from the outside as a result. Bhabha believes that nationhood emerges from the “the articulation of cultural differences” which are “in-between spaces” that “provide the terrain for the elaborating strategies of selfhood — singular or communal — that initiate new signs of identity” (*Location* 1). Bhabha’s conception of the nation is an ethically imbued argument because it denounces totalizing approaches. His argument is thus analogous to the way Emmanuel Levinas describes the language of ethics. The impact of Levinasian thought can be felt in the overall spirit of Bhabha’s argument about the image of nation which uncannily resembles Levinas’s explication on ethics as the questioning of the self exposed to the irreducibility of the other. Just as Levinasian philosophy

of ethics is contingent upon an undeniable acknowledgement of the other and the recognition of his anteriority to the self, Bhabha's theorization of nationness posits the performative negotiation that exists within the nations.

### **Levinas: The Saying and the Said**

The impossibility of reducing the other to the same constitutes the core of Levinas's philosophy. This resistance is an exteriority which is outside the language of philosophy. For Levinas, initially, the face of the other constituted this point of resistance which defies thematization and representation. The face represents not a kind of infinity but the *infinition* of infinity which exceeds signification and sublation. The face also inspires a face-to-face conversation. This conversation is not initiated by the subject because the subject does not have any subjectivity, any freedom or will before encountering the other. Such an encounter is in fact an address directed by the other to the self. This pre-linguistic address inspires an ethical response which is described as 'the saying' and is in opposition with 'the said'. In fact the saying is more of an act than actual speech. For Levinas, the saying is pre-linguistic, non-ontological while the said is linguistic, and ontological. He describes the Saying as a moving out of the self toward the other: "*Toward another culminates in a for another, a suffering for his suffering*" (Levinas 18; emphasis in original). In contrast, the Said is the self-enclosed system, the linguistic system, history with its chronological sequencing of events: "to enter into being and truth is to enter into the said; being is inseparable from its meaning! It is spoken. It is in the logos" (Levinas 45). The Saying is prior to the Said, it is "antecedent to the verbal signs it conjugates, to the linguistic system" (Levinas 5). The Saying is before signification, before an idea is petrified into a theme; it is an instance of "the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very *signifyingness of signification*" (Levinas 5; emphasis in original). The Saying pre-dates the Said just in the same way that the act of signifying is antecedent to significance. Saying is "the anarchical, the non-original" (Levinas 7). It is anarchical in the sense that it is an open becoming characterized by a performative quality which disrupts attempts at unification. Its non-originality stems from the exposure of the self to an address which predates cognition and escapes comprehension.

Before I continue with the relevance of the above discussion to Bhabha's conception of nation, I should remind the reader that both Bhabha and Levinas are antagonistic to essentialist and originary views about the formation of identity be it national (as in nationhood) or subjective (as in selfhood), respectively. Though

Bhabha never directly acknowledges his debt to Levinas, his text uncannily reverberates with Levinasian terminology. He regards postcolonial countries and communities “otherwise than modernity,” a phrase reminiscent of Levinas’s “otherwise than being.” This phrase which constitutes the title of his second magnum opus, *Otherwise than Being: or beyond Essence*, indicates “the very difference of beyond, the difference of transcendence” (Levinas 3) and in this way is not concerned with the polarity of being and nothingness but with what transcends ontology and ontological thinking. In a similar way, Bhabha’s “otherwise than modernity” refers to “cultures of postcolonial *contra-modernity*” where “national cultures are being produced from the perspective of disenfranchised minorities” (*Location* 6; emphasis in original). The point of convergence between Levinas and Bhabha is indicated by the fact that both reject the binary division of modern thought and emphasize on the indissoluble relationship between the self and the other. For Levinas, the self being addressed by the other presupposes an asymmetrical relationship of inexorable responsibility on which the self’s subjectivity is premised. Subjectivity, in this sense, for Levinas is subjection.<sup>1</sup> Responsibility is not defined in the synchrony between the self and the other. Being-for-the-other is always the past of the present of the other. We are always late therefore responsibility is persecution.<sup>2</sup> The subjectivity, the one-for-the-other is responsibility for the other “before showing itself as a said, in the system of synchronism, the linguistic system” (Levinas 77). Subjectivity or subjection is incarnated in proximity: “it is in proximity, which is a relationship and a term that every commitment is made” (Levinas 86). Ethics as first philosophy for Levinas creates sociality, a bond among humanity without which humanity is hollow. That is why Levinas claims that humanity is proximity (83). Responsibility for the other, in Levinasian ethics, is an obsession with the other which extends across and through

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1 Levinas reverses the formation of subjectivity and identity by locating their origin not in the being of the self but in the otherwise than being. There is no essence, no identity in being; subjectivity is a process of signification which is predicated on the outside/the other/the neighbor; on our being responsible for the other; on our being-for-the-other, that is, on substituting self for the other: “substitution is signification” (Levinas 13). In Levinasian terms, substitution is not a change from one substance to another or enclosing oneself in another identity, nor fusion. Levinas conceives of substitution or “the subjectivity of the subject ... as expiation” which is “traceable back to the vulnerability of the ego, to the ... sensibility” (14).

2 According to Levinas there is no synchronism or synchronicity between the self and the other. The other predates the self (has already arrived) and thus the latter finds itself eternally late and must belatedly strive to discharge his neglected responsibilities towards the other. In short, he is *de facto* persecuted by this prosecution.

“consciousness countercurrentwise [and] is inscribed in consciousness as [. . .] a disequilibrium, a delirium” (Levinas 101). While the questioning of the self opens it up to the acknowledgement of the other’s presence, thus shattering the illusion of self-identity, nations are also subject to a similar questioning which disrupts its image of consistency and coherence.

### **Bhabha: The Pedagogical and the Performative**

Bhabha’s revisionary look at Anderson’s project of defining the nation originates in his relentless denunciation of any argument that presumes that the self and the other are hermitically sealed off. Anderson’s definition of the nation as “an imagined political community—imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6) characterized by “deep horizontal comradeship” (7) and “homogeneous, empty time” (24), sounds ill-conceived and wrong-headed for Bhabha because it posits the nation or national identity as an entity which is at one with itself. The idea of the nation as a unified whole historically and functionally corresponds to the exclusionary logic of modern intellect that sought to create identity through differentiation. Bhabha’s penchant for liminality and the locality of culture undermines “the complacent and pernicious insistence on a simultaneity that tends, of course, to exclude those that do not fit” (Huddard 71). Bhabha problematizes the homogeneity of the national culture by arguing for the existence of a double movement which creates dislocation and disjunction within the time of the nation which disrupts its self-sameness. Put simply, the discourse of the national identity is torn between the past and the present:

We then have a contested conceptual territory where the nation’s people must be thought in double-time; the people are the historical ‘objects’ of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin in the past, the people are also the ‘subjects’ of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principles of the people as contemporaneity: as that sign of the present through which national life is redeemed and iterated as a reproductive process. (*Location* 145; emphasis in original)

What follows from the above argument is that the pedagogical has affinities with the historicist and wholistic view of the nation which strives to present an image of the people as a static entity while the performative is affiliated with the locality

and temporality of the nation-space highlighting the multiplicity of the people and the competing discourses of sexuality, race, and social classes. The conflictual relationship between the pedagogical and the performative is elaborated by Bhabha thus:

The pedagogical finds its narrative authority in a tradition of the people [. . .] as a moment of becoming designated by *itself*, encapsulated in a succession of historical moments that represents an eternity produced by *self-generation*. The performative intervenes in the sovereignty of the nation's self-generation by casting a shadow between the people as 'image' and its signification as a differentiating sign of Self, distinct from the Other or the Outside. In place of the polarity of a prefigurative self-generating nation itself and extrinsic Other nations, the performative introduces a temporality of the 'in-between' through the 'gap' or 'emptiness' of the signifier that punctuates linguistic difference. The boundary that marks the nation's selfhood interrupts the self-generating time of national production with a space of representation that threatens binary division with its difference. The barred Nation *It/Self*, alienated from its eternal self-generation, becomes a liminal form of social representation, a space that is *internally* marked by cultural difference and the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities, and tense cultural locations. (Location 147-8; emphasis in original)

The pedagogical in the construction of the nation directs attention to an outside "other" in an attempt to create and consolidate a sense of self-identity whereas the performative works to disrupt the outbound-gaze and to turn it into inward-looking one. The split that is caused by such a performance undermines the totality and historicity of nation-space by revealing the conflictual rather than the unitary nature of national narrative. The contestation among different subcultures and minorities creates the space of nation in which the supremacy of one cultural identity over the rest is never realized. There is an ongoing translation between the borders of these minorities that defers the formation of a hegemonic national identity because "the narrative of nationality is continually displaced by other identities, like sexuality, class or race and there can be no end to this displacement" (Huddart 74).

In an interview with David Attwell in 1993, Bhabha elaborates on the ambivalence that exists in his theory of the nation by using the socio-political context of the post-apartheid South Africa. Addressing the problematics of creating a "unified sovereignty," Bhabha points to the difficulty of building consensus and

solidarity in South Africa because

there is the notion of the nation as the liberatory horizon, which has a national, populist resonance, of the claim to justice, as you say, the claim to a new history, to a reparation for historical excision and exclusion. (“Interview” 108)

This “unificatory notion of nation” (108) embodies the pedagogical, which according to Bhabha, is problematized by the performative as the former is “always overwritten, or underwritten” by

the difference between the ANC and Inkatha and other groups, and that is underwritten further by the whole question of tribal belonging, so the text becomes a profoundly disjunctive text, and if you have to function with it, even at the liberatory level, you have to work those interstices in constructing a pan-South African national symbol, or national party or vision. (“Interview” 108)

The desire for the perpetuation of national consistency and unity was further reinvigorated by the TRC which assumed the mantle of meting out restorative justice among the victims of apartheid by encouraging them to grant amnesty to the perpetrators of human right violations. As a pedagogical tool facilitating the nation-building process, the TRC has an ambivalent function. It demanded people to relate to a past that was rife with injustice and cruelty only to unlearn it in the name of an expedient national solidarity and reconciliation. The shared sense of victimhood which used to generate a collective identity among the discrete non-white population of South Africa was to be traded with a more comprehensive and inclusive sense of belonging i.e. nationness. However, past is not completely past. The repressed memories uncannily find their way to the consciousness of the public.

As a national and cultural sovereignty, South Africa is haunted by a troubling past to which cultural and literary productions such as novels like *Disgrace* gives expression. Such is the case with *Disgrace* which tries to reveal the festering wounds that cannot be healed through some perfunctory measures and palliatives. *Disgrace* presents a postcolonial perspective for which difference and alterity should be acknowledged as an indelible presence. The novel problematizes the vision of nation as a fixed monolithic construct. The construction of such an image of nationness necessitates dismissing a history of oppression in favor of future gains. However, *Disgrace* does not seem to be acting in accord with this vision, as it reveals the cracks that have been whitewashed in the process of creating an image

of nationhood by the TRC and the ANC. *Disgrace* shows the slippage between the idealistic vision of nation and its reality “in this place, at this time” (Coetzee 112). It brings into light what has been previously tried to be kept hidden and suppressed by the discourse of nation-building. In this way the novel represents “postcolonial perspectives” which according to Bhabha,

intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic ‘normality’ to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, people. They formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the ‘rationalizations’ of modernity. (*Location* 171)

By wedging its way into the collective consciousness of the people, *Disgrace* epitomizes the disgrace of the past. Can it be assumed that *Disgrace* is engaged in an act of cultural translation that dissolves the boundaries and creates newness by “refiguring [the past] as a contingent ‘in-between’ space” whereby the “the past-present becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia of living?” (*Location* 7). The answer to this question comes from the way Lucy and Lurie view the current situation of South Africa. Lurie is the one whose feeling of cultural estrangement is obvious from the very beginning of the story. He is morally and mentally out of tune with society. That is why he attributes a sense of post-ness to different things displaying a low opinion and a cynical view of the post-apartheid era. He calls the institution of learning “emasculated” and the age he is living in as “post-religious” (Coetzee 4). He mocks the ignorance of his students who are “post-Christian, posthistorical, postliterate” (Coetzee 32). While David has to find ways to resign himself to this post-ness, Lucy, by residing on the fringe of the city and adopting the ex-centricity of sapphism, shows resilience in coming to terms with the post-apartheid milieu. Lucy, using Bhabha’s words, becomes “part of a revisionary time ... to reinscribe our human, historic commonality; *to touch the future on its hither side*” (*Location* 7; emphasis in original).

Seen from Bhabha’s viewpoint, Lucy is an unhomey figure. She is unhomey not because she does not possess a house or is an outcast. Unhomeiness as “the condition of the extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations” happens when the “recesses of the domestic space become sites for histories most intricate invasions” (*Location* 9). That moment befalls Lucy when her home and her body become part of historical interference and negotiation. Such an uncanny moment is also created

by the novel itself. The uncanny also implies the uncomfortable feelings of not being at home when one is at home.<sup>1</sup> The uncanny breaks through consciousness to make something undesirable known and to produce the feeling that one is not what one thought to be: because one discovers an alterity in oneself. This is what takes place in *Disgrace* as opposed to the national discourse which struggles to induce forgetfulness about a gruesome past or to sublimate it into an expedient national solidarity. The uncanny leads to the creation of a split time which contests “the homogenous and horizontal view associated with the nation’s imagined community” (*Location* 144). As it was explained before, this creates a double vision of the people in two contrary categories of objects and subjects: people are simultaneously the object of an originary, historic discourse originating in the past as well as the subject of a dynamic process of signification in the present. There are two temporalities involved in the creation of nations: there is “the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical and the repetitious, recursive strategy of performative” (*Location* 145). I believe that this duality is in a sense reflected in the divergent attitudes of David and Lucy in the novel. In a conversation with David, Lucy trying to explain her refusal to press charges against the larcenists and the rapists insists on the singularity of her situation:

You want to know why I have not laid a particular charge with the police. I will tell you, as long as you agree not to raise the subject again. The reason is that, as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone. (Coetzee 112)

Lucy’s insistence on viewing the personal and social developments through the urgency of “in this place, at this time” (112) coincides with the image of nation depicted by *Disgrace* as a space where differences and disagreements of counter-narratives of sexuality, race, and homeland should be acknowledged and negotiated. In this way, Lucy’s wish to dehistoricize her personal afflictions together with the novel’s interpolative revival of obnoxious memories of a past teeming with racial, sexual and territorial violations shares functional characteristics with Bhabha’s

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<sup>1</sup> Bhabha borrows the term uncanny from Freud and applies it to postcolonial situation. There is an ambivalent quality about the uncanny which is implied by its German rendition “unheimlich.” The term “unheimlich” contains its opposite “heimlich” meaning also unhomey and homey respectively. Thus as Freud writes: “heimlich is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, unheimlich” (Freud 3679).

performative as they conflict with the historicism that is represented by David Lurie's monologic and historicized attitude. *Disgrace* shows that the South African discourse of nationalism cannot be based on the idea of nation as "the sign of modernity under which cultural differences are homogenized in the 'horizontal' view of society" (*Location* 149). Contrary to Lucy's outlook, David's views are enmeshed in the rigidity of the historical discourse of the self vs. the other. He tends to read the attack on his daughter's smallholding and her rape as acts of vengeance that must be read in light of historically embedded paradigms:

Do you think what happened here was an exam: if you come through, you get a diploma and safe conduct into the future, or a sign to paint on the door-lintel that will make the plague pass you by? That is not how vengeance works, Lucy. Vengeance is like a fire. The more it devours, the hungrier it gets. (Coetzee 112)

Later when David and Lucy are talking about the rape, Lucy reveals how much she was shocked by the amount of hatred that the rapists felt towards her. David justifies this hatred by arguing that the crime must be seen on a non-personal level: "It was history speaking through them . . . a history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps. It may have seemed personal, but it wasn't. It came down from the ancestors" (156). According to Mike Marais (2006), David misreads Lucy's passive acceptance of the situation as a desire "to atone for the history of white oppression in South Africa" (83) substantiate his "failure to transcend the discursively-inscribed relations of contestation within his culture" (82). Lurie's understanding of the situation is heavily influenced by his culturally embedded preconceptions that predispose him to interpret events in the totality of mediatory terms such as race and history because he believes that Lucy is trying to humble herself before history (Coetzee 160). For Marais such "reductionist ways of thinking" motivates Lucy's rape as well because her rapists' knowledge and violation of her follow on from "the generic categories of race in South African society" (83) therefore "history speaks through both Lurie and the rapists" (84).

### **Zygmunt Bauman and the Impersonality of Ethical Justice**

Lucy's decision to go with pregnancy and her acceptance of Petrus's marriage offer in return for protection carry both personal and political overtones. On the personal level her decision reflects the inevitability of the concessions that needs to be made "in this place, at this time" (Coetzee 112). However, Lucy's decision —

to remain under the protection of Petrus as a father figure replacing her biological counterpart and to keep the baby — is marked by indeterminacy and contingency. Despite Lucy's insistence on viewing the crime committed against her as "a purely private matter" (112) her decision is informed by a vision that forsakes grand schemes that claim to offer once-for-all solutions in favor of minor, local and temporary ones which are devoid of hyped certainties. Lucy's determination to stay, in other words, can be interpreted in light of postmodern acknowledgement of the ineradicability of uncertainty. Her attitude toward her victimization conflicts with that of her father, whose pathological view of the crime is embroiled in a skewed historical understanding which reads the crime in the closure a historical vision. Obviously there is a chiasmic point in *Disgrace* which revolves around the two rapes. In David-Melanie case, against David's avowal that it was a matter of taking advantage of his "position vis-a-vis Ms. Isaacs" (Coetzee 54), there is an inclination to set the crime within "the long history of exploitation of which" Melanie's rape is a part (Coetzee 53). Such a counterpositional reading occurs once again in the second rape but this time it is Lurie who in a notable switching of position reads the crime in the totality of an enclosed historio-cultural vision which elevates the crime to a public and political level. Lucy, however, as discussed earlier, renounces such a reading. In Melanie's case, aware of the historically-informed approach taken to his transgression, Lurie defies such a reading by refusing to humble himself "and ask for clemency" (Coetzee 54). He extends this way of looking at the matter to Lucy's case and misreads the rape as motivated by historical vengeance and her silence as a "wish to humble [herself] before history" (Coetzee 160). Thus in a jarringly contradictory manner David as a public intellectual betrays the same intellectual myopia that afflicted the disciplinary committee. His ambivalent attitude toward the two rapes is the product of an "unacknowledged duality of a brutalizing enlightenment" that renders the subject simultaneously "exploitative in his relation to the others and yet" makes him "believe himself ethically conscientious" (Williams 23).

Lucy's preference for not taking refuge in the justice administered by the state is analogous to the argument that Zygmunt Bauman (1997) puts forward in discussing the relationship between state justice and interpersonal ethics. He elaborates that justice forms a totality that does away with the uniqueness of the other through the sameness and generalization of the individual as citizen:

Justice requires the foundations of the State. In this lies the necessity of the reduction of human uniqueness to the particularity of a human individual, to

the conditions of the citizen. That latter particularly reduces, impoverishes, dissolves, waters down the splendor of ethically formed uniqueness. (*Postmodernity* 49)

Lucy is working out her relationship with the other not by having recourse to a totality (i.e. state-administered justice) which is the impersonal law but by insisting on her moral responsibility which precedes the intervention and formation of the state because “moral drives have a pre-societal origin” (Bauman, *Modernity* 198). Conversely, the collective approach, taken by societal organizations to facilitate the administration of justice, ends in the inevitable elision of the uniqueness of the other. Just as it was the case with the idea of nation, the question of justice, similarly, includes a dichotomy which consists of the impersonal and the interpersonal. *Disgrace* therefore opens a space for observing the inextinguishable weightiness of interpersonal responsibility for the other by contesting the totalizing approaches which advances national reconciliation through the perfunctory display of justice carried out particularly by TRC in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. Lucy’s moral responsibility enjoys an anteriority that precedes the impersonality of the law of the state. In this way Lucy advocates an approach that adheres to the privateness and personalness of the moral party of the self and the other without letting it be dissolved in the general terms of the just state. Bauman (1997) observes that ethics “precedes the State, it is the sole source of the State’s legitimacy and the ultimate judge of that legitimacy” (52). Lucy’s emphasis on the urgency of the present moment compels us to avoid universal and timeless trends and summons us not to keep out of sight the time-boundedness of justice. That is why Bauman (1997) avers that justice is never complacent because “Justice means constant revision of justice ... [it] must exist perpetually in ... setting itself higher standards higher than those already practiced” (50). The “in this place, at this time” (Coetzee 112) of Lucy contradicts with Lurie’s “in this time, in this place” (Coetzee 141). The latter reflects a historicized and rational view stemming from the enlightenment rationality for which conflicts are part of a teleological perception of history. In this context, the resolution of conflicts can occur by resorting to all-embracing totalizing entities such as the state justice. Lucy’s refusal to rely on impersonal judiciary system can be taken as her recognition of the singularity of the situation and her irreplaceable and irrevocable personal responsibility. Here is Lucy who informs Lurie of her intention to become a non-person, a cipher by acceding to deed the farm to Petrus:

“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.”

““Like a dog.””

““Yes, like a dog.”” (Coetzee 205)

Lucy’s abnegation of her social privileges is comparable to entering the moral space that Bauman, following Levinas, describes as arriving the moral party of I and the other while “disrobed of our social trappings, stripped of status, social distinctions, handicaps, positions or roles ... reduced to the bare essentiality of our common humanity” (*Postmodernity* 46).

### **Conclusion**

My discussion about *Disgrace* was founded on three pairs of binary oppositions. They included the saying vs. the said, the pedagogical vs. the performative and the impersonal vs. the interpersonal. One of the points of similarities between these pairs is that the two sides of every dichotomy are not mutually exclusive. For example, the saying just like the performative does not seek to or cannot supplant the other side perpetually because the saying and the performative as well as the interpersonal can cause only momentary interruptions or disruptions in the opposite side. This means that as interruptive presences they are characterized by spontaneity, immediacy and instantaneity. These qualities fly in the face of the tendency toward closure and totalization which stem from the essentialism, historicity and stasis of the other side of the opposition. The performative’s tacit emphasis on spontaneity highlights “the need to re-state the reality of a nation constantly exceeding its definition” because “performativity keeps reminding us that the nation and the people are always generating a non-identical excess” (Huddart 73). The saying, similarly, is marked by performativity as it is “a verbal or non-verbal ethical performance, whose essence cannot be caught in the constative prepositions” of the said (Critchley 7).

Coming back to the main concern of this paper, that is the question of nation and the idea of justice in the context of the novel, once again, I need to reiterate that Lurie’s predisposition to analyze events and incidents through a historicist perspective rubs shoulders with that of Lucy’s. Lucy rejects the historicist view in favor of contingency and indeterminacy. Lurie’s historicist view objectifies the rapists and reduces them to soulless agents of history functioning as mercenaries exacting revenge (Coetzee 156). Lurie’s obsession with history is offset by Lucy’s

attention to the present requirements of this time and place. It is hard to say which of these two approaches is valorized in the end as the story is open-ended. The uncertainty and the “productive suspense” (Hayes 222) of the kind of image *Disgrace* projects of nation is recreated here through its inclusion of both Lurie’s historically-embedded vision and Lucy’s spontaneity. Lucy’s refusal to leave the farm which is interpreted as her passivity is indeed descriptive of the performative aspect of the narration of the nation which reminds us of the fact that “the national subjects” invent “the nation at every moment, changing its ideas of itself as well as its institutions” (Huddart 81).

Coetzee through *Disgrace* reveals the inadequacy of the definition of nation described and represented by wholistic approaches for postcolonial nations. The incongruity that exists between the idea of people as objects of historical discourse and people as the spontaneous subjects of history in the making disrupts the totalizing conception of cultural structures of modernity. Such a trend is completely in line with the depiction of the inconsistencies of the reality of the everyday life which Walter Benjamin speaks of in terms of the role of the novelist in the modern society: “To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life. In the midst of life’s fullness, and through the representation of this fullness, the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living” (qtd. in Bhabha, *Location* 161). There is one point that needs to be elucidated here and that concerns the existence of any convergence between Bhabha’s concept of national culture and Levinas’s ethics. I believe that Bhabha’s and Levinas’s idea, presented here, become confluent in Lucy’s reaction. Lucy as an ethical subject whose subjectivity is formed in the responsibility for the other and in her being-for-the-other is an embodiment of ethicality.

In the end, I would like to draw attention to the way Bhabha and Levinas are similar in the way both throw light on the way culture, nation, humanity and human subjectivity are not given, complete and self-standing concepts but are contingent upon the ex-centric that interrupts their essential centrality and rigidity by transforming them into a state of becoming, that is, an ongoing process: subjectivity into subjection, nation into narration, and rights into writing.

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