

Stretching the Language to its Limits: a Stylistic Analysis of Post-Apartheid's Racial Violence in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Abstract:

Post-Apartheid was a period of transition in South Africa; conflicts between white and black people continued. The repercussions of Apartheid were plausible in terms of socioeconomic challenges, issues of inequality, and reciprocal racial violence. Under the weighty legacy of this period, this article emerges with a stylistic analysis of specific segments from J.M. Coetzee's Post- Apartheid novel *Disgrace*. The targeted passages report a violent attack by black men on the white characters, David Lurie and his daughter Lucy. The principal goal of this stylistic analysis is to point out Coetzee's ability to push the boundaries of language and to uncover the consequences of Apartheid. The study explores his linguistic choices that manifest Gilles Deleuze's concept of "Stretching the language to its limits".

The writer's graphic and direct language in the attacking passages is a vehicle for storytelling and also a narrative technique that shows disturbing perspectives. Thus, the study addresses the exploited language in *Disgrace* that illuminates harsh realities. The abolition of Apartheid did not bring an end to racial violence but made it more complicated.

Keywords: Post-Apartheid, Stylistic analysis, Stretching the language, *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee, Racial Violence



I. Introduction:

The loud cheering after the release of Nelson Mandela from prison February 11, 1990 did not deafen writers from the background voices of white and black people who continued fighting. Post- Apartheid was a new era with old quarrels. J.M. Coetzee is one of these attentive writers, as his novel *Disgrace* captures the residues of institutionalized racism in South

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Africa. The narrative depicts the complexity of transition, race conflicts, power shifts, and societal reconfigurations.

The plot of this 1999 novel revolves around David Lurie, a white post-Apartheid South African professor who has an intimate relationship with one of his black students. After quitting university because of this scandal and moving to his daughter's farm, David's sexual, racist, and violent activities led to psychological struggles. The story continues with other perturbing events when a trio attacks David and his daughter Lucy in their farm and tortures them.

Because of this appealing plot, there is a wide scholarly attention to the novel as a Postcolonial and a Post-Apartheid work. Yet, there exists a slight gap in the examination of the attack's part through stylistic analysis and its connection to Gilles Deleuze's concept of "Stretching language to its limits" Ergo, this study addresses this gap by focusing on the detailed language that portrays the attack. The paper goes beyond thematic analysis and stresses Coetzee's approach to language. His narrative style, which does not rely on an ornate language, challenges literary aesthetics and the hopes surrounding the abolition of Apartheid.

Coetzee's linguistic choices that are studied in this paper are crafted to report the violent attack on the farm in a detailed and graphic language. The disturbing words of the writer reveal the broader, uncommon societal disorder that has occurred in the Post-Apartheid era. John Maxwell Coetzee's style forces readers to focus on specific overseen facts; it divulges another side from the story of violence in South Africa. This investigation into the stylistic features of racial aggression in *Disgrace* adds to the comprehension of direct and detailed writing as an effective medium to articulate harsh facts. Additionally, this type of writing corresponds with Gilles Deleuze calling for the harnessing of language. Furthermore, studying this novel evinces literature's role as a tape that stores sensitive events without a filter. Burning, rape, torture, and animal murder are to be deciphered.

II. Conceptual review:

1.1 Stylistic analysis:

While thematic analysis probes broader pictures and their messages, stylistic analysis appraises small elements and their effects. Enthusiastic about language's utilization in *Disgrace*, the paper's objectives are achieved via stylistic analysis. This method is described as the investigation of language's intent and impact (Verdonk, 2002). That is to say, it is a systematic exploration of language that positions literature as an outlet for conveying specific messages.

It is a literary interpretation tool that decodes authors' use of language as well as their individual voices and views. Besides, according to the British linguist H. G. Widdowson, prioritizing the study of style, tone, grammar, word choice, diction, repetition, sentence structure, and figurative language establishes the relationship between literature and linguistics (1975); stylistic analysis is a study of linguistic choices.

This method surpasses plot-driven studies. The plot is just a final product of combining different types of words, and stylistic explores the formation and the nature of these expressions. This textual examination promotes close reading, doing an autopsy for the text, and stopping at every word and sentence.

In the context of this paper, stylistic analysis can be used to check how writers stretch language to its limits through their linguistic choices in order to communicate certain ideas.

1.2 Stretching language to its limit:

Stylistic analysis shares the same focus with Gilles Deleuze's realization about the use of language. The French philosopher's works on language and expression lead to the idea of "Stretching language to its limits" (1997).

This realization is underlined in Jean-Jacques Lecercle's work *Deleuze and Language* that marks the constraints of speaking and writing (2002). The French professor of English posits that, according to Deleuze, language's significant problem is its limitations and not exploiting it. However, the solution to this problem is the limitless and the borderless writing, in other words taking language to its extreme.

Deleuze's resolution invites thinkers to break free from the restrictions of language. Pushing language to its limits means liberating thoughts from the ties of traditional linguistic expression and exploring the potentials of writing. It also advocates the development of new ideas through the nakedness of truths (Stevenson, 2009).

The writing approach is explained by the conceptual framework which is stretching language to its limits and demonstrated by stylistic analysis. This framework holds relevance not only for Coetzee's writing but also for other writers. So, this analysis can also be applied to examine instances where writers intentionally avoid specific expressions due to cultural or political or any forms of constraints. This concept can serve as a tool for writers to defend their own linguistic choices when they dare to cross certain boundaries.

This framework serves the facts that words are valued, words are important, words have to be studied, words have to be used, and a text should

be like a big fire that eats words. Language is moldable by writers. Therefore, the study explains J.M. Coetzee's manner of molding the language by addressing his linguistic choices. Coetzee's text, as a fire, did not select while eating words.

III. Stylistic analysis of *Disgrace*:

Reading J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* with its disturbing depiction of racial violence, the knocking down of a man, a session of rape, and the slaughter of a farm's dogs, can be a challenging experience (Cechurová, 2023).

But even with the provocative lexicon, John Maxwell Coetzee's literary oeuvre as a Nobel Prize winner draws from diverse historical underpinnings. His critical writings acknowledge and confront these influences, and bear the imprints of modern masters such as Daniel Defoe (Janari, 2021). Coetzee's distinctive style is often described as a fusion of realism, reminiscent of Defoe, coupled with a continuous exploration of modernist and post-modernist techniques.

According to scholars like Stephen Watson, Coetzee's linguistic choices interrogate oppression and injustice (1996). Through its portrayal of two rape scenes, Coetzee's earlier works and *Disgrace* coordinate with Stephen Watson's perspective that this South African writer discerns history not as a linear progression but as a nonprogressive cycle. The novel, which has similarities to an apocalyptic work, explores the fallout from historical injustices, the quest for atonement, and the difficulties of facing shame both personally and publicly. It asks readers to reflect on the historical legacy.

The narratives appropiate a historical framework where humanity does not flourish from tensions until the elements of the dispute exchange the damage (Mc Dunnah, 2009). Black men transgressing white people in the Post -Apartheid era is an implementation of reality, reciprocity, and nonprogressiveness. Victims and criminal taking turns.

The transgression part starts with the three non-white men's visit to the Lauries in their farm. After entering the house with the unexpected guests, the violent attack commences; they strike David forcefully:

"A blow catches him on the crown of the head. Before his limbs turn to water and he crumples, he has time to think, If I'm still conscious, I'm fine. He is conscious that he is being dragged across the kitchen floor. Then he goes black." (Coetzee, 1999) The phrase "limbs turn to water" functions as imagery for the physical impact of the stroke on the character. The description of the blow as catching him "on the crown of the head" is employed to point at the injury directly. Even the short sentences in the

passage are a linguistic choice to mirror the sudden and the violent nature of the event. The sudden shift to black at the end symbolizes unconsciousness.

The decision to write about aggressive black people becomes more realistic when set next to the larger societal challenges that Coetzee elucidates. The occurrence is similar to real-life stories, such as Brandon Huntley's case. He was accepted as a refugee in Canada in 2009 after being a victim of many violent racial acts. Huntley was stabbed by black people, and unlike black patients, his cures were intentionally delayed in the hospital because he was a white person (Mafukata, 2023).

Driven by racism or revenge, violence perpetrated by black individuals against white ones is an often overlooked dimension of racial conflicts worldwide. The history of slavery and colonization is replicated in a reversed manner. Despite the common association of racial violence with whites, it is essential to acknowledge that black individuals can also engage in racially motivated violence.

This motive becomes apparent when examining the attack in *Disgrace*. Readers may find themselves surprised by this unexpected turn of events, but a brief investigation into real-life occurrences reveals that racial violence is not confined to a unidirectional flow. It manifests as a clash between two races, illustrating that the dynamics of racial violence are more complex than a simple one-sided narrative.

Coetzee pushes the boundaries of language by removing ornamentation to express this realistic side from racial violence. Metaphors and real-world substances are all used in his report as evidenced by the following quote:

“As he lies sprawled he is splashed from head to foot with liquid. His eyes burn, he tries to wipe them. He recognizes the smell: Methylated spirits. Struggling to get up, he is pushed back into the lavatory. The scrape of a match, and at once he is bathed in cool blue flame.” (Coetzee, 1999).

Coetzee's preferred words are precise and evocative. Words like "sprawled", "splashed", "burn" and "scrape" show the visceral and the intense state of David after the stroke and the burn. "Methylated spirits" which is a disinfectant that can be used as a fuel adds a level of harshness and risk to the attack.

Phrases like "head to foot", "cool blue flame" and "pushed back into the lavatory" are imageries to engage the reader's senses. The writer harnesses the language to the point of turning it to sensory images that can be seen and felt. In the same vein, the tone awakens discomfort with words like "struggling" instead of "trying" "eyes burn" instead of "eyes closed". The short instantaneous sentences and the abrupt transitions from one action to another

augment the pace since this part is about an attack. Undoubtedly, David was not the only victim, his daughter Lucy also was tormented:

“His child is in the hands of strangers. In a minute, in an hour, it will be too late; whatever is happening to her will be set in stone, will belong to the past. But now it is not too late. Now he must do something. Though he strains to hear, he can make out no sound from the house. Yet if his child were calling, however mutely, surely he would hear! He batters the door. 'Lucy!' he shouts. 'Lucy! Speak to me!’” (Coetzee, 1999).

Writers can be compared to skilled knitters (Jaafar, 2014) and Coetzee knitted this part with many sharp elements. The choice of words, such as "strangers", "too late", "set in stone" and "belong to the past" heralds a sense of imperativeness, and helplessness. The father's exclamation "Lucy! Speak to me!" intensifies the emotional sorrowful tone.

In this quote, the author exploits language through a combination of carefully chosen words, punctuations, anxious tone, and quick pacing. Despite hardly surviving a stroke and a fire, and while he is locked in the bathroom, David's concern is always his daughter who is in the hands of three men:

“The man gives him a push. He stumbles back, sits down heavily. The man raises the bottle. His face is placid, without trace of anger. It is merely a job he is doing: getting someone to hand over an article. If it entails hitting him with a bottle, he will hit him, hit him as many times as is necessary, if necessary break the bottle too. 'Take them,' he says. 'Take everything. Just leave my daughter.’” (Coetzee, 1999).

"The man gives him a push" is a direct portrayal of aggression, suddenness and ferocity. The man's face being described as "placid without trace of anger" presents an unfeeling demeanor rooted in Apartheid. Coetzee utilizes language to report the state of both the victims and the attackers for readers to live the events.

"It's just a job he's doing" adds another degree of complication to the violence. This utilitarian approach to cruelty undermines traditional expectations by portraying this racial violence as a normal, deliberate work.

This disturbing idea of normalizing violence does not come from the writer's imagination. Data indicates a significant rise in crime rates from 1990 to 1994. During this period, various criminal activities surged such as assault, rape, robbery, vehicle theft, and burglary (Shaw, 1997). All these crimes were reservoirs of words for writers to expand their linguistic expression. Ergo, Coetzee provides a sharp prose and a utilitarian approach. The historical evidence aligns with the narrative's exploration of aggression.

While Shaw's study focuses on various crimes against humans, Coetzee's expanded language encompasses not only crimes against humans but also includes excerpts of animal torture, as illustrated below:

“The tall man with the weapon now appears from around the front. He slides a cartridge into the breech and thrusts the muzzle into the dogs' cage with practiced ease. The biggest of the German Shepherds rips at it, slaving with wrath. A heavy report is heard, and blood and brains splatter the cage. For a little moment, the barking stops. The man shoots two more shots. One dog dies instantly after being shot through the chest; another, with a gaping throat wound, sits down heavily, flattens its ears, and follows the movements of this being who does not even try to give a coup de grace.” (Coetzee, 1999).

Coetzee uses the word "with practiced ease" to describe the man's precise brutal deed. This statement strains language to express coldness and regularity in violence. "Blood and brains splattering the cage" is a visual graphic linguistic choice that elicits intense cruelty and the frightening image of the dogs' murder.

The use of the phrase "The man fires twice more" instead of writing “the man fires” heightens the savagery of the attack on the farm. This repetition pushes the phrase even further in depicting the tall man's vicious intent.

Coetzee describes the dogs' various fates, including one who "dies at once" and another with a "gaping throat-wound" who "sits down heavily" This individualized attention to each dog's gory fate amplifies the impact of the event, and forces language to communicate the details of this violent act.

With the phrase "this being who does not even bother to administer a coup de grace." Coetzee pushes language to its utmost. Being unbothered by the slaughter of the farm's dogs serves savagery, callousness, and emotional withdrawal.

Coetzee's narrative, even in the aftermath of the aggressive incident, is succinct and forthright. Following the infliction of harm upon David and Lucy, and the brutal shooting of their dogs, the subsequent stage of the attacking part is dedicated to the consequences:

“Everything is tender, everything is burned. Burned, burnt. 'Lucy!' he shouts. 'Are you here?' A vision comes to him of Lucy struggling with the two in the blue overalls, struggling against them. He writhes, trying to blank it out. He hears his car start, and the crunch of tyres on gravel. Is it over? Are they, unbelievably, going? 'Lucy!' he shouts, over and over, till he can hear an edge of craziness in his voice.” (Coetzee, 1999).

To create a striking dichotomy, Coetzee uses the words "Everything is tender, everything is burned". This linguistic choice expresses not only

physical but also emotional and psychological catastrophe. As if what was solid like David's body or the furniture became tender by the heat of the fire; everything is affected.

The recurrence of the plea "'Lucy!' he shouts" underlines the father's anguish and urgency in searching for his daughter. The visceral visual of "a vision comes to him of Lucy struggling with the two in the blue overalls, struggling against them" lends a chilling element. When he was locked in the bathroom distressed because of the stroke and the burning, his daughter was alone with a group of men.

Coetzee includes aural sensations with "he hears his car starts, and the crunch of tyres on gravel". This lexical preference makes readers hear what characters are hearing in the aftermath of the tragic attack with the assailants stealing David's car. Yet, within all the mess, David's focus is his daughter: "She is wearing a bathrobe, her feet are bare, her hair wet. He trails after her through the kitchen, where the refrigerator stands open and food lies scattered all over the floor. She stands at the back door taking in the carnage of the dog-pens. 'My darlings, my darlings!' he hears her murmur. She opens the first cage and enters. The dog with the throat-wound is somehow still breathing. She bends over it, speaks to it. Faintly it wags its tail." (Coetzee, 1999).

The ensuing chaos is portrayed with a direct language that points at the surrounding of characters "where the refrigerator stands open and food lies scattered all over the floor". Coetzee pushes the language to depict a sense of disorder that matches the characters' mental turmoil following the event.

The line "she stands at the back door taking in the carnage of the dog-pens" describes the attack's aftermath. Coetzee is honest by naming shooting dogs multiple times as carnage, and by the view of the chaos and the carnage, Lucy and David are aching as further demonstrated in the following quote:

"The living room is a shambles, as is his own room. Things have been taken from him, including his jacket and decent shoes, and this is just the beginning. He examines himself in the mirror. Brown ash, the last of his hair, coating his skull and brow. The scalp is an angry pink beneath it. He touches his skin, which is uncomfortable and starting to ooze. One of his eyelids has swollen shut; his brows and eyelashes have vanished. He heads to the restroom, but the door is shut. 'Don't come in,' Lucy's voice says. 'How are you doing? 'Are you okay?' She does not respond to stupid queries." (Coetzee, 1999).

Coetzee's choice of language provides visual chaos with "The living-room is a mess" This powerful description presses the language to describe

the physical turmoil without a filter. The missing possessions such as the jacket and decent shoes, symbolize the loss of stability and security.

The phrase "That is only the beginning of it" expresses a sense of loss and sorrow that is not going to end by the attack; it is Post- Apartheid era and violence pervades. The line "Brown ash, all that's left of his hair, coats his scalp and forehead" is an immersive description of the remnants of a fire, and the residues of pain. The selection of terms, such as "angry pink" and "ooze" pushes the vocabulary to depict the rawness and the severity of the physical decline.

Coetzee's use of vocabulary such as "one eyelid is swelling shut; his brows are gone, and so are his eyelashes" drives the narrative to convey a drastic physical pain and a clinical emergency. Swollen David and raped Lucy, these are the main aftermath of the attack. Lucy's isolation with the three men is a session of rape, thus while David's physical injuries are curable, Lucy's state is different:

"He brings up the subject of the rape once more. 'Lucy claims she saw her doctor last night.' 'Yes.' 'There's the danger of pregnancy,' he continues. 'There is the possibility of venereal infection. There is the possibility of contracting HIV. Shouldn't she also see a gynaecologist?'" (Coetzee, 1999).

The passage reflects Coetzee's delicacy in broaching the unpleasant subject. This choice of language forces the story to show the apprehension and sensitivity of the conversation, due to the emotional weight of the subject.

Coetzee employs reported speech to depict Lucy's encounter with her general practitioner. The detached reporting technique encourages the vocabulary to reflect the emotional distance in recounting the rape. Moreover, the enumerative repetition "There's a risk of pregnancy." then "There's a risk of venereal infection." There is an HIV risk." has a cumulative effect. Coetzee's linguistic choice magnifies the severity of the potential consequences. Language is stretched as Gilles Deleuze recommends portraying the anxiety and the concerns that surround the assault. Coetzee goes forward in stretching the language by employing more details: "I will pronounce the word we have avoided until now," the father declares. You'd been raped. Multiply. " (Coetzee, 1999).

The use of direct speech, "I will pronounce the word we have avoided until now" creates a moment of revelation. The declarative structure contributes to a sense of authority and determination on the part of the father. The subsequent sentence "You'd been raped. Multiply" is short, shocking, and impactful to show the harsh reality.

The tone is serious, direct, somber, and confrontational. The choice of language and the declaration by the father contribute to a mood of intensity. Surely, the passage allows readers to witness the confrontation between the father and his daughter, who was raped by three men in one session.

Coetzee's novel proves to be a challenging read, characterized by its grim and harsh subject matter. Embellishments and forceful writing would detract the stark reality portrayed in that controversial situation. The straightforwardness of the prose, devoid of unnecessary complexity and expressions, strengthens the gravity and seriousness of the novel's theme and disturbing effect.

The novel prompts readers to contemplate the profound implications of rape: What motivates the perpetrator to inflict harm on the victim? How does the victim respond to such brutality? Is there a pursuit of justice or a choice to remain silent? Can the victims recuperate from the traumatic experience, and how does this violent act alter their life? (McDonald, 2009). Furthermore, it proves that South African society is bruised, as the non white South African journalist and political analyst Eusebius McKaiser wrote in an article that was published in Rhodes university website. He argues that like any humans black people can act racist too; anti black racism exists alongside with anti white racism (2012 Archives - Blacks Can Be Racist They Are Simply Human).

It is crucial to note that the novel extends beyond a one-sided exploration of aggression against the whites. Early in the book, David commits a reprehensible act against a black girl, foreshadowing the later assault on his daughter Lucy by three black men. Coetzee's manipulation and deconstruction of language permeate this controversial narrative, revealing that racial violence is a reciprocal phenomenon rather than unidirectional.

To produce a literary work that assembles these pictures in one frame, John Maxwell Coetzee delivers a 'writable' text (Brown, 2023). In this context, the goal is to transform any reader from a mere consumer into an active receiver who thinks, and questions. Avoiding long sentences and indirect, advanced words puts readers in a direct contact with characters, notably, any kind of reader who can understand Basic English. The text is writable due to its simplicity and application of exact language.

Writers of this kind of texts dig into the language, and use its words without bothering to look at soft or likeable synonyms. By stretching the language and not coloring it, a text as mentioned earlier becomes a fire that eats words and not a vehicle that looks for other safe pathways.

IV. Conclusion:

In conclusion, JM Coetzee explores the theme of racial violence in Post-Apartheid South Africa through his novel *Disgrace*. The part where black characters aggress against white individuals is distinctive, disconcerting, and noteworthy.

Coetzee's choice of a straightforward and unembellished language, as examined in this paper, serves as an evidence of the effectiveness of pushing language to its limits. This linguistic approach evinces that Coetzee is able to sidestep the problem of language. The use of words such as "scalp" "red" "carnage" "vanish" "brains splatter" "messy" "three men" and "HIV" serves as a trigger warning about the abolition of Apartheid.

This paper, through stylistic analysis, demonstrates the efficacy of heightened, simple, exact, and direct language when addressing complex issues like racial violence. It urges readers to explore history and to see that in many cases, today's victim might become tomorrow's perpetrator. The nonlinear, reciprocal relationship calls for further studies to reexamine *Disgrace* and violence in general. Additionally, it can be said that writing about harsh realities requires linguistic courage, as certain constraints imposed by society restrict writers from fully exploiting language. Pushing language to its boundaries is the excuse and the solution to write unadornedly.

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