

Resisting The New Social Order In The Narratives Of J M Coetzee And Zoe Wicomb

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ABSTRACT

In the context of postcolonial discourse, the concepts of “cosmopolitanism” and “hybridization” are of paramount importance because citizens of postcolonial countries are involved in an intercultural dialogue. However, despite the zeal and motivation by the postcolonial subject to be involved in cross-cultural interaction, those concerned are most often than not, confronted with difficulties getting used to, and understanding another person’s culture as well as tolerating the other. Using the postcolonial theory, the aim of this article is to discuss *Disgrace*, *Youth*, *David’s Story* and *Playing in the Light* to explain the various factors that slightly or totally hindered the protagonists in the novels under study from building a favourable cosmopolitan dialogue. In a nutshell, this article focuses on the view that social barrier such as resisting the new social order is the impediment of cosmopolitanism.

Keywords: *Postcolonial discourse; cosmopolitanism; hybridization; cosmopolitan dialogue; postcolonial theory; cross-cultural interaction.*

Resisting the new social order and Vestiges of Xenophobia constitute enormous threats to dialogue and reconciliation in post-Apartheid South Africa as reflected in *Disgrace*, *Youth*, *David’s Story* and *Playing in the Light*. Despite the collapse of Apartheid and the measures taken by the successive regimes to reconcile the various races, the post-Apartheid citizen, especially those of the black race, still harbours memories of injustice and torture meted on him by his/her white counterpart. These reminiscences of injustice, humiliation and torture have pushed him/her to have an acrimonious disposition against South Africans of the white race.

One of the ways in which characters resist the politics of reconciliation, as seen in J.M Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, is by resisting the new social order. This can be seen in the character trait of David Lurie. In a conversation between him and one of the members handling his harassment case, he tells him that:

[...] we went through the repentance business yesterday. I told you what I thought. I appeared before an officially instituted tribunal, before a branch of law. Before that secular tribunal. I pleaded guilty, a secular plea. That plea should suffice. Repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse. (151-152)

From the above quotation, David appears before an officially instituted tribunal, pleads guilty and claims that repentance is neither here nor there because he does not want to acknowledge the fact that things have changed and folks like him can be tried and prosecuted. One of the committee members reminds David that: “You are confusing issues, David. You are not being instructed to repent. What goes on in your soul is dark to us, as

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members of what you call secular tribunal if not as fellow human beings. You are being asked to issue a statement” (58). It should be noted that he does not apologize because it is hard for him to come to terms with the fact that it is no longer business as usual. He is adamant simply because the committee is a secular one meaning that it is made up of blacks and whites and that is why he comments that: “I am being asked to issue an apology about which I may not be sincere” (58).

However, commenting about the issue, one of the committee members reminds him that: “The criterion is not whether you are sincere. That is a matter as I say for your conscience. The criterion is whether you are prepared to acknowledge your fault in public manner and take steps to remedy it” (58). Again, just like in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, David must acknowledge his fault publicly and apologize but he is still living in past and therefore, he finds it very difficult to realise that things have changed. Here, we realise that David is adamant and not ready to change as he tells one of the committee members that he: “can’t” (58). David is not ready to abide according to the dictates of the committee in charge of his case. When he says he cannot acknowledge his fault publicly, a committee member informs him that: “[...] I can’t go on protecting you from yourself. I am tired of it, and so is the rest of the committee” (58). With the concern he has for David, he asks him the following question: “Do you want time to rethink?” (58). The above question is rhetorical because David has already made up his mind to shun the public apology as stipulated by the committee in charge of his case. The reason for this behaviour is because he is resisting the new social order. To prove that he has made up his mind and there is no going back, the narrator states that: “ONCE HE HAS made up his mind to leave, there is little to hold him back. He clears out the refrigerator, locks up the house, and at noon is on the freeway” (69). He emphasizes that David has decided to leave his job simply because he finds it very difficult to stand in front of a multiracial committee and apologize for his misdeeds.

In a discussion with Lucy, David informs her that he was offered a compromise which he “[...] couldn’t accept” (69). When Lucy seeks to know the type of compromise he was given, he tells her that it had to do with “Re-education, reformation of the character. The code word was counseling” (69). Responding to him, Lucy asks him the following question “[...] are you so perfect that you can’t do with a little counseling?” Responding to his daughter, he tells her that the process by the committee reminds him of “[...] Mao’s China. Recantation, self-criticism, public apology. I’m old fashioned, I would prefer simply to be put against a wall and shot” (66). After listening to her father carefully, Lucy wonders aloud and asks her father the following questions: “Shot? For having an affair with a student? A bit extreme, Don’t you think, David? I must go on all the time. It certainly went on when I was a student. If they prosecuted every case the profession will be decimated” (66). These rhetorical questions show that she is surprised that her father is being severely dealt with for having an affair with a student. According to her, it is “a bit extreme,” She does not only feel that it is extreme but she also opines that this crime “must go on all the time” even when she was a student. The crime went on when Lucy was a student unnoticed because discrimination was still the order of the day. David must be prosecuted because in the New South Africa things are no longer the way they used to be.

David does not want to go through this prosecution because he is aware of the fact that the white man is no longer in charge. David confirms the fact that things have changed in the following words: “[...] These are puritanical times. Private life is public business. Prurience is respectable, prurience a flood of and sentiment. They wanted a spectacle. Breast-beating, remorse, tears, if possible. ATV Show, in fact. I wouldn’t oblige” (66). David wouldn’t oblige, as seen in the above quotation, because he still feels superior and does not want to confess his sins publicly and be forgiven. Since he does not want to confess, Lucy asks him the following question: “so you stood your ground and they stood theirs, that is how it was” (66). “more or less” (66). He answered his daughter. Responding to him, his daughter accuses him thus: “You shouldn’t be so unbending David. Is there still time to reconsider?” (66). There is time to reconsider but from all indications, David has decided to leave his job he is unbending. When Lucy seeks to know from David whether the sentence about the case is final, and whether there is room for an appeal, he addresses Lucy thus: “No appeal, I am not complaining. One can’t plead guilty to charges of turpitude and expect a flood of sympathy in return. Not after a certain age.” (67). The issue here is not whether there is appeal to the case or not but rather David is resisting the new social order which is no longer in his favour.

While in Lucy’s house, we are made to understand that David’s mind “[...] has become a refuge of old thoughts, idle, indignant, with nowhere else to go. He ought to chase them out, sweep the premises clean. But does not care to do so, or does not care enough” (67). It should be noted that David Lurie is a lecturer and a

well-respected individual in the society, however, because he has refused to accept that things are no longer the way they used to be, he finds himself doing things he is not supposed to do in his daughter's house namely, sweeping the premises of his daughter. Also, while with his daughter, Lurie feels that Lucy ought to be doing something better with her life other than keeping animals and about this, Lucy informs him that: "You think I ought to involve myself in more important things?... You think because I am your daughter, I ought to be doing something better with my life?" (74). It is obvious that David in this case is not interested in seeing his daughter follow him to the city but the fact is that he wants her to follow him to the city or better still leave South Africa for good because the new dispensation does not favour his likes.

Again, one can say that David is not only in favour of the fact that Lucy should leave South Africa it should also be noted he does not like Lucy's friends. Lucy tells him that: "[...] you do not approve of my friends like Bev and Bill Shaw because they are not going to lead me to a higher life?" (74). David rejects this accusation however; Lucy reminds him thus:

But it is true. They are not going to lead me to a higher life, and the reason is, there is no higher life. Which we share with animals. That's the example that people like Bev Shaw try to set. That's the example I try to follow. To share some of our human privilege with the beasts. I don't want to come back to another existence as a dog or a pig and have to live as dogs or pigs live under us. (74)

From the above quotation, it is apt to say that Lucy has accepted the change and is ready to live a simple life and also embrace all and sundry around her. The above passage is somewhat allegory because the images of dog and pig used in the above quotation explains the fact that Lucy is struggling to leave the past behind her and she is equally struggling to be good to all and sundry around her despite all odds. The higher life as seen in the above quotation explains the fact that David is superior and is struggling very hard to make sure that his daughter is equally superior.

Again, the idea of resisting the new social order can be seen in the text when Lucy asks David to help Bev and not expect any pay. Responding to her, he tells Lucy that: "I'm dubious, Lucy. It sounds like community service. It sounds like someone trying to make reparation for past misdeeds" (77). From this citation, it is obvious that David is aware of the atrocities that were committed against the blacks in South Africa. In this case David is resisting the new social order because unlike before there is equal opportunity for all in the new dispensation. David confirms this when he finally accepts to help Bev Shaw in the following words: "All right, I'll do it. But only as long as I don't have to become a better person. I am not prepared to be reformed. I want to go on being myself. I'll do it on that basis. His hand still rests on her foot. Now he grips her ankle light. Understood?" (77). David does not want to be a better person and is not prepared to be reformed because he is resisting the new social order in South Africa that does no longer favour whites. The rhetorical question at the end of the quotation exemplifies the fact that Lucy does not understand why her father is adamant as far as change, is concerned. When Lucy becomes aware that her father is not ready to change she asks him the following question: "So you are determined to go on being bad. Mad, bad, and dangerous to know. I promise, no one will ask you to change" (77). The adjectives used by Lucy to describe her father in the above lines goes a long way to justify the fact that David is not ready to change.

Furthermore, David confirms that he is not ready to change in the following words: "Between Lucy and myself? Nothing I hope. Nothing that can't be fixed. The problem is with the people she lives among. When I am added in, we become too many. Too many in too small space. Like spiders in a battle" (209). In the above quotation, David insinuates that he hopes he can settle issues with his daughter but the problem is the people she mixes with. However, this is not true because it is not with whom Lucy stays that is influencing her behaviour; it is obvious that Lucy is not like her father who has refused to change and live in harmony and peace with everybody around. To confirm this, David states that: "I suggest it is too late for me. I'm just an old lag serving out my sentence" (216). The above lines show that David accepts the fact that he is living in the past and somewhat licking his wounds.

In J.M Coetzee's *Youth*, there are also instances in which characters are resisting the new social order as they do not seem to understand that things are no longer the way they used to be. In the text, while in England, John goes for a job interview and "the first thing the interviewer wants to know is whether he has left South

Africa for good (44). “He has, he replies” (44). When he asked him why he has left South Africa for good, he replies that: “Because the country is heading for revolution” (44). When the interviewer asked him when the revolution is going to take place, he says “[...] Five years, that is what everyone has said since Sharpeville. Sharpeville signaled the beginning of the end for the White regime, the *increasingly* desperate white regime” (44). From this quotation, it is clear that John, who is a white, has decided to leave South Africa because he is not ready for dialogue and reconciliation hence resisting the new social order. He is scared of the revolution because he feels that he is not ready to work with blacks who are now in charge in South Africa.

The omniscient narrator justifies the fact that John is eager to leave South Africa in the following words: “He has escaped South Africa. Everything is going well, he has attained his first goal, he ought to be happy. As the weeks pass, he finds himself more and more miserable” (46). One can say here that he left South Africa because he does not want to suffer in the new dispensation however, while in England, he is more and more miserable. This is ironic because one expects him to have a better life in England but on the contrary, he is not happy. The omniscient narrator supports the above idea in the following words:

What then is he doing in England? Was it a huge mistake to have come here? Is it too late to move? Would Paris, city of artists, be more congenial, if somehow he could master French. And what of Stockholm? Spiritually he would feel at home in Stockholm, he suspects. But what about Swedish? And what would he do for a living?” (50)

The rhetorical questions in the above citation are a clear indication that leaving South Africa for England was a huge mistake. He is thinking of going to other countries other than going back to South Africa where he would be comfortable is because he wants to run away from South Africa where he belongs at all cost since he believes that he may not be treated well in the new South Africa.

Furthermore, while in England, John receives a lot of letters from his mother. The omniscient narrator states that:

EACH WEEK A letter arrives from his mother, a pale blue aerogramme addressed in neat block capitals. It is with exasperation that he receives these evidences of her unchanging love for him. Will his mother understand that when he departed Cape Town he cut all bounds with the past? How can he make her accept the process of turning himself into a different person that began when he was fifteen will be carried through remorselessly until all memory of the family and the country he left behind is extinguished? When will she see that he has grown? So far away from her that he might as well be a stranger?” (98)

The first phrase in the above quotation is written in uppercase to emphasise the unconditional love that John’s mother has for her son. Again, it is unfortunate and ironical that John’s mother is comfortable in South Africa but her son has left the country for good and is not ready to come even though he does not find things easy where he is. The numerous letters she writes to her son as seen in the above quotation justifies the fact that she loves him so much. Her mother understands that he hates South Africa so much and that is why in her letters to him, she does not mention anything about South African affairs because “[...] he has made it plain that he is not interested” (98). He is not interested in South African affairs because he is resisting the new social order and that is why the omniscient narrator states that: “South Africa is like an albatross around his neck. He wants to remove it, he does not care how, so that he can begin to breathe” (101). The simile used explains the fact that John is frustrated with life in South Africa such that he feels it is a burden on him that should be taken off. Again, the fact that everything about South Africa should be taken off him is hyperbolic and explains how disappointed and frustrated John is. He is running away from “[...] atrophy of the moral life. From shame” (216). He is running away from South Africa due to shame and that is why “[...] He could run away from Cape Town, for instance, and never come back. But is that what he wants to do? Surely not, not yet” (114). Life is not easy in England but he does not want to go back to South Africa because he is ashamed. He is ashamed because he does not want to cooperate with blacks who are now at the helm of affairs.

Again, commenting on the attitude of John towards South Africa, the omniscient narrator states that: “South Africa is a wound within him. How much longer before the wound stops bleeding? How much longer will he have to grit his teeth and endure before he is able to say, ‘Once upon a time I used to live in South Africa

but now I live in England?” (115). In the above citation, hyperbole is used by the narrator to emphasize John’s hatred for South Africa. Again, the two rhetorical questions in the above quotation explains the fact that John has made up his mind to leave his country for good simply because he is somewhat resisting the new social order and that is why the omniscient narrator stresses that: “[...] he has quit South Africa, is resolved to put South Africa behind him forever” (115).

In a chat between Theodora and John, the latter asks John the following question: “[...]” how long do you plan to stay here? (124). “Here” according to Theodora is England so responding to Theodora, John states that: “I have left South Africa” (124). Theodora further asks John whether he left South Africa because “things are pretty bad there” (124). He responds in the affirmative and Theodora further asks John whether things are pretty bad in South African “even for whites?” (124). John wonders aloud in the following rhetorical questions: “How does one respond to a question like that? If you don’t want to perish shame? If you escape the cataclysm to come?” (124). It is obvious that John has decided to leave South Africa because he does not want to die of shame and that is why the omniscient narrator states that: “Having shaken the dust of the ugly new South Africa his feet, is the yearning for the South Africa of the old days, when Eden was still possible?” (137). In the above quotation, personification is used to portray the fact that John is afraid to stay in the new South Africa because it does not favour folks like him. Biblical Allusion is also used to compare olden days in South Africa with Eden. It should be noted that the Garden of Eden is a place where Adam and Eve had everything given to them by God to enjoy until they ate the forbidden fruit. In the new dispensation in South Africa, everything is no longer at the beck and call of whites and that is why John is longing for the olden days when life was favourable to them.

Resisting the new social order is equally expressed in Wicomb’s *David’s Son*. In the text, there are traces of characters that resist the new social order. In others words, there are characters who are still living in the past and are not ready to change, given that they still feel they are superior to others. We are made to understand that David’s father is happy with him because he is part and parcel of the liberation movement that is aimed at liberating the less privileged, especially the blacks. The omniscient narrator states that: “[...] it was then on his return from God knows where that he confessed to working for the Movement. But the father would not listen to that rubbish, would not be replaced by new loyalties” (21). Although “The Movement” is aimed at liberating the less privileged, David’s father would not key into this idea by and consider it rubbish because he doesn’t want to be loyal to those in the new dispensation.

Commenting about David whom the father feels has gone against his wish, he tells his son that:

It’s people like you who give Coloured’s a bad name. What do you think I worked so hard for, getting us out of the gutter, wiping out all Griqua non-sense, just so a windbreak like you can tumble the family right back into the morass? No one could have set you a better example, a life of decency and sacrifice so you could have an education. And what are you throwing it away – politics. Going against the law, getting up to all sorts of terrible things [...] (21)

The simile in the above quotation is used to portray the disappointment of David’s father because David is not at his beck and call. The rhetorical question also suggests that David has chosen to go against his father’s wish. Out of frustration David’s father tells his son that he has thrown away all he has been taught and has decided to associate himself “[...] with people who are not his kind” (22). With this, David’s father insinuates that David’s education is somewhat useless because although he is educated he still associates with people who are not his kind. This suggests that David’s father is resisting the new social order that encourages dialogue, reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. He compares David to his uncle’s children using the following words:

Your Uncle Hennie, whose children never went to college, now sits through sunny afternoons in an arm chair with his grandchildren all playing around him. Oh yes, those motor mechanics and factory workers have time for their fathers; they’re not too busy with politics, they don’t lecture old people in keeping their independence, on their privacy in their lives, no, they’ve opened their doors to their fathers while I have to make excuses for you, about what a busy and important person you are when you’re wandering about God knows where, disappearing like a vagrant, a drunk. (22)

It is possible that Uncle Hennie's children do not see things the way David does because they are not educated. David who is educated, does not want to live in the past and that is why he does not see differences as an opportunity for separation and unnecessary disagreement but rather sees it as an opportunity for cultural coexistence and his father who is still living in the past feels that his education is useless. Again, simile is used in the above quotation when David's father compares David to a drunk because he feels that it is crazy for David to associate with people "who are not his kind" Still commenting about David's behaviour, his father insinuates that:

I hang head in shame when Hannie says, David, this education brings nothing, just loneliness and godlessness, What can I say? Must I just shut my ears and my eyes for the disgrace? ... you can stand on your bloody head but I will look after myself till my dying day. You look after your Communists Kaffirs. (22)

Firstly, the two rhetorical questions continue to express the frustration of David's father who is not happy with his son's decision. According to him, the decision of David to associate with Kaffirs (blacks) has brought him shame and disgrace. Again, it is interesting to note that the word "Kaffir" is used only once in the story but David's father uses it several times in the text because of the hatred he has for blacks. To show that he is disappointed in David, each time he mentions anything about the movement, he addresses him in the following words: "Bladdy Communist speeches, is that all you can manage? So you admit you still go around with these kinds of people. I don't know why I can allow you to my house. Just shows that I have more decency under my fingernail than you will ever have" (22-23). He feels that it is not wise to allow David in his house because he has decided to stick to what he thinks is the right thing to do. Again, it is ironic for David's father to say that he has allowed David to stay in his house because he is decent. This is ironic because he claims to be decent but he does not encourage his son to associate with blacks.

In a conversation between Mr. Dirkse and David, the latter insinuates that he should not place all his hope and trust in blacks because according to him, "[...] It's no good just working and working yourself into a ball of barbed wire – for what, for the Kaffirs kick you in the ass when got no more use for you?" (169-170). Just like David's father, Mr. Dirkse does not also like blacks because he calls them Kaffirs, He does not like them because according to him, they will use David and dump him when they no longer need him which is not true at all.

In *Playing in the Light*, there are some instances wherein the idea of resisting the new social order is portrayed. Put differently, there are instances in which some folks find it difficult to cohabit with others given the fact that in the post-Apartheid context, things are no longer the way they used to be. For example, Marion informs her father about a Black who is reliable and qualified to work in their garden, but her father replies Marion in the following words: "No he says, These Kaffirs in New South Africa kill you just like that, just for the fun of it" (14). From the above quotation, one can say that the black (Plaatjie) is a reliable person but to Marion's father, he is a "kaffir" of the New South Africa and a killer. Here, we can deduce that Marion's father is resisting the idea of living in harmony and peace with others irrespective of their cultural affiliation or race. The omniscient narrator confirms that folks like Marion are finding it difficult to live in peace in the New South Africa in the following words:

For what can she do, in the face of all this greed and violence, these senseless killings, the anarchy into which the country is slipping?... This country is going to the dogs, he says, wringing his hands. To think how hard we fought, took up arms for a decent life, for a country of which we can be proud... (152)

After listening to her father quietly, Marion stares at him in amazement and asks him the following question: "But Papa, she says, you've never supported the liberation movement" (152). Marion is surprised to hear her father talk this way because he did not care about the liberation movement that liberated the Africans from the hands of Whites during racial segregation in South Africa.

Furthermore, though John did not take part in the Liberation Movement, he is still concerned about the fact that the country is in disarray. The omniscient narrator states that:

It pains him, he says, to see how things are going to pot, to think of the good old days now all in heap collapsed, but in his confused politics he has also somehow collaged the rehabilitation image of Nelson Mandela into the past. Also a gentleman, he says, how it must pain that poor man, seeing the country to the dogs. (15)

Mr John as seen in the above quotation is thinking of the good old days and the good intentions of Nelson Mandela. He confesses that he will feel very bad wherever he is because the country is going “to the dogs.” because in the New South Africa, there is unnecessary hatred for foreigners by South Africans. In fact, in a conversation between Boetie and Brenda about the New South Africa the latter laments that: “So this is what democracy has brought us, hey, he sighs. Just chaos and violence, that’s what we can thank the new government for. In this country, you will get killed for twenty rands in your pocket” (36). The new government has not been able to consolidate the freedom and cultural coexistence in South Africa and that is why there is unnecessary hatred, disunity and violence in the country.

In summary, the rupture in the moral psyche of most South Africans, as illustrated in *Disgrace, Youth, David’s Story and Playing in the Light*, is a cause for concern in the post-Apartheid South African state. In order for nation-building and national reconciliation to be effective, it is absolutely incumbent on the ruling elite of the post-Apartheid state to fight against these ills as already explained. This entails introducing policies and laws to guide the moral lives and perception of the South African people.

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