Extended Essay – Category 1 – Sample 1

Title page

Title: “The search for identity in South African post-apartheid literature”
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Abstract:

This essay shows how South-Africa has dealt with its search for identity after apartheid, by exploring two literary works: Disgrace by J.M. Coetzee and The Quiet Violence of Dreams by K. Sello Duiker. This investigation was undertaken by examining these primary sources carefully, looking at various aspects of ‘identity’, such as sexuality, violence and race. Through the use of characterization, the authors of these works have comment on the importance of these aspects in establishing new identities in a new South Africa. After reading the works carefully and consulting several secondary texts, I have concluded that the challenges for post-apartheid South Africa relate to reconciliation and forgiveness.
Introduction

In Cape Town, Tsepho, a young black male is struggling with his mental health, sexuality and identity. When he is hospitalized at the Valkenberg mental facility, he is forced to face himself and begins a journey which brings him through insanity and male prostitution in search of an identity in the ‘new’ South Africa. In the same city, David Lurie, a white ageing academic, is facing an inquiry into his sexual relationship with a student. When Lurie leaves his job he escapes to his daughter’s smallholding in the countryside and here he is forced to come to terms with his new role in post-apartheid South Africa.

After 1994 and the fall of apartheid, South Africa was thrown into an identity crisis, as the separate and clearly defined identities of the apartheid era collapsed. There was euphoria because of the “materialization of the so-called multiracial 'rainbow nation’” (Ibinga 1) which celebrated South Africa’s multicultural society. However this ‘new’ South Africa faced enormous challenges socially, as the legacy of apartheid still weighed on the national conscience. Every segment of the population faced a redefinition of their identity in ‘new’ South Africa, and this search for identity is reflected in the contemporary literature. J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace and K. Sello Duiker’s The Quiet Violence of Dreams are two acclaimed post-apartheid works, which offer two different perspectives on South African society. The protagonists are of different race and generation and deal with the new challenge after apartheid is radically different ways.

Identity according to apartheid

Under apartheid, identity was fixed, labelled and institutionalised. The regime was based on the idea of separate development, hence the word apartheid(1), which in practice meant that the population was divided into four racial categories which determined one’s status and chances in life. The Population Registration Act of 1950 defined racial identity with these words:

"A White person is one who is in appearance obviously white – and not generally accepted as Coloured – or who is generally accepted as White – and is not obviously Non-White, provided that a person shall not be classified as a White person if one of his natural parents has been classified as a Coloured person or a Bantu..."

"A Bantu is a person who is, or is generally accepted as, a member of any aboriginal race or tribe of Africa..."”A Coloured is a person who is not a White person or a Bantu…” (2)

Identity in apartheid South Africa was not an individual issue, identity was publicly defined and influenced by other people’s perception and expectations of one’s race and lifestyle. “Whites were moulded by the political experiences of inclusion, and blacks were branded by exclusion as well as by their respective cultural affinities.” (MacDonald 4) A political system like apartheid, which structured most aspects of its citizens’ lives left a lasting legacy. This legacy is the foundation of contemporary South African literature.
Redefining identity and its forms of expression

In the two works sexuality plays a major role in defining identity. For the protagonist in The Quiet Violence of Dreams, Tsepho, his search for an identity as a young black male leads him to explore his sexual identity as a homosexual. This is not culturally accepted in the black community: “When I see black men in the street I’m overcome by how much pressure our culture exerts on us. A few times in town I have spotted men that I recognised from Biloxi (3). But in the humdrum of daily life they walk like rigid macho men….I’m always struck by how angry they seem to feel about liking men.” (Duiker 331) The homosexual black male suppresses his sexuality in order to fit into a desired cultural community, a way of choosing a ‘safe’ identity. However, Tsepho chooses to discard this cultural identity, and differentiates himself from the stereotypical image of the young black male: “I’m doing this for myself, because I want to. Perhaps this is the last rite of passage for me: liberating my body. No one should tell me what I can and can’t do with it, when it is I who face loneliness, despair, confusion.” (Duiker 334) A young homosexual fighting to accept himself is not unique to South Africa and for Tsepho homosexuality is but one aspect of what he is. In Coetzee’s Disgrace, sexuality plays a crucial role in defining the characters. Homosexuality, or even asexuality, is exemplified by the narrator David Lurie’s daughter Lucy who lives alone in a smallholding in the Eastern Cape:

“[Lucy] now in her middle twenties, she had begun to separate. The dogs, the gardening, the astrology books, the asexual clothes: in each he recognizes a statement of independence, considered, purposeful. The turn away from men too. Making her own life. Coming out of his shadow. Good! He approves!” (Coetzee 89)

Like Tsepho, Lucy has chosen to differentiate herself from her parents’ generation, which means the apartheid role of the privileged ‘white’. She “moved in as a member of a commune, a tribe of young people who peddled leather goods and sun baked pottery”(Coetzee 60) living far from the luxurious fenced neighbourhoods in the white part of Cape Town. She is trying to establish her own identity in the ‘new’ South Africa, independent of that of her parents and their generation, by living radically different from them and having different beliefs. Ostensibly, her father approves of her sexuality and her fight to create her own identity, and Lucy is not subjected to the disapproval faced by Tsepho. This might be rooted in the fact that the white’s have had the ‘superior’ role in the society and a certain ‘license’ to experiment. Yet, Lurie approves of her homosexuality because he regards lesbianism more as asexuality than sexuality. He himself is someone who is very much attached to being a heterosexual man and a womanizer, and therefore it is easier for him to deal with his daughter as an asexual creature, as it distinguishes her from other women. This order of things is brutally disturbed when Lucy and Lurie are assaulted by three black men in their house and Lucy is gang raped and later falls pregnant. The notion of gender is also important, Lucy is a woman who is living by herself on a farm, which is radical in South Africa, as apartheid fostered suspicion and fright between people and races, let alone the high crime rates and therefore it seems dangerous, that a young woman is living on her own so unprotected.
In 

In Disgrace sexuality is not only defining for homosexuals, Lurie has also previously defined his own identity based on his sexual identity.

“If he looked at a woman in a certain way, with a certain intent, she would return his look, he could rely on that. That was how he lived; for years, for decades, that was the backbone of his life. Then one day it all ended. His powers fled. Glances that would once have responded to his slid over, past, through him. Overnight he became a ghost.” (Coetzee 7)

His aging and loss of the ‘backbone’ of his life coincides to some extent with the fall of the apartheid. These two fundamental changes in Lurie’s life throw him into a battle with himself, and he too finds himself at a crossroad in his life, when he loses his job at Cape Town University, after an affair with one of his students. He has been deprived of the two essentials in his life; seduction of women and his job.

A significant aspect of Quiet Violence of Dreams is transgressive sexuality. This is shown through homosexuality, but also Tsepho’s black female friend Mmabatho’s relationship with a German man, Arne. Tsepho describes Mmabatho as following: “One could never guess where she grew up from the way she dressed. Her wardrobe gave too many conflicting clues. She’s the only person I ever saw who wore jeans and a Xhosa head wrap and pulled it off stylishly.” (Duiker 11) Mmabatho too is searching for her own identity which is apparent in the way she dresses; she does not want to be put in any box and she adds “I walk with a gait that some women whisper about in toilets, and I always wear my hair stringently short, in defiance.” (Duiker 18) She deliberately provokes reactions by standing out, and in that way she defines herself. Dating white men is another aspect of Mmabatho’s provocation and self-exploration, and also a feature unique for the post-apartheid era, where this is now possible, but still frowned upon “Indian students that stare at us [Mmabatho and Arne] accusingly as we walk by as if we’re about to do something wrong. The girls say something treacherous under their breath.” (Duiker 39) She, like Tsepho and Lucy, refuses to conform with cultural expectations. All three of them are using transgressive sexuality to break free from social expectations and norms.

In the two works masculinity is explored, as both protagonists struggle with their masculinity. David Lurie has to come to terms with his aging and loss of potency, which aptly captures the new place of the white male after apartheid. Georgie Horrell argues that the “representation of white masculinity in [recent books written by white South African men] is particularly problematic, often deeply abject and arguably sketched in distinct to that [....] South African white culture under apartheid.” (Horrell 1) Horrell argues that the underlying notion and problem is “white guilt”, which arises from colonialism and apartheid.

By comparison, the masculinity portrayed in Quiet Violence of Dreams is centred around gay and black masculinity which are neither struggling nor submissive. Rather it displays a black masculinity which is more destructive, as the fight to become respected in a masculine culture can lead to violence and prison. Tsepho celebrates gay masculinity:”To love a man? It is like the roaring ocean inside you[...]"
To know a man? It is like serenading yourself and all men. [...]. Oh, the infinite beauty of a man and his penis.” (Duiker 334-335).

**The ugly face of apartheid legacy and post-apartheid struggle**

South Africa is one of the most violent countries in the world. Both works deal with violence as an inevitable part of life. In ‘Disgrace’ after the assault, Lurie reflects on crime in South Africa: “Too many people, too few things. What there is must go into circulation, so that everyone can have a chance to be happy for a day…. That is how one must see life in this country: in its schematic aspect. Otherwise one would go mad.” (Coetzee 98) Lurie adopts a necessary pragmatic approach in order to cope with daily life. Lurie points to poverty as the main factor of violence; however South Africa has a higher crime rate than many poorer countries. The big gap between poor and rich is the legacy of apartheid and has led to seething anger, resentment and frustration in the townships. “Could it be that the rage that so many expected found expression after all, not in the formal arenas of politics but in the underworld of crime?” (Steinberg 3) One of the largest township areas is the Cape Flats, Tsepho's roommate Chris is released from prison where he served a nine year sentence for murder since he was 16. He says: “You stop being a person if you spend your whole life in the Cape Flats, if you don't go out for a while, even for a day. The deaths, the rapes, the break-ins...” (Duiker 155) Chris describes how identity in the Cape Flats is based on reputation, built on murders, drugs, break-ins and hijacking.

“I wanted to be a Gent, respected in my street because I had fucked up so and so and could drink a lot. Everyone knew that I had a short temper and that I could dance. It was like that. I thought you lived your life through other people. I thought a life well lived was always spoken about. It mattered what people said because it meant they were looking, they were noticing, they knew who you were.” (Duiker 155-156)

The title ‘Gent’ seems to suggest someone who has earned respect with ‘style’ and “success in the township […] is defined in material terms with particular symbols of success – such as cars and designer clothes- being seen as critical to one’s self-worth” (Segal 97-98) Status, respect and reputation are important to male dominated culture. The townships and prisons are riddled by criminal gangs. After leaving the prison Chris is still influenced by prison culture and this shows when he rapes Tsepho just to dominate him. “This is who I am, gemors(5), ’ I say and show him my twenty eights(6) number on my left hand.”…. ‘You check, these are also my brothers’ I say and they show him their twenty eights numbers”(Duiker 212) . He passes his gang-self as his real identity which is not surprising as he spent his formative teenage years in prison. The quote also shows the bond between gang members, as Chris refers to his two friends as brothers, maybe a form of surrogate family.

In ‘Disgrace’, violence is explored through the rape and burglary at Lucy's farm. Lucy chooses not to report her rape and when discussing the matter with her father, her rationale is as following:
“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….’

‘This place being what?’

‘This place being South Africa.’

‘…Is this a form of private salvation you are trying to work out? Do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?’

‘No. You keep misreading me. Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don’t act in terms of abstractions.’” (Coetzee 112)

Lucy’s attitude seems to be that in order to survive in post-apartheid South Africa, sacrifices have to be made. She is not thinking in terms of guilt, but simply survival. The break with apartheid will be rough, painful and violent. She could have chosen the fenced and protected suburban life, but she did not and faces the pain in creating an existence outside the norms.

Her father on the other hand responds very differently to Lucy, connecting everything with apartheid. When asking if her reasons are the ‘crimes of the past’, Lucy dismisses this as abstractions. She wishes only to deal with the present. Lurie “has a sense that, inside him, a vital organ has been bruised, abused – perhaps even his heart.”(Coetzee 107) He feels that this grave incident should not be hushed, but Lucy refuses to report the rape even though she is suffering. “[She] is not improving. She stays up all night, claiming she cannot sleep.”(Coetzee 121)

**Fear of the 'other'

Contemporary South Africa is still pervaded by racism, apparent in all layers of the society, not only white ‘superiority’. “An important psychological consequence of South Africa's social engineering was that people developed strong racial and nationalist identities [...] Apartheid was identity politics brought to perfection”(Roefs 77) There is also widespread xenophobia regarding foreigners. Both phenomena seem to point to a fear of the ‘other’. Racism is ever present in The Quiet Violence of Dreams, for instance, when the main character a gay bar, and the white waiter ‘forgets’ to bring him his change.

“'My change' I say, my eyes furious.'

‘Your change? What are you talking about? You paid a long time ago, I must have given it back to you.’ ‘You didn’t’

‘Well, I’m sorry, I can’t just open the cash register for no reason’.... Look, we’re not looking for trouble. Why don’t you just leave before I get security?’ ...I look around the bar and suddenly realise that I’m the only black person, in fact the only person of colour.” (Duiker 343)
This is a very obvious example of the racism which still exists in everyday South African life; Tsepho is shocked as he thought gay men would refrain from discriminating. “They are white people before they are gay….It is a rude awakening. You are black. You will always be black.”(Duiker 343) This incident causes a blow to Tsepho’s new identity as a black homosexual, as he is reminded that just because he has dared to find his own sexuality; society does not change equally fast. The mistrust and the stereotypes which defined each racial group under apartheid remain intact. People are still suspicious of each other, and whenever incidents occur, this suspicion comes out into the open. David Lurie belongs to an educated, white and liberal segment of people, who are politically correct. When describing people, he makes sure not to mention their race: “[Melanie] is small and thin, with close-cropped black hair, wide, almost Chinese cheekbones, large dark eyes.” (Coetzee 11) This progressive attitude is challenged, when Lucy and he are attacked and Petrus is absent. He finds this highly suspicious. Petrus is a black farmer who used to help Lucy with her land. Now he lives in her old barn with one of his wives and he is looking to expand his own land. Petrus's character represents the New South Africa, he embodies the new social order and he is Lucy's protector. Lurie is aware of Petrus's ambitions. When Lurie finds out that Petrus is affiliated with one of the assaulters, his suspicion explodes. He forgets all politically correct language:

“Depend on Petrus? Because Petrus has a beard and smokes a pipe and carries a stick, you think Petrus is an old-style kaffir? ....Petrus is not an old-style kaffir, much less a good old chap. Petrus, in my opinion, is itching for Lucy to pull out. ....look no further than at what happened to Lucy and me. It may not have been Petrus’ brainchild, but he certainly turned a blind eye.” (Coetzee 140)

However mistrust and racism is not only between South Africans. The country has in recent years experienced a wave of xenophobia, mostly directed at people from other African countries. The common slang word for African immigrant is makwere-kwere, and when Tsepho leaves for Johannesburg, Mmabatho last words to him are “Don’t go out in funny places. Hillbrow (7) is full of Nigerians and makwere-kwere….and they sell drugs.” (Duiker 451) Mmabatho is genuinely concerned about the foreigners, but is it because of racism? Cole, who is a colleague of Tsepho in Steamy Windows (8), offers this explanation for the xenophobia and racism of South Africans:

“You know in Senegal and other parts of Africa we don’t have this problem [racism] with white people, because they are hardly there. But because you have them here in South Africa some black South Africans have acquired their hang-ups….I mean some black people walk around with this superior air as if they are better than us blacks from other parts of Africa.” (Duiker 347)

After apartheid there has been an attempt to create a national identity. In the ‘rainbow nation’, and piece together divided identities. The xenophobia in South Africa might grow out insecure identities and the feeling of not being a people. Unitimg against a common ‘enemy’ is easier than facing one’s own internal problems. Tsepho has only contempt for this xenophobia and racism. “Must I always be apologetic for wanting more than what my culture offers? Am I a sell-out, an Uncle
Tom? Isn’t sticking to your own culture ruthlessly a kind of stagnation…?”(Duiker 348) This quote also shows Tsepho’s complete rejection of the apartheid system which cultivated separate development within races and minimum sharing between cultures.

The personal truth and reconciliation

In the latter part of the novel, Tsepho seems to come to terms with his identity. This changes his perspective on other people and he tells Mmabatho off for been condescending about makwere-kwere. When visiting West, his Afrikaans colleague and friend, he says “before West(9) I never thought of Afrikaans people as being sensitive or as being anything other than oppressors.” (Duiker 355) This statement expresses reconciliation with the past: “I begin to think about Afrikaans people in a way I never have before. They also love this land, I admit tomyself…” (Duiker 356)

The realisation that Afrikaaners belong to South Africa as much as he does is an important personal step. It seems to suggest that, in order to reconcile with the past, one has to a clear idea of oneself.

After the fall of apartheid and the democratic elections in 1994 it was decided that a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) should be formed to lay bare the brutality of apartheid. It was an attempt to create a new moral order through understanding and knowing the truth about the past, so that the country could have a ‘fresh’ start. Even though apartheid was abolished, the South African population was still the same, and black and white had to live side by side, and sit side by side in parliament(10). Some form of process was needed in order to prevent an explosive civil war situation. The job of the TRC was to give voice to the victims and the perpetrators of apartheid so that the truth was heard and never forgotten.

In her memoir Country of My Skull, Antje Krog conveys her experiences as a reporter at the TRC hearings. She says: “For me it’s a new beginning [....] It is not about skin colour, culture, language, but about people. The personal pain puts an end to all stereotypes. Where we connect now has nothing to do with group or colour, we connect with our humanity.” (Krog 68)

The two protagonists’ search for identity in ‘Disgrace’ and ‘The Quiet Violence of Dreams’ differs. Tsepho is actively searching for an identity, breaking his own boundaries and exploring different sides of himself. While at Steamy Windows, he takes on the name Angelo, and in the novel the narrator shifts between Tsepho and Angelo, until the last chapters, where the narrator is Tsepho-Angelo, one person, one identity. The novel finishes with Tsepho returning to his native Johannesburg. This suggests that he was not ready to return or leave Cape Town, before he had ‘found’ himself. David Lurie, even if he opposed the apartheid system, had to find a new role and position in society. His search is concentrated on reconciliation with the past and the acceptance of the new South Africa, despite its many flaws. Lurie faces an inquiry into his affair with a student. This inquiry can be read as an allegory for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Lurie faces the inquiry in the beginning of the novel, and his position is that he is guilty, but the panel wants more from him than merely pleading guilty: “You[the panel] mean, will I humble myself and ask for
clemency?....I have admitted that [I was wrong]. Freely. I am guilty of the charges brought against me.” (Coetzee 54) He never apologises for his actions to the panel, as he does not seem to regret them. As the novel proceeds Lurie develops a particular fondness for animals, unknown to his earlier personality, and at the end of the novel he helps at an animal clinic killing/relieving/cremating dogs to give them a worthy end. These actions are possibly a portrayal of white guilt and it is Lurie’s way of apologising, not to the committee, but to the victims of apartheid. Disgrace might not be a direct allegory of the TRC but rather a work “which understands that the spoken language of repentance, the 'sorry' exacted from men of torture and oppression is desperately insufficient and largely unheard.” (Horrell 4)

**Conclusion**

In conclusion one can say that the South Africa society is still to a great extent dealing with the repercussions of apartheid, and this includes a frantic search for identity, which affects people across generations and race. The analysis of these two works, point to reconciliation as the main challenge, however the characters both reconciled as they established their identity in the new South Africa.

**Footnotes**

1) Translates as 'separation'
2) Gay club in Cape Town
3) Xhosa is a tribe, which is dominant in the Cape region.
4) Afrikaans slang, translates as [mess-up] or [fuck-up] about a person.
5) Gang in the Cape Flats
6) Neighbourhood in Johannesburg.
7) A 'massage-clinic'
8) Colleague at Steamy Windows

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http://africanhistory.about.com/od/apartheidlaws/g/No30of50.htm

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