

*Dear We-writers,  
After hearing the news of J M Coetzee's Nobel Prize for Literature, I was reminded of his book Disgrace and thought, surely he cannot be our hero? Please read below what I wrote about this book when I was a columnist for the City Press some time ago.  
Phumla*

**J M Coetzee's Disgrace Raises Questions about Perceptions of Black Sexuality**  
Phumla Mthala

Post-apartheid literature is quite when it mirrors people's feelings towards this new democracy. I have just put down J M Coetzee's intriguing, beautifully written and gripping book, Disgrace. After much praise of the book by friends and my book club I decided to have my go at the novel. Of course, I couldn't help but read this book as a black woman and as a feminist. Whatever Coetzee is trying to do in the book, whether he is trying to show the degree of brutality our society has reached, or whether it is just a reflection of white liberal mentality, what really interested me are the representations of black sexuality.

I've always wanted to write about this subject in my columns but have been trying to figure out from which angle I should approach it. The paradox of sexual politics in our society is that, whilst there exist perceptions of black sexuality as intriguing and funky but disgusting, it still remains a taboo subject. We all know about the exotic-erotic, strange, fascinating, primal and uninhibited, sensuous and highly sexed black prostitute. On the other hand there is the big mad black man who is a predatory craver of white women and a rapist. Or the super-performer butch and bald headed black man who wears tight-fitting clothes that exaggerate his muscular body and his well-endowed nether regions. I think that a candid dialogue about perceptions of black sexuality in public debate would demystify dominant myths about this subject, which are mainly based on visceral feelings.

The book is brilliantly written, the prose just flows beautifully, and there is not one wasted word in the book. For me the beauty of this book is that the meaning is not lost in too much description but description is used to take me to the places where the events take place. It makes me feel as though I know the people in the book. However, what is on the page is not the whole of the story. Stories are written in contexts. Thus, if one thinks there's something wrong with what is said the context can always be traced.

Now to take you, the reader, back to the book, it is about a 52-year-old university professor whose disgrace is brought about by a young coloured woman student with whom he has sex. It starts when he meets her on the way home and invites her to his house for a drink. Then follows the usual seduction routine: "wine, music, and romantic poetry", they just hug but she feels uncomfortable and leaves. But the professor wouldn't leave it there, the following day he takes her to lunch and from lunch they go back to his house,

and he "makes love" to her on the floor. Then she doesn't turn up for classes, de-registers his course, and lodges a complaint of sexual harassment with the university. The professor admits to the crime but refuses to acknowledge that this was wrong on moral grounds, and justifies it by having been "a servant to eros". He in a way says, that this should be excused because he acted on desire. He then resigns from the university and moves to his daughter's farm. Black men rape his daughter and the author uses this to illustrate the shifting of powers in the new South Africa.

I think one of the things that are fascinating about this book is that whilst conventionally the main character is often romanticised in novels, one gets to hate this man from the beginning to the end (well I did). This 52-year-old man who has been divorced twice uses his status and position to seduce this young woman. Not only did the student/teacher power relation play a part in this woman sleeping with him but if one looks at it symbolically his fascination with Melanie's (the young student) "tiny little body, with close-cropped hair, wide almost Chinese cheek bones, and large dark eyes" can be located in the dominant perceptions of exotic "non-white" women. When I discussed this with a friend, she said "look..., I don't think it's an issue of white middle-aged men's fascination (excuse the generalisation, just trying to make a point) with black, coloured, Indian, or Asian women's bodies but an extension of their paedophilic interest with anyone young and attractive." But I think, given the history of whites exploiting blacks in our society, it's more damaging because to them black women are exotic little creatures as opposed to real human beings. This professor's fascination with "exotics", is also evident in the first chapter of the book where he chooses a sex worker from the exotic list, Soraya, an Indian woman. Soraya, "tall and slim with long black hair and liquid eyes" is also "young enough to be his daughter". Lust runs through his description of his feelings towards these girls, "he imagines that intercourse between him and Soraya must be like the copulation of snakes: lengthy, absorbed, but rather abstract, rather dry". This might be justified, given the fact that he is just dealing with a sex worker. However this theme of self-satisfaction is also evident in how he relates to Melanie the student. The professor describes it as some kind of fire, and fire is symbolic of lust. The description of his sexual experiences with these women is nothing less than a blissful delight, however, their experiences are effaced. Soraya's temperament in bed is described as "rather quiet and docile", similarly Melanie is described as being "passive throughout, however, the Prof. finds the act thoroughly pleasurable." Could he be using these docile, lifeless creatures to satisfy all the sexual fantasies he has ever had? Could they be apparatus for his sexual apparatus? I wonder. However, desire is used throughout the book to justify his actions. The relationship with Soraya, as he had become her regular customer, is dropped early in the book. The same with Melanie, her character too, is dropped early in the book. Her own feelings about what happened between her and the professor are not explored. There is only one instance, where after the professor has "made love to her" he imagines the act as "not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core".

When the professor retires to his daughter's farm after the sexual harassment case, black men rape his daughter. Then is where images of big, black, mad, men, who are cravers of white women come in. The description of these men as cold-hearted, savage, callous rapists, confirm the stereotype of highly-sexed, savage, black rapists. The irony is that the professor gets so protective of his daughter and only feels rage over these savages, whereas his acts towards Melanie and Soraya, who must be somebody's daughters too, are only justified as acts of desire. To me this anomaly of dehumanised, black rapists versus a sophisticated, white professor, raises questions about popular perceptions of black sexuality.

And just by the way, the author's description of the professor's daughter's understanding of the rape is very unconvincing. I don't believe that any white, feminist, liberal, new-age woman would see rape as a means of absolving the sins of apartheid. The whole idea of the sins of the past being revisited upon white women through rape is ludicrous. Could this be a glimpse into the white paranoia (James Coetzee's paranoia) of the new democracy our country has achieved?