

AGENCY, SEXUALITY AND FEMALE IDENTITY IN “DISGRACE” AND “THE JOURNAL OF SARAB AFFAN”

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares concepts of female identity, sexuality and agency in South African novelist J. M. Coetzee's "Disgrace" (1999) and Palestinian novelist Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's "The Journals of Sarab Affan" (1992). It specifically employs Edward Said's ideas on humanism, resistance and agency. In analyzing the colonial dynamics that secure a sovereign subject status for the West, Said's critical works such as "Orientalism" (1979), and "Culture and Imperialism" (1993) have been studied from a cultural perspective, focusing on the way he reads Western cultural representations of itself and the Other, and adding significantly to the field of postcolonial studies. Yet, Said's works are accused for relegating gender and sexual issues to a secondary position. In this article, I refute such an accusation. I argue that for Said, sexual and gender differences, similar to cultural differences, are fundamental constituents of the Otherness that is placed in contradistinction to the colonial, racial or gendered sovereign subject. To overcome such deep-seated concepts of Otherness and difference, Said introduces the concept of humanism as to understand human history as a continuous process of self-understanding and self-realization devoid of any gender, racial or ethnic bias. The paper argues that Coetzee's "Disgrace" and Jabra's "The Journals of Sarab Affan" exemplify Said's humanism. The two novels represent the complexities of the violent colonial experiences and heritage, particularly for women, in modern South Africa and Palestine. For example, when white Lucy Lurie in "Disgrace" is gang-raped by black teenagers in post-apartheid South Africa, she neither tells the police about the identity of her rapists, nor leaves South Africa. Rather, Lucy realizes that rape is the price she has to pay to maintain the connection with her land and authentic South African identity under new power structures that still based on revenge, anger and discrimination. Likewise, highly educated and independent Palestinian Sarab Affan rethinks her identity as an Arab and a Palestinian woman as she undergoes disappointment and alienation in her patriarchal society. Sarab, like Lucy in "Disgrace", relates her personal sufferings to the wider political failure in Palestine as Hamas and

the Palestinian Liberation organization (PLO) fight over power in colonized Palestine while unarmed Palestinian youth die in the intifada. However, Lucy finds agency in staying in South Africa, while Sarab leaves the Arab world to live in France. The two women explore and resist sexist and racist structures, rethinking concepts of female agency, sexuality and identity.

Keywords: female agency, identity, sexuality, (post)colonial, humanism, patriarchy

INTRODUCTION: COMPLEX COLONIAL HERITAGE IN SOUTH AFRICA AND PALESTINE

In my understanding of its relevance today, humanism is not a way of consolidating and affirming what 'we' have always known and felt, but rather a means of questioning, upsetting, and reformulating so much of what is presented to us as commodified, packaged, uncontroversial, and uncritically codified certainties. (Said 2004, 28)

In the above quotation, Edward Said redefines humanism as a liberalising and human rights movement against all forms of racism and discriminations. Said refutes the traditional versions of humanist thoughts as reductive and didactic in nature and practices so that they were "often associated with very selective elites, be they religious, aristocratic, or educational", or "left open to every sort of unruly individualism, disreputable modishness, and uncanonized learning, with the result that true humanism [was] violated, if not altogether discredited" (Said 2004, 28). Moreover, Said refuses the dominant humanist view that interprets the past as "an essentially complete history" and sustains the view that the past is "still open to the presence and the challenges of the emergent, the insurgent, the unrequited, and the unexplored" (Ibid., 26). Said insinuates that though humanism is "centered upon the agency of human individuality and subjective intuition, rather than on received ideas and approved authority", it is "sustained by a sense of community with other interpreters and other societies and periods". Said confirms further that "there is no such thing as an isolated humanist" (Said 2003, 3).

In this way, Said regards humanism as a form of intellectual and physical resistance and a practice against various forms of patriarchy, isolation and discrimination. Said's arguments concerning the role of humanist thoughts in resisting deep-seated, and complex forms of racism and hierarchy in modern societies are relevant to the exceptional colonial situations in South Africa and Palestine. Despite the fact that the colonial struggle in South Africa and Palestine has taken different forms, native people in both countries have experienced similar systematic and collective processes of discrimination and segregation. Under the apartheid system, coloured and

black South Africans suffer oppression, physical and psychological abuse and displacement, and their rights are persistently misappropriated (Barnett 1999; Lodge 2009). Likewise, Palestinians are oppressed, inferiorised, segregated and displaced. Israeli military attacks target Palestinian civilians of all age groups and gender (Hammami 2006; Dann 2012). Native black and coloured South Africans and Palestinian are economically dependent on the white minority or the Afrikaner and Israelis respectively. Not only do native South Africans and Palestinians have to deal with the fact that the colonizers, Afrikaner in the first and Israelis in the second, have claimed permanent rights to their lands, but also have to overcome a chronic state of hatred, violence and rejection of the Other.

In such complicated situations, women in South Africa and Palestine face many challenges. Women become symbols of both oppression and resistance. In imperialist calls for civilizing the uncivilized "other" or savage parts of the world, both the colonized and the colonizer are established and stabilized as biologically and mentally opposite identities. The colonizer is always civilized, superior and powerful while the colonized is always submissive, inferior, and powerless. In naturalizing its hierarchies and discriminations among its own members, cultural difference becomes a "radical instrument to relegate the rights of others to an inferior or lesser status" (Said 1985, 40). In this way, the ideologies of racial difference were intensified by their incorporation into the discourse of art and science, forming "cultural identity", an identity that demands "the fetishization and relentless celebration of 'difference' and 'otherness'" (Said 1989, 17). Under the wider umbrella of racial difference, gender and sexual difference also turn out to afford effective methods of suppression of the Other. In "Orientalism", Said argues that colonial representations of "female sexuality" of the Other generally express "temptation", "self-sufficiency", and "emotional carelessness", and particularly Oriental women are seen as possessing "peculiarly luxuriant and seemingly un-bounded sexuality". These play a significant role in stereotyping the Other as both a source of "barbaric splendor and cruelty [and] exotic and strange pleasures" (Said 1979, 188).

Put this way, within colonial and patriarchal orders, sexuality serves as force for subverting and disrupting power relations, unsettling the paradigm of the oppressor and the oppressed. In discussing sexual as well as cultural modes of differentiation, Said indicates that "this differentiation is frequently performed by setting the valorized culture over the male Other" and by "subjugating women" (Said 1979, 47). Feminist critic Barbara Bush has agreed with Said that "while white men could assert power over white (and black)

women, black men, though they are subordinate to white women in race/class terms, have sexual power [over them]" (Bush 1988, 426). I have chosen to examine the novels of the South African novelist J. M. Coetzee (1940) and the Palestinian writer Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1919–1994) in particular for a number of reasons. I argue Coetzee's "Disgrace" and Jabra's "The Journals of Sarab Affan" are particularly appropriate to a reading using Said's readings of humanism. The two writers engage with the colonial histories of their countries, are concerned with female characters and defend the rights of the oppressed.

As a white writer in a country like South Africa in a period of total repression and silencing of the majority of black people, the writings of white Coetzee have not only been judged for their political significance, but he has also had to persistently declare, if not justify, his attitudes towards the past history of apartheid and oppression. Coetzee's involvement with history and politics is intentionally blurred by his use of allegory, metafiction and semi-realist novels, a technique that not only suggests that "Coetzee's commitment [is] to the autonomy of his art" but also "ensures the political force of his novels" (Durrant 1992, 432). Coetzee undoubtedly identifies himself with the problems of the oppressed and the marginalized in South Africa. This is reflected in all his novels including "In the Heart of the Country" (1977), "Waiting for the Barbarians" (1980), "Life and Times of Michael K" (1983). In the majority of these novels, the South African polarities of master/slave, black/white, male/female, the private and the public and oppression/resistance are always dominant, upsetting the status quo and keeping the struggle alive. For instance, Michael K in "Life and Times of Michael K", Friday in "Foe", Magda in "In the Heart of the Country" and Melanie in "Disgrace" are marginalized citizens who are forced to retreat from society to their private worlds in the process of searching for an identity different from the one prescribed for them by society. Coetzee's novels represent elements of social resistance and armed violence as well. In novels set during the apartheid era, many coloured and black characters are shown to suffer oppression, physical and psychological abuse and their rights are persistently misappropriated. These victimized characters react differently. Some retreat and keep silent, while others actively join armed resistance groups (Attwell 1990, 579; Poyner 2006, 3).

If silence is the favoured tool of resistance utilized by Coetzee's oppressed characters, Jabra's characters are exceptionally talkative. Jabra himself believes that "language to the Arab is the means of giving substance to his dreams and defining those inner ways which lead to the cultural identity he seeks for himself" (Jabra 1981, 51).

Jabra, unlike Coetzee, is a politically committed intellectual whose main concern has been reforming Palestinian and Arab culture and politics. He is a liberal thinker but adopts socialist notions as well. "As a 'Third World' was being born", Jabra says, "writers were its prophets" (Jabra 1985, 88). For Jabra, there is a vital interaction between the literary text and its socio-cultural context and so Third World and Palestinian literature should both highlight and fight colonialism along with inherent forces of tyranny and oppression that have been prevalent within their borders for so long. In Jabra's novels, unlike Coetzee's "oblique" engagement with history and "elusive" characters, historical facts and events are directly presented and even discussed openly by characters. Jabra's oppressed and colonized men and women are revolutionary, voluble and challenge their enforced exile, alienation and marginalization through integrating themselves within host societies and through telling stories. They always talk about the past to keep it alive within their own and others' memories. Studying and living in the United Kingdom and moving between Iraq and Lebanon, Jabra, like his characters, is open to other cultures and aspires to get their support and even sympathy with the Palestinians. Jabra is worried that, with the disaster of 1948, "we became more and more politically alienated from the west", and as a result, "the idea of culture became extra-national" (Jabra 1985, 81).

This "extra-national" vision of the Palestinian struggle develops and changes throughout Jabra's novels. Jabra is convinced that the fate of Palestinian and Arab men and women is inseparable from worldwide conditions and the cultural hegemony of the West. To describe such interconnection, Jabra's novels embrace "hybridity as subject matter", a hybridity which directly "challenges the history of racial 'purity'" (Ghazoul 2000, 12). In "The Ship" (1970), Jabra's characters include Arabs, Europeans and Americans who all talk about both their personal life and their view of the world around them. They come from different backgrounds but all are involved in a similar historical desire for change, real human contact and liberty from repressive cultural norms. Similarly, in "In Search of Walid Masoud" (1978) and "The Journals of Sarab Affan" (1992), Arab and Palestinian men and women are open to Western culture and civilization; nevertheless, they see the world around them in relation to the Palestinian cause and the colonial experience of the Arab world. Both Jabra and his characters begin to consider the existing realities of the Arab world, realizing that the independence of Palestinian people requires them to have a separate plan of action on both

the military and the negotiational levels. A similar identity struggle dominates Coetzee's novels. He investigates the deep-seated processes of the construction of identity in South Africa, tracing its psychological and cultural repercussions on race and gender relations. Coetzee, like Jabra, believes that apartheid and racist systems worldwide establish the misconception that "humanity falls 'naturally' into three divisions, white, black, yellow, or into men and women" (Begam 1992, 426). Rejecting such fixed notions, Jabra and Coetzee suggest that identity has to pass through a continual process of redefining and compromise with other identities and within itself. This process is the outcome of the interaction between both the personal and historical dimensions of identity.

In the following analysis, I argue that Coetzee's "Disgrace" and Jabra's "The Journal of Sarab Affan" conform perfectly to Edward Said's definition of humanism, exploring the worldly connections of literary texts. I am interested in comparing and contrasting the ways humanism as a form of female political activism in "Disgrace" and "The Journals of Sarab Affan". I examine how the two novels involve and are involved with history and politics in South Africa and Palestine. I examine how female characters in both novels adopt humanist attitudes and perform acts that enhance their political agency and develop their roles in the process of decision-making.

PART ONE: FEMALE IDENTITY AND SEXUALITY IN "DISGRACE" AND "THE JOURNAL OF SARAB AFFAN"

RAPE IN "DISGRACE"

Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, far away. (Coetzee 1999, 25)

They were not raping, they were mating. It was not the pleasure principle that ran the show but the testicles, sacs bulging with seed aching to perfect itself. And now, lo and behind, the child! [...] What kind of child can seed like that give life to, seed driven into the woman not in love but in hatred, mixed chaotically, meant to soil her, to mark her, like a dog's urine? (Coetzee 1999, 199)

In the above two quotations from Coetzee's novel, "Disgrace", the character David Lurie, a white professor of communications, reflects on two acts of rape committed against two women in the novel, namely his black student, Melanie Isaacs, and his daughter, Lucy Lurie, respectively. For different reasons, Melanie and Lucy become sites of male sexual violence and revenge. The former is raped by David Lurie himself and the second is gang-raped by a group of black teenagers, instigated and motivated by Lucy's servant, Petrus. The two women are raped, but their rapists as well as their guardians evade classifying the aggressive acts as "rape". Thus, no-one is actually to claim complete responsibility or be properly punished for the appalling acts of rape. In this way, Lucy and Melanie are not only held partially responsible for their rape, but they internalize feelings of confusion and shame as sinners and victims at the same time. In the end, Lucy and Melanie are left to heal their psychological and physical wounds alone. In "Orientalism", Said argues that the colonizing mind views "itself and its subject matter [the colonized] with sexist blinkers", with "women usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing" (Said 1979, 208). In other words, as Wendy Pearson puts it, "colonialism's ideological underpinnings require the discursive construction of the bodies of the other not only as abjected components in racialized and gendered hierarchies, but also as units of exchange in economic, sexual, and cultural intercourse" (Pearson 2007, 183). Since in post-apartheid South Africa the state gives priority to political change without really reforming the apartheid-based, discriminative social relations and divisions of labour and wealth, the female characters in Coetzee's novel continue to struggle with gender stereotypes and the opportunistic cultural economy.

Coming from a middle-class black family and studying at the University of Cape Town, Melanie Isaacs symbolizes hope and ambition in post-apartheid South Africa. She is a young woman looking for fair and equal access to educational and social chances. However, Melanie discovers, as Gayle Rubin puts it, that "Sex is always political [...] especially in the world of the University" (Rubin 1984, 267). The racist past is not over yet and Melanie's racial and gender difference is still a hindrance in face of her ambitions. Her professor, David Lurie, by virtue of his racial inheritance, is placed by the apartheid government at the top of the social and political hierarchy in apartheid South Africa. As a privileged man of letters, David uses his knowledge and scholarly influence to serve the ideological aims

of his racist system. David's superior socio-racial background directly enforces his sexual power, "If he looked at a woman in a certain way, with certain intent, she would return his look" (Coetzee 1999, 7). Unfortunately, although David's "[sexual] powers fled" (Ibid., 7), as result of his old age and the decline of his political power in post-apartheid South Africa, he still figures out new ways of achieving domination in the new order, namely through his position and his money. Having an "eye" for Melanie, David pursues her, telling her that "a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone; [...] she has a duty to share it" (Ibid., 16). David understands sex as an "ungovernable impulse", so that once "Eros entered, [he] become[s] a servant of Eros" (Ibid., 52). Even if Melanie does not want to share her sexuality with him, he does not really care about her opinion. Shockingly, Melanie accepts David's sexual authority and claims as fact. She regards it as her duty to share her body and beauty with him. Edward Said defines the attitude of the colonizer towards the colonized as one of "dominating, restructuring, and having authority". Colonizers "gather knowledge about the Other" so that "through their cultural and literary representations, [they] alienate and stereotype that Other to fit their political and ideological aims" (Said 1979, 3). With his imperialist, racial background, David follows the same strategy with Melanie. He collects information about her, tries to exploit her youth in order to fill her head with his sexist ideas and finally succeeds in isolating her from her family and environment. After Melanie issues a complaint against him, David is surprised:

Melanie would not have taken such a step by herself, he is convinced. She is too innocent for that, too ignorant of her power. [Isaacs], the little man in the ill-fitting suit, must be behind it, [Isaacs] and cousin Pauline, the plain one, the duenna. They must have talked her into it, worn her down, then in the end marched her to the administration offices. (Coetzee 1999, 39)

Melanie is stereotyped by David as a weak, dependent and ignorant young woman who knows nothing about her rights as a university student, protected by university laws, one of which is "Article 3.1 [which] addresses victimization or harassment of students by teachers" (Ibid., 39). Melanie is not the only woman to be misjudged by men in "Disgrace". Reducing women's roles to the service of their own desires and needs, the majority of men in the novel practise sexual and moral double standards. They grant themselves greater sexual freedom and authority over women, whom they perceive as tools to prove their masculine superiority or political

domination. David sees no shame or wrongdoing in living in a “flurry of promiscuity” in which he “[has] affairs with the wives of colleagues”, with “tourists”, and with “whores” (Ibid., 7). His freedom to do so is based on a society of “gender polarization”, which Sandra Bem explains “aids and abets the social reproduction of male power by providing the fundamental division between masculine and feminine upon which androcentrism is built. This aspect of gender polarization manifests itself at three levels: the institutional, the psychological, and the ideological” (Bem 1993, 194). In “Disgrace”, then, sexual power has allegorical implications for broader systems of power and domination. It stands for the struggle over land ownership, racial domination and, above all essentialised gender polarizations. Regrettably, the political atmosphere in post-apartheid South Africa paves the way for old gender polarization and sexist ideas to continue and dominate. Melanie’s rape is an ideological, racial appropriation and subjugation of the female Other. Living in a period of political transformation and ideological re-organization of centres of power, South African men and women are required to fight for a better position or to readjust their interests to suit the new order. Still governed by the same laws created by the colonizers and expanded by the new post-apartheid government which, despite its attempts to equalize the position of all citizens, enables David, like many other white and black sexists, opportunists and power-seekers, still to find other indirect means of exerting their superiority, particularly over women: “If [David] want[s] a woman, he ha[s] to learn to buy her” (Coetzee 1999, 7).

The institutionalized nature of the sexual economy is highlighted through the character of Soraya. David is accustomed to visiting the Discreet Escorts Agency, where he pays prostitutes for sex. Classified under the category “Exotic”, Muslim prostitute Soraya fulfils the white professor’s need to conquer “exotic girls” (Ibid., 7). In seeing Soraya in the street with her two sons, David is shocked with her “double life”, something that he, ironically enough, thinks “would be unusual for a Muslim, but all things are possible these days” (Ibid., 3). David judges the morality of a Muslim woman and denies her the right to have a family and lead a normal public life, ignoring her denied economic rights and opportunities that force her to sell her body for money. Through its characterization of David Lurie, Coetzee’s novel indicates that double standards and gender inequalities are common in the post-apartheid era. Shaun Irlam suggests that such a representation is not inauthentic since he criticises the new South African society, claiming that it is merely an “international

media fantasy" that is widely sustained abroad but "belied at home, in the cities and townships of South Africa". Irlam argues that despite the "modest moves" toward integration, the new South Africa remains "deeply divided in racial relations, and the gulf between the poor and the rich never narrows" (Irlam 2004, 697). Karin Lombard agrees that "Most people in post-apartheid South Africa choose to forget the bitterness they suffered in the past, because issues such as the HIV/AIDS crisis, soaring crime rates, and prevailing poverty and unemployment gradually become the utmost priorities the new government has to deal with" (Lombard 2004, 186). According to these commentators, fighting poverty, social injustice, crime and chronic diseases preoccupies the majority of the South African public. If David Lurie's well-to-do life does not expose him personally to these dangers and problems, he receives a rude awakening when his daughter Lucy is impregnated through a gang-rape and is potentially infected with HIV/AIDS. Only when the situation becomes unignorablely personal, do David's views really start to change. Like Melanie, Lucy is reduced to a stereotype by the black worker, Petrus, as a vulnerable woman, with no male guardians, a weak point that Lucy herself confesses: "Objectively I am a woman alone. I have no brothers. [...] To whom can I turn for protection, for patronage?" (Coetzee 1999, 9).

To humble Lucy and to force her either to accept his protection and control over her land or to leave South Africa and emigrate to another part of the world, Petrus targets her sexuality. The aggressive attitudes of both David and Petrus towards women go beyond lack of individual morality to encompass intentional disrespect and transgression of the law. They choose to operate outside the boundaries of law, which is, as the white secretary Dawn explains, common: "Now people just pick and choose which laws they want to obey. It's anarchy. How can we bring up children when there's anarchy all around?" (Ibid., 9). Within such a chaotic situation, David and Petrus aim at upholding the patriarchal status quo. Consequently, their sexual atrocity tends to "[re-]domesticate" and "shame" the new, independent young women, Lucy and Melanie, so that "[their] place in the outside world would not constitute a significant challenge for the care and protection of the [patriarchal] nation and essential identity" (Yeegenoglu 1998, 125). Lucy classifies her rape as "fighting with death" (Coetzee 1999, 158). Petrus, similar to David, aims to quash Lucy's feelings of belonging, of dignity and of independence.

FEMALE INFERIORITY IN "THE JOURNAL OF SARAB AFFAN"

My identity is that I sometimes want to explode into shrapnel because I can no longer bear the kind of life I live. My identity is that my father loves me and is afraid of me and for me but does not understand me. [...] I am like other women my age, but I know that I am different from them and that my identity is my difference. [...] From this moment on, [Sarab] is in love, madly in love. She will also be a courageous fighter for her homeland, for freedom. She will love humanity to heal the wounds of people everywhere. (Jabra 1992, 6)

In the above quotations, the half-Palestinian, half-Iraqi character, Sarab Affan, reflects on her identity problems and her determination to resolve them. In the first quotation, she highlights her disappointment at her familial and societal relations. She lacks familial understanding and support, particularly from her doctor father, and finds difficulty in sharing her dreams, differences and aims in life with her people. She dreams of freedom not only for herself as an individual and her homeland, Palestine, but also for people worldwide. For Sarab, the route to freedom is realized through the concepts of humanism and love, which break cultural bondages and cross geographical boundaries to connect with human beings worldwide. Sarab, however, decides to devote the rest of her life to the service of the cause of freedom. However, she is concerned about which paths she should take, the support she can get and the knowledge she must have to be a qualified freedom fighter. Growing up and living in a patriarchal society and a phallogocentric culture, where either her male guardian or oppressive systems control her behaviour and shape her life according to their goals and not hers, Sarab Affan is looking for "salvation".

Set during the first Palestinian intifada (1987–1993), "The Journals of Sarab Affan" tackles the theme of salvation in the face of inescapable loss, suffering and exile. Despite the fact that Sarab is a successful secretary and leads a comfortable life, she is not satisfied with it. On the personal level, Sarab is a repressed woman and an unacknowledged and marginalized writer. She lives in a patriarchal society, where she "[is] subordinated and victimized principally because she is a woman in Arab, Muslim society, or because she is a Palestinian" (Said 1993a, 78). It is a double process of marginalization where sexuality and political identity are inseparable. As a Palestinian exile, Sarab is never at home and, as a woman, she is

never an equal human being with men. Torn by her personal-political predicament as a Palestinian, Sarab sees the Palestinian cause with “humanist” eyes, exercising what Said calls an “act of reading” by “putting [her]self in the position of the author, for whom writing is a series of decisions and choices expressed in words” (Said 2004, 62). In relating and reevaluating her cultural and political affiliations, Sarab employs her unsettled political thoughts and unhappy emotions as a means of mastering the story of her own life and equally mastering her literary profession. She decides to challenge conformist ideas and traditional female roles through turning her alienation and marginalization into resistant writings promoting the values of freedom and human rights for all people. In this way, Sarab turns from being a receiver of cultural and literary ideas into a creator of her own distinct voice and viewpoints.

In “Humanism and Democratic Criticism”, Said proposes the concept of “readism”, as a method of measuring “the effect of structures of power and authority on the process of reading” (Said 2004, 60). The process of readism depends on two steps; reception and resistance. Said explains:

Reception is submitting oneself knowledgeably to texts and treating them provisionally at first as discrete objects. [...] Expanding and elucidating the often obscure or invisible frameworks in which they exist, to their historical situations and the way in which certain structures of attitude, feeling, and rhetoric get entangled with some currents, some historical and social formulations of their contexts. [...] Only by receiving the text in all its complexity and with the critical awareness, can one move from the specific to the general both integratively and synthetically. (Said 2004, 62)

Said’s theory of “readism” is perfectly applicable to Sarab Affan. In reading the novels of her ideal writer, Nael Imran, particularly his latest novel “Entering the Mirrors” and writing her journals at the same time, Sarab, I argue, takes the crucial decisions of becoming a political activist and of initiating her writing career. Rendered immune to his influence by her knowledge, independent opinions and humanist attitude, Sarab receives Nael’s opinions and traditional views with suspicion, criticism and resistance. Marginalized by her society and neglected by her father, Sarab, similar to Melanie in Coetzee’s novel, is confused. She looks for an inspiring example and a helping hand to take her away from her own sadness and loneliness within “her society fenced in by fear and stagnation” (Jabra 1992, 103). For her, Nael Imran, the famous, liberal author,

is the perfect model. Sarab confronts her society through knowledge and understanding. With Nael, Sarab voices the aspiration that "[they] will enter together into one mirror, into worlds of impossibilities" (Ibid., 45). She dreams of equality in love, work and happiness and envisions their future life as travelling to Paris, London and Rome, and Cairo and Baghdad, as "rebellious literati", lecturing together about "Jerusalem" and "freedom" and reading their "poems and novels" (Ibid., 44). Mohamed Shaheen interprets the love relationship between Sarab and Nael in terms of their almost contradictory artistic positions as "a female artist in her youth and a male artist in the heyday of his elderliness" (Shaheen 2001, 44). Thus, it is a relation between past and present, energy and exhaustion, illusion and reality, and irrelevance and timeliness:

Sarab Affan's passion is not born of a personal deprivation, nor is it the result of an emotional vacuum, but rather is the result of an awareness of a historical ordeal. [...] The meeting between Sarab and Nael is more than a meeting between a woman and a man. Rather, this is the first outlet outside of the siege, and the first opportunity on the way back to the origin of the ordeal. (Shaheen 2001, 44)

Nevertheless, Nael, who is supposed to be supportive of her independent opinions, betrays Sarab. As she approaches the exclusive male domain, she discovers that Nael is just "the straw man" and "the greatest producer of illusion" (Jabra 1992, 44). He wants to possess her body and aims at "shaping or reshaping [her] the way [he] like[s]" (Ibid., 46). Like the majority of Arab men in Jabra's novels, Nael leads a double life. His writings are liberal, progressive and radical while he is a defeatist whose personal beliefs are traditional, sexist and submissive. Nael criticises Sarab's revolutionary ideas and inhibits her will to act against oppression and political corruption: "Sarab, the creators of all the taboos and sanctions are the masters of our day – What are we able to do with our rebellious visions to stand up to those watchdogs?" (Ibid., 113). Nael who believes that "the body is a fundamental reality", endorses sexist thinking and is complicit with oppressive systems. He escapes his historical responsibility to fight for human freedom and human rights either to live in the past or to indulge himself in a life of masculine pleasures and sensual desires. Moreover, in his romantic relations, Nael Imran, like Walid Masoud and Wadi Assaf in Jabra's earlier novels, reduces love to sensual desire. For him, Sarab's looks – her breasts, lips, cheeks, and body – come before her intellect (Ibid.,

56). According to Luce Irigaray, in phallogocentric cultures, "It is crucial that [women] keep [their] bodies even as [they] bring them out of silence and servitude" (Irigaray 1987, 19). In such a culture, Sarab's duty, like Melanie's, is to submit her body to Nael. Nael has a wife, but looks for mistresses. When the wife is dead, he keeps her pure image in his head while seeing other women as sexual objects. In defying Nael's expectations as a submissive mistress, Sarab challenges his masculine superiority and authority over a woman's body and mind. Sarab achieves the love of her life with Nael as his intellectual and emotional equal. She even prefers in the end to refuse his suggestion of marriage, so that she may remain free and able to pursue a full life without the constraints of daily conjugal cohabitation. Irigaray clarifies:

Historically [women] are the guardians of the flesh. We should not give up that role, but identify it as our own, by inviting men not to make us into body for their benefit, not to make us into guarantees that their body exists. All too often the male libido needs some woman (wife-mother) to guard the male body. This is why men need a wife in the home, even when they have a mistress elsewhere. (Irigaray 1987, 19)

In this manner, Sarab, similar to Lucy and Melanie, is stereotyped as a body to amuse men and an idealistic writer who lives in a world of fantasies. For years, Sarab has been following the rules, shielding herself behind "walls of fears" while "suffering the pain of seeing" (Jabra 1992, 98). She thinks: "Was I scared of myself, knowing that inside me there femininity capable of things beyond [Nael's] imagination or mine? Was I destined to live my life torn between those endless contradictions?" (Ibid., 96). However, Sarab's problem as a marginalized and repressed female writer is not a private one. On the contrary, in discussing the general cultural attitude towards women's writing, Lillian Robinson refers to "the apparently systematic neglect of women's experience in the literary canon, neglect that takes the form of distorting and misreading the few recognized female writers and excluding the others" (Robinson 1986, 106). Robinson indicates more that the predominantly male authors in the canon "show sexist ideology – an aspect of these classic works about which the critical tradition remained silent for generations. The feminist challenge has not been simply a reiterated attack, but a series of suggested alternatives to the male-dominated membership and attitudes of the accepted canon" (Ibid., 106). Through the literary-personal relationship between Sarab and Nael, Jabra underlines the positions and hardships of Arab female writers in the second

half of the twentieth century. Sarab expects liberal, successful author Nael Imran to support her revolutionary literary ambition. Yet, Nael still has the same traditionalist, masculinist view of women. He reduces Sarab's roles in life to be his lover and wife, but denies her independent intellectual choices.

PART TWO: FEMALE AGENCY AND POLITICAL RESISTANCE IN "DISGRACE" AND "THE JOURNAL OF SARAB AFFAN"

Expressing social and sexual autonomy and fitting well inside the new South African order, Lucy threatens the exclusive connection between black women and authentic South African identity and the land. She says:

Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange – when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her – isn't it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife in; existing afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood – doesn't it feel like murder, like getting away with murder? (Coetzee 1999, 158)

In insisting on keeping the child of rape and refusing to report her rape to the police, Lucy survives her "death" to achieve legitimate and equal national identity with the Black South Africans. She realizes that the atrocious act unfairly punishes her for the apartheid regime's past crimes. Claudia Card suggests that Lucy's rape is a "case of genetic imperialism" that "undermines political and ethnic solidarity by obscuring the identity of the next generation" and "robs [Lucy of] the intimate control she had over her body and forcefully transfer[s] this control to her rapists" (Card 1996, 18). In a similar way, Elleke Boehmer argues that Lucy is presented as "always-already a creature of dumb animality" and displays "a continuation of subjection which it would be preposterous to propose as redemptive" (Boehmer 2002, 343). I disagree with Card and Boehmer. On the one hand, Card deprecates the humanist attitude and political awareness Lucy expresses as she "[is] determined to be a good mother" and confesses that leaving South Africa would mean to "taste the defeat for the rest of [her] life" (Coetzee 1999, 216). Lucy overcomes her feelings of betrayal and shame to raise a child of mixed ethnic background but one who shares the identity and nationality of a South African

man. In this way, the identity of the next generation is not at all obscured, but reshaped and humanized.

Lucy's humanist-political perception of her rape "as a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter" (Ibid., 112), is a direct result of her way of living. Unlike her father, who lives in an ivory tower and perceives his difference from other humans and species in terms of superiority and consequently deals with the Other in terms of "generosity, not because [he] feel[s] guilty or fear[s] retribution" (Ibid., 74), Lucy is sharing life with the Other. She "share[s] the dam" with Petrus, "share[s] her house and life" with her father, and even "share[s] some of [her] human privilege with the beasts" (Ibid., 75). Lucy's and David's attitudes towards the Other reflect a completely different perception of the meaning of difference and human rights in South Africa. Said distinguishes between two ideologies of difference. The first is an exclusionary ideology "as an instrument to relegate the rights of others to an inferior or lesser status" (Said 1985, 41), while the second is "an awareness of the supervening actuality of 'mixing', of crossing over, of stepping beyond boundaries, which are more creative human activities than staying inside rigidly policed borders" (Ibid., 43). Said explains further that the two ideologies are inevitably grounded in, or affiliated to, a particular historical moment and a specific political situation. Being the privileged citizen of the apartheid regime, David believes in the separation of the populations into different, unequal groups and, after the rape, he asks Lucy "to turn the farmhouse into a fortress" (Coetzee 1999, 113). Quite the opposite, Lucy's humanistic attitude enables her to practically manage the historical reality of her country. She tells David: "We have our weak moments, all of us, we are only human" (Ibid., 216). In addition to this, Elleke Boehmer ignores the huge pressure and long heritage of hatred and abuse systematically practised against women in South Africa and thus, in blaming Lucy as "a creature of dumb animality" (Boehmer 2002, 343), she insults hundreds of thousands if not millions of Black and coloured women who kept silent about their abuses and violations to protect their families and have sacrificed their dignity to meet their responsibilities. In contrast to Boehmer, I see Lucy's silence as a Coetzeean way of paying respect to the unreported past acts of rape committed upon innocent Black and coloured women in South Africa. By making his white, female character act as she does, Coetzee condemns "European culture's silence and compliance" (Said 1983, 136) with the imperialist project. Coetzee and Lucy achieve independence from "Western civilization and morals, the reversion of originality to silence by the way of repetition"

(*Ibid.*, 136). Silence and violation are no longer related to non-whites. Lucy willingly overcomes her Western belief in her own superiority.

Within such a corrupt and sexist social order, women in "Disgrace" enter into a fierce battle against the old and emerging oppressive power of collective institutions and polarizations. Despite the fact that David abuses both Melanie and Soraya, they are both able to gather themselves and fight David's aggression back. Soraya leaves the Escort Agency and when David harasses her, she is able to defend her private life and her two sons: "I demand you will never phone me here again, never" (Coetzee 1999, 9). Soraya's shrillness, like Melanie's complaint, surprises David, who asks "what should a predator expect when he intrudes into the vixen's nest" (*Ibid.*, 10). Melanie's awareness that David's sexual-political rape "cut [her] off from everyone" and "made me bear [his] secret", is a confession that she experiences a retreat from being "just a student" or a human being, and is reduced into "a body", a "sexual object" and "a passive victim" (Sharpe 1991, 225). Issuing the complaint, Melanie cuts her bondage to the past and moves on with her life. On seeing her acting in a new play, David reflects how "she is altogether surer of herself than before – in fact, good in the part, positively gifted. Is it possible that in the months he has been away she has grown up, found herself? [...] Perhaps she too has suffered, and come through" (Coetzee 1999, 191). Similarly, Lucy's peaceful compromise to stay on her land under the protection of Petrus, though humiliating and subjugating, provides a practical solution to her loneliness and diverts feelings of anger and revenge. Moreover, Lucy's condition that her marriage to Petrus is on paper only and does not include any sexual obligations is another blow against her society's gender polarization and its judgement of her being lesbian as "unnatural". In "The Cultural Politics of Female Sexuality in South Africa", Henriette Gunkel argues that "post-apartheid homophobia further highlights that contemporary homophobia is, in effect, reintroducing a colonialist and racist discourse of sexuality into a postcolonial project" (Gunkel 2010, 28). My argument is that Lucy's compromise, her political marriage to Petrus, is a challenge to such post-apartheid homophobia. Lucy's identity is no longer constructed or naturalized in a polarizing link between gender and sexuality. Being a lesbian, mother and wife is certainly part of Lucy's life experiences and choices but her identity is South African. In countries with an intense, long history of racial struggles like South Africa and Palestine, Edward Said holds that "the fundamental problem is [...] how to reconcile one's identity and the actualities of one's own culture, society, and history to the reality of other identities, cultures, peoples" (Said, 1994, 69). Through

her political decision to stay in South Africa, Lucy achieves the awareness that her “[racial] group is not a natural or God-given entity but is a constructed, manufactured, even in some cases an invented object” (Ibid., 25).

Furthermore, Lucy has been struggling with her sexual identity. She tells her father that she had a relationship in the past and had an abortion. However, she is currently a lesbian. In reading Lucy’s sexuality in relation to her position as a woman within the political transformation in post-apartheid South Africa, Coetzee not only challenges the literary and culturally formative stereotypical image of “the lesbian female figure [as a source of] disruption, horror, and bodily grotesqueness”, but also “reformulate[s] this image of the lesbian into a figure of revolution and change” (Farwell 1966, 17). Lucy is a figure of change on the personal and ideological levels. As Jacqui Alexander points out, “women’s sexual agency, [their] sexual and [their] erotic autonomy have always been troublesome for the state” (Alexander 1997, 65). They pose a challenge to the ideological anchor that the heterosexual family is the cornerstone of society and the solidarity of the nation. As a result, for the state, sex and gender are a means of disciplining of the body and the controlling of the population. In reinventing her sexual identity, Lucy revolts against the patriarchy of the white man. Nevertheless, under the new order, post-apartheid South Africa inherits the same oppressive sexual ideas. Both David and Petrus view Melanie and Lucy, respectively, through the lenses of the past traditions, according to which Melanie is a black sex slave and Lucy is a pervert. Alexander explains that “formerly conflated in the imaginary of the (white) imperial hetero-patriarch, the categories lesbian and prostitute now function together within Black hetero-patriarchy as outlaw, operating outside the boundaries of law and, therefore, poised to be disciplined and punished within it” (Alexander 1997, 65). The sexual objectification of Melanie and Lucy into passive victim and sexual tool, however painful and humiliating, does not deny these two women’s right to a new South African identity. In commenting on Coetzee’s characterization of female characters in his novels, Pamela Cooper asserts that through all of Coetzee’s books, “the potency of women is often bound up with their mysteriousness; their strength depends on their unreadability” (Cooper 2005, 27). I partially agree with Cooper. However, I think that the unreadability of Coetzee’s characters lies in the fact that Coetzee does not offer comfortable solutions; rather, he leaves space for readers to discover their own ethics of reading. Moreover, Cooper reduces women’s strength in the face of patriarchy to their “mysteriousness” while ignoring that it is their resilience

that helps them survive. The fact that Melanie, Soraya and Lucy are able to collect themselves after rape and abuse and to claim a right to land and to their humanness is an admirable sign of resistance, a humanist act of defiance and a demand for justice. It may be that they cannot save the nation from acts of depravity and anger but they do initiate change within the close circle of themselves and their families.

Coetzee complicates the ethical reading of acts of rape and salvation in the novel. Since telling the truth or confession implies either responsibility or relief, the fact that Lurie confesses responsibility to Melanie's family but not to Melanie herself leaves him guilt-stricken forever so that mentioning the name of Melanie "unsettles him" (Coetzee 1999, 190). Similarly, Lucy's refusal to tell the truth about the rape can be taken as identification with the sufferings of other women who have sacrificed a great deal to maintain their possession of a place in South Africa. Melanie, Soraya and Lucy learn to act in defence of their rights as human beings, starting with their right to land as owners and natives, not as secondary citizens or foreigners. Like Lucy and Melanie in "Disgrace", what Sarab really misses as a writer and a female individual is an unbiased and progressive literary atmosphere and not just Nael's support. Sarab's personal liberation as a woman is, then, inseparable from what Said calls "intellectual and literary resistance" (Said 1994, 86). Sarab's personal experience with Nael opens her eyes to the realities of her society and her ability as a human being equal with men to fight her own battle and produce her own vision. Sarab takes the crucial decision to leave Iraq for Paris, searching for a freer literary medium:

When I am sober and my mind is clear, I realize that I want to get on with trying to break out of my old siege. It is as though my soul were a fenced-in city surrounded by enemies, and breaking the siege means getting away to other cities, other horizons, other desires. (Jabra 1992, 95)

In inventing the character of Randa al-Jouzy, "as the rational, balanced, logical one, and Sarab as the one refusing to be rational, balanced, and logical", Sarab does not merely resist Nael's "cheap flirtation" but empowers her own intellectual/literary authority over her life in order to fight her enemies. She is 'a lover and an intruder' (Ibid., 186). Sarab, like Lucy, learns to be cautious, practical and independent. Melanie, Sarab and Lucy lack a thoughtful and understanding father-daughter relationship. Doctor Affan, David Lurie and Mr Isaacs, despite their high level of education and open-minded attitudes, are still traditional in their attitude towards women and

consequently are participants in the oppression and sufferings of their daughters. Sarab confesses that “my father, with all his medical knowledge, was living in one world and I in another. In the last few years the divide separating us grew even wider” (Ibid., 14). As a result of her fragmented and lonely life, Sarab decides “It is my story. [...] So let me revel in my powers, so long as I am the one with the pen” (Ibid., 44). The stereotypical idea that the male guardian; father, brother, lover or even the state is the controller and protector of the female individual is challenged and turns into a fantasy. Sarab delves deep to the roots of her feelings of “slavery and siege”, to discover that it is a straw political creation. As Evelyn Accad states “if sexuality is not incorporated into the main feminist and political agenda, the struggles for freedom will remain on a very superficial level. A problem cannot be solved without going to its roots” (Accad 1991, 243). Sarab discovers that political and cultural systems isolate her from the rest of the world, designating her as the enemy. At the beginning of the novel, she thinks that “life is atrocious” and “expect[s] little of the human condition” (Jabra 1992, 29). Yet, after her experimentation in writing and love, Sarab reaches the conclusion that her “society doomed [her] to spiritual and intellectual closedness” (Ibid., 103), and sees her salvation in exploring the political roots of her oppression by her “search for truth [...] truth confined between the self and the other” (Ibid., 103). Humanity is her refuge. She decides to “care about the ordeals of others” (Ibid., 41) and to share her personal suffering and hopes with them as well. In so doing, she finds personal salvation in love but also in action, seeking collective salvation.

Sarab’s political awareness is inseparable from her readings and re-evaluations of the realities of her society. Living in post-Ba’athist Iraq, Sarab’s life and daily experiences “are driven very much by sectarianism and the concomitant religious politics” (Susser 2010, 16). Susser analyses the expansion of Islamist movements and ideas in the Arab world in the 1980s and their cultural-political repercussions on concepts of freedom, democracy, and the position of women in society. He argues further that post-independence state secularist movements in the twentieth-century in the Arab world, “[have] failed to produce secular societies” and that the “increasing economic mismanagement and corruption and rising poverty and income inequality, undermined the legitimacy of Arab regimes, creating the impression that the modernization project was failing” (Susser 2010, 52). As a result, new religious movements with mass followings have emerged, proposing a political-social substitute, based on Islamic justice and equality. Islamic movements have spread all over the Arab world; starting with the Muslim Brotherhood in

Egypt, Syria and Algeria to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine. However, all these movements designate to women the traditional roles of housewives and mothers. Despite demographic variations, Carla Obermeyer agrees with Susser that "in contemporary Islamic societies the link between gender relations and political structures seems more inextricable than it is elsewhere" (Obermeyer 1992, 52). She continues:

Traditional roles may thus come to be endowed with a positive political significance, as when veiling is used to express opposition to a regime or when producing many children is a forceful statement in a political struggle. Women can be caught between two conflicting loyalties – to their fellow-women and to their nation and may sacrifice some of their rights as women to reaffirm their identity as Arabs, Muslims, or nationals of a given country. (Obermeyer 1992, 52)

Sarab's personal struggle between either submission to, or independence from Nael is repeated on the national level. She has either to conform to the accepted norms or to be seen by society as an aberrant. Sarab does not hold a middle ground. She realizes that fighting gender stereotypes, masculinist ideas, patriarchal systems and above all supporting the Palestinian cause are the real salvation for her lonely and desperate life. The Other she has been looking for an honest and true contact with is the unexplored horizons outside her limited zones of work and love. Sarab summarizes her need to revive her belief in humanity and the humanist bond between herself and people all over the world:

The language of human understanding is doomed, and the life force is generated only in the innermost cores. [...] The same ferocious cycle is renewed every day [...] robbing all human movement from its humanity and turning it into empty, mechanical motion. And finally the hormone of feeling begins to dissipate little by little, disappearing down an ever steepening slope, to the bottom of swamps, the swamps of slavery. (Jabra 1992, 103)

Sarab leaves Iraq to join the Palestinian political resistance. A year after her departure, Nael finds her studying inside the library of the Pantheon in Paris, enjoying an intellectual respite from her activities in Palestine. In their discussions, Sarab mentions that she is a member of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. The fact that Sarab chooses the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, is significant.

The PLO officially endorses a two-state solution, contingent on terms such as making East Jerusalem capital of the Palestinian state and giving Palestinians the right of return to land occupied by Palestinians prior to 1948 (Said 2001, 14). Supporting the PLO, Sarab stands against the strict Islamism endorsed by Hamas. Working with the PLO, Sarab tells Nael: “everything I’m doing pours into the Intifada, the Revolution of Stones – Thawra al-hagāra – the revolution that has baffled the world” (Jabra 1992, 185).

In judging Sarab’s political decision to join the Palestinian resistance movement, Nathaniel Greenberg argues that she, “is a kind of product of the elite world that Nael introduces her to” and that “Sarab’s catharsis as an admirer of literature to a committed reader and finally a ‘freedom fighter’, delineates an often overlooked character type of postcolonial Arabic literature that is universal in essence” (Greenberg 2010, 6). I partially agree with Greenberg: Sarab is a universal figure who adopts humanism as a means of defending human rights worldwide, but she is not a member of the elite. As Said indicates, “there’s no isolated humanist” (Said 2003, 3); Sarab is willing to go to the Other and to find common ground. Yet, she is not in any way isolated from her people, nor does she come from an affluent family. Like Lucy, Sarab works and supports herself. She is exposed to the daily hardships of Arab women and is deeply concerned with the causes of her people. Such experiences increase her awareness of the realities and challenges facing Arab women in modern times. In parallel with Said’s definition of the humanist, Evelyne Accad argues, in relation to the contemporary Middle East, that: “If nationalism remains at a sexist stage, and does not move beyond ownership and possessions as final goals, the cycle of hell will repeat itself and the violence will start all over again” (Accad 1991, 246). Sarab’s political activism is not merely a reaffirmation of the admirable and sacrificial role of Palestine and Arab women in the historical struggle of their countries against colonialism and patriarchy, but a secular humanist stance towards life. Rather than alienation and hostility to her time and different cultures, Sarab decides to be part of the history of her country and to define the “connection between [her]self and the rest of existence” (Jabra 1992, 18–19). In doing so, she symbolises Said’s vision of “a new leadership [which] is already in evidence; a leadership not completely based on tribal roots or the web of clan affiliations” (Said, 1993a, 112). Confident, educated, and above all open to “the realities of Israel [and] the world”, Sarab “radiate[s] a kind of hopeful security. [Her] *sumud* (resilience) is real, concrete, solid” (1993a, 112).

Sarab's choice of Paris as a centre of her Palestinian activism hints that she is more on the side of a peaceful settlement and the politicisation of the humanitarian calamities of the Palestinian people, than an advocate of isolation and violence. Furthermore, Sarab's activism in Paris can be seen as intentional choice for confronting Zionist lobbies and organisations in the West that, for example, have pressured the French to transfer a United Nations international conference on the Question of Palestine in 1983 from Paris to Geneva (Said 1984, 32). Sarab, like Lucy, chooses to fight the powers of patriarchy and sexism through love and humanity, but from outside her country. It is a forward thinking idea that challenges traditional Palestinian nationalist narrative that expects women to stay in Palestine. Still in the process of mobilizing international sympathy and belief in the right of Palestinian people to have authority over their land, Sarab is not concerned with personal possession of land but with the collective right of her oppressed, displaced and exiled people. Moreover, the spread of strict Islamist ideas and politics marks an upsetting retreat for Arab women and freedom seekers in the Arab world. This fact encourages Sarab to fight for her cause from secular Paris. When Nael asks her to return to Iraq, she says:

Do you want me to go back to compulsion, blindness, and this accursed individualism in everything, the affliction of all Arabs? I'm here in the heart of everything now, and living life the way I like. [...] I'm breaking the siege and setting myself free, every day. And I write. I write a lot, and I don't need to put the scissors today to what I wrote yesterday, as I used to do every day, fearing some ignorant, unknown reader. (Jabra 1992, 185)

Impassioned and practical Sarab, like Lucy in "Disgrace", comes to represent the spirit of action missing from Arab society. In their final conversation Sarab explains: "can't you see, Nael, I've decided I would only face death with my full volition, when I'm still fully in control of my mental and physical faculties?" (Ibid., 186). Again, everything in life, including facing death, is not an emotional endeavour, but an intellectual one. Sarab's devotion to the Palestinian cause, like Melanie's and Lucy's struggles, is affirmative of the right of freedom and justice for all human beings. These female characters are acculturated into inferiority, but they are strong enough to re-accurturate themselves as equal human beings with men.

CONCLUSION

Coetzee's "Disgrace" (1999) and Jabra's "The Journals of Sarab Affan" (1992) suggest a decade of political transformation in South Africa and Palestine, respectively. Nevertheless, it is not by any means easy to identify the broader sweeps of such political transformation in the two countries. In post-apartheid South Africa or the "The Rainbow Nation", persistent political efforts have been meant to build a society of reconciliation, introducing multicultural diversity, interracial harmony and social equality. However, the desired transformations in the socio-political situation are far from real and the old inequalities, together with apartheid institutions, are actually still latent and effective. Similarly, late-1980s and early-1990s Palestine witnessed political troubles and fierce resistance against Zionist aggression. The First Intifada, the rise of Hamas and the divided opinions of Arab countries in relation to Israeli administration, along with the rise of political Islamism mark a turning point in the life of liberal and secular Arab writers and intellectuals, particularly women. Lucy and Melanie in "Disgrace" are educated women and have a reasonable degree of economic stability and independence. Their main challenge is a purely ideological fight for recognition of their humanness. Similarly, Sarab in "The Journal of Sarab Affan", is a determined, knowledgeable and independent woman who interweaves her personal interests and aims with the political conditions of her society. Female characters in the two novels share the admirable ability to balance and control their physical and mental faculties, even after violation and abuse. They know exactly what they want to do with their lives and choose to pursue their personal dreams. Rather than entering into useless conflicts with their male guardians and patriarchal society, they figure out a means to end patriarchal domination and coercion against them.

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