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Restorative Justice in Post-Apartheid Narratives: Tutu's The Book of Forgiving and Coetzee's Disgrace

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Abstract

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Restorative justice, an approach to addressing harm that prioritizes healing, accountability, and the restoration of relationships over punishment, has been pivotal in framing post-apartheid South Africa, particularly through the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). This study examines the representations of restorative justice in Desmond Tutu's *The Book of Forgiving* and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. While Tutu advances a prescriptive and hopeful model of forgiveness as central to both personal and national healing, Coetzee offers a more critical perspective that undermines the moral and social limitations of reconciliation in a society still haunted by systemic violence and inequality. This comparative research explores how both texts engage with the ideals and contradictions of restorative justice, revealing the complex interplay between forgiveness, justice, and the lingering wounds of apartheid.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Apartheid in South Africa (1948–1994) was a legal and social system designed to enforce racial segregation, resulting in widespread systemic violence, inequality, and deep-seated societal trauma. The dismantling of apartheid in the early 1990s, culminating in the democratic election of Nelson Mandela in 1994, marked a significant political transformation. However, the legacy of institutionalized racism, economic disparity, and social fragmentation persisted, necessitating mechanisms for national reconciliation.

One of the primary responses to this challenge was the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1995. The TRC was based on the principles of restorative justice, a model that prioritizes healing and reconciliation over punitive measures. Under the leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the commission provided a platform for victims to share their experiences and for perpetrators to seek amnesty in exchange for full disclosure of their crimes. The TRC's approach was rooted in the belief that truth-telling and forgiveness could serve as foundational pillars for rebuilding the nation.

However, the efficacy of restorative justice in addressing deeply entrenched inequalities and ongoing violence has been a subject of debate. While many view the TRC as a moral and ethical triumph, others argue that it fell short in delivering material justice and structural reform. Literature has played a significant role in reflecting and critiquing these dynamics, with works like Desmond Tutu's *The Book of Forgiving* advocating for the power of forgiveness and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* presenting a more cynical, unsettling portrayal of post-apartheid justice.

2. THESIS STATEMENT

This research explores the representation of restorative justice in *The Book of Forgiving* and *Disgrace*, examining how these texts engage with themes of forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice in post-apartheid South Africa. While Tutu offers a hopeful, prescriptive vision of forgiveness as a path to healing, Coetzee critiques the limitations of restorative justice in a society still grappling with systemic inequality and violence. By comparing these two perspectives, this study seeks to highlight the complexities and contradictions inherent in the post-apartheid reconciliation process.

The Book of Forgiving: A Vision of Healing Through Forgiveness

Desmond Tutu's *The Book of Forgiving* presents forgiveness as an essential and transformative act, both for individuals and society. Tutu, drawing on his experience with the TRC, argues that forgiveness is not just a moral or spiritual duty but a pragmatic necessity for moving beyond the past. The book is structured as a guide, offering a fourfold path to forgiveness:

1. **Telling the Story** – Acknowledging the harm done and bringing the truth to light.
2. **Naming the Hurt** – Identifying and validating the pain experienced by victims.
3. **Granting Forgiveness** – Making a conscious choice to forgive the wrongdoer.
4. **Renewing or Releasing the Relationship** – Deciding whether to rebuild the relationship or move forward separately.

Tutu emphasizes that forgiveness does not mean forgetting or excusing wrongdoing; rather, it is about breaking the cycle of revenge and fostering collective healing. He provides real-life examples from the TRC, showcasing moments where victims forgave their perpetrators, highlighting the cathartic and redemptive power of this process.

The book also underscores the interconnectedness of humanity, invoking the African philosophy of *ubuntu*, which asserts that “a person is a person through other people.” According to this philosophy, reconciliation is not just about the individual but about restoring the moral and social fabric of the community.

However, Tutu's vision has been criticized for being overly idealistic. Critics argue that while forgiveness is a noble goal, it does not address the socio-economic disparities that continue to define post-apartheid South Africa. Without material reparations and systemic change, forgiveness alone cannot rectify historical injustices. This critique is further developed in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, which presents a starkly different view of post-apartheid reconciliation.

Disgrace: The Limits of Restorative Justice

J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* offers a deeply unsettling counterpoint to Tutu's optimistic vision of forgiveness and reconciliation. The novel, set in post-apartheid South Africa, follows David Lurie, a disgraced university professor, as he moves to the Eastern Cape to live with his daughter, Lucy. The novel explores themes of power, guilt, retribution, and racial tensions, ultimately presenting a grim picture of a society struggling with the unresolved legacies of apartheid.

One of the most harrowing moments in the novel is Lucy's rape by three Black men, an event that echoes the racialized violence of South Africa's past. However, rather than seeking justice in conventional terms, Lucy refuses to report the crime, choosing instead to remain silent and accept her fate. This silence reflects a broader resignation—a recognition that justice, as traditionally understood, may not be attainable in the new South Africa.

Lurie's own transformation mirrors the broader questions surrounding restorative justice. Initially arrogant and dismissive of accountability, he gradually comes to accept his own disgrace, working in an animal clinic where he helps euthanize suffering dogs. This act of quiet, anonymous service contrasts with the grand narrative of reconciliation promoted by the TRC. Whereas Tutu's model emphasizes active forgiveness, Coetzee's novel suggests that reconciliation may require a more subdued, introspective form of atonement.

Unlike *The Book of Forgiving*, which sees forgiveness as an act of agency and empowerment, *Disgrace* portrays it as an ambiguous, even painful, necessity. Coetzee's vision is devoid of grand moral resolutions, instead acknowledging the enduring scars of the past. The novel suggests that true reconciliation may not be possible when systemic inequalities remain unresolved and that forgiveness, if it occurs, is a deeply personal and often silent act rather than a public or political process.

Comparative Analysis: Forgiveness vs. Structural Change

The contrast between *The Book of Forgiving* and *Disgrace* highlights the broader tension within post-apartheid South Africa's approach to restorative justice. Tutu's model emphasizes moral and emotional healing, urging individuals to transcend their pain for the sake of national unity. Coetzee, however, interrogates the limits of this approach, arguing that without addressing material inequalities and systemic violence, reconciliation remains incomplete.

The TRC's reliance on narrative testimony and forgiveness has been criticized for prioritizing symbolic justice over tangible restitution. While some victims found catharsis in storytelling, others felt that the process absolved perpetrators without ensuring accountability or reparations. *Disgrace* embodies this critique, illustrating how restorative justice, when detached from structural change, can leave underlying tensions unresolved.

Ultimately, these two texts present complementary perspectives: Tutu offers a vision of what South Africa could aspire to, while Coetzee serves as a sobering reminder of the difficulties and limitations of achieving true reconciliation.

Restorative justice in post-apartheid South Africa remains a complex and contested issue. *The Book of Forgiving* and *Disgrace* provide two contrasting yet interrelated perspectives on the possibilities and limitations of forgiveness. Tutu's work champions reconciliation as a moral imperative, whereas Coetzee's novel underscores the lingering trauma and unresolved inequalities that challenge simplistic narratives of healing. By engaging with these texts, we gain a deeper understanding of the ethical, social, and political dimensions of justice in a country still reckoning with its past.

3. Review of Literature

The intersection of restorative justice, forgiveness, and post-apartheid literature has been widely explored by scholars seeking to understand how narrative can contribute to processes of reconciliation and collective healing. Much of this discourse is rooted in South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy and the moral vision articulated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

Restorative justice in theory and practice has been framed primarily through the works of Howard Zehr (1990, 2002), who redefines justice as a process centered on healing relationships rather than administering punishment. His model influenced global reconciliation efforts, including the South African TRC, which aimed to restore social harmony through truth-telling and forgiveness. Scholars such as Martha Minow (1998) and Audrey Chapman and Hugo van der Merwe (2008) extend this discussion by examining how restorative justice can both heal and fail—particularly when it emphasizes symbolic over material forms of justice. Their insights underline the tension between moral ideals and the socio-political realities of post-conflict societies.

In the South African context, Desmond Tutu's writings (*No Future Without Forgiveness*, 1999; *The Book of Forgiving*, 2014) have served as foundational texts articulating the spiritual and ethical underpinnings of forgiveness. Tutu's theological vision of reconciliation, informed by Christian ethics and the African philosophy of ubuntu, views forgiveness as a necessary act for national survival. Scholars such as John de Gruchy (2002) and Charles Villa-Vicencio (2009) have analyzed how Tutu's advocacy of forgiveness provided a moral vocabulary for post-apartheid reconstruction, even as critics argue that his vision risks depoliticizing structural injustices.

Literary studies have interrogated these debates by exploring how fiction reflects and critiques post-apartheid justice. J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* has become a central text in this discourse. Critics like David Attwell (2005) and Sue Kossew (2009) read the novel as a meditation on guilt, shame, and the fragility of moral transformation in the aftermath of apartheid. Rita Barnard (2007) and Lucy Graham (2003) highlight how Coetzee complicates the idea of reconciliation by portraying forgiveness not as redemption but as endurance and silence, exposing the limitations of restorative justice when power inequalities persist.

In contrast, Tutu's *The Book of Forgiving* has been analyzed in theological and peace studies as a pragmatic extension of the TRC's philosophy. Anthony Balcomb (2012) and Tinyiko Maluleke (2001) emphasize that Tutu's model situates forgiveness as both a personal and political act grounded in relational ethics. However, feminist and trauma theorists such as Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (2003) and Judith Butler (2005) argue that forgiveness cannot be universalized without acknowledging asymmetries of power, gender, and historical trauma.

From a broader theoretical lens, postcolonial and trauma studies (Fanon 1961; Caruth 1996; Herman 1992) contribute critical perspectives on how violence disrupts identity and memory. These frameworks reveal that reconciliation narratives must grapple not only with moral transformation but also with the psychological and material residues of oppression.

Collectively, the existing literature shows a persistent tension between forgiveness as moral necessity and justice as structural reform. While Tutu's work celebrates forgiveness as the foundation for healing, Coetzee's *Disgrace* and related critical responses insist that reconciliation remains incomplete without addressing economic inequality, trauma, and gendered violence. This study builds on these debates by reading *The Book of Forgiving* and *Disgrace* as dialogic texts—one offering a prescriptive moral vision of restorative justice, and the other exposing its limitations within the fractured realities of post-apartheid South Africa.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates restorative justice theory, forgiveness and reconciliation studies, and insights from postcolonial and trauma theory. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive lens for analyzing how Desmond Tutu's *The Book of Forgiving* and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* engage with the moral, social, and psychological complexities of healing in post-apartheid South Africa.

4.1 Restorative Justice Theory

At its core, restorative justice emphasizes repairing harm and restoring relationships rather than imposing punishment. Howard Zehr (1990, 2002), one of the leading theorists of the movement, defines it as a process involving victims, offenders, and communities in addressing the harm caused by wrongdoing and finding pathways toward healing. This model informed the principles of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which sought to replace retribution with truth-telling, accountability, and forgiveness. Archbishop Desmond Tutu's interpretation of restorative justice, articulated in *No Future Without Forgiveness* (1999) and *The Book of Forgiving* (2014), positions forgiveness as both a spiritual and pragmatic act necessary for rebuilding national unity. His approach draws on the African philosophy of ubuntu, which holds that a person's humanity is realized through others. However, critics such as Martha Minow (1998) and Audrey Chapman (2008) contend that restorative justice, when institutionalized, can risk privileging symbolic reconciliation over material justice. This tension between moral healing and structural inequity forms the conceptual backdrop for this study.

4.2 Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Forgiveness, as a moral and psychological process, occupies a central place within restorative justice. Hannah Arendt (1958) identifies forgiveness as essential to breaking cycles of vengeance and enabling new beginnings, while Jacques Derrida (2001) views forgiveness as inherently paradoxical—unconditional in theory but constrained by political and ethical realities. These perspectives illuminate the contrast between Tutu's prescriptive vision of universal forgiveness and Coetzee's depiction of its moral ambiguity. From a psychological standpoint, forgiveness has been associated with emotional release and improved well-being (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Yet, within post-conflict societies, forgiveness also carries political weight. In *Disgrace*, forgiveness appears not as empowerment but as resignation, challenging the notion that

reconciliation can emerge purely from moral will. The study thus positions forgiveness as both an ethical aspiration and a contested site of power, shaped by historical trauma and social inequality.

4.3 Postcolonial and Trauma Theory

To understand how restorative justice is negotiated in literature, this study also draws on postcolonial and trauma theory. Frantz Fanon (1961) argues that colonial and racial violence leave deep psychological wounds that cannot be healed through moral appeals alone but require structural transformation. Cathy Caruth (1996) and Judith Herman (1992) expand this discussion by showing how trauma resists narrative closure, manifesting through silence, repetition, and fragmentation. In *The Book of Forgiving*, trauma is addressed through structured storytelling and acknowledgment, reflecting faith in narrative as a means of healing. Conversely, in *Disgrace*, trauma is expressed through silence and emotional dislocation—Lucy’s refusal to articulate her pain signals the limits of narrative and justice in a fractured society. Reading both texts through these frameworks reveals the complex interplay between personal healing and collective responsibility in post-apartheid discourse.

4.4 Synthesis

Together, these theoretical perspectives establish a framework for examining how forgiveness and justice function not merely as moral ideals but as socially and politically contingent processes. Restorative justice provides the ethical foundation; postcolonial and trauma theories expose its limitations in the face of historical inequality. This combination enables a nuanced reading of Tutu’s idealism and Coetzee’s skepticism, showing how literature both reaffirms and interrogates the moral ambitions of reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa.

5. THE BOOK OF FORGIVING: A VISION OF HEALING THROUGH FORGIVENESS

5.1 Introduction

Desmond Tutu’s *The Book of Forgiving* (2014) is a deeply personal and philosophical exploration of forgiveness as a transformative force for both individuals and societies. Rooted in his experience as chairperson of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Tutu presents forgiveness as the essential ingredient for healing in a post-conflict society. His work offers a structured model—the *fourfold path to forgiveness*—that serves as a moral and practical guide for reconciliation. This section examines the key ideas presented in Tutu’s text, its relationship to restorative justice and the TRC, and its limitations within the socio-political realities of post-apartheid South Africa.

5.2 Overview of *The Book of Forgiving*

Tutu’s framework for forgiveness consists of four sequential steps:

1. Telling the Story – bringing past harms into the open.
2. Naming the Hurt – acknowledging and validating the pain experienced by victims.
3. Granting Forgiveness – choosing to forgive, not as an act of condoning but as liberation.
4. Renewing or Releasing the Relationship – deciding whether to rebuild or move forward separately.

He emphasizes that forgiveness is not synonymous with forgetting or excusing wrongdoing. Rather, it allows individuals to “remember—the hurt, the betrayal, the loss—without allowing it to control us” (*The Book of Forgiving*, 2014). In this sense, forgiveness becomes a means of reclaiming personal agency. Co-authored with his daughter, Mpho Tutu van Furth, the book merges spiritual, psychological, and therapeutic dimensions, framing forgiveness as an act of self-liberation independent of the wrongdoer’s remorse.

5.3 Restorative Justice in Tutu’s Framework

Tutu situates forgiveness within the broader philosophy of restorative justice, which seeks healing through truth-telling and relationship repair rather than retribution. He views storytelling as a cornerstone of this process, asserting that being heard is itself deeply restorative:

“There is nothing more difficult than realizing that you have been heard. It is deeply healing when someone listens to your pain.” (*The Book of Forgiving*, 2014)

This view aligns with Howard Zehr's model of restorative justice, which emphasizes healing and community restoration over punishment (*Changing Lenses*, 1990). The TRC embodied these principles by creating a space where victims could share their stories and perpetrators could confess their crimes.

However, storytelling and acknowledgment alone do not guarantee justice. Critics such as Lyn Graybill (2002) and Audrey Chapman (2008) argue that restorative justice can shift the emotional burden to victims, who are encouraged to forgive without receiving material reparations or structural redress. In this regard, Tutu's model reflects the broader tension within South Africa's post-apartheid context—between moral healing and economic justice.

5.4 Forgiveness as a Tool for Personal and Societal Transformation

Tutu presents forgiveness not only as a moral virtue but as a pragmatic necessity for national survival. "Without forgiveness, there is no future," he declares (*No Future Without Forgiveness*, 1999). His philosophy is deeply influenced by ubuntu, the African concept that emphasizes communal interdependence—"a person is a person through other people." In this framework, reconciliation transcends the individual and becomes a collective moral responsibility. Forgiveness, then, operates as both personal empowerment and societal reconstruction. Yet, as Mahmood Mamdani (2001) observes, truth-telling without systemic transformation risks reproducing inequality. While Tutu's TRC promoted emotional healing, it did not dismantle the economic hierarchies that apartheid entrenched. Consequently, forgiveness in this model may function as a moral bandage over structural wounds that remain unhealed.

5.5 Tutu's Experiences with the TRC

Tutu's faith in forgiveness was shaped by his direct involvement in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established in 1995 to address human rights violations under apartheid. The TRC granted amnesty to perpetrators who made full disclosures, prioritizing truth and healing over punishment. Tutu recounts moments of extraordinary grace during these hearings—such as a mother forgiving the officers who murdered her son, declaring, "I forgive you so that I can free myself." Such stories, for Tutu, illustrate the capacity of forgiveness to restore human dignity and interrupt cycles of hatred. Yet, the TRC's achievements were accompanied by significant shortcomings. Many victims received acknowledgment but no reparations, leading critics like Chapman (2008) to argue that "truth without justice is an incomplete form of reconciliation." Moreover, the Commission's focus on individual acts of violence overlooked broader structural injustices such as land dispossession and economic inequality. These gaps raise critical questions about whether forgiveness alone can rebuild a just society.

5.6 Critique of Tutu's Vision

While Tutu's theology of forgiveness remains morally compelling, it has been critiqued as overly idealistic. Martha Minow (1998) contends that forgiveness cannot be imposed or morally mandated; victims must not be pressured to absolve offenders. In contexts of persistent inequality, urging forgiveness may inadvertently reinforce injustice. Similarly, Judith Butler (2005) argues that acts of forgiveness are shaped by power relations—those who are expected to forgive often occupy less empowered positions. The limitations of Tutu's optimism become particularly visible when read alongside J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, where Lucy's silence after her assault reflects a society where forgiveness offers no real justice. Her endurance exposes the emotional costs of reconciliation in the absence of equality. Beyond South Africa, similar tensions have been noted in other post-conflict societies. In Rwanda, the *gacaca* courts encouraged community reconciliation after genocide, yet many survivors found forgiveness unattainable (Clark, 2010). In Argentina, families of the disappeared have resisted state-imposed narratives of forgiveness, demanding accountability instead (Feitlowitz, 1998). These examples underscore the difficulty of universalizing forgiveness as a moral or political solution.

5.7 Conclusion

Tutu's *The Book of Forgiving* articulates a powerful vision of moral and spiritual renewal through forgiveness. His *fourfold path* provides a practical structure for personal and collective healing, rooted in truth-telling, acknowledgment, and the philosophy of ubuntu. Yet, while Tutu's framework has inspired many, it risks idealizing forgiveness in a context still marked by inequality and trauma. Truth alone cannot substitute for justice; reconciliation without material redress remains incomplete.

Tutu's vision thus stands as both a beacon of hope and a moral challenge. It invites South Africa—and humanity—to believe in the redemptive potential of forgiveness, while reminding us that true peace demands structural transformation. The next section examines how J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* interrogates these ideals, exposing the limits of restorative justice in a fractured, post-apartheid society.

6. DISGRACE: THE LIMITS OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

6.1 Overview and Summary

The novel begins in Cape Town, where David Lurie, a 52-year-old professor of Romantic poetry, is forced to resign from his university position after an affair with his student, Melanie Isaacs. He refuses to show contrition during his disciplinary hearing, insisting, "*I was enriched by the experience.*" His lack of remorse sets the tone for the novel's interrogation of power, accountability, and moral responsibility. Following his disgrace, Lurie retreats to the Eastern Cape to live with his daughter, Lucy, who runs a small farm. His exile is marked by his growing discomfort with the racial and economic shifts occurring in post-apartheid South Africa. The pivotal moment in the novel occurs when three Black men attack Lucy's farm, gang-rape her, and set Lurie on fire. Lucy's response to the crime is shocking—she chooses not to report the attack, accepts her fate, and later submits to becoming the unofficial wife of her Black neighbor, Petrus, who offers her "protection" in exchange for her land.

6.2 Key Themes: Power, Vulnerability, and the Aftermath of Violence

Coetzee's novel presents power as something deeply fluid, shifting unpredictably in the new South Africa. Lurie, who once wielded power over his student Melanie, finds himself powerless in the face of the attack on his daughter. Lucy, too, experiences a dramatic reversal of power, moving from an independent farm owner to a woman dependent on her attacker's associate, Petrus, for survival.

Vulnerability is central to *Disgrace*. Lurie initially refuses to acknowledge his own culpability in exploiting Melanie, but after witnessing his daughter's trauma, he begins to understand the weight of shame, powerlessness, and victimhood. However, the novel suggests that vulnerability alone does not lead to justice—rather, it reinforces the precarious position of those who, like Lucy, are left to negotiate survival in an unbalanced society.

6.3 Lucy's Decision to Forgive Her Attackers

One of the most perplexing aspects of the novel is Lucy's decision not to seek justice for her rape. Rather than reporting the crime or attempting to hold her attackers accountable, she remains silent, stating:

"What happened to me is a purely private matter. It has nothing to do with anyone else, and least of all with the law."

Her words signal a fundamental break from the logic of restorative justice, which emphasizes truth-telling and accountability as prerequisites for reconciliation. Lucy's silence represents a painful form of resignation rather than empowerment.

Restorative justice scholars argue that true reconciliation requires acknowledgment from perpetrators. As Desmond Tutu writes in *The Book of Forgiving*:

"Without truth, forgiveness is an empty gesture."

However, in *Disgrace*, Lucy's attackers never acknowledge their crime, and she does not demand an apology. This absence of accountability challenges the optimistic framework of restorative justice, suggesting that in a deeply unequal society, forgiveness may be nothing more than forced endurance.

6.4 David Lurie's Struggle with Guilt, Shame, and Forgiveness

Lurie's character arc mirrors the novel's broader interrogation of justice and moral reckoning. Initially, he is dismissive of remorse, refusing to acknowledge the harm he caused Melanie. However, his experiences in the Eastern Cape force him to confront his own disgrace. His transformation is symbolized by his work at the animal clinic, where he helps euthanize unwanted dogs. Lurie's care for the animals becomes an act of quiet atonement, yet it offers no clear redemption. As he prepares to euthanize one dog at the novel's conclusion, he reflects:

“Yes, I am giving him up.”

The moment is ambiguous—does Lurie finally accept responsibility for his past, or does he merely resign himself to the impossibility of justice? Unlike Tutu’s vision of restorative justice, which sees forgiveness as a path to healing, *Disgrace* leaves open the question of whether forgiveness can ever truly lead to redemption.

6.5 Critique of Restorative Justice in *Disgrace*

Skepticism About the Effectiveness of Forgiveness

Coetzee’s novel suggests that forgiveness, when unaccompanied by justice, is often meaningless. While Tutu envisions forgiveness as a moral necessity for healing, *Disgrace* portrays it as a survival mechanism that ultimately reinforces existing power structures. Mahmood Mamdani’s *When Victims Become Killers* (2001) critiques post-conflict reconciliation efforts that prioritize symbolic gestures over substantive justice. Coetzee’s novel echoes this critique, showing that without economic and legal reforms, forgiveness does little to address systemic inequalities.

The Tension Between Individual Forgiveness and Systemic Change

Lucy’s decision to forgive is deeply personal, but it has broader political implications. By refusing to demand justice, she passively reinforces the existing power dynamics in post-apartheid South Africa. This tension highlights a fundamental flaw in restorative justice: while it can facilitate healing at an individual level, it does little to dismantle systemic oppression. Howard Zehr, a leading scholar in restorative justice, argues that true justice requires addressing structural inequalities, not just interpersonal harm (*The Little Book of Restorative Justice*, 2002). Yet *Disgrace* suggests that in a deeply fractured society, individual acts of forgiveness may serve as a distraction from the larger, unresolved injustices.

6.6 Symbolism and Ambiguity in *Disgrace*

The Role of Land as a Metaphor for Power and Dispossession

Land ownership serves as a key symbol in *Disgrace*. Lucy, a white South African woman, initially owns her farm, but by the novel’s end, she is reduced to a dependent tenant under Petrus. This shift reflects the broader redistribution of power in post-apartheid South Africa. However, rather than portraying land redistribution as a form of justice, Coetzee presents it as an uneasy compromise—one in which historical grievances are acknowledged, but not truly resolved.

Animals as Symbols of Vulnerability and Moral Reckoning

Lurie’s work at the animal shelter serves as a metaphor for human suffering. The abandoned dogs represent the expendability of the powerless in South African society, while Lurie’s care for them symbolizes his own moral awakening. However, his ultimate act of euthanasia suggests that some forms of suffering—like the legacy of apartheid—cannot be healed, only endured.

6.7 Coetzee’s Vision of Reconciliation as Incomplete and Unsettling Process

Disgrace ends without resolution. Lucy remains on the farm, Lurie continues his work at the animal clinic, and no justice is ever served. This ambiguity forces readers to confront the uncomfortable reality that reconciliation may be an ongoing, incomplete process rather than a singular moment of closure. Unlike *The Book of Forgiving*, which offers a prescriptive model for healing, *Disgrace* leaves open the possibility that justice may never be fully achieved. In doing so, Coetzee presents a powerful critique of restorative justice, questioning whether forgiveness alone can ever truly rectify the deep wounds of history.

“Where Tutu’s framework offers hope grounded in moral transformation, Coetzee’s narrative exposes the fragility of that hope within the unresolved realities of post-apartheid life. The following section contrasts these visions to evaluate the broader implications of restorative justice in South African literature.”

7. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS – CONTRASTING VISIONS OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN TUTU AND COETZEE

7.1 Introduction

Desmond Tutu’s *The Book of Forgiving* (2014) and J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999) present two contrasting visions of forgiveness and restorative justice in post-apartheid South Africa. Both texts engage with the

aftermath of historical trauma, exploring the potential and limitations of reconciliation. However, while Tutu offers a prescriptive and hopeful model of forgiveness, Coetzee presents a more ambiguous and critical portrayal, questioning whether true justice can be achieved in a society still marred by systemic inequality and unresolved racial tensions. This section provides a comparative analysis of these two texts, focusing on their shared themes, their divergent perspectives on forgiveness and justice, and their broader implications for post-apartheid South Africa and other post-conflict societies. By examining their literary and philosophical approaches, this analysis seeks to illuminate the ongoing debates about the feasibility of restorative justice in deeply divided societies.

7.2 Shared Themes: The Complexities of Forgiveness and Healing

Forgiveness as a Personal and Political Act

Both *The Book of Forgiving* and *Disgrace* explore the role of forgiveness in personal and collective healing. Tutu sees forgiveness as essential for breaking cycles of resentment and revenge. He argues:

"Forgiveness is not just an altruistic act; it is the best form of self-interest. It is how we free ourselves from the past." (*The Book of Forgiving*, 2014)

For Tutu, forgiveness is both a moral imperative and a pragmatic necessity. By choosing to forgive, individuals reclaim their agency and refuse to be defined by their suffering. This view aligns with the principles of restorative justice, which emphasize healing and reconciliation over punishment.

In contrast, *Disgrace* portrays forgiveness as fraught with ambiguity. Lucy's decision to forgive her rapists is not framed as an act of moral triumph but as one of survival and resignation. She states:

"Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing."

Her words suggest that forgiveness, in her case, is not a freely chosen act of grace but rather a concession to the harsh realities of post-apartheid South Africa. Unlike Tutu's vision, which sees forgiveness as a means of restoring dignity, Coetzee presents it as an act of endurance in a world where justice remains elusive.

The Challenge of Healing After Trauma

Both texts acknowledge that healing is not a linear process. Tutu's *fourfold path to forgiveness*—Telling the Story, Naming the Hurt, Granting Forgiveness, and Renewing or Releasing the Relationship—provides a structured framework for moving forward. He emphasizes the power of storytelling in the healing process, stating:

"There is nothing more difficult than realizing that you have been heard. It is deeply healing when someone listens to your pain."

This perspective aligns with psychological studies on trauma recovery, which suggest that narrativizing pain can be a crucial step in overcoming it (Herman, 1992). However, *Disgrace* complicates this idea by showing that storytelling alone does not always lead to resolution. Lucy refuses to speak about her assault, and Lurie, despite his attempts to process his shame and guilt, remains adrift. The novel challenges the assumption that confronting trauma necessarily results in healing, suggesting instead that some wounds remain open.

II. Divergent Perspectives on Forgiveness and Justice

Tutu's Optimistic, Prescriptive Approach

Tutu's approach to forgiveness is deeply rooted in Christian theology and the African philosophy of *ubuntu*, which emphasizes communal interdependence. He believes that no crime is beyond forgiveness, stating:

"There is nothing that cannot be forgiven, and there is no one undeserving of forgiveness."

His view is reflected in the workings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which sought to heal South Africa's divisions through truth-telling and amnesty rather than retributive justice. Tutu saw this process as a necessary step toward national unity. However, critics argue that this vision of forgiveness is overly idealistic. Mahmood Mamdani (2001) critiques the TRC for focusing on individual perpetrators rather than addressing the structural inequalities left behind by apartheid. This critique is reflected in *Disgrace*, which shows how racial and economic disparities persist despite efforts at reconciliation.

Coetzee's Ambiguous, Critical Stance

Unlike Tutu, Coetzee does not offer a clear resolution to the question of forgiveness. In *Disgrace*, forgiveness is portrayed as deeply problematic, shaped by power dynamics and historical grievances. Lucy's silence after her rape and her willingness to submit to Petrus's authority highlight the limits of restorative justice in a world where power structures remain unchanged. Her decision to stay on the farm under these conditions is not framed as a choice but as an acceptance of her powerlessness. Lurie's character arc also complicates traditional narratives of redemption. His work at the animal clinic, where he helps euthanize abandoned dogs, suggests a form of atonement, but it is a quiet, almost futile one. The novel ends with Lurie preparing to euthanize a dog, a moment that symbolizes his resignation rather than his transformation. Unlike Tutu's framework, which sees forgiveness as a path to liberation, Coetzee presents it as an ambiguous and often painful necessity.

III. The Role of Structural Inequality in Shaping Restorative Justice

Forgiveness Without Justice?

One of the major tensions between *The Book of Forgiving* and *Disgrace* is the question of whether forgiveness is meaningful in the absence of structural justice. Tutu's model assumes that forgiveness can coexist with accountability, but Coetzee challenges this assumption by showing how unresolved economic and racial inequalities continue to shape post-apartheid South Africa. As Lucy's attack demonstrates, the legacy of apartheid cannot simply be erased through acts of personal forgiveness. The power dynamics remain deeply entrenched, and victims are often left to navigate their suffering alone. This critique aligns with postcolonial theorists like Frantz Fanon, who argues that reconciliation is meaningless without material reparations (*The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961).

8. CONCLUSION

Restorative justice in post-apartheid South Africa embodies both a moral aspiration and a lived contradiction. As this study has shown through the comparative analysis of Desmond Tutu's *The Book of Forgiving* (2014) and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), forgiveness and reconciliation remain deeply contested within the nation's struggle to heal from historical trauma. Both texts emerge from the same ethical landscape—the aftermath of apartheid and the legacy of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)—yet they envision radically different paths toward justice.

Tutu's work represents the ideal of restorative justice, grounded in Christian theology, the African philosophy of *ubuntu*, and the moral conviction that “there is no future without forgiveness.” His *fourfold path* offers a prescriptive model of healing that emphasizes truth-telling, acknowledgment, and the transformation of pain into collective hope. In this vision, forgiveness becomes both a spiritual and pragmatic act—a way to reclaim humanity and rebuild fractured relationships.

In contrast, Coetzee's *Disgrace* exposes the fragility and incompleteness of this vision. Through Lucy's silence and Lurie's moral disillusionment, the novel reveals that forgiveness, in the absence of justice and equality, often becomes a form of endurance rather than liberation. Coetzee's narrative rejects the promise of moral closure, depicting a society where reconciliation is undermined by persistent power asymmetries, economic disparities, and the haunting memory of violence.

Together, these texts illustrate the paradox at the heart of restorative justice: it seeks healing through forgiveness, yet it cannot succeed without structural transformation. The moral call to forgive, as Tutu envisions, risks losing its integrity when systemic injustices remain unresolved. Coetzee's critique does not dismiss the possibility of reconciliation but insists that genuine healing requires more than symbolic gestures—it demands accountability, redistribution, and recognition of enduring inequalities.

Ultimately, *The Book of Forgiving* and *Disgrace* represent two moral poles of post-apartheid discourse. Tutu offers the blueprint for what South Africa might aspire to be—a nation reconciled through compassion and truth. Coetzee, conversely, reminds us of what it still is—a society struggling under the weight of its history, where forgiveness cannot yet bear the full burden of justice.

By reading these works together, we come to understand that forgiveness and justice are not opposing ideals but interdependent processes. Forgiveness without justice risks sentimentality; justice without forgiveness

risks perpetuating cycles of resentment. The path toward genuine reconciliation, as both texts reveal, lies in balancing moral renewal with material transformation. Only when empathy meets equity can the promise of restorative justice become more than a moral ideal—it can become a lived reality.

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Ethical Consideration

This research is based exclusively on desk study, secondary sources, and published literature. No primary data was collected, nor were any human or animal subjects involved in this research. All sources have been appropriately cited. Efforts were made to ensure the highest standards of accuracy, transparency, and respect for intellectual property throughout the writing process.

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Author contribution

Jaber Najaei conceptualized the research, carried out the comparative textual analysis, and led the preparation and revision of the manuscript. Dr. Nusrat Jamal contributed to the formulation of research methodology, critical review of literature, and provided substantial feedback throughout the drafting process. Both authors approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

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