

**THE MALE GAZE AND PROMISE OF
HAPPINESS: A PSYCHOFEMINIST STUDY
OF J.M. COETZEE'S *DISGRACE* (1999) AND
K.E. RUSSEL'S *MY DARK VANESSA* (2020)**

BY

MUHAMMAD WAQAS



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ABSTRACT

Title: The Male Gaze and Promise of Happiness: A Psychofeminist Study of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) and K.E. Russel's *My Dark Vanessa* (2020)

This study investigates the intricate dynamics of sexual consent and manipulation in patriarchal power structures through a psycho-feminist analysis of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) and Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* (2020). The primary objective is to explore how internalised patriarchal ideologies distort perceptions of agency and consent within relationships marked by pronounced power imbalances. Drawing on feminist and psychoanalytic frameworks—particularly the theoretical contributions of Luce Irigaray and Sara Ahmed—the research engages in close textual analysis to uncover the psychological subjugation and manipulation experienced by the female protagonists, Melanie and Vanessa. These characters' encounters reveal how patriarchal narratives shape women's understanding of intimacy, often conflating coercion with genuine consent and thus rendering autonomy a fragile, if not illusory, construct. The comparative approach highlights the temporal and cultural differences between the two novels while underlining their thematic continuity in representing gendered exploitation. Attention is given to narrative voice, character development, and the ways in which both texts negotiate the tension between personal agency and systemic oppression. The analysis also situates the works within broader feminist discourse on sexual ethics, trauma, and power, considering how literary depictions can challenge or reinforce prevailing norms. The findings emphasize the persistent role of patriarchal norms in blurring the boundaries between consent and coercion, sustaining cycles of abuse under the guise of mutual agreement. This underscores the necessity for heightened critical awareness of how societal structures perpetuate exploitation. Future research could extend this inquiry by adopting intersectional perspectives, examining representations of consent across diverse cultural contexts, and analysing emerging literary responses to shifting conversations around sexuality and power in the 21st century.

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DEDICATION

This effort of mine is possible only because of my parents. This thesis is solely and entirely dedicated to them...

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by heightened scrutiny of power, gender, and the very meaning of consent, this thesis argues that the appearance of freely given sexual consent can mask deeply entrenched patriarchal manipulation. Focusing on J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* (1999) and Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* (2020), it examines how male authority figures exploit emotional, social, and institutional power to manufacture a veneer of consent that conceals coercion. Drawing on Luce Irigaray's psychoanalytic critique of the male gaze and Sara Ahmed's feminist concepts of the promise of happiness and the willful subject, this psychofeminist study unveils the psychological mechanisms by which women's agency is undermined. By combining close textual analysis with these theoretical lenses, the research maps the thin line between genuine sexual autonomy and subtle forms of manipulation, demonstrating that patriarchal norms persistently distort interpersonal dynamics even when apparent consent is given.

The idea of sexual consent and manipulation offers a complex landscape, underscoring the complicated power dynamics that characterize human relationships. It has become increasingly critical to comprehend the discourse surrounding consent and manipulation. The notion of sexual consent has taken center stage amidst all the complexities of evolving interpersonal dynamics of the society and the people living in it. The elevation of consent to a central position in today's societal dialogue is a response to the changing dynamics of relationships, the challenges posed by digital communication, power imbalances, and a growing understanding of the need for comprehensive education on the subject. The increasing prominence of consent in public discourse is a reaction to the changing nature of power and relationships, especially in the context of greater awareness of systematic injustices, growing amounts of digital communication, and the need for a more sophisticated understanding of sexual politics. Particularly since power imbalances are involved, the #MeToo movement has also heightened the discourse surrounding sexual consent by drawing attention to the blurred boundaries between consensual and non-consensual behaviors. In this context, a critical psychofeminist study is essential because it explores internalized ideologies

that shape people's understanding of consent and agency in addition to the external forms of power and control.

Women subjugation has been a cardinal issue since the Western enlightenment to the present day. Mgqolozana states in *A Man Who is Not a Man* (2009), it is only men who have the ultimate control of all the processes, meanwhile females are deemed passive and play an inconsequential role (29). Its implications such as violence and sexual abuse, economic disparities, limited educational opportunities, psychological effects, social stigma and objectification can be often more pervasive than they appear. One pervasive manifestation, as we speak, is sexual exploitation without consent; a facade of consent is created, and under it, manipulation is hidden. The subtle and extremely problematic practice of sexual manipulation conceals real consent. Sexual manipulation, as opposed to overt coercion or assault, depends on psychological strategies that undermine the victim's autonomy while producing the appearance of agreement. This type of manipulation frequently makes use of emotional blackmail, power disparities, and deception to manipulate and control a person's sexual decisions, making it challenging to understand between real and fake consent. Exploiting vulnerabilities lies at the core of sexual manipulation. A variety of psychological techniques is employed by manipulators to create an atmosphere in which the victim feels pressured to comply with sexual demands. This may entail emotional manipulation, in which a sense of duty or guilt is fostered by playing on the victim's moods and emotions. The primary cause of such sexual exploitation can be traced in deeply ingrained imbalances in the power relations of both genders. Cultural norms, stereotypes, and traditional gender roles restrict the agency of women in general by confining them to restricting roles. Tyson accentuates the fact that such disparities and factors have been noticed throughout history and are pertinent in even contemporary time (81). For dismantling of this pervasive system, comprehensive and sustained efforts are mandatory so that the factors perpetuating the subjugation of women are rooted out.

Empirical evidence indicates that women are frequently subjected to gendered social norms, power dynamics and institutional practices that perpetuate inequality. That is how patriarchy is also defined in today's time; where we witness a lot of controlling access with men in different occupations. It is why when we talk about the structuring of the society, men always hold dominant roles, pushing the other gender to

the peripheries. Brennon argues that the 19th century that cast women with less lucrative attributes, such as impassiveness, dependency, transparency, and delicacy, women were provided with underprivileged characters in society, and that is how they were also portrayed in literature (162). The subordinate position of the unprivileged gender creates a breeding ground for abuse, where the phenomenon of sexual manipulation occurs; the dominant gender often remains oblivious to the consequences of its domination. The study argues that within this multifaceted exploitation, one facet includes the manipulation of the sexual consent. The underprivileged gender is compelled to a situation where their autonomy is compromised. This power imbalance persists in our societal structures, concealed under the delusion of consent. Mirkin underscores the idea that the proponents of gender-based power dynamics stick to their stereotypical view of women being weak and submissive. Men have always thought of women to be their subordinate; but the modern theorists of patriarchy propose their notion that more than that, men emotionally and physically imprison them (54). Tyson states that the gender-based power dynamics have made men think of themselves as the position of authority and women merely as their subordinates. This leads us to the idea of internalized patriarchy, as discussed by Irigaray, which plays a significant role particularly in how it shapes the perceptions of consent for both the victim and the perpetrator. Internalized patriarchy refers to the way patriarchal values and beliefs become ingrained in individuals, leading them to unconsciously accept or even perpetuate gender-based inequalities. Therefore, it is very much natural for a woman to show compliance even though she does not willingly want it. Tyson says that, if women do not act in familiar way to men, she is not actually a woman (96). Disparities in wages, lack of its understanding and the overall economic dependency of women on men makes them vulnerable, which can be exacerbated by limited access to education and limited employment opportunities. Hence, they are trapped in the vicious cycle of dependency.

Thus, in the today's time, it has now become exceedingly critical to study the areas of sexual consent and manipulation as it holds a significant amount of importance in the context of a male-dominated society. There is a need of a study, which can also look at the psychological working of the women of the society with relation to the gender-based power roles in the real world. The present study endeavors to do that. The study will establish the need for studying how there is a dearth of valid sexual consent

in the relationship between two adults and a need for distinctive explanation in the domain of feminist study and psychoanalytical study so that the boundaries between sexual consent and manipulation do not blur, because there is a thin line between sexual consent and manipulation.

The present study will be making use of Feminist concepts of Willful Subject, Promise of Happiness, as discussed by the theorist Sara Ahmed. It relates to the exercising of agency, autonomy, and the ability of an individual to make choices and decisions. These aforementioned concepts by Sara Ahmed refer to the women's position against the impediments, laid down by the patriarchy through exclusive patriarchal structures, excluding them from the mainstream. This results in the ransacking of their autonomy and agency, and a disdainful gaze is casted upon them by the privileged gender, pushing them to the peripheries; resulting in their total exclusion. Therefore, in their pursuit of happiness, they show compliance to certain matters, which do not involve their valid autonomy; rather they do it only due to their hierarchal order. In the context of sexual consent and manipulation, these concepts explore the issues of power dynamics, compulsion, and the ways in which individuals assert or navigate their agency in intimate relationships. This study focuses on young female students in relationships with older male authority figures, such as teachers or mentors, who assume the role of Willful Subjects. These male characters exert power and influence, leading the young women to comply not out of genuine consent, but due to the social and hierarchical structures that undermine their autonomy. The research examines the psychological impact on these ostensibly consenting young women, using Luce Irigaray's psychoanalytic concepts, particularly the male gaze and the use of language, to delve into the nuanced dynamics of manipulation. Irigaray's theory highlights how the male gaze objectifies women, stripping them of agency and reshaping their sense of self, while patriarchal language perpetuates control and subjugation. By applying these concepts, the study aims to understand how male characters, such as David Lurie in *Disgrace* and Jacob Strane in *My Dark Vanessa*, use their authority and societal position to manipulate and dominate young female characters like Melanie and Vanessa. This dynamic creates a facade of consent, masking the underlying coercion and exploitation.

Through an analysis of these characters, the research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how patriarchal structures and power imbalances distort the notion of authentic sexual consent, offering critical insights into the psychological and societal

factors at play in these complex relationships. The first text this study aims to explore is J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999). The novel provides a compelling narrative of racism, power dynamics, morality, and the complexities of sexual consent in post-apartheid South Africa. In *Disgrace*, Melanie, a student of David Lurie's, becomes involved in an affair that he presents as consensual but is actually the result of patriarchal pressure and sexual manipulation. About the clandestine affair in the novel between these two characters, Evie Robinson states that Mr. Lurie offers her wine at his house, clearly taking advantage of her vulnerabilities, and never once does he stop to think about what she could be thinking. Because of his position of authority as her professor, Lurie is able to start a relationship with Melanie in which she only tolerates rather than actively engages. Because of his patriarchal mentality and his conviction in his entitlement to her body, he is oblivious to her suffering and lack of agency. Because of his internalized patriarchal mindset, Lurie is able to see Melanie as a passive object of his desire rather than as a free-thinking person who has the ability to reject him. *Disgrace* (1999) becomes a thought-provoking meditation on the blurred lines between victimhood and complicity. Lurie sees Melanie's compliance and silence as a sign of agreement, her behaviors show that there is a power imbalance between them, making it impossible for Melanie to reject his advances. Coetzee's depiction of this relationship emphasizes how patriarchal ideals can make it difficult to distinguish between consent and abuse, especially when the abuser is in a position of power.

The second text this study aims to explore is Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* (2020). The novel provides us with a narrative of an inappropriate relationship between a teacher and his student. In the novel, *My Dark Vanessa* (2020), an instructor named Jacob Strane seduces his pupil Vanessa into having a sexual relationship in the guise of a mentor. Because of her immaturity and gullibility, Vanessa is a prime candidate for deception by Strane. Additionally, because of her internalized patriarchal views regarding male dominance and female submission, Vanessa sees the relationship as consenting though it is causing her significant psychological pain. Social narratives that romanticize the concept of an older, more experienced guy showing interest in a young, naive woman further undermine Vanessa's feeling of agency. Despite the obvious power disparity between them, Strane manipulates Vanessa in a subtle but devious way by making her believe that she is a consenting partner in their relationship. According to Madison Owens, Russell wants us to acknowledge the disgusting nature

of sexual manipulation and grooming as well as the fact that victims experience severe anguish and agony (2020). Russell's narrative skillfully navigates the grey areas of consent, explaining the repercussions faced by Vanessa in her later years based on choices she made when she was young, which she thought at the time were autonomous. About the novel, Sophie Gilbert who composes content for *The Atlantic* says that it a tale of damage, instead of labelling it as a story of love (2020). The story tackles fluctuating power dynamics and tries to explore topics like race, power, gender, rape etc. Similar to Melanie, Vanessa's view of consent is clouded by the patriarchal systems that shape her conception of male-female interactions.

Drawing on the lines of the above-mentioned discussion, this present study explores the complexity of the thin line that exists between sexual consent and manipulation, which often blurs when a person who is in position of authority deals with a person who is a subordinate. This research aims at elaborating the authenticity or validity of the sexual consent and its underlying repercussions for the victim. There are robust connections between the selected novels of this study and perhaps the most perceptible connection is how the girl characters are represented in their affairs with the male characters. The presence of patriarchy and a conspicuous lack of sexual consent is discernible in both these novels when we analyze the male characters' mannerism, who are the most vibrant participants and the female characters are rendered passive. The selected texts and the main characters in them provide a critical analysis of the ways in which patriarchal ideas influence the dynamics of relationships that appear to be consensual, highlighting the social and psychological factors driving individuals to either exploit or submit to these power imbalances. By employing the chosen theoretical concepts, this study explores the thin line between consent and manipulation, revealing how patriarchal norms strip women of agency. This research addresses a significant gap in the existing literature by examining how patriarchal power dynamics obscure the distinction between consent and manipulation in *Disgrace* and *My Dark Vanessa*. The analysis adopts a psycho-feminist framework, combining close textual reading with theoretical insights to dissect the complex interplay of agency, power, and manipulation in the selected texts.

1.1 Thesis Statement

The fictional works, *Disgrace* (1999) and *My Dark Vanessa* (2020), delineate the pervasive impact of internalized patriarchal ideology in the apparently consensual relationships of Melanie with David and Vanessa with Jacob. This research exposes how these relationships marked by sexual manipulation and psychological subjugation systematically blur the line between genuine agency and coercive control.

1.2 Research Questions

The following are the research questions for this study:

1. What textual and contextual factors shape the dynamics of sexual interaction between Melanie and David in *Disgrace* and Vanessa and Jacob in *My Dark Vanessa*?
2. How do the selected texts demonstrate the Male Gaze and the Promise of Happiness? How do they affect the characters?
3. How do *Disgrace* and *My Dark Vanessa* blur the boundary between genuine consent and manipulative coercion in the protagonists' relationships?

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study delves into the intricate interplay of consent and manipulation within patriarchal power dynamics, offering a profound exploration of how these concepts are blurred in literature and real-life scenarios. In a society where gendered power structures often dictate the boundaries of relationships, the research highlights the subtle and overt mechanisms of control that undermine women's autonomy. By focusing on the narratives of Melanie in *Disgrace* and Vanessa in *My Dark Vanessa*, the study sheds light on the pervasive impact of internalized patriarchal ideologies, which distort perceptions of agency and consent. The analysis uncovers how coercion, manipulation, and psychological subjugation render consent an illusion rather than a genuine, autonomous choice.

The study also bridges critical gaps in existing scholarship by integrating feminist and psychoanalytic frameworks to examine nuanced depictions of gendered power dynamics. Utilizing Luce Irigaray's theories of the male gaze and patriarchal language, alongside Sara Ahmed's feminist concepts such as the "Willful Subject" and the

"Promise of Happiness," this research provides a multidimensional critique of the mechanisms that perpetuate systemic oppression. By highlighting how these theoretical concepts manifest in the lived experiences of Melanie and Vanessa, the study offers a fresh perspective on the portrayal of consent and manipulation in literature, emphasizing the societal normalization of such dynamics.

The research also holds significance in addressing a critical gap in the existing literature on *Disgrace* and *My Dark Vanessa*. By examining how patriarchal power dynamics obscure the distinction between consent and manipulation, the study provides a nuanced understanding of these narratives. It contributes to academic discourse by offering fresh insights into the portrayal of agency, coercion, and authority in the selected texts. Additionally, it engages with broader cultural conversations, emphasizing the need to redefine consent and challenge oppressive structures in contemporary society. By exploring the psychological and societal constructs that facilitate manipulation, the study aspires to inform feminist theory, legal frameworks, and activism that advocate for women's autonomy and empowerment.

1.4 Delimitation

This research is delimited to narratives of two specific characters in the selected novels: Melanie from JM Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Vanessa from Kate Elizabeth Russel's *My Dark Vanessa*. The boundaries of the study are set to control the range of research and ensure the study's objectives are achieved.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review for this study navigates through a broad spectrum of feminist and psychoanalytic scholarship to establish a comprehensive understanding of the nuanced interplay between consent, manipulation, and patriarchal power dynamics. It begins by exploring foundational feminist theories that critique the structures of patriarchal dominance, emphasizing the contributions of pioneers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler in shaping discourses on gender and agency. From this broad theoretical base, the review narrows its focus to feminist psychoanalytic frameworks, particularly Luce Irigaray's concepts of the male gaze and patriarchal language, and Sara Ahmed's feminist phenomenology, including her notions of the "willful subject" and the "promise of happiness." By critically examining existing research on patriarchal power, internalized gender norms, and the societal pressures shaping female autonomy, the review highlights significant gaps in the application of these frameworks to the dynamics of consent and manipulation. It culminates in an analysis of prior scholarship on J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa*, identifying underexplored dimensions in these texts and laying the groundwork for the study's unique integration of feminist psychoanalytic perspectives.

2.1 Historical Background

Feminist theory emerged as a vital critique of the patriarchal structures that dominate social, political, and cultural systems, seeking to expose and challenge the systemic oppression of women. Its origins can be traced back to the 18th century with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), which is widely regarded as one of the first major feminist texts. Wollstonecraft argued that women's apparent inferiority was not an innate truth but the result of lack of education and opportunities, asserting, "Make women rational creatures, and free citizens, and they will quickly become good wives" (Wollstonecraft 113). Her work laid the groundwork for future feminist waves by demanding equality in education and intellectual pursuits. In the 20th century, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) became a cornerstone of feminist thought, shifting the discourse to existential and philosophical analyses of women's oppression. De Beauvoir's assertion that "One is not born, but rather becomes,

a woman” (267) introduced the idea that gender roles are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Her exploration of "woman" as the "Other" in a male-dominated society remains a foundational concept for subsequent feminist scholarship.

Feminism has since evolved through multiple waves. The first wave (19th and early 20th centuries) focused primarily on suffrage and legal rights, culminating in achievements such as the right to vote for women in many Western countries. The second wave (1960s-1980s) expanded its scope to workplace equality, reproductive rights, and cultural critiques, with prominent figures like Betty Friedan (*The Feminine Mystique*, 1963) and Germaine Greer (*The Female Eunuch*, 1970). The third wave (1990s onward) introduced intersectionality, emphasizing how race, class, sexuality, and other identities intersect with gender oppression, as articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her seminal essay “Mapping the Margins” (1991). These historical developments are crucial for understanding the theoretical frameworks that inform feminist literary criticism, particularly the critique of gender-based power imbalances, objectification, and the systemic subjugation of women.

The field of feminist literary criticism emerged alongside second-wave feminism, gaining prominence as scholars began to analyze literature through the lens of gender, power, and representation. Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) introduced the concept of “gynocriticism,” which focused on the study of women writers and the development of a female literary tradition. Showalter emphasized that women’s writing often reflects the constraints of their historical and cultural contexts, making it essential to study their works within these frameworks (Showalter 13). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) further advanced feminist literary criticism by examining the ways in which patriarchal ideologies shape literary representations of women. Their analysis of 19th-century female authors, such as Charlotte Brontë and Mary Shelley, revealed how these writers subverted patriarchal norms by creating characters who challenged traditional gender roles. They argued that the “madwoman” trope symbolized the suppressed rage and creativity of women constrained by societal expectations (Gilbert and Gubar 85).

Later developments in feminist literary criticism incorporated psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theories. Julia Kristeva’s concept of the "semiotic" in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984) highlighted the ways language perpetuates patriarchal

structures while also offering spaces for resistance through poetic expression (Kristeva 27). Hélène Cixous, in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976), advocated for “écriture féminine,” a form of writing that disrupts patriarchal language and embraces female subjectivity (Cixous 881). These frameworks expanded the scope of feminist criticism by emphasizing the interplay between language, power, and gender.

The evolution of feminist theory and literary criticism provides a robust foundation for analyzing the dynamics of power, language, and psychological manipulation in literature. Key themes such as the objectification of women, the internalization of patriarchal norms, and the societal construction of gender are central to both feminist theory and the present study. As Luce Irigaray’s psychoanalytic critique and Sara Ahmed’s feminist phenomenology demonstrate, patriarchal systems are perpetuated not only through overt oppression but also through the subtle, insidious mechanisms of language and societal expectations. In analyzing J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999) and Kate Elizabeth Russell’s *My Dark Vanessa* (2020), this study builds upon the legacy of feminist literary criticism by examining the psychological and linguistic mechanisms that enforce compliance in ostensibly consensual relationships. The frameworks developed by feminist pioneers allow for a deeper understanding of how patriarchal power operates within these texts, making them essential to the theoretical underpinnings of the current research.

2.2 Feminist Critiques of the Present Study

Feminist engagement with psychoanalysis has long been marked by ambivalence—critically utilizing its concepts while challenging its patriarchal underpinnings. Sigmund Freud’s theories, particularly those regarding sexuality and gender identity, have been both foundational and problematic for feminist theorists. Freud’s conceptualization of women as the “Other” and his idea of “penis envy” have been critiqued for perpetuating patriarchal norms (Freud 154). However, feminists like Juliet Mitchell in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974) reclaimed Freud’s insights into the unconscious to analyze how patriarchal ideologies are internalized and reproduced (Mitchell 37). Building on Freud, Jacques Lacan introduced the notion of the “Symbolic Order,” a linguistic and cultural realm that defines individual identity. Lacan’s theory of the “mirror stage” and his emphasis on language as a structure of identity have been adapted by feminist theorists to critique how patriarchal ideologies are perpetuated

through language and symbols (Lacan 93). Feminist psychoanalysts such as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray reinterpreted Lacanian frameworks to highlight the ways women's voices and bodies are marginalized within the Symbolic Order.

Power imbalance is another critical component of patriarchal dynamics that complicates consent. Foucault's theories on power, particularly in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), have been widely applied to feminist analyses of gendered relationships. Foucault posits that power is exercised not only through overt coercion but also through subtle mechanisms of control embedded in societal norms and institutions (Foucault 136). Scholars like Bartky (1990) have expanded on this to argue that patriarchal power operates through both external domination and internalized compliance, making it difficult for women to recognize or resist manipulation (Bartky 71). In literary studies, these ideas have been applied to examine how male authority figures exploit power imbalances to secure female compliance. Furthermore, power imbalances are not limited to physical or institutional authority but extend to psychological manipulation and emotional dependence.

Luce Irigaray is a seminal figure in feminist psychoanalysis, critiquing the patriarchal biases embedded in Western thought and language. In her works such as *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977), Irigaray argues that women are positioned as objects rather than subjects within a phallogentric culture, where the "male gaze" dominates representation. Irigaray contends that this gaze reduces women to mirrors reflecting male desires, thereby denying them autonomy and subjectivity (Irigaray 26). Irigaray also critiques the patriarchal use of language, describing it as a tool for enforcing male dominance. She asserts that language constructs women as commodities in the "exchange of women" by men, a concept she explores through her analysis of Freud and Lacan (Irigaray 31). Irigaray argues that language is structured in ways that favor male-centric worldviews, suppressing female agency by framing women's speech as either compliant or deviant (Irigaray 32). This idea is echoed in Tyson's book that patriarchal language limits women's ability to articulate dissent, instead coercing them into silence or submission (Tyson 93). Subsequent studies have extended Irigaray's critique to literature, exploring how male characters wield linguistic dominance to manipulate female counterparts. For instance, Horsfall (2001) explores how patriarchal discourse in modern literature perpetuates gendered hierarchies, often presenting male authority figures as the arbiters of reason and women as passive recipients of their

influence. Her call for a new, feminine language that disrupts these patriarchal structures aligns with Hélène Cixous' concept of *écriture féminine*, emphasizing the need to reclaim female subjectivity. Irigaray's critique of the male gaze and language is particularly relevant to the current study, as both *Disgrace* and *My Dark Vanessa* portray male characters who exercise linguistic and visual control over women.

The concept of the male gaze, first articulated by Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), has become a cornerstone of feminist theory. Mulvey argues that the male gaze positions women as passive objects of male desire in visual media, reinforcing patriarchal power structures (Mulvey 12). While her analysis initially focused on film, the male gaze has since been applied to literature, art, and other cultural forms. Feminist scholars have expanded Mulvey's framework to explore how the male gaze operates in various contexts. Mary Ann Doane, for instance, examines the ways in which women internalize the male gaze, adopting self-surveillance as a means of conforming to societal expectations (Doane 32). Irigaray's dynamic mirrors Mulvey's male gaze by framing women as passive objects within a visual or linguistic economy that privileges male authority. The male gaze is thus not limited to cinematic or artistic representation; it extends into the symbolic order, where women are constructed as reflections of male desire, devoid of autonomous subjectivity. Irigaray also connects the male gaze to the broader operation of patriarchal language, which, like visual representation, defines women in terms of their utility to men. She argues that the gaze, when coupled with patriarchal discourse, creates a system in which women are reduced to commodities within a structure of exchange among men (Irigaray 31). This dual mechanism—visual and linguistic—ensures that women are confined to roles that serve the needs of male-dominated systems, further entrenching their subjugation. The male gaze, as theorized by Mulvey and expanded by Irigaray, provides a powerful framework for understanding the mechanisms of patriarchal control in literature. By examining how the gaze operates visually and linguistically, it becomes possible to uncover the layers of coercion that obscure consent and autonomy.

Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) examines how the concept of happiness is employed as a regulatory ideal in patriarchal societies. Ahmed critiques the cultural narrative that links happiness to conforming to societal norms, arguing that happiness is often wielded as a tool of oppression (Ahmed 10). By presenting certain

life choices—such as marriage, motherhood, and compliance with patriarchal values—as pathways to happiness, society marginalizes individuals who deviate from these norms. Ahmed’s concept of the “affective economy” is particularly pertinent, as it highlights how emotions, such as happiness, circulate to reinforce societal expectations. Women, in particular, are burdened with the responsibility of upholding collective happiness, often at the expense of their own autonomy (Ahmed 13). This idea resonates with her concept of the “Willful Subject,” introduced in *Willful Subjects* (2014), where she discusses how willfulness is pathologized in individuals who resist conformity (Ahmed 18). Ahmed’s “Willful Subject” challenges the cultural condemnation of individuals, particularly women, who resist normative expectations. Willfulness is framed as a refusal to comply with the demands of patriarchal authority, making the willful subject a figure of defiance and potential liberation (Ahmed 21). Ahmed critiques the tendency to label such resistance as irrational or disruptive, emphasizing that this pathologization serves to maintain existing power structures. This theoretical framework provides a lens to analyze the actions of characters like Melanie in *Disgrace* and Vanessa in *My Dark Vanessa*. Ahmed’s critique of happiness intersects with feminist analyses of consent, particularly in the context of relationships shaped by power imbalances. Feminist scholars have highlighted how patriarchal societies often equate women’s compliance with happiness, perpetuating a culture where consent is presumed rather than actively given (Berlant 43). Ahmed’s work reveals how the promise of happiness can obscure coercion, framing exploitative relationships as consensual or even desirable. The study of patriarchal power structures has long been a cornerstone of feminist scholarship. Central to these analyses is the exploration of patriarchal language, objectification, and power imbalances, which contribute to the subjugation of women and complicate the boundaries of consent. Both of these theoretical concepts presented by Ahmed and Irigaray are established as conceptual framework in the third chapter with focus on their specific postulates that are relevant to the analysis in present study.

2.3 Key Scholarships on the Primary Texts

The selected primary texts, J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999) and Kate Elizabeth Russell’s *My Dark Vanessa* (2020), have attracted significant scholarly attention for their exploration of complex themes such as power dynamics, consent, trauma, and societal hierarchies. Recent studies have analyzed these texts through various critical

frameworks, including feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and sociocultural critique. This section reviews key scholarship on both novels, identifying prevailing analytical trends while highlighting areas that remain underexplored. By examining how contemporary researchers have engaged with these texts, this review establishes the scholarly landscape and identifies critical gaps that the present study seeks to address.

Sue Kossew's "The Politics of Shame and Redemption in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*" (2003) provides a profound exploration of the interplay between personal and public spheres, focusing on the themes of shame, redemption, and morality within the context of post-apartheid South Africa. Kossew identifies Coetzee's engagement with Dostoevskyan motifs, particularly the moral and existential dilemmas of confession, grace, and self-awareness. She connects David Lurie's journey to Dostoevsky's skepticism about "bad faith" and "double thought," as reflected in *The Possessed* and other works. According to Kossew, *Disgrace* examines the contradictions of self-conscious confession, drawing on Coetzee's earlier essay "Confession and Double Thoughts," where he critiques the self-deceptive nature of monologic confession and underscores the necessity of faith and grace for true absolution. David's attempts at redemption, whether through his work at the animal clinic or his reconciliation with his daughter Lucy, embody this tension between self-awareness and self-deception. Kossew frames David's personal disgrace within a broader critique of societal shame and reconciliation, linking his narrative to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). She argues that Coetzee problematizes the TRC's processes of confession and forgiveness, reflecting a deeper skepticism about their moral efficacy in a fractured nation. By juxtaposing David's private struggles with the public discourse of the TRC, Kossew illuminates how Coetzee critiques both individual and collective notions of morality, grace, and redemption, framing them as inherently complex and fraught with ambiguity. Through this analysis, Kossew situates *Disgrace* as a critical meditation on the limits of reconciliation, both personal and political, in a society grappling with its historical and moral legacies.

Susan Kok's *An Investigation of Masculinity in J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace* (2008) delves into the evolving notions of masculinity, particularly through the lens of "masculinity in crisis," a theoretical concept that critiques the perceived erosion of traditional masculine roles in contemporary society. Kok situates David Lurie, the protagonist of *Disgrace*, as a figure emblematic of this crisis, one whose stoic resistance

to change reflects the broader dynamics of destabilized masculinity in post-apartheid South Africa. Through Lurie's rejection of counseling and his disdain for compromise—epitomized in his refusal to submit to what he terms “re-education” or “reformation of character”—the study examines his inability to adapt to shifting societal expectations. Kok highlights how Lurie's resistance to self-reflexivity and empathy marks his entrenchment in dominant ideologies of masculinity, which ultimately alienate him in a world that no longer valorizes such traits. The study also explores Lurie's characterization as an antihero, drawing comparisons with the Byronic hero to underscore his complex and contradictory identity. While the antihero is defined by passivity, ineffectuality, and moral ambiguity, the Byronic hero is often marked by passion, talent, and defiance, traits that Lurie intermittently exhibits. By placing Lurie in the context of contemporary South Africa, Kok argues that Coetzee reimagines the Byronic archetype to interrogate the role of masculinity in a rapidly changing societal landscape. This intertextual connection, particularly through Lurie's initial focus on Lord Byron in his chamber play and Lucy's description of him as “mad, bad, and dangerous to know,” underscores the tension between traditional notions of heroic masculinity and the realities of a postmodern, post-apartheid world. Kok's analysis is particularly insightful in its exploration of how Lurie's masculinity is constructed and deconstructed through his interactions with other characters and the shifting gender dynamics of the novel's setting. The study posits that Lurie's downfall is not solely a product of personal flaws but also a reflection of the diminishing status of white males in post-apartheid South Africa. His inability to adapt to these changes highlights the fragility of traditional masculinity when confronted with evolving power hierarchies and social expectations. Kok raises critical questions about whether *Disgrace* seeks to critique or validate the notion of rescuing masculinity and what the destabilization of such identities signifies within the broader sociopolitical context. This analysis intersects with the present study by shedding light on the role of patriarchal ideologies in shaping power dynamics and interpersonal relationships. While Kok focuses on masculinity, the present research extends these insights to explore how patriarchal systems perpetuate manipulation and complicate consent, particularly through the psychological subjugation of female characters like Melanie. Lurie's entrenched sense of entitlement and inability to empathize serve as manifestations of a broader patriarchal structure that normalizes exploitation, a dynamic central to both Kok's discussion of masculinity and the current study's focus on consent and manipulation.

Graham St. John Stott's "Rape and Silence in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*" (2009) examines the complex representation of sexual violence and the aftermath of trauma through the character of Lucy Lurie. Stott argues that Lucy's silence following her rape is a deliberate rejection of societal frameworks that seek to rationalize or explain trauma. Lucy neither seeks justice nor presents herself as a victim demanding sympathy; instead, she embodies a quiet resilience, adopting a stance that echoes Simone Weil's philosophical rejection of rights and rationalization. Stott interprets her silence as a form of witnessing that resists traditional narratives of victimhood or redemption. By doing so, Coetzee portrays rape as an act devoid of meaning, a trauma that eludes the catharsis of storytelling. Stott's analysis is particularly striking in its discussion of Lucy's decision to continue her life without seeking rational explanations, symbolized by her tending to her garden—a tableau reminiscent of *Candide*'s retreat to cultivation as a means of enduring suffering. This perspective highlights Coetzee's rejection of consolatory myths and underscores the novel's engagement with the incomprehensibility of trauma. Stott's exploration intersects with the present study by emphasizing the ways in which societal and patriarchal structures render victims of trauma voiceless. While his focus is on Lucy's silence, this research extends the discourse to examine how patriarchal power and language contribute to the silencing of female agency, both in Lucy's experience and in David Lurie's interactions with Melanie. Through the lens of feminist psychoanalytic theories, the present study analyzes how such silences and acts of compliance are shaped by manipulation and internalized patriarchal ideologies, providing a broader critique of consent and power in the narrative.

Gareth Cornwell's "Realism, Rape, and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*" (2010) situates the novel within the context of Coetzee's broader narrative strategies and philosophical inquiries. Cornwell highlights Coetzee's use of realism to confront the brutal realities of sexual violence while simultaneously employing distancing devices to explore ethical and existential questions. He draws parallels between *Disgrace* and Coetzee's other works, such as *The Lives of Animals*, to demonstrate the author's preference for narrative as a means of engaging with complex ideas. In this framework, *Disgrace* examines the moral and societal dimensions of rape through a realistic portrayal that resists easy moralization or resolution. Cornwell underscores the novel's discomfiting realism, particularly in its depiction of rape as an act that destabilizes

both the individual and the societal frameworks surrounding justice and reconciliation. This perspective aligns with the current study's focus on the blurred boundaries of consent and manipulation within patriarchal contexts. While Cornwell emphasizes realism as a narrative strategy, the present study delves deeper into the psychological and societal mechanisms that perpetuate power imbalances and complicate autonomy. By analyzing how patriarchal ideologies shape characters' perceptions of agency and compliance, this research builds on Cornwell's insights to provide a feminist psychoanalytic reading of the novel's exploration of gendered violence and its aftermath.

Lucy Valerie Graham's "Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*" (2010) critically examines the contentious representation of racial and sexual violence in the novel, particularly the rape of Lucy Lurie by three Black men. Graham contextualizes this depiction within the history of South African literature and apartheid-era narratives, where the trope of interracial rape was often deployed to perpetuate racial injustices and white anxieties. She acknowledges that Coetzee's portrayal has drawn accusations of racism and fearmongering; however, she argues that the novel subverts the conventional "black peril" narrative. Instead of reinforcing stereotypes, Graham suggests that *Disgrace* dissolves rigid distinctions between victim and perpetrator, particularly by paralleling David Lurie's sexual exploitation of Melanie Isaacs with the violence inflicted upon Lucy. Graham provocatively asserts that Lurie and Lucy's attackers share a moral equivalence as both rapists and destroyers of life, emphasizing the novel's interrogation of power and violence across racial and gendered lines. The study further highlights the complexities of narrative silences, particularly Lucy's refusal to articulate her trauma within frameworks of justice or retribution. Graham argues that this silence, combined with the novel's unflinching realism, compels readers to confront the pervasive and systemic nature of violence in post-apartheid South Africa. However, while Graham offers a compelling critique of racial and sexual politics, her analysis primarily focuses on Lucy's experience and the subversion of apartheid-era stereotypes. The nuanced dynamics of David's relationship with Melanie, particularly concerning consent, remain underexplored in her study. Graham's work provides a critical foundation for understanding the intersection of power, violence, and narrative in *Disgrace*. The current study extends this discourse by focusing on the complexities of consent and manipulation in David and Melanie's

relationship. While Graham critiques the moral ambiguities in the novel, this research seeks to address the gaps in analyzing how patriarchal power and psychological subjugation operate to obscure the boundaries between consent and coercion, providing a more comprehensive examination of the novel's gender and power dynamics.

Elleke Boehmer's "Not Saying Sorry, Not Speaking Pain: Gender Implications in *Disgrace*" (2011) examines the refusal of confession by both David Lurie and his daughter Lucy, situating these acts within the broader personal and political contexts of post-apartheid South Africa. Boehmer contrasts David's refusal to officially apologize for his exploitation of Melanie Isaacs with Lucy's decision not to lay charges or articulate the trauma of her gang rape. Through this dual lens, Boehmer interrogates the implications of silence and the absence of conventional acts of reconciliation in a society deeply influenced by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). While the TRC emphasized confession and forgiveness as tools for addressing systemic injustices, *Disgrace* subverts this model by presenting secular atonement—embodied in forms of humiliation and physical abjection—as an alternative means of reckoning with guilt and trauma. Boehmer highlights the gendered dimensions of this secular atonement, noting that its manifestations often align with traditionally feminine or emasculating roles. For David, this is exemplified in his voluntary work at the animal clinic, where his care for discarded and dying animals reflects his own moral and societal marginalization. For Lucy, her silence and decision to stay on her farm after her assault signal a form of endurance and survival that resists patriarchal narratives of victimhood or redemption. Boehmer critiques this dynamic, arguing that the novel's ethic of unstinting love and acceptance is often realized at the expense of women's bodily autonomy, reinforcing their subjugation even in the pursuit of moral resolution. Boehmer's analysis contributes to an understanding of how *Disgrace* interrogates the limitations of traditional modes of reconciliation and justice, particularly through its exploration of silence, humiliation, and atonement. However, while Boehmer focuses on the gendered implications of these dynamics, the present study builds on her insights by investigating the psychological and societal forces that underpin both David's exploitation of Melanie and Lucy's silence. By applying feminist psychoanalytic theories, this research delves into the patriarchal structures and internalized ideologies that complicate autonomy and consent, providing a more comprehensive examination of the novel's treatment of gender and power.

Carine M. Mardorossian's "Rape and the Violence of Representation in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*" (2011) critically examines the novel's portrayal of sexual violence, focusing on the interplay of gender, class, and race as inseparable social categories that shape the meanings of identity and justice. Mardorossian argues that rape in *Disgrace* is not merely a gendered act complicated by race and class but a deeply discursive phenomenon, where its material consequences are constituted through racialized and class-based narratives. She contrasts the responses to Lucy Lurie's rape by Black men and David Lurie's sexual exploitation of Melanie Isaacs, asserting that the novel exposes how racial politics and narrative dynamics naturalize these discrepancies. In doing so, Coetzee underscores the contingency of justice, which remains deeply racialized, whether in the context of Black South African society or the liberal, predominantly white university environment. Mardorossian's analysis highlights the complexity of *Disgrace* as a text that interrogates the intersections of race, gender, and class within post-apartheid South Africa. Her study emphasizes the discursive and systemic underpinnings of violence and the ways these structures shape societal responses to it. However, while the research adeptly addresses the racialized dimensions of sexual violence, it does not engage with the dynamics of consent or the psychological manipulation present in David Lurie's relationship with Melanie. The nuanced boundaries between consent and coercion, particularly in the context of patriarchal power and internalized societal norms, remain unexplored in this discussion. Collectively, the scholarship on *Disgrace* demonstrates a robust engagement with its themes of power, race, and violence. Yet, despite this abundance of research, the specific lens of consent and manipulation as influenced by patriarchal ideology and psychological subjugation has been largely overlooked. By applying feminist theories, such as Sara Ahmed's notions of the "promise of happiness" and Luce Irigaray's critique of patriarchal language, the present study seeks to address this gap, offering a novel perspective on how patriarchal power complicates consent within the narrative of this text.

While *Disgrace* has been the subject of extensive scholarly exploration for over two decades, Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* is comparatively a newer work, first published in 2020, and has thus not yet been examined as thoroughly. The emerging scholarship on *My Dark Vanessa* primarily focuses on themes of grooming, abuse, and trauma, reflecting the novel's engagement with contemporary issues brought

to light by movements like #MeToo. This transition from a widely studied classic to a more recent text allows for the exploration of shared thematic concerns—power dynamics, manipulation, and consent—through fresh critical perspectives. Kamilla Båtnes’ master’s thesis, *A Portrait of Grooming and Educator Sexual Abuse in My Dark Vanessa and Boy Toy* (2022), offers a detailed examination of the grooming processes and their psychological and social repercussions in two novels, with particular focus on *My Dark Vanessa*. Båtnes explores how educator sexual abuse operates within the framework of grooming, emphasizing how the nuanced dynamics of manipulation and loyalty complicate the victim’s perception of abuse. Vanessa’s internal conflict, exemplified in her reflections on the #MeToo movement and her inability to reconcile her emotions with the label of “grooming,” underscores the ambivalence that characterizes her relationship with Strane. Båtnes highlights how societal gender scripts, such as the virgin/whore dichotomy, distort public and personal understandings of victimhood, contributing to the internalization of blame and the silencing of survivors. The thesis also critiques the institutional failures that exacerbate the trauma of educator sexual abuse. Vanessa’s experiences with her school principal, who publicly humiliates her and dismisses her concerns to protect institutional reputation, exemplify how institutional sexism perpetuates harm. Båtnes notes that these actions reinforce damaging stereotypes, such as the “female seductress” trope, further isolating victims and compounding their psychological distress. Vanessa’s subsequent therapy sessions reveal the enduring impact of these systemic failures, which not only retraumatize survivors but also intimidate others into silence. This study provides valuable insights into the mechanisms of grooming and the societal and institutional responses to educator sexual abuse. However, while Båtnes focuses on the immediate and long-term effects of grooming, the present study seeks to expand this analysis by interrogating the patriarchal ideologies and psychological subjugation that complicate perceptions of consent in *My Dark Vanessa*. By employing feminist psychoanalytic frameworks, this research aims to uncover the deeper societal and psychological forces that underpin Vanessa’s internal conflict, offering a novel perspective on the interplay between manipulation, power, and autonomy.

Farah Rasfia Putri’s study, *Portrait of Sexual Abuse in Vanessa Wye in Novel My Dark Vanessa* (2023), employs Kelly’s framework to categorize the forms of sexual harassment experienced by Vanessa Wye, focusing on visual, verbal, and physical

dimensions of abuse. Using a qualitative descriptive method and mimetic approach, the research identifies specific incidents in the novel that illustrate these categories. Visual harassment is exemplified by Jacob Strane's recommendation of *Lolita*, a book that romanticizes an exploitative relationship, subtly conditioning Vanessa to view their dynamic as acceptable. Verbal harassment is evident in Strane's sexualized comments that blur professional boundaries, while physical abuse is detailed through his coercive advances, which escalate despite Vanessa's evident discomfort. Putri's study underscores Strane's calculated manipulation, portraying Vanessa as a victim ensnared by the power imbalance inherent in their teacher-student relationship. The study draws attention to how societal and psychological pressures distort perceptions of abuse, emphasizing how Vanessa's sense of loyalty to Strane complicates her ability to recognize his actions as exploitative. However, while Putri successfully outlines the explicit manifestations of harassment through Kelly's framework, the study does not delve into the deeper ideological and psychological mechanisms that underpin Strane's manipulation or Vanessa's internal conflict. The broader feminist implications of how patriarchal ideologies shape perceptions of consent remain unexplored. This gap aligns with the focus of the current study, which seeks to investigate the internalized patriarchal norms and psychological subjugation that complicate Vanessa's perception of agency and consent. By employing feminist psychoanalytic theories, such as Sara Ahmed's "promise of happiness" and Luce Irigaray's critique of patriarchal language, the present research aims to expand on Putri's findings. It will explore how societal narratives and patriarchal power contribute to the manipulation of female characters, providing a more nuanced understanding of how consent is compromised in ostensibly consensual relationships.

Tyra Persson's thesis, *Giving Lolita a Voice: A Feminist Reading of Lolita and My Dark Vanessa* (2022), explores the impact of patriarchal ideology, traditional gender roles, and the male gaze on female characters in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa*. Using feminist literary criticism, Persson examines how Dolores and Vanessa are objectified, manipulated, and harmed by the patriarchal systems embodied by their abusers, Humbert Humbert and Jacob Strane. The analysis reveals how both characters, as victims of sexual abuse, struggle against the submissive roles imposed upon them. While Dolores is silenced and rendered voiceless by Humbert's narrative control, Vanessa, with a more prominent voice in the

text, grapples with her internalized patriarchal beliefs and eventually begins reclaiming her narrative as she grows older. Persson highlights the role of internalized patriarchy in shaping Vanessa's perception of herself and other victims of Strane. Vanessa's protective stance toward Strane and her initial dismissal of other women's accusations against him reflect the deep psychological imprint of patriarchal ideologies, which distort her understanding of abuse. This contrasts with *Lolita*, where Dolores' internalization of patriarchal control is difficult to analyze due to her limited narrative voice. Nevertheless, Persson identifies instances where Dolores exhibits resistance to Humbert's manipulation, revealing subtle cracks in his narrative authority. Both characters, however, endure objectification through the male gaze, with Humbert's "nymphet" fixation and Strane's predatory behavior reinforcing their roles as objects of male desire. Yet, Vanessa's eventual ability to challenge and break free from Strane's gaze signifies a critical divergence between the two characters. The thesis underscores the parallels between *Lolita* and *My Dark Vanessa*, illustrating how patriarchal assumptions perpetuate cycles of abuse and subjugation across generations. Vanessa's admiration for *Lolita* and her misreading of Dolores' experience further highlight how cultural narratives rooted in patriarchal norms can shape victims' self-perceptions and experiences. While Persson's study provides a robust feminist critique of patriarchal power and the male gaze, it primarily focuses on the external manifestations of these dynamics. The current study builds on these insights by delving deeper into the psychological subjugation and internalized ideologies that complicate Vanessa's perception of agency and consent. By applying feminist psychoanalytic theories, this research aims to provide a nuanced analysis of the intersection of manipulation, power, and autonomy in *My Dark Vanessa*.

Dewi Anisa and Linusia Marsih's article, *The Psychological Impacts of Sexual Abuse in School on Vanessa Reflected in Kate Elizabeth Russell's My Dark Vanessa* (2024), focuses on the depiction of sexual abuse, its psychological consequences, and the protagonist's eventual resilience. Through a qualitative descriptive approach and psychological lens, the study examines how Vanessa's experiences with educator sexual abuse result in severe emotional and mental health issues, including depression and trauma. Vanessa's symptoms of depression—characterized by sadness, loss of interest in daily activities, and low self-esteem—are compounded by the lasting trauma of her abuse, which significantly impacts her interpersonal relationships and self-

perception. The research highlights Vanessa's struggles as reflective of the broader harms caused by sexual abuse in educational settings, where such incidents create unsafe and damaging environments for victims and communities alike. The article also sheds light on Vanessa's gradual process of recovery, emphasizing her efforts to rebuild her life through work, social interactions, and eventually speaking out about her past. Vanessa's resilience is portrayed as a long and arduous journey, marked by the acceptance of her trauma and the pursuit of healing through external validation and community support. Her eventual decision to share her story symbolizes a pivotal step in reclaiming agency and addressing the harm inflicted by her abuser and the institutions that failed to protect her. This study provides valuable insights into the psychological dimensions of Vanessa's experiences and the nuanced portrayal of recovery in *My Dark Vanessa*. Collectively, the scholarship on this novel reveals a growing interest in its exploration of abuse, trauma, and resilience. However, despite these contributions, there remains considerable room to examine the intersections of manipulation, patriarchal power, and consent within the framework of feminist psychoanalysis. The present study builds on these foundational analyses to delve deeper into the societal and psychological mechanisms that complicate autonomy and consent, offering a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play in Vanessa's relationship with Strane.

2.4 Establishing Niche for Present Study

Existing scholarship on gender dynamics, consent, and manipulation has significantly contributed to feminist and psychoanalytic discourse. However, critical gaps remain in fully integrating theoretical frameworks to address the complex boundaries of consent, particularly within the literary contexts of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa*. These gaps are evident in three primary areas: the limited application of integrated feminist psychoanalytic theories, underexplored intersections of consent and manipulation, and the restricted focus on themes central to the selected primary texts. The current study identifies and seeks to bridge these lacunae by synthesizing theoretical perspectives and applying them to neglected dimensions in the analysis of these works.

One critical gap in the existing literature is the limited application of feminist psychoanalytic frameworks that integrate Luce Irigaray's theories of the male gaze and

patriarchal language with Sara Ahmed's feminist phenomenology. While Irigaray's work has been pivotal in unpacking the symbolic violence of patriarchal language and its role in shaping gendered subjectivity, its application to literary analysis remains fragmented. Studies such as Tyson's exploration of patriarchal language structures provide foundational insights but often lack the depth needed to interrogate how these structures influence consent dynamics in specific narratives. Similarly, Ahmed's feminist phenomenology, particularly her concepts of the "willful subject" and the "promise of happiness," has received growing attention in feminist literary criticism. However, its potential to unravel the psychological and societal dimensions of consent in literary texts remains underexplored. The absence of a cohesive framework that merges these two theoretical approaches leaves significant gaps in understanding how patriarchal systems manipulate consent and agency.

Another underdeveloped area of scholarship concerns the nuanced boundary between consent and manipulation. While studies on gendered power dynamics and abuse are abundant, they often focus on overt acts of violence or coercion, neglecting the more insidious forms of manipulation that blur the lines of consent. Feminist scholars such as Bartky and Fraser have highlighted how patriarchal norms perpetuate psychological subjugation and compliance. However, the specific mechanisms through which these norms operate in ostensibly consensual relationships, as depicted in *Disgrace* and *My Dark Vanessa*, remain insufficiently analyzed. Psychological grooming, societal expectations, and internalized patriarchy complicate female autonomy, yet these dynamics are often overshadowed by discussions of explicit abuse. For instance, while Nariswari et al. provide a compelling analysis of grooming in *My Dark Vanessa*, their study stops short of exploring how Strane's manipulation intersects with Vanessa's internalization of societal norms, which shapes her perception of the relationship. Similarly, existing research on *Disgrace* frequently centers on racial and colonial politics, as seen in Mardorossian's and Graham's works, rather than delving into the power imbalances and psychological coercion that characterize David Lurie's interactions with Melanie.

The primary texts, *Disgrace* and *My Dark Vanessa*, have inspired a robust body of scholarship that explores themes of power, trauma, and societal structures. However, critical gaps persist in the nuanced examination of consent and manipulation within patriarchal frameworks. In *Disgrace*, scholarship such as Sue Kossew's exploration of

shame and redemption (2003), Graham St. John Stott's analysis of silence and trauma (2009), and Elleke Boehmer's focus on gendered implications of confession and pain (2011) underscores the novel's rich engagement with post-apartheid racial politics, violence, and morality. Similarly, works by Marina Susan Kok (2008) and Carine M. Mardorossian (2011) delve into masculinity in crisis and the intersection of gender, race, and class. While these studies provide significant insights, they often overlook the psychological subjugation of Melanie Isaacs and the societal pressures that complicate her ability to consent. David Lurie's exploitation of Melanie, rooted in patriarchal entitlement and linguistic power, remains insufficiently interrogated for its manipulation of agency and autonomy, leaving a critical dimension of the narrative underexplored. In the case of *My Dark Vanessa*, the scholarship is still emerging due to the novel's relatively recent publication. Studies such as Kamilla Båtnes' (2022) and Farah Rasfia Putri's (2023) focus on grooming, abuse, and harassment, providing valuable analyses of the explicit manifestations of sexual abuse in the teacher-student dynamic. Tyra Persson (2022) examines patriarchal ideologies, gender roles, and the male gaze, while Dewi Anisa and Linusia Marsih (2024) explore the psychological impacts of abuse and Vanessa's eventual resilience. However, these works primarily emphasize overt aspects of abuse and trauma, often sidelining the intricate ways in which patriarchal power manipulates Vanessa's perception of consent and autonomy. For instance, Strane's calculated grooming and emotional manipulation of Vanessa remain underexplored as mechanisms that obscure her ability to recognize the exploitative nature of their relationship. While the existing scholarship on both texts has provided foundational insights, it has largely failed to interrogate the deeper ideological and psychological forces that blur the boundaries between consent and coercion. The present study addresses these gaps by employing feminist psychoanalytic theories—Luce Irigaray's critique of patriarchal language and the male gaze, alongside Sara Ahmed's concepts of the "willful subject" and the "promise of happiness." This framework allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the interplay between societal norms, psychological subjugation, and patriarchal power in shaping ostensibly consensual relationships in *Disgrace* and *My Dark Vanessa*.

The niche of the current study lies in addressing these conceptual and thematic gaps by integrating the feminist psychoanalytic frameworks of Irigaray and Ahmed to analyze the blurred boundaries of consent and manipulation in *Disgrace* and *My Dark*

Vanessa. By synthesizing Irigaray's theories on the male gaze and patriarchal language with Ahmed's concepts of the "willful subject" and the "promise of happiness," the study provides a robust theoretical foundation for examining how patriarchal systems exploit societal norms and internalized ideologies to perpetuate psychological subjugation. This integration offers a novel lens to explore the intersections of power, language, and autonomy, shedding light on the subtle yet pervasive mechanisms through which patriarchal norms compromise consent.

The study also contributes to scholarship by offering a comprehensive perspective on the internalization of patriarchal norms and their impact on female autonomy. Unlike existing works that focus predominantly on overt acts of violence or abuse, this research delves into the covert dynamics of manipulation and compliance that characterize ostensibly consensual relationships. In doing so, it highlights the ways in which patriarchal systems not only enforce external domination but also shape internal perceptions of agency, thereby complicating the discourse on consent. By applying this framework to *Disgrace* and *My Dark Vanessa*, the study uncovers the psychological and societal dimensions of patriarchal power that have been overlooked in previous analyses, providing a deeper understanding of the complexities of consent and manipulation in contemporary literature.

2.5 Conclusion

Summing up the discussion, the existing body of scholarship on J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* provides valuable insights into themes such as racial and gendered violence, sexual abuse, trauma, grooming, and the societal implications of patriarchal power. Scholars such as Sue Kossew and Elleke Boehmer have engaged deeply with the racial and political contexts of *Disgrace*, while Marina Susan Kok and Carine M. Mardorossian have illuminated aspects of masculinity, gendered power, and the intersections of race and class in Coetzee's work. However, these studies often overlook the nuanced exploration of consent and manipulation, particularly the psychological subjugation and patriarchal mechanisms that obscure the boundaries of agency for female characters like Melanie Isaacs. Similarly, while emerging scholarship on *My Dark Vanessa*, such as the works of Kamilla Båtnes, Farah Rasfia Putri, and Tyra Persson, has focused on grooming, harassment, and internalized patriarchy, it rarely ventures into the intricate dynamics of

consent as shaped by societal norms and psychological manipulation. Studies on Vanessa's relationship with Jacob Strane highlight the overt forms of abuse but often fail to unpack the layered and often ambiguous portrayal of Vanessa's internal conflict, shaped by the internalization of patriarchal ideologies and Strane's manipulation.

This study builds on the existing research by addressing the critical gap in analyzing how patriarchal power and societal expectations obscure the fine line between consent and manipulation. By employing feminist psychoanalytic theories, particularly Luce Irigaray's concepts of the male gaze and patriarchal language alongside Sara Ahmed's notions of the "promise of happiness" and the "willful subject," the current research seeks to uncover the psychological and ideological forces at work in these narratives. This approach allows for a deeper examination of how characters like Melanie and Vanessa are coerced into compliance under the guise of autonomy, revealing the intricate and systemic ways in which patriarchal norms perpetuate exploitation. In doing so, the study not only provides a novel perspective on the selected texts but also contributes to broader discussions on the complexities of consent, manipulation, and agency within gendered power structures. It aims to move beyond the established discourse, shedding light on the subtleties of coercion and autonomy that are often overlooked, thereby advancing the critical understanding of these pivotal texts.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter outlines the research design and conceptual foundation of the study by dividing the discussion into two key components: the research methodology and the theoretical framework. The first section details the qualitative approach adopted for the textual analysis of *Disgrace* (1999) and *My Dark Vanessa* (2020), explaining the rationale behind method selection and data delimitation. The second section introduces the theoretical concepts guiding the analysis, focusing on feminist psychoanalytic perspectives that interrogate how patriarchal structures influence agency, consent, and manipulation. Together, these components provide a comprehensive foundation for critically examining the power dynamics embedded in the relationships portrayed in the selected texts.

3.1 Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to conduct a textual analysis of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) and Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* (2020). These texts serve as primary sources of data, allowing for an in-depth exploration of themes related to consent, manipulation, and patriarchal power dynamics. According to McMillan and Schumacher, qualitative research emphasizes understanding complex phenomena through interpretative approaches, making it particularly suited to analyzing the nuanced and layered narratives of these novels. This methodological focus on interpretation allows researchers to engage deeply with the subtleties of the texts, exploring how meaning is constructed through language, symbolism, and character dynamics. Unlike quantitative methods, which often aim for generalizability and statistical precision, qualitative research prioritizes the depth and richness of insights, making it ideal for dissecting complex literary works that intertwine individual experiences with broader societal constructs. The research methodology is guided by a descriptive-analytical framework, employing an exploratory approach to delve into the psychological and societal constructs underpinning the relationships depicted in the selected texts.

The study employs Catherine Belsey's framework for textual analysis as its primary analytical method. Belsey asserts that meaning in a text is constructed within

cultural and ideological frameworks rather than being intrinsic to the text itself. Her approach emphasizes close reading as a technique to uncover the interplay between language, power, and meaning within a narrative. This aligns with the study's focus on deconstructing the dynamics of psychological subjugation and manipulation through feminist psychoanalytic theories. Close reading will enable the researcher to extract and analyze specific excerpts that align with the study's objectives, emphasizing the interplay of language, symbolism, and cultural assumptions embedded in the narratives. By employing Belsey's framework, the study gains a lens through which it can interrogate the texts' portrayals of complex relationships and societal constructs. It enables the researcher to move beyond surface-level interpretations and delve into how cultural and ideological frameworks shape the characters' experiences and the reader's understanding of them. This method also highlights the constructed nature of narratives, emphasizing how authors use language and symbolism to challenge or reinforce prevailing power structures. Through close reading, the study can identify and analyze specific excerpts that exemplify the texts' engagement with themes of agency, power, and identity, offering a deeper and more nuanced critique of patriarchal systems and their psychological impacts.

According to Ranjit Kumar, qualitative research is often descriptive, focusing on the lived experiences and social constructs that inform human behavior and relationships. This research aligns with Kumar's approach by analyzing the narrative elements—dialogue, actions, and internal monologues—within their socio-cultural contexts to understand how patriarchal ideologies permeate and influence the characters' interactions. Textual analysis, as described by Arya, is not merely the passive reading of a text but an active interpretative process that deconstructs language and symbols to reveal the ideological assumptions embedded within. Through this method, the research aims to unravel the subtle mechanisms of manipulation and control that shape the ostensibly consensual relationships in the selected texts. The method provides a means to critique how power dynamics are normalized through language, exposing the ways in which cultural assumptions subtly validate coercion or undermine agency. Furthermore, this analytical approach ensures that the texts are not treated as isolated works of fiction but as reflections and critiques of real-world gendered power structures. Ultimately, the descriptive and interpretative nature of

qualitative research enables a holistic examination of how societal constructs inform the relational dynamics and psychological realities within the selected texts.

The study is delimited to specific narrative elements that highlight the dynamics of consent and manipulation. Following the principle of "winnowing," as outlined by Matthew Miles and Michael Huberman in their book, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, the researcher focuses on passages and scenes that exemplify the central themes of the study, while less relevant content is excluded. This ensures that the analysis remains targeted and coherent, enabling a deeper exploration of the issues at hand. In this study, "winnowing" refers to the deliberate selection of narrative excerpts that most directly illuminate the central themes of consent, manipulation, and patriarchal power. This adapted use is not empirical in nature but interpretive, allowing for focused textual engagement while maintaining analytical depth and thematic coherence. By integrating close reading with feminist psychoanalytic theory, the methodology provides a comprehensive approach to understanding how patriarchal systems undermine agency and perpetuate coercion, both in literature and in broader societal contexts. This selective approach not only streamlines the analytical process but also enhances the precision and depth of the findings, ensuring that the research delves into the most significant and illustrative aspects of the texts. Through close reading of these key excerpts, the methodology captures the subtle interplay of language, action, and symbolism that reveal deeper insights into the characters' experiences and the societal forces shaping them. The incorporation of feminist psychoanalytic theory further strengthens the analysis, enabling the researcher to dissect the psychological and ideological mechanisms at work in the manipulation and subjugation depicted in the novels. This approach ensures that the analysis not only remains focused on its core themes but also contributes to a broader understanding of the ways literature reflects and interrogates societal structures of power and control.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a feminist psychoanalytic framework to explore how patriarchal ideology is internalized by women, contributing to their psychological submission and complicating the boundaries of sexual consent. By employing key theoretical concepts from French psychoanalysis and feminist criticism, particularly the works of Luce Irigaray and Sara Ahmed, the research examines the nuanced dynamics of power, language, and psychological manipulation in *Disgrace* (1999) by J.M. Coetzee and *My Dark Vanessa* (2020) by Kate Elizabeth Russell. These theories provide critical insights into the internalization of patriarchal norms, the dynamics of gender-based power relations, and the psychological and linguistic mechanisms that enforce compliance and complicity in ostensibly consensual relationships.

This conceptual framework builds on Luce Irigaray's seminal concepts of the "male gaze" and the "male use of language," as articulated in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977). Irigaray argues that patriarchal power manifests through visual and linguistic domination, where women are subjected to the objectifying gaze of men, reinforcing their subordinate status. According to Irigaray, "the man looks; the woman is looked at. And it is the one who looks who is in control" (Tyson, 2006, p. 102). This power dynamic positions women as objects of male desire, depriving them of agency and autonomy. The study uses the concept of the male gaze to analyze the experiences of Melanie and Vanessa, demonstrating how their objectification serves to blur the boundaries between consent and manipulation. Irigaray's critique of patriarchal language further enriches the analysis. She posits that language itself is a tool of male domination, structuring interactions to perpetuate female subjugation. As Irigaray explains, patriarchal language suppresses women's individuality, forcing them to reproduce ideas that align with male-centric worldviews (Irigaray, 1977, pp. 29-31).

This theoretical lens allows the study to examine how David and Jacob's language psychologically represses Melanie and Vanessa into predefined gender roles, making compliance appear obligatory. Patriarchal language not only enforces gender hierarchies but also limits women's ability to articulate dissent, leaving them with two constrained choices: silence or compliance. As Tyson (2006) observes, women often internalize patriarchal assumptions unconsciously, perceiving submission as inevitable due to the psychological oppression embedded in everyday interactions (p. 95). The

internalization of patriarchal ideology, a central focus of this study, refers to the unconscious acceptance of beliefs and values that reinforce male dominance. Tyson (2006) argues that internalized patriarchy affects women's psychological experiences and consciousness, making them unaware of their own subjugation (p. 93). Irigaray's insights into the psychological effects of patriarchal language further elucidate this phenomenon.

To complement Irigaray's psychoanalytic lens and to further build on the current conceptual framework, the study integrates Sara Ahmed's feminist theories from *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), focusing on the concepts of the "Willful Subject" and the "Promise of Happiness." Ahmed's critique of happiness as a tool of societal control offers a powerful lens to analyze the limitations of autonomy in ostensibly consensual relationships. Ahmed's notion of the Willful Subject challenges the perception of agency in hierarchical relationships. According to Ahmed, individuals who resist or deviate from societal norms are often labeled as willful, a term that carries negative connotations in patriarchal contexts (Ahmed, 2017, p. 2). The study applies this concept to Melanie and Vanessa, highlighting how their roles as young, subordinate females in relationships with older, authoritative males complicate their capacity to provide genuine consent. Their apparent agency is constrained by gendered power dynamics, making their consent a product of coercion rather than autonomy. The "Promise of Happiness" further contextualizes the internalization of patriarchal norms. Ahmed argues that happiness is often presented as a reward for conformity, perpetuating inequality by encouraging individuals to adjust their feelings rather than challenge oppressive structures (Ahmed, 2017, p. 60). By framing their relationships as pathways to fulfillment, the male characters obscure the coercive nature of their actions, further blurring the lines between consent and manipulation.

The integration of Irigaray's psychoanalytic concepts with Ahmed's feminist theories creates a comprehensive framework for analyzing the relationships in *Disgrace* and *My Dark Vanessa*. While Irigaray's theories focus on the psychological and linguistic mechanisms of patriarchal domination, Ahmed's concepts provide a broader critique of societal structures that perpetuate gender-based inequalities. Together, these perspectives allow the study to:

1. Examine the psychological subjugation of Melanie and Vanessa, emphasizing how patriarchal language and the male gaze contribute to their perceived lack of agency.
2. Analyze the gender-based power dynamics in their relationships, highlighting the manipulative strategies employed by David and Jacob to secure compliance.
3. Explore the societal and psychological implications of internalized patriarchal norms, particularly in the context of young women's experiences in hierarchical relationships.

The study employs Irigaray's theory to explore how Melanie and Vanessa internalize patriarchal language and the male gaze, leading to their psychological subjugation. It complements this analysis with Ahmed's framework to examine the external power structures that influence their decisions and constrain their autonomy. By analyzing these intersecting dimensions, the study investigates the phenomenon of blurred consent and its implications for understanding gender-based power dynamics. To analyse the excerpts from the two texts, the study utilises the following focused postulates that are created by combination of the two theorists:

- **Patriarchal Language and the Male Gaze:** Patriarchal power manifests through objectifying gazes and linguistic dominance, psychologically subjugating women and framing their compliance as inevitable.
- **Internalized Patriarchy and Consent:** Women internalize patriarchal norms that blur the lines between consent and manipulation, rendering submission as perceived autonomy.
- **Promise of Happiness as Coercion:** The societal promise of happiness is manipulated to enforce compliance, making resistance appear deviant and undermining genuine agency.

Although the psychoanalytic theory developed by Luce Irigaray and the feminist lenses by Sara Ahmed might seem unrelated because of the disciplinary background of the thought-psychosis and sociocultural criticism, respectively, the conceptual interplay between them is both purposeful and a necessity in the aims of the present undertaking. Due to the internal psychological constructions using language and male gaze, the work by Irigaray is directed toward the examination of how the patriarchal ideology is absorbed unconsciously by women. The psycho-analytic approach proposed by her

provides an understanding of the inner world of a person and dampens how female subjectivity is constructed in the frameworks of visual and linguistic domination. Psychoanalysis, though, does not offer an adequate explanation of how women experience the world around them in their everyday lives through institutionalized discourses and their roles in society. It is at this point that the analysis is taken further by the feminist theory of Ahmed. In the next step, Ahmed goes beyond the intrapsychic to consider how intrapersonal frameworks based on family, school and culture support compliance by making emotional promises, especially the promise of happiness and that they accept them. This combination of the internal psychological process with the external sociocultural process based on Irigaray and Ahmed allows the study to create a dual lens through which the coercion that resists visibility, taking place at the level of the self, and the wider scripts of society that authenticate and legitimize such a kind of psychological coercion becomes visible. This inter excavation needs to be done to fully question the modus operandi of patriarchy power both in and around the female subject. Moreover, the two theoretical approaches converge on a central concern: the mechanisms by which patriarchy renders female submission both natural and invisible. Irigaray explores how patriarchal language structures subjectivity, making compliance feel psychologically inevitable; Ahmed critiques how societal ideals like happiness are mobilized to sustain the same compliance by making dissent seem selfish, disruptive, or even pathological.

This theoretical framework underscores the interplay of psychological and societal forces in shaping the experiences of Melanie and Vanessa in *Disgrace* and *My Dark Vanessa*. By employing Luce Irigaray's psychoanalytic concepts and Sara Ahmed's feminist theories, the study reveals the pervasive influence of patriarchal ideologies on women's autonomy and agency. It highlights how the internalization of patriarchal norms and the pursuit of societal happiness contribute to the coercive dynamics of ostensibly consensual relationships. This framework provides a robust foundation for analyzing the complex intersections of consent, manipulation, and power in the selected texts.

CHAPTER 4

POWER, CONSENT AND MANIPULATION IN J.M. COETZEE'S *DISGRACE*

The intricate interplay of male power, consent, and manipulation forms a central theme in both J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa*. In this context, male power is understood not merely as physical dominance but as a systemic force embedded in patriarchal structures, sustained through cultural narratives, institutional hierarchies, and linguistic practices. Drawing on feminist theory, male power operates through what Luce Irigaray describes as the "male gaze" and patriarchal language—mechanisms that objectify and silence women—while Sara Ahmed highlights how societal norms reframe compliance as a pathway to happiness, reinforcing gendered submission. This chapter focuses on *Disgrace* and unravels how these patriarchal dynamics shape the perceptions and experiences of the female protagonist. By examining key textual excerpts, the analysis illuminates how coercive power structures and internalized ideologies blur the boundaries between autonomy and exploitation. The analysis explores relationships where power asymmetries dictate the actions and responses of the female protagonist, presenting consent as a contested and manipulated construct. The chapter proceeds with close reading guided by the psychofeminist frameworks of Irigaray and Ahmed to dissect the gendered power dynamics at play, exposing how David Lurie's interactions with Melanie Isaacs are entrenched in patriarchal entitlement and systemic manipulation.

J.M. Coetzee, one of the most celebrated authors of the modern world, was born in South Africa in 1940. He earned degrees in both English and Mathematics from the University of Cape Town before pursuing advanced studies in literature and computer programming. Coetzee's academic journey, coupled with his experience as a university professor and his vocal opposition to apartheid, profoundly influenced his works. His novels often grapple with themes of morality, justice, and the human condition. *Disgrace*, published in 1999 and awarded the Booker Prize, exemplifies his ability to interrogate complex social and ethical questions within a South African context. Set in post-apartheid South Africa, *Disgrace* explores the intersections of power, race, gender, and societal transformation. The narrative follows David Lurie, a middle-aged professor of Communications, whose manipulative and exploitative relationship with

his student, Melanie Isaacs, leads to his public disgrace and resignation. The novel further delves into David's attempts to navigate his life after his fall from grace, as he retreats to his daughter Lucy's farm in the Eastern Cape. The story is marked by acts of violence and upheaval, reflecting the tensions and uncertainties of a society undergoing profound change. Through David's interactions with Melanie and other characters, *Disgrace* interrogates the ethical ambiguities of power dynamics, particularly in relationships that blur the lines between consent and coercion.

This chapter analyses David Lurie's interactions with Melanie Isaacs, applying the theoretical frameworks of Luce Irigaray's critique of patriarchal language and Sara Ahmed's notions of societal expectations and autonomy. By examining pivotal moments in the text, the analysis reveals how David's sense of entitlement and Melanie's passive compliance reflect broader patterns of patriarchal control. David's invocation of beauty as a duty, coupled with his objectifying gaze, exemplifies Irigaray's critique of male-dominated linguistic frameworks, which frame women as objects to be possessed and consumed. Coetzee's portrayal of Melanie's passivity further underscores Ahmed's insights into societal pressures that limit female agency, illustrating how internalized patriarchal norms complicate the boundaries of consent. Through a close reading of these dynamics, the analysis exposes the mechanisms through which power and manipulation operate under the guise of autonomy, offering a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between gender, power, and consent in *Disgrace*. In the novel, J.M. Coetzee meticulously constructs a narrative where the interactions between David Lurie and Melanie Isaacs become a microcosm of broader patriarchal dynamics. These interactions exemplify the complex interplay between power, consent, and silence, which operate in a system that obscures the true agency of individuals. This analysis employs Luce Irigaray's critique of patriarchal language and Sara Ahmed's concepts of societal expectations to elucidate how Coetzee portrays the mechanisms of manipulation and psychological subjugation.

4.1 Patriarchal Entitlement and Transactional Intimacy

David Lurie's initial mentality and his perception of women, as depicted in the opening chapter of *Disgrace*, establish a critical foundation for understanding the patriarchal and objectifying lens through which he views his relationships. His interactions with Soraya exemplify the transactional nature of his approach to intimacy

and reveal the ingrained structures of male entitlement that underpin his worldview. From the outset, David's reflections reveal his self-perception as a man entitled to pursue personal satisfaction, a perspective steeped in patriarchal privilege and one that is critically relevant to the study's theoretical framework. The narrative introduces David's weekly sessions with Soraya, a sex worker, as a form of "moderated bliss" (Coetzee, 4). This description underscores his calculated and self-serving approach to relationships, where emotional intimacy is eschewed in favor of controlled, commodified pleasure. The use of the term "bliss", coupled with the qualifier "moderated," signifies his desire for pleasure within predefined boundaries, devoid of complexity or commitment. This dynamic encapsulates the patriarchal notion of male fulfillment being achievable through the objectification and commodification of women's bodies. Soraya is reduced to an instrument of David's satisfaction, her role confined to fulfilling his needs within a transactional framework. Luce Irigaray's critique of the male gaze, which reduces women to objects of desire and denies them subjectivity, is evident here. David's observations of Soraya are devoid of curiosity about her as an individual; instead, his focus remains on her physicality and her ability to conform to his expectations.

David's control over Soraya extends to the minutiae of their interactions, as demonstrated by his preference for her to wear no lipstick, no earrings, no high heels (3). These directives reflect his belief in his right to dictate her appearance, further emphasizing his view of her as an object to be molded to his liking. This insistence on controlling her presentation aligns with patriarchal norms that seek to regulate women's bodies and autonomy. Irigaray's analysis of patriarchal language as a tool for domination is particularly pertinent here. By prescribing Soraya's appearance, David asserts his linguistic and symbolic authority, reinforcing the dynamics of control inherent in their relationship. His satisfaction with her compliance reveals an expectation of female acquiescence, a theme that resonates throughout his interactions with women in the novel. Moreover, David's detached musings about Soraya's life beyond their sessions highlight his disregard for her agency. He reflects on the possibility of meeting her outside of her work but these thoughts are fleeting and devoid of genuine curiosity or empathy (3). The juxtaposition of his conjecture about her personal life with his inability to engage with her as an individual underscores the objectifying nature of his perspective. Sara Ahmed's concept of the "Willful Subject"

becomes relevant here. Soraya's compliance within the parameters set by David may be seen as an absence of willfulness, shaped by societal structures that condition women to conform to male expectations. Her apparent passivity aligns with patriarchal constructions of the "ideal" woman—submissive, accommodating, and devoid of resistance.

David's reflection on his temperament further illuminates his self-centered worldview. He describes himself as having "solved the problem of sex rather well" and considers his arrangement with Soraya to be "soothing" and "uncomplicated" (2). This self-congratulatory attitude reveals his belief in the adequacy of his approach, rooted in a patriarchal framework that prioritizes male convenience and pleasure over mutual respect or emotional connection. His framing of sex as a "problem" to be solved reflects his utilitarian approach, reducing intimacy to a logistical challenge rather than a shared experience. Ahmed's critique of the "Promise of Happiness"—the societal narrative that equates compliance with fulfillment—provides a lens to examine David's satisfaction with his arrangement. His contentment stems not from genuine happiness but from the absence of challenge or disruption to his authority, reinforcing the coercive nature of patriarchal ideals.

The disruption of David's carefully curated dynamic with Soraya occurs when he encounters her outside their sessions, accompanied by her children (4). This moment shatters the illusion of control and exclusivity that he has constructed, forcing him to confront her existence as a multifaceted individual. His discomfort and subsequent decision to terminate their arrangement reveal his inability to reconcile his objectified view of her with the reality of her autonomy. This incident prefigures his later interactions with Melanie, where his failure to acknowledge women's agency and complexity leads to further moral and personal decline. The male gaze, as critiqued by Irigaray, falters when confronted with the irreducible subjectivity of its object, exposing the fragility of patriarchal control. In examining David's relationship with Soraya, it becomes evident that his mentality before meeting Melanie is deeply entrenched in patriarchal norms. His objectification of women, reliance on transactional dynamics, and disregard for female agency reflect broader societal structures that perpetuate inequality. This analysis lays the groundwork for understanding how these attitudes inform his later actions and the blurred boundaries between consent and manipulation in his relationship with Melanie. Theoretical frameworks by Irigaray and Ahmed

provide critical tools for deconstructing these dynamics, revealing the intersections of power, language, and societal expectations that shape David's worldview.

David Lurie's routine at the beginning of *Disgrace* illustrates his profound detachment from the world around him, providing a crucial backdrop for understanding his interactions with Melanie Isaacs. He describes his life as devoid of excitement, where "without the Thursday interludes the week is as featureless as a desert" (5). This metaphor of the "desert" suggests an emptiness in David's existence, both emotionally and intellectually. His life lacks the vibrancy of genuine human connection, and it is filled with predictable, monotonous activities. This detachment serves as a foundation for his objectifying attitudes towards the women he encounters, including Melanie. David's life is structured by rituals that offer him a sense of control and comfort, such as his solitary enjoyment of the reading room and his walk home, "the brisk winter air, the damp, gleaming streets" (5). These moments, marked by an absence of meaningful connection, reflect a life in which David remains emotionally distant from the world. His environment—the quiet spaces, the solitary walk—becomes a metaphor for his own isolation and detachment from real engagement with others, particularly women. The narrative presents him as a figure defined by self-sufficiency, but this self-sufficiency is revealed to be a shield from confronting the complexity of interpersonal relationships, especially those governed by power and authority. As a man in a position of institutional authority, his detachment allows him to perceive women as passive objects upon which to project his desires without much consideration of their autonomy.

In contrast to this emotional detachment, when David first perceives Melanie, his assessment of her reveals his tendency to objectify women based on their physical appearance and their utility in reinforcing his desires. Barnard (2013) reads *Disgrace* through a radical-feminist lens, treating sex (even prostitution) as a form of patriarchal domination. Her discussion of David Lurie's affairs (treating Melanie as a prostitute) and Lucy's assault as "bought-and-sold rape" resonates with themes of male entitlement and victimization. We can draw on Barnard to support our analysis of Lurie's attitudes (e.g. his ambivalence toward Melanie's consent) and the novel's critique of patriarchal power. David remarks, "Not the best student but not the worst either: clever enough, but unengaged" (6). This evaluation of Melanie as "clever enough" yet "unengaged" underscores his tendency to view women not for their intellectual worth but for their proximity to his expectations. His focus on Melanie's academic performance, rather

than her humanity or individuality, reflects a patriarchal lens that reduces her to a mere part of the system of power in which he exists. The language David uses reveals his sense of entitlement; women, in his view, should be either useful or invisible, and Melanie's "unengaged" position places her in a category of neutrality—neither particularly noteworthy nor especially resistant. In this light, Melanie's passivity becomes a blank canvas upon which David projects his desires, failing to acknowledge her subjectivity. This dynamic speaks to Irigaray's critique of the patriarchal gaze that renders women as objects to be evaluated and consumed rather than subjects with autonomy. The objectification of women through language is not simply an issue of seeing them as physical bodies but involves the erasure of their individuality, as demonstrated by David's clinical assessment of Melanie's abilities and engagement. David's description of Melanie's physical appearance further complicates the power dynamics at play. He observes her with a mix of interest and detachment: "She smiles back, bobbing her head, her smile sly rather than shy. She is small and thin, with close-cropped black hair, wide, almost Chinese cheekbones, large, dark eyes" (6). His observation of her physical traits, framed in terms of their exoticism and sensuality, positions Melanie as an object of desire rather than an autonomous individual. David's description is meticulous, highlighting physical features that he finds alluring. The focus on her "small and thin" frame, her "close-cropped black hair," and "wide, almost Chinese cheekbones" reveals a fascination with her exoticism, further reinforcing the ways in which women are reduced to their physical attributes in patriarchal discourse. Melanie's body, rather than her thoughts, personality, or feelings, becomes the subject of David's attention, and in his mind, she is there to be appreciated for her beauty. This objectification echoes the male gaze that Irigaray critiques, where the woman is always viewed through the lens of male desire. By reducing Melanie to a set of physical attributes, David denies her agency and treats her as something to be possessed and admired rather than as a subject in her own right. The slyness of her smile, noted by David, reflects a subtle challenge to the way he is seeing her, yet it is framed as something playful and teasing rather than a serious challenge to his authority. Even in her resistance, she is positioned within a framework of male pleasure, unable to escape the objectifying gaze.

David's reflection on his own feelings toward Melanie reveals the routine nature of his interactions with women. He acknowledges, "He is mildly smitten with her. It is

no great matter: barely a term passes when he does not fall for one or other of his charges” (6). This statement reveals a pattern of behavior in David, where his affection or attraction to students is framed as trivial, almost inevitable. His detachment from any genuine emotional connection is evident in the casualness with which he regards his attraction. For David, the allure of younger women is a repeated, almost mechanical part of his existence, something that does not hold any weight beyond temporary gratification. This sentiment reflects his understanding of relationships through a patriarchal lens, where women are interchangeable and their worth is tied to their ability to fulfill male desires. The fact that David falls for “one or other of his charges” highlights his habitual, transactional view of women, where they are seen as objects to be seduced rather than as people with their own desires and needs. This objectification is compounded by his assumption that his desires are an inherent part of his life, thus absolving him of any need to reflect on the ethical implications of his actions. His detachment and routine approach to women reflect the normalization of patriarchal entitlement to women’s bodies and the systems that enable it. The coercive nature of David’s worldview is evident when he remarks, “Because a woman’s beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it” (8). Here, David articulates a core patriarchal belief: women’s bodies and beauty are not their own; they belong to the world, to men, to society. This idea denies women autonomy over their own selves, reducing them to mere vessels for the pleasure of others. The language of “duty” reveals a coercive framework that positions women’s beauty as an obligation rather than a personal trait. It is not enough for Melanie to exist as a person with her own agency; she must also conform to societal expectations of sharing her beauty for the benefit of others. The coerciveness embedded in this belief is subtle but powerful. Through this lens, Melanie is not simply allowed to exist as a woman with desires of her own, but rather as a tool through which male desires are validated. Irigaray’s critique of patriarchal language becomes particularly relevant here, as David’s words work to silence Melanie’s autonomy and reshape her into an object within his narrative of desire. The language of “duty” reflects a broader social expectation that women’s bodies are for public consumption, reinforcing patriarchal structures that limit women’s agency and self-determination.

David’s attempt at seduction, however, is not without internal conflict. He reflects on the nature of his desire, acknowledging that his attempt to seduce Melanie

is “not a good move” (8). This recognition hints at some awareness on David’s part of the power imbalance between them. However, rather than a moment of self-reflection or ethical consideration, David’s concern is that his “pentameter,” (8) or seduction technique, has lost its power. The phrase “the pentameter, whose cadence once served so well to oil the serpent’s words” reflects David’s understanding of his seduction as a performance, a ritual that has worked in the past but now seems to fail. The use of the word “serpent” evokes the biblical imagery of temptation, suggesting that David sees himself as a figure offering something desirable, yet tainted. His reflection is not a moment of moral reckoning, but rather a moment of frustration that his usual methods of control and persuasion are not as effective as they once were. The fact that he acknowledges that he has become “a teacher again, man of the book, guardian of the culture-ward” (8) suggests that his power as a teacher has, in this moment, overtaken his desire. This shift in David’s awareness signals the difficulty of reconciling his roles as a teacher and as a seducer, particularly in the context of his authority over Melanie. When Melanie eventually expresses her resistance and prepares to leave, it is clear that her response is one of cautious disengagement. She asks, “‘And what if I already share it?’ In her voice there is a hint of breathlessness. Exciting, always, to be courted: exciting, pleasurable” (8). Melanie’s response reveals a complex mix of emotions—pleasure, excitement, but also an underlying reluctance. The hint of breathlessness indicates her discomfort, but also the thrill of being desired. Her statement, “I must leave, I’m expected,” marks a clear withdrawal from the situation, not only physically but emotionally as well. She leaves not only because of external obligations but also because of the discomfort she feels in the face of David’s coercive behavior. The fact that her departure is framed as a duty, something she “must” do, underscores the tension between societal expectations and personal agency. Melanie’s departure is an assertion of autonomy, but it is framed within the context of the roles and expectations society places on women. It reflects the constraints women face in navigating the complexities of consent, desire, and power within patriarchal systems.

4.2 The Male Gaze and Objectification of Melanie

In Chapter 3 of *Disgrace*, the internal conflict David experiences is palpable, especially in his rationalization of his pursuit of Melanie. When he reflects, “She does not own herself; perhaps he does not own himself either,” (8) David’s words betray a deep-rooted sense of entitlement and disconnection from the consequences of his

actions. He acknowledges, albeit in an indirect manner, that both he and Melanie are trapped within a system of power and desire that limits their autonomy. By stating that Melanie "does not own herself," David perpetuates the patriarchal belief that women's bodies are available to men to possess, control, or manipulate, rendering Melanie's consent as something that exists only within the confines of his desire. His implication that he "does not own himself" seems to suggest that his actions are somehow beyond his control, positioning him as a passive agent in the scenario, despite his clear dominance in the situation. This is an example of the self-justification often embedded within patriarchal logic—where men absolve themselves of responsibility by presenting their behavior as an inevitable reaction to external, often patriarchal, forces. Moffat (2017) also argues that *Disgrace* is focalised through David Lurie, embedding rape in a "white European patriarchy". She argues that Coetzee deliberately depicts Lucy's rape through Lurie's male perspective ("servant of Eros"), highlighting how patriarchal ideology shapes interpretations of violence.

David's reflection may hint at a subconscious recognition of powerlessness in his own way, but it is ultimately a rationalization that lets him evade accountability for the manipulation of Melanie. David's internal struggle with the boundaries of consent is articulated through the question: "Too far. What is far, what is too far, in a matter like this? Is her too far the same as his too far?" (9) This passage illustrates David's moral ambiguity, as he grapples with the concept of consent in the act itself. His questioning reveals his uncertainty, but more importantly, it shows his attempt to create a space in which his actions are less defined, less transgressive. The ambiguity of the phrase "too far" allows him to sidestep clear moral judgment, as it functions as a means of deflecting responsibility. David's questioning is not an attempt to evaluate the harm he might have caused Melanie; rather, it is a way for him to gauge whether the violation of consent is mutual—whether his "too far" aligns with Melanie's. This aligns with Ahmed's idea of the "Willful Subject," where a person's desires are positioned as naturally aligned with their own happiness, and the recognition of boundaries is blurred in favor of self-satisfaction. David's thought process suggests an unwillingness to recognize that boundaries in the context of power dynamics are not always negotiable; they are often predicated on unequal power structures. In this sense, David's internal struggle becomes a tool for justifying his continued pursuit of Melanie despite the clear

lack of her consent, revealing the lengths to which patriarchal entitlement can cloud one's understanding of harm.

When David describes Melanie's passivity during the sexual act, saying, "Her body is clear, simple, in its way perfect; though she is passive throughout, he finds the act pleasurable, so pleasurable that from its climax he tumbles into blank oblivion," his perception of Melanie's body echoes a theme of objectification. The focus on Melanie's body as "clear" and "simple" implies that she is reduced to a physical form that exists to provide pleasure to him. The phrase "in its way perfect" reinforces this idea, as it aligns her body with an idealized, non-agentive object of desire, something to be admired, not engaged with as an autonomous subject. Her passivity is presented as part of the "perfection" of her body, with her lack of resistance positioned as a passive contribution to his enjoyment. This framing aligns with Irigaray's critique of patriarchal representations of women, where women's subjectivity is obscured, and their physicality is viewed through the lens of male desire. Parker's essay (2020) revisits Disgrace in the #MeToo era, noting how David's "disgrace" stems from his utter lack of empathy – he "minimises Melanie's voice and stomps over Lucy's" and mainly provides David's account of the events. This accessible critique underscores the patriarchal violence and self-justifying rhetoric in Lurie's behavior. David's experience of "blank oblivion" after the climax indicates his emotional detachment; he is not experiencing any real intimacy or connection but instead is engulfed in self-centered pleasure. His dissociation highlights the disparity between his experience of the act and Melanie's, further emphasizing the manipulation of consent and the emotional isolation that characterizes their interaction. Following the incident, Melanie's reaction is one of disengagement and withdrawal: "Averting her face, she frees herself, gathers her things, leaves the room. In a few minutes she is back, dressed. 'I must go,' she whispers. He makes no effort to detain her." (9) Melanie's physical actions of averting her face and leaving the room illustrate a strong desire to escape not only the physical space but also the emotional and psychological aftermath of the encounter. Her attempt to "free herself" is a tacit acknowledgment of the violation that has occurred, as she physically removes herself from the situation. The fact that she "must go" further reveals her sense of duty, an internalized societal expectation that she must comply, even in the face of emotional trauma. David's lack of effort to detain her shows his indifference to her distress, indicating his disregard for her agency and autonomy. This moment captures

the gendered dynamics of power at play, where David's sense of entitlement overrides any concern for Melanie's emotional state. In patriarchal systems, women's distress often goes unnoticed, as men like David are conditioned to perceive their desires as the central point of any interaction, leaving no room for genuine empathy or reflection on harm caused.

David's self-justification, despite recognizing Melanie's distress, is encapsulated in his thought: "Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core." (11) In this rationalization, David draws a line between what he perceives as "rape" and his own actions, minimizing the significance of his behavior while still acknowledging that Melanie did not want the encounter. His dismissal of it as "not rape" reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of consent, as it hinges on a narrow, legalistic view of what constitutes sexual assault, rather than considering the psychological and emotional harm caused by the violation of consent. The phrase "undesired to the core" illustrates the deep dissonance between Melanie's emotions and David's perception of the event. While Melanie's distress and lack of desire are apparent, David clings to the belief that his actions are not criminal or fully harmful, relying on a patriarchal framework that distinguishes between "rape" and other forms of violation. This enables him to distance himself from the true nature of the harm he caused, reinforcing his detachment from the consequences of his actions. Melanie's coping mechanism is described as "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." (11) This metaphor of the rabbit reflects Melanie's psychological withdrawal in response to the trauma she has experienced. The imagery of the rabbit "dying within herself" suggests a complete surrender to the trauma, an emotional collapse that serves as a defense mechanism to survive the violation. Her comparison to the rabbit is significant in that it portrays her as both vulnerable and powerless—an animal at the mercy of a predator. In this instance, Melanie's psychological response is to dissociate, to retreat inwardly as a means of coping with the overwhelming reality of what has just occurred. This detachment is a coping mechanism, a way for Melanie to endure the violence of the moment without fully confronting it. This resonates with Irigaray's idea of the silencing of women's voices and the ways in which they are conditioned to internalize their trauma. Hassanin (2021) links this phenomenon to gender and race arguing that

Coetzee's white women remain "silenced, raped, submitted and dispossessed". It discusses how *Disgrace* portrays patriarchal power beyond individual characters.

David's recognition of Melanie's need to cleanse herself of the act is made evident when he thinks, "At this moment, he has no doubt, she, Melanie, is trying to cleanse herself of it, of him." (11) His perception of Melanie's need to cleanse herself suggests that he is aware, on some level, that his actions have left a mark on her. However, this awareness is filtered through his own self-interest, as he seems more concerned with her attempts to remove the stain of his presence rather than reflecting on the harm he has caused. The need to "cleanse" herself symbolizes Melanie's desire to regain control over her body and emotions, to restore herself to a state of wholeness that has been violated by David's actions. This desire for purification speaks to the gendered dynamics of power, where women are often seen as needing to "cleanse" themselves after experiencing sexual violation, rather than having the autonomy to confront and process their trauma on their own terms. Melanie's subdued request, "Can I sleep here tonight?" (12) whispered without making eye contact, signals a profound shift in the power dynamic between her and David. While her previous actions—leaving the room, preparing to depart—indicated a desire to escape, this request to stay demonstrates her vulnerability and need for safety. Her avoidance of eye contact reveals her discomfort and reluctance, but her request suggests an unconscious desire for some form of solace, perhaps a sense of security after the emotional and physical upheaval she has endured. The power imbalance in this moment is stark; David has already violated her, and now she is asking for a form of comfort, perhaps because the world outside feels unsafe. This request complicates the dynamics of consent, showing how women in situations of trauma may seek comfort in the very space where they have been harmed, further underlining the psychological and emotional consequences of sexual violence.

As Melanie begins to sob in David's arms, he experiences "a tingling of desire" (12) despite the emotional intensity of the moment. This reaction reveals the depth of David's moral and emotional disconnect, as he experiences physical pleasure even in the midst of Melanie's visible distress. His conflicting emotions—sympathy for her suffering and desire for her body—underscore the narcissistic and exploitative nature of his character. This moment highlights David's inability to recognize the humanity of Melanie, as his desires remain rooted in the physical, unaffected by her emotional pain.

His reaction speaks to the ways in which patriarchal entitlement allows men like David to remain disconnected from the emotional realities of the women they exploit, unable or unwilling to confront the harm they have caused. David's paternalistic tone is evident when he almost says, "Tell Daddy what is wrong." (12) This comment, which remains unsaid, carries with it a subtle yet clear implication of control and authority. By positioning himself as a paternal figure, David reinforces the power imbalance between him and Melanie, casting himself as a protector or caretaker, even as he continues to harm her. This paternalistic dynamic is emblematic of the ways in which men in positions of power often seek to dominate women through a veneer of care or concern, further obscuring the exploitative nature of their behavior. The use of the term "Daddy" evokes both a sense of infantilization and dominance, further solidifying the gendered and coercive dynamics that shape their interactions.

In Chapter 4 of *Disgrace*, David's objectification of Melanie continues to unfold, with his thoughts revealing a deeper sense of ownership and entitlement over her body. He reflects, "He is beginning to learn the way her body moves. She is quick, and greedy for experience." (13) This passage underscores the way David reduces Melanie to a mere object of sexual desire, dissecting her body in a way that allows him to position her as a source of gratification for himself. His language—describing her movements as "quick" and "greedy"—frames her as a passive instrument for his pleasure, as though her body exists to serve his desires. The use of "greedy for experience" also speaks to a troubling view of Melanie as someone who is eager to please or fulfill his needs, regardless of her own emotional or psychological state. This interpretation reflects a common patriarchal notion that women are, at best, passive participants in sexual encounters, acting in accordance with male desires. David's focus on her body's movements, rather than her subjective experience, showcases the depth of his objectification, positioning Melanie as an object to be observed, studied, and consumed. This pattern of viewing women through a lens of physicality rather than agency plays directly into Irigaray's critique of patriarchal systems that reduce women to their bodily functions, stripping them of autonomy and subjectivity. David's patronizing attitude towards Melanie is further revealed in his internal monologue: "Poor little bird, he thinks, whom I have held against my breast!" (14) This metaphor reflects David's distorted sense of intimacy, where he sees himself as a protector or savior of Melanie, while simultaneously positioning her as weak and vulnerable. The

image of a "poor little bird" suggests that Melanie is fragile, helpless, and in need of care, but this care is tainted by the inherent power imbalance in their relationship. The metaphor of holding her "against my breast" evokes a possessive, almost parental image, as though Melanie is an object to be nurtured or cared for, rather than an independent person with her own desires and agency. This sense of possession reveals David's deep entitlement to Melanie's body and his need to control and dominate her, despite his claims of affection or concern. By framing their interaction as one of protection, David obscures the predatory nature of his behavior, reinforcing the patriarchal idea that men have the right to "claim" women, while simultaneously infantilizing them in a way that limits their ability to assert their own independence. Brownmiller's book *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* argues that rape is not about sex but a conscious act of male domination. She describes rape as an "instrument of terror" by which men control women. This concept reinforces the argument about Coetzee's depiction of sexual violence as patriarchal control, and support analyses of how characters react (or fail to react) in such situations.

The theme of silence and suppression is woven throughout the chapter, with several moments revealing the unspoken societal complicity in the abuse of power. When David reflects, "Though he cannot believe they know what is afoot, they are clearly waiting to see what he will do about the intruder," (14) the tension in the classroom becomes apparent. The "intruder" here can be interpreted as the disturbance caused by David's actions, both in the immediate context of his relationship with Melanie and in the larger societal framework that seeks to ignore or downplay sexual exploitation. The fact that David feels their eyes on him suggests an atmosphere of judgment, yet there is a tacit understanding that no one will speak openly about the abuse that has taken place. This silence mirrors the societal denial and complicity that often surrounds instances of sexual violence and exploitation, where those who might recognize the harm are hesitant to intervene or acknowledge it. The waiting, unspoken tension in the classroom serves as a powerful metaphor for the broader societal silence surrounding abuse, where the burden of addressing the wrong falls on the victim, rather than on the perpetrator or the community. Melanie's response to this silence is captured in her expression: "She stares back at him in puzzlement, even shock. You have cut me off from everyone, she seems to want to say. You have made me bear your secret." (15) This moment is pivotal, as it reveals the profound isolation Melanie feels as a result of

David's actions. The metaphorical "secret" she is forced to bear highlights the psychological burden placed upon her—an emotional and social isolation that stems not only from the abuse itself but from the secrecy and shame imposed by David. By cutting her off from others, David ensures that Melanie has no one to turn to, no one with whom to share the trauma she has experienced. The phrase “You have made me bear your secret” suggests a psychological manipulation in which Melanie's silence becomes a form of complicity, even though she is the victim. This suppression of her voice and her forced isolation echoes Irigaray's critique of patriarchal systems that suppress women's voices and their ability to express their trauma or desires. In this way, Melanie's trauma is compounded by the societal expectation that women should remain silent, that their experiences are not worthy of being voiced or acknowledged.

The theme of manipulation and power dynamics comes to the forefront when Melanie asks, “Do you do this kind of thing often?” (13) This question is loaded with meaning, as it reflects her growing awareness of David's predatory tendencies. Melanie's inquiry is a subtle yet powerful challenge to David's behavior, signaling that she is beginning to see through his manipulation and recognize his exploitation of her. While David has previously portrayed himself as a protector or caretaker, Melanie's question exposes the discrepancy between his words and actions, hinting at the growing recognition that he is not an innocent or misunderstood figure, but rather someone who regularly engages in exploitative behavior. This marks a significant shift in Melanie's understanding of her own agency within the power dynamics at play. She is no longer entirely passive; her question signals a conscious awareness of the manipulation she is being subjected to, challenging the distorted narrative that David has spun around their relationship. The follow-up question, “Aren't you collecting me?” (13) further underscores Melanie's recognition of her objectification. In this moment, she sees herself as one of many objects that David is accumulating, a mere addition to his collection of sexual conquests or possessions. The word "collecting" is key here, as it frames their relationship in terms of ownership and accumulation, reinforcing the power imbalance between them. Melanie's words suggest a deepening sense of alienation, as she realizes that she is not seen as an individual with agency, but rather as another trophy or object to be consumed and discarded. This moment highlights the disturbing reality of sexual exploitation, where the victim's humanity is erased, and their worth is defined solely by their ability to fulfill the desires of the perpetrator. Melanie's

recognition of this treatment represents a critical moment in her psychological journey, as she becomes increasingly aware of the manipulation and power dynamics at play.

The shared burden of shame between David and Melanie is encapsulated in the line, “If he has been shamed, she is shamed too.” (14) This phrase underscores the inequitable distribution of shame, where Melanie is forced to bear the same burden of disgrace as David, even though she is the victim. The idea that Melanie shares in David’s shame, despite the fundamental power imbalance between them, highlights the societal tendency to place the burden of sexual violence on the victim rather than the perpetrator. In patriarchal societies, women are often expected to carry the emotional and social consequences of abuse, while the perpetrator is allowed to go unpunished or to continue manipulating the situation. This dynamic reflects the deeply ingrained misogyny that sustains gendered power structures, where the victim’s shame is compounded by societal judgment and silence, while the perpetrator faces little consequence. The shared nature of this shame, though unequally distributed, further isolates Melanie, reinforcing her internalization of guilt and the sense that she is complicit in her own victimization.

4.3 Coercion, Silence and Melanie’s Withdrawal

In Chapter 5 of *Disgrace*, the narrative intensifies with the aftermath of David’s actions, and Melanie’s response highlights the societal pressure she faces to conform to institutional and familial expectations. The quote, “Melanie has been such a good student, and now she says she is going to give it all up. It has come as a terrible shock to us,” (16) reflects the deep societal shock and disbelief surrounding Melanie’s decision to abandon her studies. This moment underscores the weight of expectations placed on individuals, particularly women, within patriarchal systems. Melanie is not merely a student but a symbol of success, one whose academic accomplishments represent familial pride and societal validation. Her decision to give up her education is perceived as a catastrophic failure, not just by her family, but by the wider institutional framework. This resonates with the patriarchal pressure that women must maintain their roles within established systems—whether in education, marriage, or family life. The shock expressed here suggests the depth of societal investment in Melanie’s adherence to these norms, as well as the profound dissonance between her internalized expectations and the trauma she has experienced. The narrative implicitly

critiques a system that values the appearance of success over an individual's well-being, effectively silencing the trauma that may lie beneath the surface. This theme of institutional failure is further explored when David is confronted with Melanie's father's words: "We put our children in the hands of you people because we think we can trust you. If we can't trust the university, who can we trust?" (17) Here, Mr. Isaacs directly challenges the breach of trust perpetrated by David and the institution. The line exposes the vulnerability inherent in systems of authority, where figures like David Lurie hold immense power over their subordinates, including the emotional and psychological well-being of young women like Melanie. The deep sense of betrayal felt by Melanie's family speaks to the larger societal contract between institutions, such as universities, and the public, which promises safety and care. When that trust is broken, as it is in this case, the ramifications extend far beyond the immediate victims, affecting the reputation of the institution and the broader societal trust in its structures. This moment of confrontation emphasizes the power imbalance at the core of the relationship between David and Melanie, highlighting how institutional authority can be misused for personal gain and the silencing of vulnerable individuals.

David's growing awareness of the damage his actions have caused is revealed in his comment, "Respect? You are out of date, Mr. Isaacs. Your daughter lost respect for me weeks ago, and with good reason." (16) This moment of self-awareness is significant in that it demonstrates David's reluctant acknowledgment of the consequences of his actions. However, his response to Mr. Isaacs is not one of genuine remorse but rather a defensive rationalization of his behavior. His dismissive tone—suggesting that Mr. Isaacs is out of touch—undermines the very idea of respect and reinforces David's belief that his actions were somehow justified or inevitable. The fact that David acknowledges Melanie's loss of respect only underscores the emotional manipulation at play. He understands that his power has been undermined, yet he frames this loss of respect as something that is her problem, rather than an inherent flaw in his actions. This reflects a patriarchal resistance to accepting responsibility, where the focus remains on the man's perceived entitlement to respect, even in the face of abuse. In contrast, Mr. Isaacs provides a more direct critique of David's actions with the line, "You may be very educated and all that, but what you have done is not right." (17) This represents an unambiguous condemnation of David's behavior, laying bare the ethical breach that occurred. While David's education and intellectual prowess are

often presented as markers of superiority, Mr. Isaacs strips away these pretensions, asserting that no amount of education can excuse immoral behavior. This moment functions as a critique of the intellectual and professional authority that figures like David wield, suggesting that such authority should be held accountable to ethical standards. In this context, Mr. Isaacs's words challenge David's notion that his position entitles him to act with impunity, emphasizing the need for moral accountability in both personal and professional spheres.

David's internalized view of Melanie as passive and without agency becomes evident when he reflects, "Melanie would not have taken such a step by herself, he is convinced. She is too innocent for that, too ignorant of her power." (17) Here, David infantilizes Melanie, dismissing her actions as driven by external influences rather than recognizing her autonomy. This view reveals a fundamental patriarchal mindset that sees women as inherently naïve, lacking the ability to make informed decisions, particularly when it comes to sexual agency. By framing Melanie as "too innocent" and "too ignorant of her power," David denies her subjectivity, reducing her to a passive figure who is manipulated by forces beyond her control. This reflects a larger societal tendency to undermine women's autonomy, particularly in situations of sexual exploitation, where their agency is often questioned or negated. David's perception of Melanie as an object of innocence allows him to justify his actions as those of a more experienced, knowledgeable individual, further reinforcing the unequal power dynamics between them. The symbolic power of writing is highlighted in the moment when David observes, "A hand takes up the pen, a hand he has kissed, a hand he knows intimately. First the name of the plaintiff: MELANIE ISAACS, in careful block letters." (18) This moment marks a pivotal shift in the dynamics of their relationship, as Melanie's agency is reclaimed, even within the confines of an institutional framework designed to uphold patriarchal power. By writing her name on the legal document, Melanie transforms from a passive object of David's desire into an active subject, asserting her voice in a legal context that acknowledges her victimhood. The imagery of the hand that David has kissed—his intimate knowledge of her body—serves as a stark contrast to the moment of legal reclaiming, suggesting that Melanie is no longer defined solely by her victimization but is asserting her right to seek justice. This moment represents a psychological turning point for Melanie, as she moves from silence to action, challenging the manipulative dynamics imposed upon her.

4.4 Institutional Betrayal and Reclaimed Agency

David's perception of their relationship undergoes a significant transformation when he notes, "Two names on the page, his and hers, side by side. Two in a bed, lovers no longer but foes." (18) This line highlights the rupture in their relationship, which has moved from the intimacy of the bed to the legal conflict of the courtroom. The shift from lovers to foes reflects the dissolution of any pretense of consensuality or mutual desire. The use of the word "foes" frames their relationship in terms of adversarial opposition, signaling the breakdown of the power dynamics that once existed between them. No longer is Melanie an object of David's desire; instead, she has become an opponent in a legal battle, a transformation that underscores the ethical breach that has occurred. This shift from intimacy to conflict illustrates the profound psychological and emotional toll that exploitation and manipulation take on both individuals. The institutional response to the abuse is reflected in the statement, "Ms. Isaacs has officially withdrawn from the course she takes with you, and you will be expected to refrain from all contact with her." (18) This is a clear assertion of boundaries following the violation of trust between David and Melanie. The university, acting as an institutional authority, intervenes to enforce a separation between the two, acknowledging the breach of professional conduct and the need to protect Melanie from further harm. However, this institutional response is not without its limitations. While it acknowledges the need for physical and emotional distance, it does little to address the underlying power dynamics that allowed the abuse to occur in the first place. This reflects a broader critique of institutional responses to sexual exploitation, which often focus on containment and discipline rather than a meaningful reckoning with the power structures that enable such exploitation.

In Chapter 6, David's continued dismissal of the gravity of his actions is evident when he states, "I plead guilty to both charges. Pass sentence, and let us get on with our lives." (21) His statement is marked by a profound lack of emotional engagement or responsibility. David's plea of guilt is not accompanied by remorse or reflection; instead, it is framed as a procedural formality, a necessary step to move on from the incident. This reflects his deep psychological resistance to acknowledging the harm he has caused and his unwillingness to engage meaningfully with the consequences of his actions. His attitude exemplifies a patriarchal tendency to view sexual exploitation as a matter of formal acknowledgment rather than an ethical or moral failing. David's

arrogance and sense of invulnerability are further revealed in his declaration, “I have no fear of the committee. I have no fear of the observer.” (21) This moment underscores David’s belief in his own superiority, both intellectually and morally. He does not fear the consequences of his actions because he believes that his position—his education, his status—protects him from any real accountability. This reflects a patriarchal worldview in which men, particularly those in positions of power, feel entitled to operate above reproach, with no fear of external judgment or consequence. David’s rejection of the possibility of self-improvement is starkly expressed when he states, “No, I have not sought counselling nor do I intend to seek it. I am a grown man. I am not receptive to being counselled. I am beyond the reach of counselling.” (22) This statement reveals David’s resistance to any form of introspection or growth. He rejects the very idea that his behavior could be remedied or corrected, positioning himself as beyond the reach of any external help or moral framework. This mirrors a deeply ingrained patriarchal belief that men, particularly those in positions of power, are not subject to the same rules or expectations as others, and that their actions—however harmful—are beyond reproach.

David’s defiance of societal expectations for repentance is epitomized in his remark, “Frankly, what you want from me is not a response but a confession. Well, I make no confession.” (22) Here, David refuses to conform to the expected moral script of confession and remorse, further highlighting his rejection of societal norms of accountability. His refusal to confess his wrongdoing demonstrates a profound psychological resistance to acknowledging the full extent of the exploitation and harm he has caused. The absence of female voices in the proceedings is pointed out by David when he says, “In this chorus of goodwill, I hear no female voice.” (23) This comment highlights the exclusion of female perspectives in the institutional processes that surround his actions. David acknowledges the absence of female voices, yet his comment also reveals a mocking, dismissive attitude toward the very concept of female agency or input in matters of sexual exploitation. This further reinforces his patriarchal worldview, in which the experiences and voices of women are secondary to those of men. Finally, David’s rationalization of his actions through a romanticized narrative is evident when he says, “The story begins one evening... Suffice it to say that Eros entered. After that I was not the same.” (23) This framing of his relationship with Melanie as a tale of romantic desire echoes patriarchal notions of male entitlement and

desire. David positions himself as the victim of an overwhelming force—Eros—suggesting that he was swept up in a love story rather than engaging in an exploitative and manipulative relationship. This rationalization serves to absolve him of moral responsibility, casting his actions as inevitable rather than unethical.

In Chapter 7, David acknowledges the power dynamics of his relationship with Melanie, albeit in a detached and unemotional manner: “I took advantage of my position vis-a-vis Ms. Isaacs. It was wrong, and I regret it.” (24) While David’s words reflect a recognition of his abuse of power, his lack of genuine emotional engagement or remorse undermines the sincerity of his acknowledgment. His language is clinical and impersonal, minimizing the emotional impact of his actions. David further distances himself from any meaningful process of atonement when he states, “Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse.” (25) This rejection of repentance highlights his refusal to engage with the ethical implications of his actions. For David, repentance is not a meaningful or necessary step, further reinforcing his resistance to accepting responsibility for the harm he has caused. Finally, David’s statement, “No, I was enriched by the experience,” reveals his deep entitlement and lack of empathy. His claim of enrichment suggests that he perceives the exploitative relationship as a personal gain, disregarding the psychological and emotional damage done to Melanie. This reflects a deeply ingrained patriarchal attitude in which men view their interactions with women primarily through the lens of personal gratification and self-interest, rather than acknowledging the harm inflicted.

The analysis of *Disgrace* through the lens of feminist psychoanalysis, particularly utilizing the frameworks of Luce Irigaray's critique of patriarchal language and Sara Ahmed's concepts of willfulness and happiness, reveals how the novel intricately portrays the psychological subjugation, manipulation, and gendered power dynamics within relationships. David Lurie's actions toward Melanie Isaacs embody the exploitation and objectification that Irigaray critiques, where women’s voices and agency are subsumed by patriarchal structures of desire and control. His rationalizations and dismissals of Melanie’s autonomy reflect Ahmed’s notion of the 'willful subject,' where patriarchal systems actively suppress women’s desires and subjectivity in favor of male dominance. The portrayal of Melanie’s trauma, her attempts to reclaim agency, and the societal and institutional responses to the abuse echo the study's focus on the contested nature of consent, autonomy, and agency. By examining how David’s internal

justifications and Melanie's silencing mirror broader societal dynamics, the analysis contributes to understanding how gender-based power imbalances are negotiated, resisted, and perpetuated. This interpretation fills a crucial gap in feminist psychoanalytic discourse by highlighting the psychological complexity of consent within manipulative, patriarchal frameworks, providing new insights into the ethical and emotional underpinnings of power in literature. This chapter underscores the ways in which both novels explore the psychological manipulation of women's autonomy, positioning *Disgrace* as a profound case study in the intersection of feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and the lived experiences of gendered exploitation.

CHAPTER 5

INTERNALIZED PATRIARCHY, CONSENT AND MANIPULATION IN KE RUSSELL'S *MY DARK VANESSA*

Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* (2020) is a striking and deeply unsettling exploration of power, manipulation, and the psychological consequences of abuse. As her debut novel, *My Dark Vanessa* received widespread acclaim and sparked intense public discourse, securing its place as one of the most controversial and thought-provoking literary works of the year. Critics have drawn comparisons between *My Dark Vanessa* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* due to their shared focus on adult predation and adolescent vulnerability. However, Russell's novel differs profoundly in its perspective, as it centers the voice of the victim, Vanessa Wye, offering readers an intimate and often uncomfortable portrayal of her trauma. Set against the backdrop of the #MeToo movement, the novel situates Vanessa's experiences within a broader cultural and historical discourse on sexual abuse and power dynamics.

The novel alternates between two timelines: Vanessa's teenage years, beginning in 2000 when she is a 15-year-old student at the elite Browick boarding school in Maine, and her adult life in 2017, as she navigates the lasting impact of her relationship with Jacob Strane, her 42-year-old English teacher. At the heart of the story lies Strane's grooming of Vanessa, which he disguises as a "special" and romantic bond. Vanessa, a socially isolated and emotionally vulnerable teenager, initially embraces this relationship as a source of validation and empowerment. Strane preys on her intellectual aspirations and burgeoning sense of self, using literature, particularly Nabokov's *Lolita*, to manipulate her perception of their interactions. Through this connection, he establishes a psychological and emotional hold over her, blurring the lines between consent and coercion. As an adult, Vanessa clings to the belief that her relationship with Strane was consensual and even transformative. However, the novel skillfully depicts the contradictions and fragility of this belief. Set in 2017, during the height of the #MeToo movement, Vanessa is confronted with the testimonies of other women who accuse Strane of similar abuse. Her internal struggle to reconcile her understanding of

her past with the stark reality of Strane's predation forms the crux of the narrative. The novel's non-linear structure allows readers to witness Vanessa's gradual realization of the exploitative nature of her relationship with Strane, despite her initial resistance to framing herself as a victim.

Russell's treatment of grooming is notable for its complexity and nuance. Critics have lauded her ability to inhabit Vanessa's perspective without imposing retrospective moral judgments. For instance, *The New York Times* described *My Dark Vanessa* as a "clever but unsettling" account of abuse, capturing the intricate interplay of power and vulnerability in Vanessa's narrative (Sophie, 2020). Similarly, *The Atlantic* emphasized that the novel explores "damage, not love," highlighting the psychological scars left by Vanessa's relationship with Strane (Gilbert, 2020).

5.1 Grooming and Internalised Patriarchal Narratives

The novel's engagement with grooming as both a psychological process and a societal issue makes it a compelling subject for feminist psychoanalytic critique. Russell's work reveals how patriarchal structures perpetuate and obscure abuse by manipulating the victim's sense of agency and self-worth. By presenting Vanessa's perspective, *My Dark Vanessa* challenges readers to grapple with the complexities of consent, victimhood, and the long-lasting impact of exploitation. This section will analyze *My Dark Vanessa* using feminist psychoanalytic frameworks, specifically Luce Irigaray's concept of male gaze and critique of patriarchal language, and Sara Ahmed's theories of willful subjects and the promise of happiness. By deconstructing the power dynamics between Strane and Vanessa, the analysis will reveal how patriarchal systems operate through psychological manipulation, ultimately shaping Vanessa's perceptions of her agency and autonomy. Additionally, this exploration will underscore the societal complicity that enables predators like Strane to exploit vulnerable individuals under the guise of mentorship and affection. Through this analysis, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how patriarchal structures influence and manipulate the constructs of consent and power in abusive relationships.

Vanessa Wye's character in Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* offers a profound exploration of how patriarchal ideologies are internalized by women, shaping their perceptions of autonomy and consent in relationships marked by power imbalances. The novel reveals Vanessa's alignment with Jacob Strane's narrative, her

reinterpretation of her experiences, and her reluctance to adopt the language of victimhood. These dynamics are intricately tied to the study's focus on how patriarchal norms distort agency and blur the boundaries between consent and manipulation. Using Luce Irigaray's feminist psychoanalytic framework and Sara Ahmed's critique of societal norms, this analysis examines Vanessa's internalized patriarchy through her own words and actions.

Vanessa's early alignment with Strane's narrative is evident in her assertion, "Everything she wrote is a lie" (Russell, p. 3), referring to an article written by another of Strane's victims. This statement highlights Vanessa's refusal to accept perspectives that challenge her constructed reality of their relationship. Vanessa's rejection of the other victim's account underscores her internalization of Strane's manipulative framing. She dismisses narratives that expose him as predatory, choosing instead to protect her perception of being uniquely significant in his life. Irigaray's critique of patriarchal language is particularly relevant here. According to Irigaray, patriarchal systems dictate the terms through which women can speak, often coercing them into silence or compliance with male-dominated narratives (Irigaray, 1985). Vanessa's dismissal of other victims' experiences reflects this dynamic, as she perpetuates Strane's justification of their relationship to maintain her self-perception as "special."

The internalization of this narrative is further evident when Vanessa reflects, "I was the first student who put the thought in his head" (5). This belief not only absolves Strane of responsibility but also frames Vanessa as a catalyst for his actions. By positioning herself as the initiator, Vanessa undermines her own victimhood and adopts a patriarchal script that obscures the inherent power imbalance in their relationship. Irigaray's theory of the male gaze elucidates this phenomenon, as Vanessa views herself through Strane's eyes, internalizing his objectifying perspective and thereby reinforcing her subjugation. The male gaze, as described by Irigaray, positions women as objects of desire, denying them agency and subjectivity (Irigaray, 1985). Vanessa's self-perception as "unique" in Strane's life exemplifies how patriarchal structures compel women to seek validation through male approval, perpetuating cycles of exploitation and manipulation. Witt (2020) also provides similar critiques of Vanessa's psychology. As she notes, Vanessa "doesn't want to be a victim" and fiercely clings to agency: "She prefers to believe she has made choices of her own free will, even when shown evidence that she's been coerced". She later characterizes Vanessa as seeing herself "not as a

victim of abuse but as the protagonist of an illicit romance”. These observations show that how Vanessa rationalises consent and resists the label of victimhood, reflecting the novel’s focus on self-blame and the refusal of structural explanations.

Vanessa’s reluctance to label her experiences as abuse further illustrates the pervasive influence of internalized patriarchy. In a key moment, she muses, “Abuse in someone else’s mouth turns the word ugly and absolute” (51). This statement reveals Vanessa’s discomfort with external categorizations of her relationship, as she perceives the term “abuse” as reductive and stigmatizing. Her rejection of the victim label aligns with Irigaray’s assertion that patriarchal language suppresses women’s individuality, forcing them to conform to male-centric narratives or face societal rejection. Vanessa’s internal conflict reflects this silencing effect, as she navigates the tension between societal expectations and her own fragmented sense of agency. The patriarchal framing of “abuse” as a definitive and disempowering label contributes to Vanessa’s reluctance to acknowledge her victimhood, illustrating how language itself becomes a tool of control.

Vanessa’s reinterpretation of her experiences is further complicated by her belief that the relationship with Strane offered her a sense of identity and purpose. She views her involvement with him as a defining aspect of her life, resisting narratives that frame her as a passive victim. This reinterpretation aligns with Irigaray’s concept of mimicry, where women adopt patriarchal narratives to navigate oppressive structures. Mimicry, as Irigaray explains, involves women imitating male-dominated discourses to gain a semblance of agency within systems that deny them subjectivity. Vanessa’s insistence on framing her relationship with Strane as consensual and meaningful exemplifies this dynamic, as she internalizes and perpetuates the patriarchal logic that justifies his behavior. By doing so, she not only silences her own dissent but also reinforces the systemic power dynamics that perpetuate her subjugation.

The psychological manipulation embedded in Vanessa’s experiences is further illuminated through Sara Ahmed’s concept of the “Promise of Happiness.” Ahmed argues that societal expectations of happiness are often used to enforce conformity, compelling individuals to prioritize compliance over resistance (Ahmed, 2017). In Vanessa’s case, the promise of happiness is embodied in her belief that the relationship with Strane offered her love, validation, and a sense of purpose. This promise obscures

the coercive nature of Strane's actions, as Vanessa perceives the relationship as a source of fulfillment rather than exploitation. Ahmed's critique of happiness as a tool of control provides a critical lens for understanding Vanessa's reluctance to confront the abusive dynamics of her relationship. The societal framing of romantic relationships as a pathway to happiness reinforces Vanessa's internalized patriarchy, as she prioritizes the perceived benefits of the relationship over her own autonomy and well-being. Bodnár (2023) explicitly compares *My Dark Vanessa* to *Lolita*, describing Vanessa's novel as a "reverse modern-day *Lolita* story" that gives voice to victims and "broadens the palette of trauma literature". It provides a trauma-studies angle: Vanessa's disjointed, first-person narrative is identified as characteristic of a modern trauma novel. Hence, Bodnár's analysis supports this research in relation to the psychological effects of abuse.

The interplay of patriarchal language, the male gaze, and societal expectations in Vanessa's narrative underscores the complexity of internalized patriarchy. Her alignment with Strane's narrative, reinterpretation of her experiences, and rejection of the victim label reveal the insidious ways in which patriarchal norms distort perceptions of consent and agency. By analyzing Vanessa's experiences through the theoretical frameworks of Irigaray and Ahmed, this study illuminates the psychological mechanisms that sustain patriarchal power dynamics. Vanessa's story exemplifies the blurring of consent and manipulation in relationships shaped by gendered hierarchies, offering critical insights into the social and psychological factors that perpetuate women's subjugation in ostensibly consensual contexts. This analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of how internalized patriarchal ideologies shape women's experiences and constrain their capacity to assert autonomy within oppressive systems.

5.2 Fetishisation of Youth and Distortion of Consent

Strain's fixation on Vanessa's appearance in *My Dark Vanessa* (2020) offers a vivid illustration of how patriarchal dynamics are entrenched in acts of objectification. His seemingly benign remark, "That's a nice dress" (27), serves as more than a casual compliment; it underscores his ability to wield the male gaze as a form of control. The compliment's simplicity belies its deeper implications. Within Ahmed's critique of the male gaze, such observations are tools for reinforcing patriarchal standards, wherein women's worth is tied to their aesthetic appeal as determined by male observers.

Ahmed argues that the male gaze is not merely visual but a social mechanism for assigning value, perpetuating a system in which women's identities are constructed through external judgments (Ahmed, 102). By praising Vanessa's dress, Strain signals that her appearance is under scrutiny, subtly shifting the power dynamic to establish her body and presentation as subjects of his approval. Vanessa's reaction to such remarks—initial discomfort tempered by a burgeoning desire for validation—reveals her gradual internalization of these standards.

This internalization becomes particularly pronounced in Strain's more explicit remark, "Vanessa, you were young and dripping with beauty" (7). The overt sensuality of this statement emphasizes the fetishization of Vanessa's youth, framing it as her most defining characteristic. Strain's language situates Vanessa within the archetype of the "ideal" female: young, desirable, and malleable. This archetype is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology, which values women primarily for their physical appeal and perceived innocence. Irigaray's theory of patriarchal language is relevant here, as it critiques how language can confine women within limiting constructs that prioritize male desire. Irigaray asserts that such language functions as a tool of domination, reducing women to objects whose primary purpose is to fulfill male fantasies (Irigaray, 29-31). Strain's comment exemplifies this reduction, as his focus on Vanessa's beauty overrides her individuality and autonomy. Her later reflections on her appearance, including her fixation on maintaining this "dripping beauty," highlight how deeply she has absorbed these projections, shaping her self-perception around Strain's objectifying gaze.

The dynamics of infantilization and fetishization further illuminate Strain's manipulation. His obsession with Vanessa's youth is not merely a preference but a means of asserting dominance. By fetishizing her age, Strain reinforces her perceived inferiority, situating himself as the "wise elder" and Vanessa as a naïve pupil in need of guidance. Ahmed's notion of the "Promise of Happiness" offers critical insight into this dynamic. Ahmed posits that societal constructs often equate happiness with conformity to prescribed roles, encouraging individuals to embrace positions of subservience under the guise of achieving fulfillment (Ahmed, 60). Strain's portrayal of their relationship as "special"—a bond rooted in her youthful allure—implicitly suggests that Vanessa's happiness lies in embodying this ideal. Vanessa's internalization of this narrative is evident in her reluctance to challenge his authority,

as she equates his approval with emotional satisfaction. Her belief that her desirability and youth grant her power within their relationship reveals the extent to which she has absorbed patriarchal notions of value and worth.

The power dynamics in Vanessa and Strain's relationship are further complicated by Strain's distortion of consent. Vanessa's observation that "After a while he starts asking permission after he's already done the thing he's asking about" (99) underscores his manipulative tactics. By framing his actions as consensual post hoc, Strain creates an illusion of mutual agreement while effectively negating Vanessa's agency. His approach aligns with Irigaray's critique of patriarchal language, which she argues often reconfigures reality to align with male-centric perspectives. Through this lens, Strain's behavior can be seen as a linguistic strategy to assert control: by labeling his actions as consensual, he silences Vanessa's dissent and reframes her role in the relationship as a willing participant. Vanessa's conditioned response to this manipulation—a mix of confusion and reluctant acceptance—reveals how deeply entrenched power imbalances distort her ability to assert her boundaries. Strain's tactic of "asking permission" post-violation not only negates Vanessa's autonomy but also erodes her confidence in her ability to consent, blurring the line between coercion and agreement. Hence, the exploration of power and consent through Vanessa's perspective is already twisted. As Gilbert (2020) highlights Vanessa's paradoxical point of view, she observes that Vanessa stubbornly refuses to "categorize" her experience as abuse, arguing that in "someone else's mouth the word [rape] turns ugly and absolute". This insight about language and denial is useful for discussing Vanessa's mindset: she mimics Strain's words to frame the affair as love. To invoke in Gilbert's words, "this story is about damage, not love".

The quote, "I don't understand what he is doing until he starts doing it" (99), further highlights the complexity of this distortion. Vanessa's delayed comprehension of Strain's actions reflects the cumulative effect of his psychological manipulation. His deliberate ambiguity creates a dynamic in which Vanessa is perpetually on the defensive, unable to anticipate or articulate her boundaries. This strategy mirrors Ahmed's concept of coercion through the "Promise of Happiness." By framing his actions as part of a "special" and "unique" relationship, Strain obscures the coercive nature of his behavior, presenting compliance as the path to relational fulfillment. Vanessa's internal conflict—her simultaneous discomfort and desire for validation—

illustrates how patriarchal expectations co-opt her autonomy, making resistance feel like a betrayal of the promised happiness. Ahmed's critique reveals that this promise is inherently deceptive, as it conditions individuals to prioritize conformity over self-assertion, perpetuating cycles of subjugation.

Together, these dynamics expose the intricate interplay between objectification, manipulation, and patriarchal power in Strain and Vanessa's relationship. Strain's fixation on Vanessa's appearance, his fetishization of her youth, and his distortion of consent exemplify the mechanisms through which patriarchal norms are perpetuated and internalized. Ahmed and Irigaray's theoretical frameworks provide critical tools for deconstructing these mechanisms, revealing how language, gaze, and societal constructs coalesce to undermine Vanessa's agency. By scrutinizing these interactions, the analysis underscores the pervasive impact of patriarchal ideologies on consent and autonomy, highlighting the urgent need to challenge and dismantle these structures in both literature and real-world contexts.

5.3 Psychological Subjugation and Moments of Resistance

Vanessa's defense of Jacob Strane and the psychological subjugation she experiences are complex manifestations of the internalization of patriarchal ideologies, which shape her perceptions of her abuse and her role in the relationship. One of the most striking moments in *My Dark Vanessa* occurs when Vanessa is confronted with the words "fired, a creep, harassing, girl" (163), and she reacts with shock. Her initial response—"I blink through the shock of her words"—demonstrates her profound emotional investment in Strane and his narrative. Strane's manipulation of Vanessa has distorted her understanding of their relationship, making it difficult for her to reconcile the harsh accusations with the emotional attachment she feels. This reaction is symptomatic of the cognitive dissonance that arises when a victim internalizes the manipulative logic imposed by an abuser, and it exemplifies the gaslighting tactics Strane employs to maintain control over her. The psychological manipulation Strane exerts is central to how Vanessa rejects the victim label, even in the face of clear abuse. She clings to the narrative that their bond is "special," which allows her to justify and normalize the predatory behavior that surrounds her. This cognitive distortion represents the internalization of patriarchal ideologies that demand women endure subjugation without protest, often framing abuse as a form of validation or affection.

Vanessa's reluctance to acknowledge her victimhood is further emphasized when she reflects, "Abuse in someone else's mouth turns the word ugly and absolute" (51). Here, she articulates her resistance to the very notion of abuse, revealing the dissonance she experiences in accepting the reality of her exploitation. In line with Irigaray's critique of patriarchal language, this reluctance to adopt the term "abuse" highlights the ways in which language itself functions as a tool of patriarchal control, obscuring the victim's experience and imposing silence on their suffering. Irigaray (1985) argues that women often internalize patriarchal discourses, adopting them as survival mechanisms in societies that reject female voices. In Vanessa's case, the use of language to silence herself is a direct result of her desire to avoid societal rejection and to preserve her sense of self-worth within a patriarchal framework. This repression of her trauma also speaks to the broader social tendency to dismiss or trivialize women's experiences of abuse, reinforcing a culture in which victims are encouraged to remain silent or to reinterpret their pain in ways that align with patriarchal expectations.

As the novel progresses, Vanessa's defense of Strane grows more pronounced, reflecting the deep psychological hold he has over her. When Vanessa questions, "Did they have no self-respect?" (9), in reference to other women who have experienced similar abuse, it becomes evident how Strane's manipulation has shaped her worldview. His gaslighting has not only altered her perception of their relationship but has also instilled in her a sense of shame about her victimhood. This self-blame is an embodiment of the internalized victim-blaming that pervades patriarchal societies, where women are often made to feel responsible for their exploitation. In Vanessa's case, this self-blame is compounded by Strane's reframing of the relationship as one of mutual desire and intellectual connection, which distorts her sense of agency and self-worth. The question of "self-respect" serves as an echo of Strane's manipulation, as he has positioned her to believe that her submission is a sign of her own empowerment, rather than an act of coercion. By interrogating the concept of "self-respect," Russell reveals how patriarchal ideologies perpetuate abuse by placing the onus on women to preserve their dignity within systems that exploit and oppress them.

Furthermore, Vanessa's emotional detachment from the trauma she has endured is a direct result of Strane's psychological manipulation and the internalization of patriarchal values. Her struggle to frame her experiences as abuse is not merely a personal conflict but a reflection of a broader societal issue. This tension is embodied

in Vanessa's disconnection from her emotional responses, which leads her to rationalize Strane's actions as something less harmful than they truly were. When Vanessa reflects, "I wonder what level of crazy I've reached" (197), she grapples with the realization that her emotional state has been distorted by her relationship with Strane. This self-doubt is a product of the gaslighting she has endured, as Strane's manipulation has caused her to question her own sanity and the validity of her emotional responses. It is also an expression of the cognitive dissonance that occurs when a victim's experiences are consistently denied or minimized by the perpetrator. This emotional struggle is compounded by the societal rejection of victims who speak out, forcing Vanessa to navigate a complex psychological terrain where her sense of self and her emotional health are deeply entwined with the abusive relationship she has been conditioned to accept. Bikić (2022) also compares *My Dark Vanessa* directly with *Lolita*, showing how Russell updates the story for a post-#MeToo age. Crucially, she argues that Vanessa's account is "characteristic of a trauma novel," meticulously exploring the victim's psyche, unlike Dolores Haze's hidden trauma. Her analysis emphasises how Vanessa's first-person narrative (and non-linear time-shifts) function to immerse the reader in her confusion and eventual insight which reinforces the argument of psychological subjugation and trauma.

At the same time, moments of resistance, although fleeting, begin to surface within Vanessa. When she demands, "Please stop talking" (58), it marks a rare instance of defiance against Strane's controlling influence. However, this resistance is complicated by the emotional and psychological trauma that underpins her response. As Sara Ahmed's theory of the "Willful Subject" suggests, this act of resistance represents a moment of agency, where Vanessa's desire for autonomy briefly overcomes the conditioning she has experienced. Ahmed (2010) argues that willfulness, often seen as a refusal to conform to societal expectations, is a crucial component of feminist resistance. In this moment, Vanessa's defiance—however fragile—demonstrates her willingness to reclaim some measure of control over her own narrative. However, this defiance is not easily sustained. The internalization of Strane's manipulation, coupled with her deep-seated guilt and confusion, undermines her ability to fully reject the abusive dynamics that have defined her relationship with him.

The reference to *Lolita* throughout *My Dark Vanessa* provides additional insight into Vanessa's internalized struggles. The novel explicitly engages with Nabokov's

classic as a point of comparison, drawing attention to the ways in which Vanessa's perception of her relationship with Strane is shaped by both literature and societal expectations. In her reflection on Strane's actions, Vanessa often aligns herself with the victimized, yet idealized, figure of *Lolita*, believing that her victimhood somehow grants her an elevated status in Strane's eyes. This intertextuality serves as a metaphor for the normalization of abuse within the patriarchal structures that define both the personal and cultural landscape of Vanessa's experience. The cultural narrative around *Lolita* reinforces the idea that sexual victimization, particularly in the context of a teacher-student relationship, can be misinterpreted or even romanticized as love or affection. Vanessa's internalization of this narrative further complicates her ability to recognize the exploitation she has endured, as she comes to see herself as both a victim and an object of desire.

The psychological conflict within Vanessa is not merely a personal struggle but a reflection of the broader cultural forces that shape women's responses to abuse. By intertwining the dynamics of resistance, self-perception, and cultural intertextuality, *My Dark Vanessa* provides a profound critique of the ways in which patriarchal ideologies and structures reinforce victimization, making it difficult for women to recognize and resist the abuse they experience. The novel's exploration of these themes, through Vanessa's internalized victim-blaming and moments of fragile resistance, underscores the complexity of recognizing one's victimhood within a society that perpetuates such ideologies. Through the lens of feminist psychoanalytic theory, it becomes clear that the boundaries between agency and subjugation are not only blurred but are actively constructed by patriarchal power dynamics that seek to maintain control over women's bodies, emotions, and self-perceptions.

5.4 Trauma, Dissociation, and the Willful Subject

Vanessa's long-term psychological impact, stemming from her years of manipulation and abuse at the hands of Jacob Strane, can be analyzed through the theoretical framework of feminist psychoanalysis, particularly Luce Irigaray's critique of patriarchal language and Sara Ahmed's concept of the "willful subject." The dissociative coping mechanisms Vanessa employs, such as her reliance on alcohol, reflect a psychological disconnection that serves as a means to distance herself from the trauma while attempting to retain control over her identity. As she states, "I love

whiskey” (212), alcohol becomes a numbing agent, an externalized escape from the emotional devastation inflicted by Strane. The repetition of this behavior signals the deeper emotional scars left by her abuse, which disrupt her ability to confront the reality of her victimization. The dissociative moments described as “my mind slips out of [me]” (45) indicate the profound disconnect between her lived experiences and the way she processes them. According to Ahmed, the manipulation of a victim’s agency through emotional distancing serves as a means of entrenching the subject within a broader societal framework that normalizes power asymmetries. Vanessa’s detachment, thus, not only reflects a personal coping mechanism but also illustrates the broader ideological forces at play, wherein patriarchal structures dictate the emotional responses of women subjected to manipulation.

Irigaray’s theories of patriarchal language and silence further illuminate how Vanessa’s sense of self becomes fractured due to Strane’s control. Her inability to acknowledge the full extent of her victimization reflects the way in which patriarchal language works to silence women’s experiences and diminish their agency. Strane’s narrative of their relationship is internalized by Vanessa, leading her to question her own desires and emotional responses, as illustrated in her fear of becoming a predator herself: “I wonder if I will be one of those people who is always attracted to power” (192). This statement echoes a broader cultural narrative about the cycles of trauma, wherein victims of abuse internalize the patterns of manipulation and fear replicating the abuse in their own lives. The fear of perpetuating the cycle of abuse underscores the insidious nature of Strane’s psychological control, which continues to affect Vanessa even after the physical aspect of their relationship ends. From a feminist psychoanalytic perspective, this illustrates how patriarchal power dynamics are perpetuated not only through direct abuse but also through the internalization of victimhood and the perpetuation of harmful power structures.

The trauma Vanessa experiences leads to a significant disruption of her autonomy, which is further exacerbated by Strane’s obsessive fixation on her appearance. In his repeated comments such as “Vanessa, you were teenage and erotic and so alive; it scared the hell out of me” (7), Strane reduces her to a mere object of desire, infantilizing her and disregarding her agency. This reflects Ahmed’s critique of the male gaze and its role in suppressing the autonomy of women. Strane’s fixation on her youth and sexualized presence serves not only to objectify Vanessa but also to

diminish her sense of self-worth and autonomy. As Strane externalizes his desires onto Vanessa, framing her as an object of male gaze, he simultaneously erases her agency by making her complicit in his narratives of desire. Vanessa's own internalization of these projections is pivotal in understanding how patriarchal structures impose limitations on female autonomy. In her struggle to reconcile Strane's manipulation with her own desires, Vanessa reflects the broader societal forces that enforce women's compliance with patriarchal expectations of femininity and sexual objectification.

Further complicating this dynamic is the conflict between Vanessa's internal beliefs about their relationship and the external manipulations Strane imposes. The letters Strane writes to Vanessa after their relationship ends are an extension of his control, continuing to frame their interactions as one of love and mentorship, thus further entrenching her in his narrative. Vanessa's inability to distinguish Strane's manipulative tactics from her own emotional experiences underscores the extent of his psychological hold over her. This inability is a direct result of the patriarchal language and ideological structures that inform Vanessa's understanding of relationships. As she reads Strane's letters, Vanessa struggles to disentangle the emotional manipulation from the affection she craves, which is a manifestation of the broader societal patterns that normalize and even romanticize exploitative power dynamics. Through Irigaray's lens, Strane's letters function as a reinforcement of the patriarchal narrative that women are objects to be molded to male desires, highlighting how women's autonomy is systematically suppressed by the dominant cultural discourse.

This analysis aligns with the research objectives of exploring how patriarchal ideologies manipulate the constructs of consent and autonomy within abusive relationships. Strane's manipulation of Vanessa's desires and his framing of their relationship as love challenges the very notion of consent, blurring the lines between autonomy and exploitation. The psychological subjugation Vanessa experiences is indicative of the ways in which patriarchal systems exert control over women's bodies, desires, and agency. The continuous reinforcement of Strane's manipulative narrative through his letters and Vanessa's internal struggle with her victimhood demonstrate the broader cultural and societal complicity in perpetuating abuse. From a feminist psychoanalytic perspective, the analysis of these power dynamics underscores the importance of recognizing the complex psychological effects of abuse and the way patriarchal power structures shape the perceptions and experiences of women subjected

to manipulation. Singh (2022) notes that *My Dark Vanessa* “explores the tough questions around consent,” showing how Vanessa eventually realizes that “sex” with a child is legally rape. Singh also describes how the #MeToo wave compels Vanessa to “revisit her own narrative” and acknowledge she was “wronged by the man who raped her”. This research also reinforces these ideas by discussing the transformation in Vanessa’s consent perception and the novel’s engagement with contemporary discourses on believing survivors.

In the final part of this analysis, the focus on the long-term effects of Strane’s abuse on Vanessa’s self-identity and mental health ties into the overarching research question of how patriarchal ideologies and power dynamics complicate the constructs of consent and victimhood. The suppression of Vanessa’s desires and autonomy, her struggle to reconcile internal beliefs with external manipulations, and the ongoing psychological effects of the abuse highlight the far-reaching consequences of patriarchal control. By analyzing these themes through the lens of feminist psychoanalysis, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how patriarchal structures not only perpetuate abusive behaviors but also shape the psychological responses of those who experience them. The long-term trauma and the cycle of victimization Vanessa endures reflect the broader societal mechanisms that obscure victimhood, reinforcing the need for a more nuanced and critical examination of power, consent, and manipulation in abusive relationships. Through this analysis, the study highlights the necessity of recognizing the complexities of trauma and the role of patriarchal power in shaping female experiences of agency, autonomy, and selfhood.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has explored the intricate dynamics of sexual consent and manipulation within patriarchal power structures, drawing on the analysis of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) and Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* (2020). By employing feminist psychoanalytic theories, particularly the works of Luce Irigaray and Sara Ahmed, the study has shed light on how patriarchal ideologies distort the boundaries between autonomy and exploitation. Both novels reveal the psychological subjugation and manipulation of their female protagonists—Melanie Isaacs and Vanessa Wye—within relationships that are marked by power imbalances, with consent becoming a contested and often illusory construct.

This study addressed the first research question—*What factors influence the sexual manipulation experienced by Melanie in Disgrace and Vanessa in My Dark Vanessa?*—by highlighting how patriarchal power dynamics and societal norms shape the manipulation experienced by both protagonists. Melanie's encounter with David Lurie is framed by the coercive authority of his social and professional position, while Vanessa's relationship with Jacob Strane is rooted in emotional grooming and psychological dependency. Both cases illustrate how patriarchal structures position women as subordinate figures, where consent is undermined by the interplay of authority, manipulation, and the internalization of societal expectations. These factors are compounded by the protagonists' youth and vulnerability, making them susceptible to exploitation masked as mentorship or care. The study finds that manipulation in both texts is perpetuated through a combination of psychological control, societal pressure, and the normalization of male dominance.

The second research question—*How do the selected texts demonstrate the Male Gaze and the Promise of Happiness, and how do they affect the characters?*—was explored through feminist psychoanalytic concepts. Irigaray's theory of the male gaze reveals how Melanie and Vanessa are objectified, their agency reduced under the controlling perspective of male characters. This objectification frames their experiences, where compliance is mistaken for consent. Ahmed's concept of the

Promise of Happiness further elucidates how patriarchal ideologies coerce both protagonists into believing their subjugation will lead to emotional fulfillment. This framing manipulates their understanding of agency, leaving them complicit in their own exploitation. The study demonstrated how these mechanisms shape the protagonists' internal struggles, as they attempt to reconcile their imposed roles with their desire for autonomy, ultimately underscoring the pervasive impact of patriarchal ideologies on their sense of self.

The third research question—*How does the psychological subjugation by male characters in the selected texts obscure the boundaries between sexual consent and manipulation?*—was analyzed through the frameworks of feminist psychoanalysis. The study revealed that psychological subjugation operates as a subtle yet potent force, where patriarchal ideologies shape the internal landscapes of Melanie and Vanessa, blurring the distinction between consent and coercion. David Lurie's manipulation of Melanie exploits her reluctance and silence, framing his actions as consensual while disregarding her lack of agency. Similarly, Jacob Strane's grooming of Vanessa fosters an emotional dependency that confuses her perception of autonomy, making her compliance appear voluntary. These dynamics demonstrate how patriarchal control not only manifests through overt power imbalances but also through the internalization of societal norms that obscure exploitation as mutual desire. By analyzing the psychological manipulation in both novels, this study underscores the complexities of consent as a construct deeply intertwined with power and control, challenging simplistic binary understandings of autonomy and exploitation.

This dissertation has demonstrated that the relationships depicted in *Disgrace* and *My Dark Vanessa* systematically blur the line between genuine agency and coercive control, thereby validating the central thesis: that internalized patriarchal ideology shapes ostensibly consensual relationships into ones marked by manipulation and psychological subjugation. Through detailed textual analysis and the application of feminist psychoanalytic theory, the study intervenes in existing literary and gender discourse by foregrounding how subtle, internalized forces—rather than overt violence—sustain patriarchal dominance. This nuanced focus offers a critical contribution to ongoing debates on sexual consent, demonstrating that autonomy cannot be evaluated in isolation from the psychological and cultural frameworks that shape it.

Through the lens of Irigaray's critique of patriarchal language and the male gaze, this study has demonstrated how both Melanie and Vanessa are objectified and reduced to passive figures within their respective relationships with David Lurie and Jacob Strane. Their autonomy is systematically undermined through the controlling dynamics of male desire and dominance, perpetuated by patriarchal structures that limit their agency and frame their compliance as inevitable. Irigaray's concept of the male gaze reveals how male characters in both texts position the female protagonists as objects of desire, stripping them of their individuality and self-determination. The male gaze, coupled with patriarchal language, subjects women to a silencing process, where their voices are marginalized and their autonomy is continually questioned.

Sara Ahmed's concept of the "willful subject" has been pivotal in understanding the ways in which women are coerced into compliance, often internalizing patriarchal norms that render submission as a form of perceived autonomy. In both *Disgrace* and *My Dark Vanessa*, Melanie and Vanessa are caught in the tension between their internal desires and the external forces that shape their perceptions of themselves and their relationships. The "willful subject" challenges the idea that women's agency is inherently autonomous; instead, it is shaped by societal expectations and power imbalances that encourage compliance. This is particularly evident in Melanie's reluctance to resist David Lurie's advances and Vanessa's enduring attachment to Jacob Strane, despite the emotional and psychological harm they endure.

The "Promise of Happiness," as theorized by Ahmed, has also been a critical framework through which the study has analyzed the manipulation of consent in both novels. The male characters in both texts frame their relationships with Melanie and Vanessa as pathways to emotional fulfillment and personal growth, presenting their actions as acts of love or mentorship. This promise of happiness obscures the coercive and manipulative nature of their behavior, rendering the female protagonists' consent as a product of emotional manipulation rather than genuine, autonomous choice. In the case of Melanie, David Lurie's justification of their sexual encounter as an expression of mutual desire and her emotional distress afterward highlights the psychological complexities of consent within manipulative relationships. Similarly, Jacob Strane's grooming of Vanessa operates under the guise of mentorship, where his manipulative behavior is rationalized as a means of providing emotional guidance and stability, further complicating her understanding of what constitutes consent.

One of the primary contributions of this study has been the exploration of how internalized patriarchal norms shape the experiences of Melanie and Vanessa, making it difficult for them to recognize the exploitation they endure. The analysis of these characters through the theoretical frameworks of Irigaray and Ahmed has revealed how the internalization of patriarchy operates not only through external social structures but also through the psyche, influencing the ways in which women perceive their own agency and consent. Both Melanie and Vanessa are conditioned to accept patriarchal frameworks as part of their identity, making their resistance to exploitation difficult and fraught with psychological tension.

Expanding the ideas of this study, in future, research may be beneficial to look into the works of modern literature in which the same ideas of internalized patriarchy, consent and psychological manipulation are explored. Such texts as *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov (though they were published earlier), are still reinterpreted within the context of recent feminist and psychoanalytic developments especially regarding the ways how grooming and coercion is made to appear in the guise of love or desire. Novels written later such as Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* give some rich ground on analysis with help of such theoretical frameworks as psychoanalysis feminism of Luce Irigaray and such affect theory as Sara Ahmed did, especially in this thesis. Intersectional feminist theories by bell hooks or Kimberle Crenshaw could also be introduced among the scholars to investigate how race, class, and sexuality even further complicate the process of internalizing the patriarchal norms. The implications of applying the theory of affect or post-structuralist feminist theory to these texts would open up the possibilities of exploring how emotional economies and the discursive structures defining limits of agency and consent to an extent that would be beneficial.

The significance of this study lies in its ability to offer a more nuanced understanding of consent, power, and manipulation within patriarchal contexts. The study has illuminated how patriarchal ideologies and societal expectations conspire to obscure the authenticity of sexual consent, rendering women vulnerable to exploitation. The study has also provided critical insights into how power asymmetries and patriarchal ideologies shape women's emotional and psychological experiences, complicating their ability to assert genuine autonomy in relationships.

Furthermore, this research addresses a critical gap in existing literature by demonstrating the subtle and often invisible mechanisms of control that govern gendered relationships, particularly those between women and men in positions of power. The analysis has highlighted the importance of recognizing the psychological and societal forces that shape women's experiences of consent, agency, and exploitation. By focusing on the complex intersection of power, language, and psychological manipulation in both *Disgrace* and *My Dark Vanessa*, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how patriarchal ideologies shape and constrain women's autonomy and self-determination.

The findings of this study also suggest that the internalization of patriarchal norms does not only affect individual women but also perpetuates broader societal patterns of gendered power imbalances. The psychological subjugation of Melanie and Vanessa, coupled with the manipulation of their desires and the blurring of consent with coercion, underscores the ways in which patriarchy continues to operate on both individual and institutional levels. The study emphasizes the need for greater awareness of how patriarchal structures and the manipulation of consent shape women's experiences in relationships and how these dynamics are often overlooked or dismissed in broader social discourses.

In conclusion, this study has underscored the complex and multifaceted nature of consent, manipulation, and power in relationships shaped by patriarchal ideologies. By analyzing *Disgrace* and *My Dark Vanessa* through the lens of feminist psychoanalysis, the research has contributed to a deeper understanding of the psychological, emotional, and societal forces that govern women's experiences of agency and autonomy. The study has shown that sexual consent is not simply a matter of individual choice but is profoundly influenced by the broader socio-cultural and psychological structures within which it occurs. It is only by critically examining these power dynamics and challenging the patriarchal norms that sustain them that we can begin to understand and address the complexities of consent and manipulation in relationships.

Future studies could build on this research by expanding the scope to include a broader range of texts that explore similar themes of consent, manipulation, and patriarchal control. Comparative analyses of other literary works, particularly those that

feature relationships between individuals of different ages or power dynamics, could further deepen the understanding of how patriarchy shapes the experiences of women across diverse contexts. Additionally, exploring the intersectionality of gender, race, and class in the context of sexual consent and manipulation could provide valuable insights into how these dynamics differ for women of varying socio-cultural backgrounds. A focus on non-fictional narratives, including memoirs and autobiographies of survivors of abuse and manipulation, could further illuminate the real-world implications of the theoretical frameworks used in this study.

Another potential direction for future research could involve examining the role of cultural and societal shifts in how consent is understood and portrayed in literature. As conversations around consent and sexual violence continue to evolve, particularly in light of movements like #MeToo, studies that trace the changing representations of power dynamics in contemporary literature could offer a timely and relevant contribution to feminist discourse. Furthermore, a more in-depth psychological analysis of characters like Melanie and Vanessa, incorporating empirical studies on trauma, victimization, and psychological manipulation, could add an interdisciplinary dimension to the field, bridging literary analysis with psychological research to offer a more comprehensive understanding of how patriarchy influences women's perceptions of autonomy and consent.

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