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##### MLA Citation

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The American University in Cairo

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**The ‘Ivory Tower’ Exposed:  
The University in Ashour’s *Atyaf* and Coetzee’s *Disgrace***

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of English and Comparative Literature

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

By

**Fatma Atef Massoud**

Under the supervision of

**Dr. Ferial Ghazoul**

**May 2016**

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## Acknowledgment

I wish to thank the English and Comparative Literature Department at AUC, professors and administrative staff (Omneya Ali and Ola Shanab), for being extremely helpful since the day I started my journey as a graduate student.

I want to especially thank my supervisor, Professor Ferial Ghazoul, for believing in me and for pushing me to do much more than I knew I could, and for her diligent dedication and unbelievable help. Many thanks to Dr. Tahia Abdel Nasser and Dr. Khaled Mattawa for their help and valuable feedback that enhanced my project.

I also want to thank my friends and family for their love and support, especially my beloved father who always saw the best in me and knew I could do something special, even when I wasn't so sure I could. Thank you Dr. Inas Ibrashy and Dr. Magda Haroun for your continuous support and guidance since I was an undergraduate at Ain Shams University.

Finally, I want to express gratefulness for the one and only late professor Radwa Ashour, who continues to inspire me endlessly. I have written this thesis about her and for her. I want to thank her for all what she had taught me when I was her student a few years ago, and what I am still learning as I go along and read her work today. The values I have learned from being her student and following traces of her life and work when writing this thesis are invaluable and priceless.

## Abstract

The sub-genre of the campus novel is relatively new, only starting in its recent form in the mid-fifties in England and the United States. There have been attempts for writing campus novels in Arabic modern fiction, but none of them were consciously categorized under this sub-genre; the term is fairly new to the Arabic literary scene. This thesis is a comparative study of *Atyaf (Specters)* (1999), an Egyptian modern campus novel by writer and professor Radwa Ashour (1946-2014), which ushers this sub-genre in Arabic literature, and *Disgrace*, by South African writer and Professor J. M. Coetzee (1940- ). *Atyaf* is semi-autobiographical, with an intersection of the life of a fictional character into the narrator's own. Creating a double corresponding to the main character is indicative, of double trajectories that could have been undertaken. *Disgrace*, though fictional, overlaps with Coetzee's professional career as a professor at Cape Town University.

As an academic, Ashour firmly believed in institutional autonomy and academic freedom and struggled against authoritarian surveillance in the university. Coetzee wrote intensively on the importance of establishing institutional autonomy and defending academic freedom. He also had expressed concerns about intellectuals and their role inside the walls of the university. By exposing corruption, revealing issues of lack of intellectual integrity, hypocrisy, abuse, academic life in the so-called 'Ivory-Tower,' I attempt to explore how both Ashour and Coetzee expose the reality of the university against its idealistic, utopian picture as woven in the consciousness of the public. The thesis addresses the image, role, function, and social position of the intellectual and the University as presented in theoretical works of Edward Said, touching on definitions by Martin Heidegger, Cardinal Newman, Michel Foucault, Paul Baran, and Taha Hussein.

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## Chapter One – The Modern University

The modern university, in its simplest definition, is a place of seeking and acquiring knowledge of a desired specialty in sciences or the arts. It is also a place of nurturing talents, raising cultural awareness and engagement in social change.

The notion and shape of the modern university has progressed throughout the centuries to be what it is today. The idea itself is as old as Plato, where the place of seeking knowledge was called ‘the academy.’ Edward Said, in his speech “On the University”, elaborates more on this: “The academy, as Plato called it, was a protected almost utopian place. Only there could collective learning and the development of knowledge occur and, as in recent years we have discovered it could occur only if academic freedom from non-academic authority was somehow guaranteed and could prevail” (27).

European historians believed that the idea of the university originated in Italy around the fifteenth century, and it kept developing and evolving till it reached its modern manifestation. Jakob Burkhardt, for example, in his book *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* pondered the idea that since the beginning of the fifteenth century on, “the Italian humanists, with their mode of exposition and their Latin style, had long the complete control of the reading world of Europe” (59). However, Said differs, and explains that “The origins of the modern system of knowledge that we call humanism did not originate, as Jakob Burkhardt and many others believed it did, in Italy during the fifteenth and sixteenth-century Renaissance, but, rather in the Arab colleges, *madrasas*, mosques, and courts of Iraq, Sicily, Egypt, Andalusia, from the eighth century on” (“University” 27). The Arabs relied on critical thinking, analysis, logic and reason in their studies of religious texts or secular sciences, and these very elements are the constituents of the modern mode of knowledge seeking. Said expands on this idea by telling us that we should take pride in the fact that Muslims and Arabs

were the first to create and develop the currently existing modes of study: “For those of us who are of Arab origin, and who in the modern period have gotten used to the notion that Europe and the West gave rise to modes of study, notions of academic discipline, and the whole idea of what in Arabic we call *ijtihad*, or the central role of individual effort in study and interpretation, it is salutary indeed to realize that our Arab-Islamic culture contributed substantially to what later was to become the whole system of education, which today we call modern, liberal, and Western” (28).

To know more about the origins of the notion of the university, it is useful to look at prominent figures who attempted to define the university and its role in the modern world. Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-1890) wrote about it in his book *Idea of University*. Cardinal Newman reinforced the importance of the presence of the Church to maintain the moral integrity of the institution of the university in seeking knowledge and truth; but at the same time he stressed the fact that the goal of a university was mainly secular. Its main purpose was to educate ‘young men’ and prepare them for the world: “Liberal Education makes not the Christian, not the Catholic, but the gentleman. It is well to be a gentleman, it is well to have a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life; – these are the connatural qualities of a large knowledge; they are the objects of a University” Newman explains (89). Though Newman was a cardinal in the nineteenth century, his initial ideas on higher education were significantly progressive and ahead of their time.

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), on the other hand, points out that the concept of “‘Self-governance’ is commonly seen as the dominant characteristic of the university’s essence” (470), and it is what makes the German University what it is. He believes that “science and German fate must come to power in this will to essence. And they will do so if, and only if, we – this body of teachers and students – on the one hand expose science to its



innermost necessity and, on the other hand, are equal to the German fate in its most extreme distress” (471). Thus, science is extremely important for the advancement of the German nation. Heidegger explains that teaching sciences must be done in the right way, which is “questioning.” He explains that “Questioning is then no longer a preliminary step, to give way to the answer and thus to knowledge, but questioning becomes itself the highest form of knowing. Questioning then unfolds its ownmost strength to unlock in all things what is essential. Questioning then forces our vision into the most simple focus on the inescapable” (474). It is through working the intellect, then, that the right way of knowledge is acquired, and the university is responsible for providing this mode of study.

If we wish to review what Arab intellectuals and cultural figures thought of the role of the university and the goal of higher education, Taha Hussein (1889-1973) would be the best example. Hussein was an Egyptian professor, writer, and critic. He held the position of Dean of the Faculty of Arts in the 1940s, and Minister of Education in 1950. Hussein believed the university is “a seat of learning, not only by its own standards but by comparison with other environments as well” (Galal 695). By other environments, he meant fostering and integrating the approach of European educational system into the Egyptian one. He also saw that the main purpose of Higher Education was “a route to the practical world and not to some state of Platonic happiness” (Hussein 247). Higher education is a “superior degree of culture,” a necessity to earn a proper living by being highly specialized in a certain field, not a luxury anymore. That is why he was one of the first and most ardent supporters of the importance of offering free education, equally, to everyone without any forms of discrimination or elitism. This view was mostly influenced by the European modes of study in the nineteenth century that Hussein firstly experienced as a student in France, then later on adopted as an official who is responsible for shaping the educational approach in his contemporary Egypt. Hussein also believed that “universities and educational institutions in general [must not be looked

upon] as schools which simply impart knowledge and form minds. Knowledge by itself is not everything.” The University in his view is an “environment [...] for culture and civilization in the widest sense” (Galal 695-96), and that such culture will help young people who graduate from the university in excelling in their specialized areas.

As the university developed around the twentieth century, the focus on teaching the humanities subsided and the focus on managerial sciences and actuarial sciences rose to the surface, in an attempt to address the ‘market’ and pertain to its needs. Accordingly, its sources of funding, whether they are private, or belongs to the state, have always controlled the content and shape by which it is governed. The result is usually a university that is authority-affiliated, or that follows a political agenda. Intellectuals and academics have long fought for the institutional autonomy and the independence of the university from all external agendas. J. M. Coetzee asks, “Is a university still a university when it loses its academic autonomy?” Coetzee says that, for instance, universities in South Africa must fight the interference of the state, but so far such resistance has been so weak and “ill organised; routed, the professors beat a retreat to their dugouts” (“Universities” n. pag.). Many intellectuals express their concern that if the modern university continues to be controlled by the state or security or business, it will surely head to its own demise. Terry Eagleton, for instance, says in an article in the *Guardian*: “What we have witnessed in our time is the death of universities as centres of critique. . . The role of academia has been to service the status-quo, not challenge it in the name of justice, tradition, imagination, human welfare, free play of the mind or alternative visions of the future.” That is why it remains a continuous strain on the shoulders of academics and intellectuals, to prevent the university from ‘death’ and ‘extinction’ (n. pag.).

Throughout this thesis, issues of institutional autonomy and academic freedom among other struggles that the university faces will be discussed in detail, both in Egyptian and South African Universities. This will be done through meticulous analysis and close reading of two

prominent campus novels: Radwa Ashour's *Atyaf* (1999) [translated as *Specters* by Barbara Romaine 2010], and J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999).

The Campus novel is a relatively new sub-genre. It is, as defined by literary critic David Lodge in his article "Nabokov and the Campus Novel," a work of fiction that witnesses its main action – as clear from its name – in or around a university or a college campus ("Nabokov" n. pag.). The campus novel, or the "*Professorroman*" as Elaine Showalter in her book *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* likes to call it, is usually a work that involves stories of the lives of university academics – whether students, staff, faculty or administrators. The genre of the campus novel is relatively new, only starting in its recent form in the mid-fifties. The rise of this sub-genre goes back to various factors. After World War II, the universities in Britain and the United States had to expand and grow to absorb the return of veterans from war, and the booming population. The nature of campus life also contributed to the rise of campus fiction. Showalter believes that "Creating a complete society on the campus, with housing, meals, medical care, and social life all provided communally and institutionally" was one of the reasons that fostered writing about the realities of campus (1). The existence of such society may have pushed academics to write more memoirs, sharing their personal experiences as insiders with a sharp eye to scrutinize academic life. The emergence of Creative Writing courses also had a hand in enriching the campus novel, as more creative writers were present on campus, having the competence to express their experiences on campus.

Showalter described the campus novel as a commentary on and criticism of contemporary issues, a satire of educational and stereotypical trends inside academia, conveying the challenges that university professors have to encounter while measuring themselves against each other and "against their internalized expectation of brilliance" (4).

Campus fiction started as satirical and comical, with settings and plots woven only inside the walls of a campus. The action was most of the time critical of academic life, and satirized its follies. Works like Mary McCarthy's *the Groves of Academe* (1952) and Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954) and David Lodge's *Campus Trilogy* (1970s) are considered precursors to the genre in its recent form, according to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (33).

Many critics of the academic novel criticized the repetitive pattern of all early novels that were written under the genre. Robert F. Scott says that their critics questioned the existence of constant features that repeated themselves, including “the absurdity and despair of university life; the colorful, often neurotic personalities who inhabit academia; and the ideological rivalries which thrive in campus communities” (82). He argues, however, that though the novels under this genre were initially built and stylized as ‘comedies of manners,’ “they nonetheless exhibit a seemingly irresistible tendency to trivialize academic life and to depict academia as a world that is both highly ritualized and deeply fragmented” (83).

Later on, as many writers took on the task of writing novels about campuses, this trend changed. Campus novels started to depict problems of class, race and politics through the eyes of college professors, or portray the staff's relation to all these themes inside and outside the university. As the nature of academic fiction kept shifting and developing to be more complex, Showalter notices that “Contemporary academic fiction is too tame, substituting satire for tragedy, detective plots for the complex effects on a community of its internal scandals, revelations, disruptions, disappointments and catastrophes” (119). Novels of this genre also fiercely criticize the stark contrast between an idealized appearance of the university life and professors, with all the shiny glamour of prestige, honest competition and success, versus accounts of failing standards, corruption, daunting bureaucracy and devious pursuit of money and literary fame. Scott argues that “the academic novel is a vital and

aesthetically rich literary genre that has continually evolved in order to meet the demands of its large and ever-expanding readership” (82). Feature writer Aida Edemariam wrote in an article in *The Guardian* that the campus novel has become “a way to measure the state of the nation” (n. pag.). David Lodge ponders why the campus novel appeals to all readers, whether academics or not: “one reason, perhaps, is that the university is a kind of microcosm of society at large, in which the principles, drives, and conflicts that govern collective human life are displayed and may be studied in a clear light and on a manageable scale” (“Campus Novel” 34).

Throughout my thesis, I will try to explore the consequences of exposing the institution of the university with all its shortcomings and flaws. *Atyaf* and *Disgrace* are campus novels, but both of them can be categorized under other sub-genres. *Atyaf* is semi-autobiographical, semi-fictional, and *Disgrace* takes place partly in a campus, and is partly a pastoral novel. In my analysis, I will focus on many themes, but will especially trace whether the main characters are considered intellectuals, and if they are, what kind of hardships and austerities they face in their day-to-day job that makes it challenging to carry on the role of an intellectual. To understand this further, I will use critic Edward Said’s *Representations of the Intellectual* to have a better understanding of what intellectuals are, what their role is, what challenges they face. I will also tap on Michel Foucault and Paul Baran’s views of intellectuals in *Truth and Power* and “the Commitment of the Intellectual” respectively. Said defines an intellectual as:

an individual with a specific public role in society that cannot be reduced simply to being a faceless professional, a competent member of a class just going about her/his business. The central fact for me is, I think, that the intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public. And this role has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d’être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept

under the rug. The intellectual does so on the basis of universal principles: that all human beings are entitled to expect decent standards of behavior concerning freedom and justice from worldly powers or nations, and that deliberate or inadvertent violations of these standards need to be testified and fought against courageously.” (*Representations* 11-12)

This definition of the role of a modern intellectual goes hand in hand with the present struggles that academics and thinkers everywhere, whether in academia or not, tend to face. We will encounter such examples in *Atyaf*, and will notice their absence in *Disgrace*.

Said also notes the crucial role of intellectuals in any society: “There has been no major revolution in modern history without intellectuals; conversely there has been no major counter-revolutionary movement without intellectuals. Intellectuals have been the fathers and mothers of movements, and of course sons and daughters, even nephews and nieces” (*Representations* 10-11). They are then the major forces of change, or its absence. Said goes on to articulate the role and purpose of an intellectual in this insightful excerpt:

There is no such thing as a private intellectual, since the moment you set down words and then publish them you have entered the public world. Nor is there only a public intellectual, someone who exists just as a figurehead or spokesperson or symbol of a cause, movement, or position. There is always the personal inflection and the private sensibility, and those give meaning to what is being said or written. Least of all should an intellectual be there to make his/her audiences feel good: the whole point is to be embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant.” (*Representations* 12)

Said sees the modern intellectual as someone who represents and defends a point of view, and makes an effort to articulate this viewpoint to his audience, no matter how many obstacles he/she stumbles upon: “My argument is that intellectuals are individuals with a vocation for the art of representing.” Said goes on to say, “whether that is talking, writing, teaching, appearing on television. And that vocation is important to the extent that it is publicly recognizable and involves both commitment and risk, boldness and vulnerability” (*Representations* 12-13). So intellectuals are not silent or mute; they actively engage in raising

public awareness vis-à-vis crucial issues through every venue that they can reach out to people from.

Professor and scientist Paul Baran has a rather different perspective of an intellectual. Quite simply, Baran believes an intellectual is “a person working with his intellect, relying for his livelihood (or if he need not worry about such things, for the gratification of his interests) on his brain rather than on his brawn” (n. pag.). However, he admits that this definition is too simplistic, and inadequate. In his article “The Commitment of the Intellectual,” he introduces the term ‘intellect worker’:

[an] intellect worker’s work and thought is the particular job in hand. It is the rationalization, mastery, and manipulation of whatever branch of reality he is immediately concerned with. [. . .] He is not concerned with the relation of the segment of human endeavor within which he happens to operate to other segments and to the totality of the historical process. His “natural” motto is to mind his own business, and, if he is conscientious and ambitious, to be as efficient and as successful at it as possible. (n. pag.)

Baran then distinguishes between the job and function of an ‘intellectual’ and an ‘intellect worker,’ saying that

What marks the intellectual and distinguishes him from the intellect workers and indeed from all others is that his concern with the entire historical process is not a tangential interest but permeates his thought and significantly affects his work. To be sure, this does not imply that the intellectual in his daily activity is engaged in the study of all of historical development. [...] But what it does mean is that the intellectual is systematically seeking to relate whatever specific area he may be working in to other aspects of human existence. (n. pag)

So, while the ‘intellect worker’ minds his own business and does not seem to put much thought into placing himself in the historical grid, an intellectual seeks to make an effort to “interconnect things” (Baran n. pag).

Foucault’s ‘specific intellectual’ goes along the array of Baran’s views. As opposed to the ‘universal’ intellectual who defended the Platonic, abstract concepts of truth and justice, the ‘specific’ intellectual is someone who

Work[s], not in the modality of the ‘universal,’ the ‘exemplary,’ the ‘just-and-true-for-all,’ but within specific sectors, at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them (housing, the hospital, the asylum, the laboratory, the university, family, and sexual relations). (126)

Said’s perception of the nature and role of an intellectual is different from Foucault’s or Baran’s. Said offers an idealistic, universal and a rather progressive picture of the duties and burdens an intellectual has to carry in a contemporary society. On the other hand, Baran, like Foucault, seeks to present a more neutral, specialized type of intellectual whom we tend to meet or read about more often. Taha Hussein’s view of the main role of the university was to pave way for young people to get highly specialized in their own fields, to be ‘intellect workers’ in Baran’s terms, each concerned with his/her own little part, rather than get engaged in the issues of the Whole/Universal.

In the course of *Atyaf* and *Disgrace*, We will meet both types as the main characters of the novels. We will trace their successes, disappointments, defeats and transformations. Said’s intellectual can be considered more congruent with the portrayal of the double Radwa/Shagar in *Atyaf*, while the ‘intellect worker’, or the ‘specific’ type of intellectual goes together with *Disgrace*’s Lurie, which is more prone to human error and moral degradation. Throughout both novels, specific roles of the academics in both novels will be traced. Do they speak truth to power? Do they suffer from a sense of exile? Are they alienated? Has the university blossomed or withered their souls? These are all questions to be explored within the following chapters.



## Chapter Two – *Atyaf*

*The university isn't outside society—what happens in society happens in the university, too!*

Radwa Ashour

*Atyaf (Specters)* is definitely one of the masterpieces that Radwa Ashour wrote. The novel is a conscious narrative that recounts the pitfalls and deficiencies in the higher education institutions in Egypt, and an urgent call for action to save the university that was once alive and dynamic, but is now, to many critics, on the way to its death. Not much scholarly work has been done on *Atyaf* so far; however, many of those who reviewed it or wrote critical articles on the novel are professors who knew Ashour one way or another, and bore the same sentiments of concern and distress over the deteriorating status of the Egyptian universities.

Ashour wrote *Atyaf (Specters)*\* in late 1998, and it was published in 1999. As a professor at a public university, and as a political activist, Ashour has always expressed her vehement disappointment in the educational system, and in the crippling bureaucracy and corruption of university officials and heads; her novel came as an embodiment of such sentiment. Her attempts to portray these shortcomings come from the conviction that the university is a manifestation of society; whatever happens inside demonstrates what happens on a larger scale in all other institutions, and in the nation at large. The genre of the novel is semi-autobiographical, semi-fictional, with instances of metafictional interferences, which serve as a way of involving the reader in the consciousness of the author and the making of the story. The narration moves between first and third person, with a non-linear frame of events, along with occasional segments of meta-fictional narration of the author commenting on the characters, or displaying her own thoughts to the readers while composing the story. Such interventions into the narration make it quite “impossible to distinguish between Ashour

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\* I will be quoting from the English translation of the novel by Barbara Romaine. Following the pages of the translated passages, I have added the pages of the Arabic original, so readers can consult it if they wish.

the author and Ashour the character” (Abdelmohsen n. pag.). Ashour builds the structure of her book upon “personal memoirs and brief fictional anecdotes” (Qualey 31), while shuffling between Radwa’s life and her double character, Shagar, simultaneously.

To understand more about the author’s motives and process of composition of this novel, it is firstly useful to review what Ashour herself said of *Atyaf*. Upon writing it, Ashour briefly mentioned it in an article she wrote in *The Massachusetts Review* in 2000. “I would like to add a few words about my last novel: *Atyaf: Shadows*. It’s a semi-autobiographical narrative, a partial record of my life intertwined with that of another character of my age and profession” (Ashour 91)\*\* . She describes the nature of the book, which is primarily and heavily based on the element of history (something that Ashour had been very involved in and wrote intensively about in many of her novels and critical works). History is the “centre stage” (Ashour 91) of *Atyaf*, in which testimonies of survivors in Deir Yassin, and historians’ work on the subject are quoted in detail. However, Ashour also mentions that apart from inserting these testimonies along with description of the “the social and economic conditions of Egypt in the early years of this century” (92), the importance of history is highlighted “through tracing aspects of the *personal* history of the two protagonists, Radwa and Shagar. History in this novel is three-fold, *personal*, collective and mythical” (Ashour 92; my emphasis). Ashour’s personal history is what I will be mostly concentrating on here, since this ‘history’ includes her struggle as an academic inside the university campus, and her direct encounters with distressing corruption at both Cairo and Ain-Shams Universities: “Possibly these elements, all constitutive of my life, had to be brought in to encompass my experience,” she concludes (92).

To take this point into further discussion, professor and critic Faten Morsy believes that the deterioration of the status of the university is brilliantly depicted in *Atyaf*. She notes

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\*\* For consistency, I will be referring to the main character in the novel as Radwa, and to the author as Ashour.

that the novel “focused on the conditions of the Egyptian University and the outcomes of its deterioration, which is the result of an organized and systematic scheme launched since the late seventies. Thus, the scientific, administrative and financial corruption are exposed [...] so that the university, that was once a stronghold of ambition, an entity closed upon itself, and one that the society always thought of as above suspicion becomes despised, humiliated, and condemned before public opinion” (140; my translation). Critic Ashraf Zidan also discusses the depiction in *Atyaf* of the “shameful misdeeds committed by some of their chancellors and staff members,” like academic plagiarism or tolerance of cheating and corruption (72). He analyses how the novel presents a “frightening picture” of those who are supposed to be beacons of light, and role models for the students they teach. Faculty members in leading positions, who used to be “pioneers of national political awareness” (73) in the past, are now a disgrace to their noble profession resisting all the attempts of political and social change, with their disclosed affiliation with the authorities and their obstinate efforts to preserve the status-quo. Many deans, department chairs and university presidents, who may be considered as ‘intellect workers’ in Baran’s terms, fall under this category.

Edward Said discusses this idea in *Representations*, saying that “intellectuals who are close to policy formulation and can control patronage of the kind that gives or withholds jobs, stipends, promotions tend to watch out for individuals who do not toe the line professionally and in the eyes of their superiors gradually come to exude an air of controversy and noncooperation” (86). In *Atyaf*, Radwa reports that she was not appointed as a teaching assistant at Cairo University, just because the department head does not like her. Ashour writes: “the department chair at that time, Dr. Rashad Rushdie, said, ‘I don’t want this girl.’ So the girl went to work elsewhere” (131; *Atyaf* 102). Shagar, Radwa’s double, as well, is be harshly reprimanded by the chair of the department for participating in the student sit-ins in

1972, and is threatened to be fired: “You know that we can cancel the appointment of a teaching assistant at any time. [...] I can dismiss you from the university!” (86; *Atyaf* 67).

Ashour writes more on this idea a few pages earlier, noting that “she was lucky – Shagar often reflected on this. If she had defended her thesis two or three months later the administration would have obstructed her appointment, and might have even expelled her from the college. So said the president of the university. Were his words only a threat, his way of brandishing a stick at a young woman barely 25 years old? Was it a *preventive measure, to constrain her future conduct?*” (83; my emphasis; *Atyaf* 64-65) Later in the novel, Radwa *is* indeed expelled from the university for a period of time: “my name did not appear among theirs [the list of political detainees], although it did appear on the list of professors dismissed from the university” (166; *Atyaf* 130). All these measures taken against faculty members reveal a stubborn, unrelenting attitude of “constrain[ing the] conduct” of those who hold an oppositional standpoint within the institution of the university, and are resisting the existing stagnant status-quo as Said described them (*Representations* 7). Using verbal threats and expulsion is one of the many reasons the university, as an entity, has “crumbled” (Morsy 149; my translation), and is representing a “reality characterized by fragmentation, confusion and corruption in all aspects” (Morsy 147; my translation).

Critic and professor Sabry Hafez notes that the university has turned into an *‘izba*<sup>1</sup> that is “run according to the personal whims of department heads with political influence, who prefer to appoint subordinate sycophants rather than brilliant students who preserve their integrity and independence of voice” (Morsy 13; my translation). Professor and writer Ra’uf ‘Abbas, in his memoir *Mishaynaha Khutan* (We Walked Life in Footsteps) also used the same word *‘izba* to describe the department chairs’ and deans’ attitude in running the university. ‘Abbas recounts, “Since Sadat, it was destined for the authorities to choose *elements* that were known by their blind loyalty to the ruling regime – or closely related to one of its cornerstones

– to be heads of all public institutions, from ministries to universities. Allegiance was the main criterion for being chosen; anyone in charge of an institution was left to run it as if it was his *'izba*, doing whatever he pleases with it, without supervision or accountability” (112; my translation, my emphasis). Those ‘elements’ have been sabotaging the message and vocation of the university as a source of awareness and freedom of expression, by affiliating themselves to security forces to ensure that they keep their positions for as long as they can, or get promoted. This will only happen if they silence the voices of opposing figures from staff or students at any cost, using all kinds of violence, from verbal to physical.

By undertaking a close reading of the novel, it will be clear that Ashour accurately expresses the authorities’ use of verbal and physical violence in dealing with students and staff on campus to convey a bleak picture of a modern, deteriorating Egyptian university, contrasting with its past status as an icon of freedom and knowledge. Instead, the presence of soldiers, rifles, detention, imprisonment, and gunshots on campus are considered normal and predictable. Ashour, for instance, talks about the student uprising and sit-in in 1972, and that despite all their efforts, she “will learn that the students were arrested at dawn and led off to prison” (51; *Atyaf* 40). She goes on to bitterly describe “the boy who was shot near the School of Engineering and the following day *Al-Ahram* published a picture of that wall splattered with his blood”. She also mentions “the security forces, or the truncheons or the smoky tear-gas bombs or the stampedes” (57; *Atyaf* 45). Professor Ahmed Abdalla<sup>2</sup> discusses the reasons that instigated this uprising in his book *The Student Movement and National Politics in Egypt 1923-1973*, referring to President Anwar Sadat’s earlier speech on his failure to make 1971 a “decisive year” (178) to go to war with Israel, taking the Indo-Pakistani war as an excuse, and that the world cannot handle “two simultaneous major wars” (178). Sadat also mentioned that reliance on support from Soviet Union might enrage the US and provoke retaliation. The speech was met by wide waves of anger that built up in the following days, taking the shape

of demonstrations, writing wall-magazines and placards, collecting signatures on petitions, and finally the sit-ins at both Cairo and Ain Shams universities.

As Ashour keeps writing about the confrontations between the students and security forces, she portrays the whole scene as a “battle between the students and the police, who tried to prevent them from staging a huge funeral for their martyred comrade” (74; *Atyaf* 57). Further portrayal of the “battle” between students and forces in *Atyaf* results in “the kids decid[ing] to put an exhibition of their *loot*, and they brought some of it to me [Shagar] to hold onto for them. One of the students grabbed the truncheon from its owner. The helmet rolled onto the ground in the commotion...” (87, emphasis mine; *Atyaf* 68). In the course of these tragic events, Shagar is briefly detained, spending only “ten days in prison” (85; *Atyaf* 66). Old Shagar contemplates the day she got “stuck by the truncheon that leaves its black-and-blue mark on the upper arm” (58; *Atyaf* 47), bluntly telling the readers how authorities deal with anyone who opposes them in opinion. In *The Student Movement*, Abdalla narrates in detail the incidents that led to the sit-in, and describes the built-up tension and finally the bloody confrontation between students and security forces. “At dawn on 24 January, the Minister of the Interior gave his answer: he ordered his Special Forces, the Central Security Forces, to storm the university and arrest the students” (183). He recounts that President Sadat himself addressed the issue a few days later in a speech, describing whoever participated in the uprising to be of a “‘deviant minority’, of some thirty students, carrying out ‘a carefully planned operation from outside the university’. To define the political composition of this ‘minority’, the president employed the well-known terminology of the security services: ‘students of special leanings’, ‘elements of certain colours’ and ‘remnants of the deposed centres of power’” (185).

Ashour also uses recurrent expressions of prison, wars, soldiers and guns to describe the daunting job of being a college professor. “Something about the profession constricts the

spirit” is how Radwa describes her feelings about teaching (*Specters* 118; *Atyaf* 93). Shagar, as well, expresses a similar thought. For example, while proctoring exams, she sees herself as “a military guardsman supervising the prison complex from the highest watchtower – she lacked only a rifle to brandish in the faces of the prisoners... God, what sort of role was this?” she wonders (20; *Atyaf* 15). When she detects the glaring similarities in the students’ answers while correcting, and later on discovers a mass cheating case, she thinks of the incident as a “crime,” and wonders about the fact that “she hadn’t chosen to be a police officer or a spy, surely” (145; *Atyaf* 113). Correcting “tens of thousands of answer booklets” can turn a spacious place into a constricted, uncomfortable one that ultimately gives her a sense of claustrophobia: the booklets “rose up around her like pillars, closing off all open space and leaving her a small, confined area in which to sit” (20; *Atyaf* 16).

Occasionally, Ashour uses the same vocabulary of gunshot and gunfire to convey feelings of shock or disappointment. Here is her description of her teacher in school when hearing a wrong answer from a student, “frown[ing] and jerk[ing] his head backward as if it had been struck by a stray bullet and his hand shot out with the index finger extended toward the student charged with having given an incorrect answer” (37; *Atyaf* 27).

By reading further into the novel, one will come to realize that Ashour, by writing *Atyaf*, wanted to present an example of a professor/intellectual that – in Edward Said’s terms – ‘speaks truth to power’ despite the existence of corruption and violence. Throughout the book, we will encounter both Radwa and Shagar in constant resistance to the existing corrupt system, and doing their best (in their own different ways) to set straight a system that allows “professors plagiarizing research papers from one another, students graduating with high honors they do not deserve because they are sons/daughters of faculty members [...] or those who graduate with complete ignorance of the code of conduct for the professions that the university qualified them to perform” (Hafez 11; my translation). For example, Shagar

participates in the student sit-in as an assistant lecturer, and does not apologize when asked to do so. She believes that as a member of the Faculty of History, it is her duty to be present at the scene and take part in it (which is completely frowned upon by the administration). Instead, she is involved –heart and soul – with the students in their struggle against security forces, occasionally coming out of the daily ‘battles’ on campus with a “truncheon and a soldier’s helmet” or a “tear-gas bomb” (87; *Atyaf* 68).

In *Representations*, Said says that the “uncompromising freedom of opinion and expression is the secular intellectual’s main bastion” (89), and that defending it is his/her calling. This is clear in the instance when Shagar defends the appointment of Khalil, the brilliant student with Islamic tendencies, and believes in his right to be a teaching assistant because he is academically the best, and intellectually a “first-rate reader.” Other colleagues were shocked and astonished, not believing that a person with “secular inclinations” (Ashour 251; *Atyaf* 199) like her would agree to the presence of Islamist elements in the teaching staff. Another instance is when Shagar finds out the mass cheating case and talks informally to her students, to whereby they confess that they cheated on all the questions of that exam, as well as on others. Shagar instantly writes a report to the Dean, explaining the details of this calamity, and to her disappointment, the Dean responds that there is no such thing as ‘mass cheating,’ and that the “examination process at the college was a paragon of discipline”, and that she is “wrong, inadequate and deluded” (149; *Atyaf* 116).

Speaking truth to power is not only restricted to the ‘power’ of Deans and Presidents of universities, but goes to include the ‘power’ of renowned academics (mostly Zionists) coming from all around the world in an academic conference. When Shagar decided she wanted to present a paper in a conference on Zionist thinker Martin Buber<sup>3</sup> about the massacre of Deir Yassin, her colleague told her it is like “sticking [her] head in a hornets’ nest” (218; *Atyaf* 173).



According to Said, it is the intellectual's role to be "on the same side with the weak and unrepresented" (22), and Shagar did just that. She represented the marginalized and the repressed. Said mentioned the "disputatious matter of objectivity, or accuracy, or facts" (89), and ironically, Shagar was scrutinized on those three elements in particular. She was accused of "anti-Semitism, of a failure of objectivity, of a fanatical nationalist agenda" (Ashour 219; *Atyaf* 174). She was later brutally attacked in London and left to bleed in the street a few blocks from where Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-'Ali –who was assassinated also in London in 1987 – lived. Ashour steps out of the narrative, and talks about al-'Ali's family and house. This metafictional moment is indicative; the fact that she made Shagar get attacked at the same place where al-'Ali was assassinated is a fierce commentary that shows how standing up to Zionist thought is fought and resisted by all means. It seems that an artist like al-'Ali, or in Shagar's case – a brave academic – is more dangerous than politicians and leaders.

Towards the end of the novel, Shagar lashes out at the Dean when he summons her to rebuke her for saying that the university has killed Yusuf, her colleague. "It was her habit to listen, to state her opinion calmly, to contain and restrain her outrage" (255; *Atyaf* 202) thought Shagar, but "she was fed up" (256; *Atyaf* 202) after the department flagrantly agrees to accept a flawed dissertation that was refused by two external examiners, when the supervisor just discards their opinion and goes on to form another committee to accept it and give it the highest honors. Yusuf and Shagar try to ferociously fight this barefaced corruption, much to the discontent of the department chair and academic committee. They see that it is a matter of opinion, and that both Shagar and Yusuf are making "a problem out of nothing" (257; *Atyaf* 204). Yusuf believes in the "very core of the university's mission [,] the value of the research and the integrity of the professor" (257; *Atyaf* 204), and that is why, he tells the chair of the department that it was not a matter of viewpoints, but rather a matter of "destroying the university with our own hands" (257; *Atyaf* 203). After Yusuf dies of a heart

attack, Shagar tells the Dean: “I don’t like to think who will come after Yusuf. I see the coffin and the pallbearers, and I know it’s the university that’s in the coffin” (260; *Atyaf* 206). With the death of one of the most honest, dedicated people, Shagar considers the university to have been indeed destroyed.

Radwa also speaks truth to power in her own way. In one of the instances in the novel, she enters the campus to find that there is a ‘dry-cleaning establishment’ (136) at the entrance. Outraged, she goes to talk to the Dean of Humanities, describing the incident as a “travesty” (137; *Atyaf* 107). She tells him that the university has no cafeteria for students, or enough space in lecture halls for them to sit, so they have to stand or sit on the floor. The library is a “book closet,” and the whole gesture is just “so ugly” (137; *Atyaf* 107). Furthermore, it is very important to point out that Radwa writes the testimonies of political detainees back in the late 1970s and 1980s like Latifa Al Zayyat,<sup>4</sup> and Thurayya Shakir Habashi<sup>5</sup> in prison, and all the injustices they had been subjected to, as a way of exposing the truth against an oppressive ‘power.’ She went on for several pages recounting the women prisoners’ stories of torture, investigation, and denial of the simplest rights, their laughter, tears and struggle. Said discusses this notion further in his book, saying that “certainly in writing and speaking, one’s aim is not to show everyone how right one is but rather to try to induce a change in the moral climate whereby aggression is seen as such, the unjust punishment of peoples or individuals is either prevented or given up, the recognition of rights and democratic freedoms is established as a norm for everyone, not invidiously for a select few” (*Representations* 100). As an intellectual (and most importantly a socially engaged college professor), Radwa believes that it is her role, through writing, to highlight aggressions committed by authority in an attempt to bring about moral and social change. To add to this, Radwa also applies her influence as a literature professor to instigate this sense of change. She tells us about the African-American literature course that the students love to attend, in which they listen to the

slaves' folk songs, their folklore, their myths, poems, stories, the and the Emancipation proclamation. What she inferred in the course of her lectures is found in the students' answers at the end of the year, much to her satisfaction that "oppression and the struggle for liberation are for the emotional life of this generation the tautest of bowstrings. In 30 years – the age difference between them and me – none of that has changed!" (Ashour 135; *Atyaf* 105). So, her profession is luckily one that does not belong to the category of an ivory-towered, secluded, limited job that has no influence on society; on the contrary, she has the chance to witness and assess the effect of political and social matters.

It is important to examine a different type of an intellectual that might not be regarded under Said's view as a 'public' one with political interests. Ashour for example writes about her maternal grandfather, Professor Abdul-Wahab 'Azzam.<sup>6</sup> Professor 'Azzam was different than she ever was. He was the traditional type of intellectual who spent years researching in books and academic journals. "I don't think my grandfather was in the vanguard of political activism. He was a scholar, intent upon his research and his papers. He went to the university and taught his students, met with his colleagues – professors and writers, returned home to his house in Helwan or al-Manyal, played with his daughters, then went into his office to carry on with his studies" (129; *Atyaf* 100).

Another different example of intellectuals (one that is contrary to Radwa, Shagar and Yusuf), would be Khalil, the clever scholar who had some extremist tendencies but chose to give them up for the sake of career advancement. Shagar has always defended Khalil's right to be appointed and to pursue his career in academia, but much to her disappointment, he did not live up to her expectations. Said mentions this kind of intellectual at the beginning of his chapter "Speaking Truth to Power":

The intellectual, properly speaking, is not a functionary or an employee completely given up to the policy goals of a government or a large corporation, or even a guild of like-minded professionals. In such situations the temptations to turn off one's moral sense, or to think entirely from within the specialty, or

to curtail skepticism in favor of conformity are far too great to be trusted. Many intellectuals succumb completely to these temptations.” (86-87, my emphasis)

Khalil’s conversation with Shagar confirms that he *had* succumbed to these temptations: “I think about my academic performance at all times. It is what I will safeguard at any cost. I safeguard it and I rise, and I rise in order to safeguard it... I will [...] guard that achievement by means of rank and power,” he says (Ashour 253-54; *Atyaf* 200). Khalil believes that academic performance and excellence in the academic career is mutually exclusive to resistance or speaking truth to power. He chose to conform to the tendency to curb policies created by the authority to survive and “rise.” Khalil continues to justify his opinions:

A person chooses sometimes to work to change reality – this seems feasible to him. [...] I discovered that I don’t have it in me to change the way things are, and I don’t see that I have any power I might bring to bear for the sake of such change. In short, I found that the question was whether one was to be the wolf or the lamb. Better to eat than be eaten, I said.” (253; *Atyaf* 200)

By reading more analytically into the novel, an important realization rises to the surface. All the efforts of the main characters (Radwa, Shagar, and Yusuf) to stand up to corruption and make the university a better, more politically active, socially engaged, awareness-raising place are met with much resistance and discontent from the authority. Consequently, the characters in *Atyaf* all experience feelings of defeat, frustration, exile, marginality or silence, one way or the other. Edward Said talked extensively about the different definitions of an intellectual, his/her role in society, and different variations of what intellectuals can do or the conditions they might end up in, as previously explained in the introductory chapter. In *Representations*, he dedicated a section that deals with the idea of *intellectual exile*, which can be physical, but can very well be metaphorical. Said explained that intellectuals can be subjected to an exilic status, and it has significant effects on their life and work. Because of their oppositional stances and utopian vision of their vocation and their effect on their surroundings, intellectuals of this type are alienated and ostracized.

My interest here is to examine this idea, and see how far the intellectuals in *Atyaf* are marginalized, exiled and silenced as a result of this idealized vision. Said says that an intellectual is a “permanent outcast, someone who never felt at home, and was always at odds with the environment, inconsolable about the past, bitter about the present and the future” (47). Shagar is the perfect example of this. I believe that Ashour invented Shagar to portray and display all the feelings of defeat/exile that she has been through, but preferred the defeated persona to be the fictional one. Radwa the character and the author had more hope in a brighter future, and still had potential to carry on. Shagar is the ideal, marginalized, Gamal Hamdan<sup>7</sup> type of intellectual (253-54, 272; *Atyaf* 200-01, 216), while Radwa is the resilient one. Ashour may have created Shagar to pour out her feelings of *qahr* (oppression), *‘ajz* (helplessness), two words often mentioned in the novel (135,181; *Atyaf* 105, 142) within the sequence of fictional events, so that she might get enough strength as a writer and activist to continue her struggle. Writer Ahdaf Soueif expresses the same sentiment while reviewing *Atyaf* in *the Independent*, saying that “Ashour braids together scenes from her own autobiography with scenes from an invented life; the life of "Shagar;" a woman she has invented *to help her carry the burden of her own life*” (n. pag; my emphasis).

Shagar will be the first thread to trace in the fabric of the narrative. As an MA student, she feels like she is a “machine... But her soul? It had stolen away somewhere, retreated into the distance. She didn’t get angry, she didn’t cry, she didn’t stop” (59; *Atyaf* 46). When she called for the nullification of the test results after she discovered the cheating of students, the dean’s response comes back as “a new battle, and a losing one as usual! (148; *Atyaf* 116). Even when she finally came to express her frustration in Khalil’s conduct out loud, saying “I want him to stay on the straight and narrow, not to be a hypocrite or a yes-man. Am I asking the impossible?” (252; *Atyaf* 199), she declaimed the rhetorical question to herself, while she was driving. So, in fact, it is still a private question that is not articulated publicly.

Her next attempt to set Khalil straight was even more disappointing for her. Shagar's constant feelings of defeat and metaphorical exile culminated in her confrontation with Khalil, in which she expresses her disappointment in him for giving up his principles. During their confrontation, Khalil defends himself and tells her: "You've chosen to be beautiful, and to be *defeated*. I gave it a lot of thought, and then I decided that I didn't want to be defeated or persecuted" (253; *Atyaf* 200, my emphasis). Shagar describes Khalil to be someone that "no one could get in his way" (252) *la yastadim bi-ahad* (he does not collide/clash with anyone) (*Atyaf* 199). I would like to note that the Arabic version expresses his state of retreat better than the English one. In this passage, the verb *yastadim* (collide) signifies friction, collision, clash or confrontation. Confrontations require engagement or belief in a cause, and defense of this cause on all fronts. Khalil chose to be on the safe side, to ascend the ladder of his academic career with as little confrontations as possible. Shagar defended his appointment as a faculty member despite his extremist inclinations because she would have loved to see a member of the university standing up to what they believe in. The fact that he was a student of hers, this may have brought her a sense of pride. She loved his "attentiveness, an alertness of the spirit" (250; *Atyaf* 198). Perhaps it was this alertness that she felt she lacked, or couldn't show. She might be silent, but she would have loved to know she helped generate someone who isn't. That is why she was very disappointed in him for taking "the easiest way out, and the most disgraceful" (253; *Atyaf* 200). After the conversation with Khalil, she wonders if "had he defeated her, or had she been defeated already [?]" (255; *Atyaf* 201).

Another instance of defeat is presented when Shagar just "picked up her papers and left" (258) after the committee ratified the flawed dissertation and gave it the highest honors. She did not object, or shout, or fight. She just left, knowing this is one more defeat against corruption. The same reaction of silence takes place when she and Yusuf find out that a colleague of theirs in another School who happened to have plagiarized a book, has been

appointed as the department chair, despite the court's ruling that the theft took place. Shagar and Yusuf, the ideal professor with impeccable moral integrity, do not say anything, and are just "dumfounded" (258; *Atyaf* 205).

Shagar's final manifestation of internal exile and defeat is demonstrated in her resignation from the university. She chooses to retreat and become totally disengaged. The connotation of this ending is terrifying: Shagar the warrior, the one who stood up in the face of misconduct and wrongdoing for decades, has chosen to surrender, just like Gamal Hamdan, the committed scholar who shunned academic promotions to produce his monumental work *Egypt's Identity: A Study in the Genius of the Place* (1975-84); she buries herself in books and research. It is worthwhile to note that Shagar has always preferred to escape – in her classroom, in her books, in people:

Are the boys and girls an anchor? A sail? A rudder? A compass? The wood of a ship that buoys her up and preserves her from drowning? Does she escape to them, there in the classroom that encloses her history lessons? Or does she attend to them because when she is on the point of despair their eyes give the lie to reality, in favor of an alternative truth so that she knows that there is a hidden way, obscure and unseen now, whose sudden appearance will not take her by surprise, for she has seen it and felt it and experienced it on every day that she has stood before them and given herself to them and they have given themselves to her? Enough melodrama, Shagar. You keep looking the other way, Shagar. You're clinging to visions of a resplendent savior the embodiment of whom is miraculously distributed among several hundred students! [. . .] They're no magic cloak, Shagar. (143-44; *Atyaf* 112)

The students, too, find their escape and refuge in Shagar. After the incident of the cheating, one of them tries to justify his mistake by telling her that "our society annihilates us in a thousand ways on a daily basis, so we learn gradually how to get our own back from it. [. . .] your presence here preserves something of value for us, a light that assures us the darkness is no longer total, and chaos, wickedness, ignorance, injustice, and corruption, even if we can't get away from them entirely, aren't the law of the land. People naturally need a star in their sky [. . .] don't cut off that power source, Dr. Shagar" (147; *Atyaf* 114-15). Shagar is

considered a “star” to her students, a guide and a compass, so after all, her melodrama is not exaggerated; the sentiment is mutual: they do consider her a compass and a rudder, too, and their mentor and role model.

Radwa, too, has her fair share of frustration – physical and metaphorical exile – and disappointment. Throughout the chapters where the focus is on her, we get to trace segments of her challenging life, as she keeps losing loved ones, oscillating between cities to be united with her husband and son, or struggle with her illness. She reaches a point where she loses all motivation to proceed after she heard of Bashir Gemayel’s assassination in Lebanon<sup>8</sup>: “I am aware that there is a bitter irony here, in that my attention or lack of attention to what happened could make not the slightest difference, since ultimately the outcome was absolute powerlessness either way: frustration, and nothing but frustration” (181; *Atyaf* 142). The translation of the words *qahr* and *‘ajz* does not serve the original meaning well, in my opinion. ‘Frustration’ does not amount to ‘oppression’ or ‘helplessness,’ which could be more accurate to describe what Radwa felt. Something as simple as watching the television for news becomes a daunting job: “She felt, after sitting in front of the television for five minutes, that she did not have the energy for it” (232; *Atyaf* 183).

Radwa goes on to talk about her experience with forced exile of her husband Mourid<sup>9</sup>, after being deported from Egypt in the late 1970s because he was against the Camp David treaty. “Was this not the law of dispersal” she wonders, “imposed upon the mothers of every Palestinian I knew, of Mourid’s mother and her four children?” (168; *Atyaf* 132).

What Radwa is experiencing here is first-hand physical exile. Radwa is tackling a disturbing aspect of her life; she had to travel back and forth to reunite with her family for a while, then come back for work commitments. The journey across different cities of Europe, the long car drives, plane flights, oscillating between Cairo and Budapest, or Balatonföldvár, Hungary or Vienna, Austria, or Doha, Qatar wears her out. Thus, the actual exile imposed on



her husband and son has by extension been imposed on her as well. Besides the metaphorical exile that she might have been experiencing for years as a professor and an activist in a public university with deans and presidents loyal to the authorities who facilitate policing the university, a new layer of actual exile is imposed on her. Every time she is forced to leave her husband stranded in a European city all by himself is considered a moment of 'defeat' in her eyes. "Who can separate fear of impending defeat from previous defeats?" she asks (230; *Atyaf* 182).

Defeat, however, is not constant or a final decision in Radwa's case. She and Shagar are different in this aspect: Shagar chooses to retreat and escape being subjected to more confrontations and failures, while Radwa has the courage to find a new motive to come back and carry on her struggle. One way of doing this is by writing: "Writing *Granada*, followed by *Maryama* and *The Departure*<sup>10</sup>, restored to the woman [Radwa] her balance, perhaps because the process of writing restored a will negated and paralyzed before the 'desert storms,' with their military equipment and their propaganda machines" (232; *Atyaf* 183-184). Writing brought her a sense of equilibrium, because she needed an outpouring of all the received input of war, exile, illness, killing, loss, and resistance. Because Radwa has always been very communicative and interacting since the beginning, unlike Shagar, so an outlet to all her experiences and life events she was exposed to is needed. This is why though both characters seem to have similar life trajectories, in fact they don't, or at least their endings are different. Shagar chooses to accept defeat and forced exile, as Khalil mentioned in their heated conversation. Radwa, on the other hand, finds ways to break the pattern of being engulfed in frustration and disappointment, either by writing, or teaching. "The job has aged her, or maybe tied her down, or educated her. It has trained her not to show a fragility that is her lot by heredity and natural disposition," says Radwa (230; *Atyaf* 182). Teaching has taught her how to be strong and resilient against austerities of life. Shagar escapes from reality by getting

into the classroom and dealing with it as a closed entity that is separated from its outside surroundings. Radwa, on the other hand, gets into the classroom to induce change, trying to reform or reconstruct a bitter, distorted reality (through teaching her students African American literature, for example, that represents the agencies of an oppressed segment in the American society). Radwa chooses to write, to get her balance back, and to record her own version of history.

In the end, she feels that writing “gave her back her sense of mastery over her life, even if it was in a fictitious world” (232; *Atyaf* 184). Writing does not only provide inner balance, but also sets forth a very important way of instigating change, resistance, and expression of opinion on very sensitive causes (on which most are not welcome by those in power), and breaks the imposed restrictions on academic freedom in public universities by providing an alternative narrative, simultaneously a personal and general one – an alternative to the existing one narrated by authorities.

### Chapter Three – *Disgrace*

*When all else fails, philosophize.*  
J.M. Coetzee

South Africa witnessed a horrific system of apartheid that existed for years, and left behind a country that desperately needed transformation in all aspects: culturally, educationally, and institutionally. Since segregation was enforced even in universities, there were white universities with a measure of academic freedom and advanced education, while black universities suffered from bureaucracy and lack of academic standards. Naturally, in the new post-apartheid South Africa, the transformation of the university became the objective and agenda of many intellectuals and professors.

In his article “Critic and Citizen: A Response,” Coetzee says that “when people speak of the transformation of the university in South Africa they mean any or all of a variety of things. They mean making the student body and the academic staff more demographically representative. They mean making the university more socially accountable, which in practice today means making it responsive to the market. And they mean subjecting this historically European institution to an African critique with a view to turning it into a properly African institution” (110). Such presumable reforms, within the hypothetical bigger vision of a more progressive state, will need to have the cooperation of its socially engaged academics, active staff and faculty members, intellectuals, cultural critics, writers and artists to carry on the mission of transforming the university to fit into this general vision. However, in the course of Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace*, we meet a protagonist who clearly does not fit into the shrunk role or position designed for him. He is a problematic character that does not fall into such boxed stereotype of an idealistic, larger-than-life intellectual. He is more complex, and threads of his wrong-doings, imperfections and flaws are entangled in a cobweb of suffering, defeat, and attempts of atonement.

*Disgrace* takes place immediately in post-apartheid South Africa (after the election of Nelson Mandela in 1994), while the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was initiated under the rule of the African National Congress was carrying on the job of hearing thousands of testimonies from victims of apartheid, and giving way to the South African society to have a second chance at ‘redemption’ from all the violations that resulted from the apartheid racist system. Sandra Young describes TRC in more detail:

It was born in compromise, during the negotiations for a new constitution, in the hope of addressing the atrocities of the past without recourse to the criminal justice system which, it was anticipated, would prove unwieldy and divisive to South Africa’s fragile social fabric. The offer of amnesty to self-confessed perpetrators was suggested as a means to arrive at the truth of apartheid atrocities, while enabling the victims of apartheid’s human rights abuses to benefit from public acknowledgment of the truth after years of harassment and denials. (147)

However, the Commission is fundamentally based and functioning on the grounds of Christian teachings: Confession and Repentance. Coetzee comments on this point saying, “in a state with no official religion, the TRC was somewhat *anomalous*: a court of a certain kind based to a large degree on Christian teaching and on a strand of Christian teaching accepted in their hearts by only a *tiny proportion of the citizenry*. Only the future will tell what the TRC managed to achieve” (Poyner 22; my emphasis). This complicates its task even more, as the vast majority of South Africans, black, colored or white having different beliefs. With this in mind, Coetzee will shed the light on whether the process of public Confession and Repentance is indeed effective. Whether the TRC has carried on its designed role and achieved its idealistic goal of making amends with the past and attaining social justice for the oppressed under apartheid is under inspection in *Disgrace*.

The novel tells of a college professor, David Lurie, who teaches at “Cape Technical University, formerly Cape Town University College” (3). He taught Modern languages previously, but now is an adjunct professor of Communications. Lurie is promiscuous and

finds little joy in anything other than fulfilling his desire. He has an unlawful affair with a student, and gets reprimanded in a tribunal, in which he was asked to have a leave of absence. The campus setting ends by the end of chapter six, where Lurie moves to live with his daughter Lucie on her farm in Salem City. Lurie will be exposed later in the novel to issues of gender, class and race that will make it possible for him to change from being lustful and egocentric to someone who could have the seeds of empathy and compassion.

I argue that in this novel, Coetzee presents an example of university intellectuals that are marginalized by and excluded from the new, rapid change of system inside the educational institutions in particular, and in South Africa at large. This marginalization is two-fold: a forced one, coming from the “great rationalization” (*Disgrace* 3) that was taking place by closing down the Classics and Modern Languages department, because it clearly did not “conform to the economies of neoliberal capitalism” (Lenta n. pag.) which took it upon itself to down-size departments of humanities across universities worldwide as they do not fulfill the capitalist ‘needs of the market’ anymore. Shrinking down the humanities classes to elective courses on the offered curricula entailed that the professors, intellectuals and critics working in majors of Humanities grew ‘out of fashion’ and had to adapt to the new roles cut-down for them. Marginalization of David Lurie also was enforced on him due to his own personal pitfalls. Coetzee manages to present a failed, defeated intellectual, brought down by his own ego, his personal flaws, disengagement and silence. Such example is regarded as ‘unwanted’ in the whole process of transformation of the University for being seen as morally reprehensible, and intellectually obsolete.

Coetzee asks and answers himself: “Are intellectuals people who teach at universities? Clearly not. Not all intellectuals are academics; equally well, not all academics are intellectuals. Similarly, not all intellectuals are creative people, and not all creative people are intellectuals” (“Critic” 109). When asked in an interview what he thought of Said’s idealistic

definition of a public intellectual, Coetzee responded saying, “The *resurrection* of the term public intellectual, which for years was not part of public discourse, is an interesting phenomenon. [...] Perhaps it has something to do with people in the humanities, more or less ignored nowadays, trying to carve out a niche for themselves in the body politic” (Poyner 23; my emphasis). He sees that holding the label of a public intellectual contemporarily maybe outdated, and *resurrecting* it would either be too utopian or have a pretext of gaining personal prestige or fame in political and intellectual circles.

Baran also offers some insight into what he perceives an ‘intellect worker’ is, saying that “he is not concerned with the relation of the segment of human endeavor within which he happens to operate to other segments and to the totality of the historical process,” (n. pag.) as opposed to an intellectual who would be consciously aware of his place and function in society. An intellect worker, according to Baran, minds his own business, and works in his specific realm without caring too much about his place within the social grid. This view of the role of the intellect worker seems to be in perfect match with the portrayal of Lurie. So, rather than placing the protagonist of *Disgrace* under a definite, narrow category of intellectuals, it would be interesting to explore how applicable Coetzee’s and Baran’s views are on David Lurie and trace the change and development, not only in his character, but in his line of reasoning, his intellectual and literary production and his moral judgment as he was forced to leave his position, status and the old world of privilege, only to go through an unconscious journey of rediscovery of self, and long lost feelings.

From a first outsider glimpse at Lurie in the first chapter – taking into account his moral failures and lack of ethical responsibility – it would seem that he is not the perfect, ideal academic/intellectual. Lurie starts out as an academic, living in a secluded ivory tower with the legacy of classical literature and the voices of Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Byron. Throughout the first six chapters of the novel during which the story takes place on

campus, we never see Lurie engaging in any event that could be related to social, educational or political issues. He has no passion for what he teaches and contemplates that “he continues to teach because it provides him with a livelihood; also because it teaches him humility, brings it home to him who he is in the world. The irony does not escape him: that the one who comes to teach learns the keenest of lessons, while those who come to learn learn nothing. It is a feature of his profession” (*Disgrace* 5). He is apathetic towards his job and does not care if he makes a difference: “Because he has no respect for the material he teaches, he makes no impression on his students. They look through him when he speaks, forget his name.” He reinforces the same idea a couple of lines later saying, “He has never been much of a teacher” (4). Later on in the novel, he makes the same statement once again: “Teaching was never a vocation for me. Certainly I never aspired to teach people how to live. I was what used to be called a scholar. I wrote books about dead people. That was where my heart was. I taught only to make a living” (162). Coetzee describes Lurie’s duties with great apathy and disinterest: “he fulfils to the letter his obligations toward them, their parents, and the state. Month after month he sets, collects, reads, and annotates their assignments, correcting lapses in punctuation, spelling and usage, interrogating weak arguments, appending to each paper a brief considered critique” (*Disgrace* 4-5). Even after almost twenty-five years of building an academic career, he published three books, and he admits his scholarly work never “caused a stir or even a ripple.” The books that he published are: “The first on opera (Boito and the Faust Legend: The Genesis of Mefistofele), the second on vision as eros (The Vision of Richard of St Victor), the third on Wordsworth and history (Wordsworth and the Burden of the Past)” (*Disgrace* 4). He might have very well been following the famous publish or perish rule, but it is clear he never really put his heart into any of his works. He never mentions having trouble writing any of them, which is the opposite of his experience in writing the Opera about Byron towards the end of the novel. His attitude and mindset while composing

his works during his past position as an academic, so absorbed in his vanities and desires, is significantly different than his grueling, failing attempts to compose the scenes of the Opera about Lord Byron and his lover Teresa. He also expresses his sentiment of apathy and weariness towards academic studies further by refusing to write a book on Byron, though he really wanted to. “The truth is, he is tired of criticism, tired of prose measured by the yard,” he says (*Disgrace* 4). He longs for a project that would ‘engage’ his heart, so decides to compose an Opera, something that he feels more passionate about, and would present less pressure on him, not having to worry about criticism or writing dry prose. Lurie is being marginalized in the new post-apartheid transformative approach of South Africa because he lacked the flexibility or willingness to adapt to change, or participate in it. “The poetry of the 1790s constantly focuses on the outcasts and the marginalized,” which would explain his captivation with Romantic poets (Beard 60). He relates to their poetry and the state of being they created in their work, one of otherness and alienation. He is not the ‘center’ anymore, and so he had to be pushed to the side. His daughter, Lucy, tells him that he is no longer the ‘main character.’ She adds, “You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn’t make an appearance until halfway through. Well contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor” (*Disgrace* 198). While he was distanced and disengaged, he was so sure of his intellectuality while writing the previous books. However, later on, he failed to compose the Opera after so many attempts.

Lurie comments the whole notion of transformation and reform of the institution of university after the apartheid period is over, expressing his feelings of alienation: “In this transformed and, to his mind, *emasculated* institution of learning he is more out of place than ever. But then, so are other of his colleagues from the old days, burdened with upbringings inappropriate to the tasks they are set to perform; clerks in a post-religious age” (*Disgrace* 4;



my emphasis). Since he has always been a white, male privileged South African, the newly founded concepts of equality and maintaining human rights in the post-apartheid era sound like they are very exasperating and displeasing to him his lack of interest in public matters would seem questionable and indicative of a deeply troubled person.

Initial investigation of Lurie's character in the first half of the novel would show that he is depicted as a condescending, egocentric man who holds his erotic desires above everything and anything, "a self-absorbed womanizer who routinely reduces women to objects for the purpose of gratifying his desires" (Zembylas 225). He has a serious problem of breaching all codes of conduct and ethical boundaries. First, he confesses that he is a lustful man, and we see him sleeping with various women: a prostitute, Soraya, which he will stop seeing after he encounters her family by accident in the market, Dawn the secretary, and later in the novel Bev Shaw, a white woman who works at the clinic in the farm. The events halt themselves for a while at the affair he had with his student, Melanie Isaacs. He will force her to have sexual encounters with him against her will, and will feel no guilt admitting that this is something he rather enjoys. When Melanie asks him why he wants to have sex with her, he says: "Because a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is a part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it" (*Disgrace* 16). When Rosalind, his ex-wife scolds him for having an affair with a girl the age of his daughter, he tells her that she is probably right: "Perhaps it is the right of the young to be protected from the sight of their elders in the throes of passion. That is what whores are for, after all: to put up with the ecstasies of the unlovely" (*Disgrace* 44). This shows Lurie's, degraded moral and ethical code, and his misogyny. By portraying Lurie, "Coetzee depicts the absence of ethical action in both apartheid and post-apartheid society" (Marais 59).

Coetzee applies intertextual allusions to many works of literature throughout *Disgrace*; one of them is Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Even when Lurie remembers a character

from a literary classic, he has Emma Bovary on his mind – a promiscuous woman who fulfills her sexual desires much in the same way he does:

“He thinks of Emma Bovary, coming home sated, glazen-eyed, from an afternoon of reckless fucking. So this is bliss! says Emma, marveling at herself in the mirror. So this is the bliss the poets speak of! Well, if poor ghostly Emma were ever to find her way to Cape Town, he would bring her along one Thursday afternoon to show her what bliss can be: a moderate bliss, a moderated bliss.” (5-6)

Lurie commits yet another breach of the code of conduct as a teacher by falsifying Melanie’s grades when she is absent in the mid-term: “When he fills in the register afterwards, he ticks her off as present and enters a mark of seventy. At the foot of the page he pencils a note to himself ‘Provisional’. Seventy: a vacillator’s mark, neither good nor bad” (26).

Ironically, Melanie’s father tells Lurie several times on the phone that she has much “respect” for him. However, when he finds out about the affair, he makes it clear that the institution of the university cannot be trusted with the presence the likes of Lurie – with an obviously corrupt moral conscience – working in it. He tells Lurie in a confrontation in front of students and staff: “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? We never thought we were sending our daughter into a nest of vipers. No, Professor Lurie, you may be high and mighty and have all kinds of degrees, but if I was you I’d be very ashamed of myself” (38), to which Lurie feels embarrassed and rushes out.

*Disgrace* portrays David Lurie as an ‘out of fashion’ intellectual that experiences alienation and exile all throughout the novel, from the beginning to the end. Colleen Sheils, for example, explains that “David finds himself physically removed (from society) and metaphysically dislodged (from a public psyche)” (38). He finds himself all of a sudden ostracized from his familiar urban surroundings and day-to-day job, only to move into a completely different pastoral environment. He is not only physically dislocated, but also metaphorically and psychologically banished, as an academic who no longer has the same

grand status as a Humanities professor, and because of his dismissal from the University for the harassment case. She adds that “on one level, David’s state is one of disgrace, but to this list we should add dislocation, disaffection, dispossession” (40).

Sheils analyzes Lurie’s fascination with Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Byron by explaining that Lurie escapes from a present where privilege is no more given to him on a silver plate to a past of glory: “David has lost authority in the new South Africa, and in the novel we find him turning to fantasy in order unconsciously to cope. We are privy to his constant references and thoughts interwoven with the words and works of Wordsworth, Shakespeare, Byron, Greek mythology, and more. These moments are anything but grounded in his present; his escape is to the traditions of a European literary past” (40). David’s love for Byron is related to the fact that Byron, too, was exiled in many ways. According to Sheils, Byron was exiled to Italy because of a presumable affair with his half-sister. Parallel to that, Lurie, as well, went his daughter’s farm, as an outcast from the university because of his affair with Melanie. “The shared experience of exile, for Byron perhaps more physical, for David more psychological, speaks of common grounds of abandonment. Both men have been somehow rejected by an environment in which they once thrived” (42) as Sheils analyzes. Both men have lost their sense of belonging in exile, their self and their authority and privilege. “Perhaps David is attracted to Byron’s ability to embrace the state of transition so easily” (41), something that Lurie was not ready to accept or cope with. He cannot cope with the fact that he is an old man, or that he teaches subjects he doesn’t like, or most importantly, the transformation of the South African university in the post-apartheid era, with the new rules of de-racialization and equality. Lurie finds it hard to embrace all these transitions, and when he thinks it cannot get any worse, he gets dismissed from the university and is forced to accept yet a harsher transition, one of both place and status. Furthermore, Lurie does not have traits of an intellectual that would stand up for a cause or engages in resistance to the

existing status-quo. Byron, according to Sheils, was the opposite: “This courage to embrace, support and fight for a move towards political and social egalitarianism is a character trait of Byron that David lacks. It seems David chooses Byron as the subject of his opera because he wants to understand the mindset of those who have the foresight and bravery – albeit, at moments irrationally – to support a just cause” (41). Later in the novel, the experience of writing this Opera would be symbolic of Lurie’s trajectory of suffering and emotional transformation.

It is very important to stop at the scene of the tribunal held to question the harassment complaint filed against Lurie. Many critics see this scene in particular, and *Disgrace* in general, as Coetzee’s take on the functionality of the Truth and Reconciliation commission (TRC). Coetzee has been preoccupied in his novels by the dynamics of reconciliation, the question of adequate apology for the past and transcendence of its horrors. *Disgrace* is considered a subtle statement of how he, as a South African and an intellectual, translated the message and function of the TRC. Patrick Lenta notes that “Coetzee's critique of the university's disciplinary mechanism is only part of his broader critique of the transformation of the university wrought by globalization and neoliberalism” (n. pag.). The tribunal, though conducted in an educational institution investigating an offence reported inside campus walls, is emblematic of the larger scheme of the somewhat ambiguous hearings held by the TRC and draws questions on its efficacy, the effectiveness of its decisions in achieving justice and enforcing proper legal actions. Elizabeth Anker argues that “*Disgrace* suspends the expectation that the law plays a determinate role in advancing justice,” and that “the law in *Disgrace* is revealed to be a particularly blunt tool for intervening within the murkiness of interpersonal relations” (234). The ambivalence of the law in the procedures of the TRC in general, and in the tribunal scene in particular, gives way to inconclusive assessment of wrongdoing, and consequently the reprimanding decisions would most of the time emphasize

the importance of the willingness to issue a public statement with confession, rather than assuring actual remorse for the misdeed committed or taking proper legal action against the culprit. Furthermore, such emphasis on confession and repentance holds religious connotations, which turns away those who foster secular ideologies.

In *Disgrace*, the members of the disciplinary panel, who know Lurie one way or the other, make it clear that they are only taking this matter seriously because it got the media's attention. "Ideally we would all have preferred to resolve this case out of the glare of the media," one of the committee members said; "But that has not been possible. It has received a lot of attention, it has acquired overtones that are beyond our control. All eyes are on the university to see how we handle it" (53-54). They were trying to get his statement of repentance and admission of guilt only to cool a heated situation that has become a public issue. The two members of the committee who knew Lurie were trying to deal informally with him in a supposedly formal hearing. Dr. Hakim addressed him by his first name, telling him: "'we would like to help you, David, to find a way out of what must be a nightmare.' They are his [Lurie's] friends. They want to save him from his weakness, to wake him from his nightmare. They do not want to see him begging in the streets" (*Disgrace* 52). They repeatedly tried to illicit any kind of confession from him, and "trying to work out a compromise which will allow [him] to keep [his] job" (54), despite the blatant violations of all ethical and professional codes. This raises serious flags on the integrity of the faculty members and on how far they would go about bending or breaking the codes of ethics and conduct for the sake of their colleagues, and what kind of affairs they would conceal if it stayed anonymous and unknown to the public opinion or the media. The reflection on the university's disparaging ethical integrity can cast doubts in the mind of the reader, having to wonder if a committee would have never been held in the first place, if it had not "received a lot of attention, it has acquired overtones that are beyond our control" (53-54). Apart from

questioning the integrity of the legal procedure, it also sheds some doubts on who should have the power and authority to enforce legal action on a defendant, and the means to assess their moral consciousness and ethical judgment, whether within the context of the university, or in society at large.

Elaine Showalter notes that “writers and their protagonists no longer recognize the university’s moral authority to solve its problems” (124) since such authority is obviously questionable and needs to be closely inspected and reformed. This is why Lurie becomes “unapologetic” (Kalua 51) and refuses to ‘confess’ and ‘repent,’ only pleading ‘guilty’ to the accusations directed to him. He does not trust the whole process, and sees it as vain and unnecessary. (Of course doing so also because of his absolute conviction that he is who he is, and it is too late to change his principles or compromise; something that will prove wrong later on). In Edward Said’s terms, he speaks some truth to the ‘power’ he is presented against, which is the hearing committee, insisting that he is guilty but not ashamed of his acts, and refuses repentance. Consequently, the committee refuses to keep him in his job and dismisses him. Lurie’s unrelenting stance during the hearing committee is seen by critic Felson Kalua to be a form of what Edward Said described in *Representations* as the condition of the ‘exilic consciousness,’ adding to his alienation and marginalization that already exist.

Critic Martin Swales writes about the understanding of the notions of guilt and shame in the novel. “Guilt, unlike shame, is a legal concept. That is to say: guilt operates within an institutional framework of codifications of law, and offences against that law have to be provable . . . guilt always has a judicial dimension,” he says. Furthermore, he explains that “shame is incomparably more diffuse than guilt. As an emotion of self-assessment, shame is often physical, even visceral in its causes and manifestations. It is often linked with the sense of being seen in an inappropriate or wrong context--with losing face” (10). In an attempt to apply such an important distinction that Swales made on Lurie’s behavior, we firstly know

that he carries out sexual encounters with a prostitute, Soraya. He does not find any shame in satisfying his sexual needs through resorting to prostitution, nor feels guilty. Coetzee sets out to describe the relationship between Lurie and Soraya in a way that would make readers perceive of it as a professional matter, a mechanical act, automatic, and lifeless in spite of Soraya's efforts to attain some intimacy. He describes it saying, "Intercourse between Soraya and himself must be, he imagines, rather like the copulation of snakes: lengthy, absorbed, but rather abstract, rather dry, even at its hottest" (2-3). Lurie sees Soraya as an instrument for the fulfillment of his wishes, and nothing more. He used to tell himself that even if he had initiated any kind of emotional attachment or affection for her – not love – at any time, their encounters have to always be "abstract, rather dry" (3).

Afterwards, he has raped his student, Melanie Isaacs. When he was scandalized and the word of his breach of teacher/student code of conduct spread out, he is prepared to admit that he is *guilty* of committing such a violation. However, the tribunal set to investigate his case needs to hear more than just an admission of guilt; they expect a confession of shame. Farodia Rassool, a member of the tribunal, says she refuses the fact that Lurie "accepts the charges only in name" (50). But Lurie refuses to 'repent,' because he is not ready to admit that he has done a shameful deed. Repentance would reinforce this notion, and his pride would not handle it. "What you want from me is not a response but a confession. Well, I make no confession. I put forward a plea, as is my right. Guilty as charged. That is my plea," he says (51). He objects to the idea of 'repentance' that indicates an admission of shame and disgrace, which are deemed stronger than guilt. He tells the committee, "I told you what I thought. I won't do it. I appeared before an officially constituted tribunal, before a branch of the law. Before that secular tribunal I pleaded guilty, a secular plea. That plea should suffice. Repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world" (*Disgrace* 58). This stance is understandable, considering the fact that he is not religious, and so does not

really think he is obliged to perform a procedure that is Christian in the first place, and also one that breaches the privacy of his own thoughts and feelings.

The question remains lurking: Does Lurie's attempts to 'come to terms' with all his defeats, grant him redemption at the end on his own terms? Does all the alienation and forced exile serve as proper punishment and a means to proper contrition? Critic Elleke Boehmer suggests that Lurie has achieved what she called "secular atonement" (343).

Lurie clearly abused his power as a professor in an academic institution, but such abuse has more resonance than just being rooted out of the privileged position that he possessed as a white, male professor. His abuse bears racial and gendered ramifications that will be explored through the second half of the novel, right after he was dismissed from his job, and by reading through these ramifications that we come to realize the true process of atonement that Lurie went through as a person. Boehmer discusses the notion of 'reticence' (344) that Coetzee embeds in the structure of the novel. Such lack of expression that reaches instances of silence begins with Lurie's description of his job, his encounters with Soraya, and even his relationship with Melanie. It extends to the way he described how he imagined Lucy's gang-rape as well. In my opinion, such reticence is a self-constructed barrier that Lurie has built around his feelings and senses to safeguard them from being involved in characteristics he thought he was not capable of acquiring: love, empathy and change. Such silence is also the quality that will torment him physically and emotionally, when he is locked up in the toilet when Lucy was raped. He was helpless to help not only her, but also the dogs that he cared for deeply. He, therefore, thought that he has failed himself, Lucy and the dogs at the very roles he took upon himself to fulfill since he came to the farm – as a father and a 'dog-man' as he used to call himself. It is the 'silence' that will force the sudden, and later on, gradual change of heart. It became clear to him that he has exercised his patriarchal, racial power to force himself upon Melanie, who was silent all the time when



he was abusing her, and now he sees how his daughter is put in the same situation: silent. He thinks that Lucy's abusers will go about their lives normally, and on "the body of the woman *silence* is being drawn like a blanket" (Coetzee 110; my emphasis). However, Lurie succeeds in partially breaking such silence gradually, and unconsciously. He finds himself thinking of his daughter's feelings, and by extension of Melanie's. Boehmer notices that in *Disgrace*, reparation of past wrong-doings is "achieved rather through highly private rituals of self-abnegation" (344). So redemption, however secular, is not achieved by public confessions or expression of shame in a committee. It is achieved through 'reticence,' which was an integral part of the process of atonement that Lurie had to go through; it was highly personal, and very subjective. Coetzee may have wanted to draw some question marks on the functionality of the TRC as a means of achieving justice to those who were oppressed, and bringing true catharsis to those who did wrong.

The Melanie-Lucy gendered parallel of rape, silence and mute acceptance that Coetzee portrayed in *Disgrace* bears many implications on the transformation of David Lurie. He describes the sexual encounter with Melanie to be "undesired to the core" by her, and her decision to "die within herself for the duration" (25). Lucy expresses the same sentiment after her rape: "I am a dead person and do not know yet what will bring me back to life" (161). It is then as if a revelation has been made to him for the first time: that "rape [is] the man lying on top of the woman and pushing himself into her" (160), and that is exactly what he has done to Melanie. He thinks to himself that he now understands, but he does from the position of the assailant, not the victim. A clear marker of the beginning of the process of redemption is his question to himself, "does he have it in him to be the woman?" (160). Does he have the strength to trade positions of power that he intrinsically inherited as a privileged White man, and place himself for the first time in the shoes of the victimized, the silenced, the oppressed and the discriminated against? From this moment

on, Lurie's take on things shifts considerably. "The self that has inflicted suffering is broken down by a partially unintended participation in suffering, and also by silently, bodily, bearing witness to it" Boehmer notices (343). A very crucial parallel in the portrayal of Melanie-Lucy situation, is that neither victims see true justice served to them, nor listen to their abusers admit committing an atrocity and expressing regret. Lurie realized this when he got involved in the incident of his daughter's rape, and later made an attempt to apologize to Melanie's father for the 'grief' he has caused the family (171), although I believe it does not suffice as a proper expression of true regret. Coetzee has expressed his views on the idea of the true essence of confession in one of his essays, saying that "true confession . . . comes from faith and grace" (Coetzee qtd in Boehmer 345), and Lurie himself acknowledges in the same passage when he was apologizing to Mr. Isaacs that he is both, a disbeliever of God, and that he has "sunk into a state of disgrace" (172). This does not make his attempt of apologizing to be any less sincere; it just situates it out of the grounds of religious connotations of confession.

In his journey of transformation, Lurie comes to gain a crucial quality that he lacked: empathy. This newly acquired quality dictates how he perceives his *self* – his reduced status as a 'dog-man,' rather than an egocentric, urban 'intellectual' – is a significant sign of 'coming to terms' with the brand-new changes forced upon him. Lurie came to achieve empathy towards animals, empathizing with Petrus's sheep that were going to be slain for the party (Coetzee 123), and cares deeply for the dogs that are about to be put to sleep, and caress them to make sure they are feeling as comfortable as they can be before the "soul is out" (219). Then, he gradually feels for the people around him and tries to picture himself in their place. He dares himself to imagine being put in the place of a woman raped, (160) and wonders at the idea of learning to be a good grandfather to Lucy's child (218).

Coetzee used 'reticence' and 'silence' as techniques to map Lurie's trajectory of suffering, disgrace, and vanity. He (Lurie) started out as ambiguous, lacking self-expression of simple, basic human feelings maybe because he was never capable of having them in the first place. But, by the end of the novel, there is a sign, a change of course, announcing the transformation of the Byronic protagonist through a newly acquired quality of having no trouble identifying his feelings, his shortcomings, and his flaws. Lurie has no problem admitting that he "lacks the virtues of the old: equanimity, kindness, patience" (217). He also believes that having an eye only for "pretty girls" and nothing else has got him nowhere, and was probably the reason why he is where he is now. We see him asking himself questions that signify a newly obtained willingness to try for change, contrary to his old belief that "his temperament is not going to change, he is too old for that" (2). Instead, he asks himself, "is it too late to educate the eye?" (218), "Do I have to change"? he runs his thoughts (126). I believe that by achieving this new state of being, that not only has Lurie reached grace or redemption as a human being, but also has made himself a better intellectual.

Lurie also shows signs of change in the way he thinks of and relates to literature, and his reflections on the discourse he has always adopted with Byron and Wordsworth in his teaching, or writing material. Lurie always had an all-present, somewhat vain, erotic reflection to his favorite Romantic poets. Boehmer says that "the discourse of 'Eros', which Lurie first teaches in the classroom, is [...] based on intellectual distance and even vanity, lacking a sense of responsibility for others" (347). Nevertheless, the state of "intellectual distance" that Boehmer describes is finally broken, and for the first time, Lurie finds himself leaving his ivory-tower and his feet dug deep into the grounds of multiple harsh realities. When he remembers Byron right after Lucy's rape, he suddenly "looks very old-fashioned indeed" against all odds (*Disgrace* 160). While trying to write the Opera, he is surprised to

find himself 'engaged' by an older Teresa, rather than the "young, greedy, wilful, petulant" that he often fantasized about (*Disgrace* 181). He began to relate more to a Teresa that was "past her prime," one that the good looks have long deserted, as her lover Byron deserted her. He went on for pages reflecting on what she must have felt as she lived alone with all the memories and stashed memorabilia from her dead husband. Lurie, who admitted to himself that he never had an "eye for anything, except pretty girls" (218), finds himself wondering if he would be drawn to a "plain, ordinary woman" (182).

The process of writing the Byron Opera is without doubt very different from all the works that Lurie had composed earlier as a professor. He had expressed his disappointment in the reception of his books, and it was obvious that he had written them with anything but passion or purpose. However, writing the Opera is exponentially meaningful, and that is why he suffers while composing it. His shifted perspective and reflection of himself, his surroundings and the characters he is drawing do not seem or feel the same. The question of finding meaning in his intellectual work has not been a priority to Lurie, based on his cold, lame description of his written work; however, it is not the case anymore. The failed intellectual we read in Lurie is somehow resurrected by the overall internal and external transformation he is subjected to.

## Chapter Four – Conclusion

It is useful to review the histories of how both institutions – the Egyptian and the South African ones – were founded and trace their evolution to juxtapose their past with their present, and see which one had a trajectory of deterioration or progress.

Egyptian nationalist leader Mustafa Kamil was among the first to call for building an Egyptian University. Proposing to call it the University of Muhammad ‘Ali, he kept corresponding with French journalist Juliette Adam on the greatness of the idea, and how it will benefit his fellow Egyptians (Manawi 17). The Egyptian University was officially inaugurated in 1908 as a private institution with Prince Ahmad Fu’ad as its first rector (Reid 1). Later in 1928, it was nationalized and called King Fu’ad University, and professor Ahmed Lotfi El-Sayed was appointed as its rector (Manawi 33). The name was changed after the 1952 revolution to Cairo University. As Reid puts it, “Cairo University has always been crucial to much of the political and intellectual life of twentieth-century Egypt. Doctors, lawyers, engineers and scientists, novelists and philosophers, teachers and bankers, prime ministers and bureaucrats – all studied there” (4). The university may have started gloriously, but its conditions slowly and devastatingly deteriorated. Though *Atyaf* depicts the deteriorating condition of the Egyptian University in the 1990s, we find very dedicated academics – a minority – that are constantly and relentlessly fighting for a better, more equipped, functional educational institution. On the other hand, there have been immense efforts to re-build and restructure the South African University after the fall of apartheid, around the same period of time. In *Disgrace*, however, David Lurie was disinterested in that crucial cause, which turned into a national trend that his fellow academics and colleagues are supposedly taking part in. This lack of interest in this point of view was generated from a firm belief in the dysfunctionality of the new system, and its ineffectiveness in including those who come from “old days” (4). Accordingly, his sense of marginalization contributes

to his feeling of not belonging – neither to the institution he works for, nor for the bigger cause.

Prior to 1994, the system of higher education in South Africa was “fragmented and unco-ordinated” (Bunting 25). Universities were built and segregated according to how the apartheid government conceived of race. There were universities designated for the four dominant race groups in South Africa: Whites, Africans, Indians and colored. Each category was legally refrained from being enrolled in the institution exclusively used by a different race (Bunting 37). White Universities were more in number, and better in quality of education, having been designed to compete with the European model of the University, other institutions lacked quality, necessary funds, and proper structure to deliver knowledge to its students. It was not until 1994, with the fall of the apartheid regime that the government decided to conform to the new post-apartheid vision of a new South Africa, by reforming this system and de-racializing it. To transform the higher educational system, the government initiated the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) in 1994 to carry out this mission.

Black South African intellectuals were also rarely given any chance to be engaged in social, cultural and educational affairs prior to 1994. Hugo notes that “African intellectuals have for too long allowed themselves to be silenced” (25). Hugo affirms the fact that they are encouraged to reconnect to “principals and patterns of African civilization” (25), which is the most important aspect in combating apartheid and its devastating legacy. So, by going back to their African roots and revisiting their history, they will be able to bring important cultural and moral lessons to learn from and reintroduce to the society. Reconnecting to history and learning from it is the key to building a better, more functional future based on equality, tolerance and intellectual and cultural thrive.

Coetzee has similar views; ones which also seem to apply to Ashour's *Atyaf*: "People function as intellectuals in social discourse insofar as they relate our present and our future to our past. Their discourse, to put it roughly, has a certain historical breadth. More than that, intellectuals tend to see themselves as ultimately answerable to history, that is, to a future from which they will be seen as belonging to the past" ("Critic and Citizen" 109). After reading the two novels, it becomes clear that Ashour grafts the past with the present; and considers it to be the stepping stone to the future. Coetzee mentions history when he lets Farodia Rassool mention "the long history of exploitation of which this is part" (53), referring to the history of abusing power, not only as academics, but as a racial group and a gender. It is the famous stereotypical binary of exploitation of White men in positions of power of colored, helpless women. In *Atyaf*, Shagar and Radwa are both concerned with history; all elements of history, national, personal and collective. Shagar takes refuge in it, Radwa uses it to instigate change, and Lurie either escapes in it, burying himself in the history of long gone Romantic poets, or uses it to come to terms with his inability of action or vengeance at the horrid incident of Lucy's rape, and finally acceptance of both the complicated relationship of power, race and gender issues and the nature of violence that still prevailed in South Africa after the apartheid was over (*Disgrace* 156).

The protagonists of both novels have striking differences in their characters, dispositions and roles. Reflecting on the various definitions mentioned in the introduction of the different types of intellectual, one will clearly see Lurie as anything but ideal. He is not a social gem or one with a pervasive public appearance. Instead, he is mostly perceived as a libidinal id to the ego that is Shagar and Radwa. His main purpose was only caressing his sexual desires, while they were portrayed to give away their lives selflessly for their students, their universities, or their country. Radwa believes her role, as an intellectual and academic, is to shed light on violations committed by authority, and in doing so, she tries to

bring about social transformation. She actively does so by writing and teaching. However, not once in the novel do we see Radwa – or Shagar for that matter – call herself an ‘intellectual.’ They carry out their roles diligently without caring for labels. David Lurie, who is also a teacher and writer, on the other hand, thinks he is an “intellectual” (*Disgrace* 61). He wonders how a person who is carrying that title would eventually have a daughter interested in the countryside, farming life, a “throwback, [. . .] sturdy young settler” (61). If measured against Said’s perception of an intellectual, he will barely qualify as one, as he does not really have any significant role in engagement in issues of the institution during the course of the novel. However, when looking at him through the lens of Baran or Foucault, then we will come to terms with the fact that he has a sharp, witty intellect. He has very high analytical skills, and his literary knowledge is impeccable. Within the scope of his specialized field (which is Romanticism and Classical literature), he proves very knowledgeable and demonstrates something resembling passion for discussing Byron and Wordsworth. However, because he was placed to teach courses he does not find meaningful, he does not really display any signs of efficiency or vigor.

Despite the ongoing trend of down-sizing the Humanities in universities since the seventies, and regarding them as second-class majors, Radwa and Shagar consider their profession a responsibility, and keep fighting to utilize it to build generations that are more aware of present-day struggles and challenges, while Lurie does not even try, and teaches only for “livelihood” (*Disgrace* 5). Shagar is seen by her students as a compass, a beacon of light that guides them to the right path, while Lurie’s students “look through him when he speaks, forget his name” (4).

Throughout *Atyaf*, Radwa uses literature in the classroom to relate to and reflect on history, the challenges of the present and hopes for the future. She uses it to instigate change in her students’ consciousness. Lurie occasionally refers to literary allusions when reflecting



on his inner desires, or to boost his already inflated ego. He embodies everything that Radwa and Shagar have spent their lives struggling against. The ethical code of the characters of both novels is highlighted when Shagar keeps fighting against mass cheating in the university, while Lurie falsifies Melanie's grades in exchange for forced sexual encounters.

It is also worth mentioning that both Radwa and Lurie have written and published books. However, Radwa describes the process of writing to be transformative and regenerative. Writing is what restores her equilibrium and sets her straight after being exposed to repeated defeats and disappointments. Her work engages her, motivates and inspires her and others. Lurie wrote three books on Romantic poets, but none of his work really "caused a stir or even a ripple" (4). Lurie, while interested in Romanticism and Classical work in general, lacks the passion and inspiration needed to make any of the three works impactful. Later on, we see a shift in the process of Lurie's thought, when writing the Opera about Byron and his lover is harder than he expects, having to think about his favorite characters differently. Empathizing with Teresa, Byron's old, deserted lover, and making her the focus of his musings in the different scenes he was trying to compose instead of a young, desired woman is a cursor of marked change in his mindset and attitude. Because writing now involves him being totally engaged in the process with feelings he did not experience or share before, the mission was unsuccessful because it "failed to engage the core of him. There is something [...] that does not come from the heart" (*Disgrace* 181).

However different they are, Lurie and Shagar are alike in that they are two defeated intellectuals within their respective contexts. Shagar, to begin with, is constantly haunted by feelings of defeat since she was an MA student, up until she was a professor. Her disappointment was always about her failure in reforming the stagnant system with its corruption and bureaucracy, and for being too conscientious that she almost lost in all the battles she fought. The culmination of her defeat is when she resigned from her position as

a professor, choosing to retreat and accept failure. Shagar keeps reading Gamal Hamdan's work, and recurrently thinks about him, which indicates her own thought of seclusion and defeat. Moreover, even writing becomes a grueling task to do: "She has left the university and is no longer able to write: three files crouch upon her desk, each one containing material for a book, [...] She sees the three files, reaches for them, opens them, and closes them again" (270; *Atyaf* 214).

Lurie is no different. He attempts several times to compose the Opera that he always wanted to make time for, both on Lucy's farm and after he left, but to no avail. This leaves him even more disappointed and defeated at his own game as a writer and intellectual. This layer of inefficacy comes after multiple mishaps he went through: his failure to fulfill his role as a father and a caretaker of the dogs on the farm, his inability to defend his daughter while she was raped, or convince her of filing a report or bring her justice. Such impotency enforces Lurie into a state of defeat, one that he has to accept and come to terms with, against his will.

Khalil and Lurie also resemble each other in that as intellectuals and academics, they both chose to work within the system and stay away from collision with public matters of the university or society. Their trajectory is marked with ascension on the academic ladder with little or no clashes (until Lurie was questioned by the tribunal). Khalil chose to surrender to the temptations of academic excellence away from the turbulence that the role of a public intellectual would ensue, and Lurie lacked the vision and the interest to engage himself in anything that did not satisfy his personal whims. Both of them end up being 'disgraced' – Lurie for his moral reprehensibility and breach of the ethical code of conduct inside the university, and Khalil for taking the "easiest way out" and not fighting for his beliefs, as Shagar said in the novel (253; *Atyaf* 250)

There is, however, a slight limitation when analyzing *Disgrace*, caused by the versatility of the genres inside the novel. Because the campus setting constitutes only a small part of it, it is relatively hard to witness instances of change in the South African university, or trace its shortcomings. Coetzee focused on portraying Lurie to be representational of the university as an entity and as an icon. It is very limiting to judge the progress or the deterioration of higher education system of a country on the portrayal of one person. In *Atyaf*, the university is the main setting, and the struggle traced in the novel goes from the beginning to the end inside its walls. Whether the main characters were present or absent in the scene, such struggle still haunts the general ambience, and forces its presence. In *Disgrace*, the existence of the university is affirmed when Lurie is there, and is diminished once he leaves. Although Coetzee wrote much on the University in South Africa and its daunting challenges, and on the roles of South African intellectuals in building stronger higher education institution in other books and essays, he did not adequately address these issues in *Disgrace*, and if he attempted to do so in the first six chapters, he did so by making those elements absent from the scene. We hardly see or hear any staff member other than Lurie and the members of the tribunal. There is hardly any trace of the issues that constituted a burden to the South African collective consciousness in the post-apartheid era, like the role of the university in “undo[ing] the effects of apartheid and [. . .] creat[ing] a new system commensurate with the values of a free society” (Hugo 24). For as far as Lurie is working as a professor, we do not see him taking part in any initiative, conference, or talk related to the development of the university he works in, or even self-developmental activities. Critic Pierre Hugo notes that intellectuals in South Africa took it upon themselves to “engage in a process of ‘re-educating themselves’” (25), but we do not see Lurie go on this process of re-education or self-development until he has to unconsciously go through an experience of change in the second half of the novel. His self-complacency is clear in that he is not ready

for change, and in fact avoids it, though it seemed inevitable. He does nothing to make the university “more socially responsive and critically engaged in deepening and broadening South Africa’s democracy” (Reddy n. pag.), which was, and continues to be an alarming challenge to the South African intellectuals and academics.

*Disgrace* was successful in presenting an example of intellectuals that exist in almost all academic institutions. A person that has many imperfections and maybe unscrupulous, but is still well-read, studious and has a sharp intellect. Lurie embodied binaries of being apathetic versus empathetic, assailant versus victim, fixated versus change. Lurie may not come off as a genuinely good person, but if anything, it only categorizes him under being human. The existence of such a complicated character in the wheel of Higher education can answer some of the questions I was trying to raise about the functionality and role of the academics and intellectuals working in the South African university, their moral compass, and their mechanisms to re-adapt themselves to different situations under the variability of sociopolitical conditions of their country. It does not however answer my questions on whether universities in South Africa made progress in achieving autonomy and de-racialization of its campuses, dealt with issues of race, gender, and academic freedom or not, remains a question that needs answering and further research. There is only one remark on the color of Melanie Isaacs, being “the colored one” (18), which may indicate the presence of different races on campus, but it is still inadequate. *Disgrace* is a very important literary work in its category, but it does not aim to respond to these issues – not inside the university anyway – and this is why I consider it a limitation that does not offer more insight to the pressing issues of the South African University.

The two novels brought very different characters under inspection, Ashour’s characters are following the model of Said’s public intellectuals, being scholars and intellectuals who hold academia and the university dear to their heart and soul, while

Coetzee's Lurie follows a more practical, earthly view of an intellectual who might not take his profession as a vocation or have the perfect moral compass, but still suffers and adapts to change as a human being, and strives to offer better intellectual work, to the best of his knowledge. We see instances of engagement versus seclusion, and generosity versus selfishness, parallel patterns of alienation and defeat, similar paths of strife and suffering inside and outside the walls of campus. In both novels, critique of present-day universities in Africa, South and North, is articulated in a fictional form that is critically compelling.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> According to Badawi and Hinds's *A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic*, 'izba means a "country estate consisting of a manor house and laborers' dwellings surrounded by farmland," or a "hamlet which was formerly such an estate, and which is under the jurisdiction of the 'umda [headman] of a village" (595).

<sup>2</sup> Ahmed Abdalla (1950-2006) was an academic, writer and a leftist political activist who was mostly known for his activism as a student leader in the uprising that took place in the early 1970s.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Buber (1878–1965) was an Israeli Zionist author, scholar and philosopher whose works ranged from biblical studies to philosophical anthropology among other areas of study. Buber was known for his views on the Palestinian cause, calling for a bi-national state instead of only a Jewish one, and his condemnation of the Massacre of Deir Yassin. In *Atyaf*, Shagar participated in a conference on Buber, and attacked his underlying Zionism and his condescension towards the Palestinian cause, even when he had sympathetic views towards Palestinians. Shagar still believed that the colonialist discourse can be traced in his work, in which "the sacred mission of the chosen people spreading the light of civilization in a primitive desert; he deigns to allow the presence of its inhabitants to be taken into consideration" (220; *Atyaf* 174).

<sup>4</sup> Latifa Al-Zayyat (1923-1996) was an Egyptian academic, activist, novelist and critic. She was professor of English at The Girls College, Ain Shams University. Al-Zayyat wrote novels, short stories, critical books, essays, literary reviews and studies in English and American Literature. Amongst her most notable works is *Al-Bab al-maftooh (The Open Door)*, published in 1960. She was imprisoned twice on political charges in 1949 and 1981.

<sup>5</sup> Thurayya Shakir Habashi (1928- ) is a former political activist, and was detained for five years during Nasser's era. She is wife of communist activist Fawzy Habashi, who was called "the detainee of all eras," having been politically imprisoned during King Farouk, Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak's eras.

<sup>6</sup> Abdul-Wahab 'Azzam (1894-1959) was a writer, diplomat, scholar, translator, thinker and a pioneer in Persian Studies, who carried out a variety of research in literature, history and mysticism. He studied Eastern Languages in London, and taught in the faculty of Eastern Languages at Cairo University after getting his Master's and PhD degrees in Persian literature. He wrote many books on both Arabic and

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Persian cultures, Islamic thought, and mysticism. ‘Azzam also translated many works of Pakistani poet and philosopher Muhammad Iqbal. He was Ashour’s maternal grandfather.

<sup>7</sup> Gamal Hamdan (1928-1993) was an Egyptian scholar and geographer, widely known for his multi-volume Arabic work *Shakhsiyyat Misr* (Egypt's Identity: A Study in the Genius of the Place). Disappointed, Hamdan left his position at Cairo University in 1963, and lived in seclusion for almost thirty years.

<sup>8</sup> Bashir Gemayel (1947-1982), former commander of the Lebanese forces and president-elect of Lebanon in 1982, was the son of Pierre Gemayel (founder and leader of Lebanese Phalange). Gemayel was assassinated immediately after his election, and before he had a chance to assume office. His assassination was thought to be due to his involvement with Israel and the eventual invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

<sup>9</sup> Mourid Barghouti (1944- ) is a Palestinian poet and writer, best known for his memoir *I Saw Ramallah*. He is Ashour’s husband and father of poet Tamim. Barghouti was deported from Egypt before Camp David treaty in 1977, and was only allowed to visit Egypt occasionally much later.

<sup>10</sup> The three novels later on were collected and published together as a trilogy, in which the three sections recount the story of three generations of one Arab family from Andalusia.

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