

Södertörns University College  
English Department  
Supervisor: Jenny Bonnevier

C-essay  
Spring 2007

**In Control or in Despair:**  
Protagonist Analysis of  
David Lurie in *Disgrace*  
and  
Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*

Tove Andersson

## Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Previous research	3
Historical background	3
Agency and narrative drive	7
Analysis	
Protagonist analysis of David Lurie	7
Protagonist agency as narrative drive – David Lurie	10
The Political Situation’s effect on David Lurie in South Africa	11
Protagonist analysis of Okonkwo	13
Protagonist agency as narrative drive – Okonkwo	15
The Political Situation’s effect on Okonkwo in Nigeria	16
Comparison	
Protagonists’ agencies	17
Protagonists’ agencies as narrative drive	18
The Political Situation’s effect on the two Protagonists	19
Conclusion	21
Works Cited	23

## **1. Introduction**

This essay will deal with two novels, *Disgrace* by J.M Coetzee and *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. *Disgrace* takes place in South Africa and *Things Fall Apart* takes place in Nigeria. The intentions of the essay are to examine the two protagonists in each novel, David Lurie in *Disgrace* and Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*. I will analyze the two protagonists in order to examine their agency, that is, if they are in control of their own lives, look at the choices that they make and see if they can control their own positions. This will be done in order to see if and how their agency function as narrative drives which means how the stories are brought forward. The essay will examine whether the protagonists' agency are what brings the story forward or if the narratives focus on anything else that brings the story forward. Furthermore, the essay will deal with if and how the political situations in the two novels affect the protagonists' actions and whether the protagonists face positions as colonial subjects or not.

### **1.1 Previous research**

In general, the critics who write about J.M Coetzee and Chinua Achebe tend to evaluate and develop the two authors in a critical context. Many books that have been written deal with a selection of novels by the two authors where critics place the novels in a historical, social and political context. The books I have chosen to use in this essay deal with the authors J.M Coetzee and Chinua Achebe and the novels *Disgrace* and *Things Fall Apart* which I write about. I connect my writing about the two protagonists with what previous research says about them as characters and I leave out the analysis of J.M Coetzee and Chinua Achebe as authors since that has no relevance here.

### **1.2 Historical background**

The British Empire colonized several nations throughout Africa during the nineteenth century. Two of them were Nigeria and South Africa. The British Empire became a commonly used name for the colonial power. It is "signifying a historical period and set of relationships which are no longer current" (McLeod 6). The operation of colonialism was bringing wealth to Western nations through exploitation of other nations. "The seizing of 'foreign' lands for government and settlement was in part motivated by the desire to create and control markets abroad for Western goods, as well as securing the natural resources and labour-power of different lands and peoples at the lowest possible cost" (McLeod 7). Having said that, the British Empire colonized not only the nations as such but also the people living in the nations.

One could say that the British Empire colonized nations and minds. Colonizing the mind is a commonly used term for what happened to the people living in the colonized nations.

Under colonialism, a colonised people are made subservient to ways of regarding the world which reflect and support colonialist values. A particular value-system is taught as the best, truest world-view. The cultural values of the colonised peoples are deemed as lacking in value, or even as being ‘uncivilised’, from which they must be rescued (McLeod 19).

This tells you that the colonizer needed to control the colonized. They basically saw them as children who needed to be ruled for their irrationality and by taking away their culture, religion and social life they seemed to believe that they could control and rule the colonized people.

Another aspect of colonization is the trauma that the colonized people suffered in the transformation of becoming a colonial subject.

The most widespread understanding was that ‘deculturation’ was the cause of rising insanity. The breakdown of traditional structures and the strains of ‘modern’ society had literally unhinged Africans who were unable to cope with change [...] (Loomba 139).

They experienced tremendous traumas during the time and became subjects “to the authority of the British crown” (McLeod 6). It was no longer a matter of being a person with human rights belonging to a society, culture and religion of one’s own. It became a matter of being a colonial subject. In *Disgrace* the subject is David Lurie, a white man. In *Things Fall Apart* the subject is Okonkwo, a black man. They are both experiencing positions as colonial subjects, but their situations are different. David belongs to the offspring of former colonizers in post-Apartheid South Africa and Okonkwo belongs to the colonized people in Nigeria. Ania Loomba defines how the colonial subject might feel in *Colonialism/postcolonialism*. “For the black subject however, the white other serves to define everything that is desirable, everything that the self desires” (144). The white man became a master to the black man, a person seen as the better, wiser and more powerful. At the same time the white man became the Other for the black man. The African people had to try to find a sense of self, a sense that they were people outside the Other, outside the white man. In *Things Fall Apart* the case is

that the black man is being the subject. In *Disgrace* it is the white man who is the subject with David Lurie as the white privileged South African. Due to historical facts the two protagonists both face positions as colonial subjects.

The postcolonial subjects faced a number of conflicts within themselves, between one another and in the collision with the white man. This created problems not only for each and every one of the black people but also in the relationship between them as families and friends. The case could be that one member of a family chose to spend time with the white people in the village where they had settled down. They converted to Christianity, went to the schools that the white built and followed the white man's footsteps. The rest of the family, of course, had difficulties in understanding the actions that their relative chose. This created conflicts both in the family as a whole as well as between the family and the white man's movement in the African society and culture.

In Nigeria, where the native people still had villages for the tribes which is the case in *Things Fall Apart*, the fight between the colonial subject and the white Other was a troublesome matter. The British overtook the Nigerian societies and brought new buildings and thoughts to the country. In *Things Fall Apart* the British missionaries get to the village Umuofia in which the novel is set. They destroy the Nigerian culture in Umuofia. White men are seen as entertainment in a way since the village people have never seen a white man before. Furthermore, the missionaries cause religious conflicts and they build trading stores and a huge amount of money starts circling in the village, things that have never been seen before turns into everyday life. Even though the people in the village dislike the new people they talk about nothing else and they ignore their own people.

In South Africa the situation was different. The South African society had to witness Apartheid which is the matter in *Disgrace*. The word Apartheid is Dutch for "apartness" and was established by the Afrikaans. The origin to Apartheid goes back to the 1650's when white supremacy due to slavery was strong in South Africa. In *The Making of Modern South Africa* Apartheid is developed distinctly. Dutch settlers in South Africa at the time wanted "a structured form in the divisions of legal status in early Cape society [...]" (Worden 75). Apartheid was in place during the period 1948-1994. It consisted of laws that let the white people in South Africa rule. One example is the Mixed Marriage Act that did not allow mixed marriages. Another example is the act that "placed increasingly stringent controls over the mobility and property rights of Indians (87). Segregation showed another example of being racist when people in South Africa were given names due to The Population Registration Act in 1950. Bantu was the name for black Africans, white for white people and

Coloured for people of mixed races. The laws also led to limited rights of black Africans to own land and it increased the white people's control of 80% of South African land.

South Africa was a member of The British Commonwealth which was critical of Apartheid and in 1961 South Africa withdrew their membership. After this the "anti-apartheid pressure mounted within and outside South Africa [...]" (Appiah & Gates Jr. 36). In the early 1990's the government began to destroy the system of apartheid and in 1994 the constitutions were rewritten. That same year became historical when the first free general election took place and the Apartheid system was over in South Africa.

*Disgrace* takes place in post-Apartheid South Africa where there is a great mix of people from all over the world, something that is not only positive in the novel. Living in the cities is more valuable than living in the countryside since the city is where you get the opportunity to education and successful jobs. There is also a big conflict between black and white people which is well illustrated in particular parts in the novel.

People who struggled against apartheid fought for their rights to a South Africa that belonged to all who lived in it, black or white. In *South Africa*, Graham Leach writes about the situation during Apartheid. The people in South Africa wanted the rest of the world to know "that our people have been robbed of their birthright to land, liberty and peace by a form of government founded on injustice and inequality" (Leach 109). The people also wanted a free country but that could not happen until they lived "in brotherhood, enjoying equal rights and opportunities" (109). One could imagine how tense that time was and how the undemocratic situation at the time created unrest among the people living there.

During Apartheid the minority of the white people in South Africa owned most land and occupied big parts of the working life. In *Disgrace* the conflict between black and white people is shown when white, wealthy people are attacked by poor and frustrated black people. It turns into a case of white people's fear of black people's revenge.

### **1.3 Agency and narrative drive**

The political situations in both the novels imprint the characters choices, lives and actions. The situations in the two countries have an impact on particular the protagonists in the novels, Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* and David Lurie in *Disgrace*. The two protagonists struggle with family issues and at the same time they try to face the fact that the political situation in their country is changing. This essay will deal with the agency of the protagonists. That is, it will analyse who are in control of their lives, who make choices in some directions and if they have power of their own positions. Furthermore, it will examine the protagonists' agency as a narrative drive and see how the stories are brought forward. It will not examine who are the focalizers in the novels, it will examine how the events and agencies in the protagonists' lives function as narrative drives. In this essay, I will also search for evidence of how the political situations in the novels affect the protagonists' actions and whether the protagonists are positioned as colonial subjects or not. Colonial subject in this context refers to a state of mind where the colonized people feel that they are being controlled and ruled over by the colonizers in the novels. In *Things Fall Apart* it is obvious that there are the missionaries who are the colonizers. The protagonist experiences loss of agency due to colonization. In *Disgrace* it is not that obvious since the protagonist is a part of the colonizers. It is more a case of the protagonist losing his agency and social power due to the loss of personal matters and privilege as a white man in post-Apartheid South Africa.

## **2. Analysis**

### **2.1 Protagonist analysis of David Lurie**

David Lurie is a well known professor of Literature at a university in Cape Town in South Africa at the beginning of the novel. He has divorced twice and he is well aware of the fact that he does not have the best relationship with women. He sees a prostitute named Soraya at first, and that is also among the first things the reader gets to know about him. He thinks that he is entitled to women's beauty and uses that as a reason for having sex with them. "Because a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it" (16). According to him, it is acceptable, to treat women like property. Not once does he wonder why he got divorced twice, he tends to think that his place in the world is meant to be in the arms of women and the other way around. David believes that he is in control of everything in his life in the beginning of the novel since he strongly feels that all he does is right which is a sign of agency.

David thinks that he is in control of the affair he starts with his student Melanie. However, it leads not only to her not attending his classes afterwards but also to him being investigated on charges by the disciplinary committee at the university. In “Guilt, reconciliation and redemption: Disgrace and its South African context”, Jacques Van Der Elst mentions the consequences of David Lurie’s affair with Melanie: “He is transgressing the ethical code on the relationship between teacher and student and seduces a young girl, a drama student” (Van Der Elst 40). The ethical code refers to David being in a position of power which he mixes with sexual relations. As David himself reflects: “...as teachers we occupy positions of power. Perhaps a ban on mixing power relations with sexual relations. Which, I sense, is what was going on in this case. Or extreme caution” (53). David says that one needs to separate the power relations and sexual relations but I argue that he does not separate them and that he is satisfied with having both at the same time. It is part of his agency, that he wants as much power as possible over everything in his life, including his work and his affair with women.

The affair with Melanie leads to David leaving the university. He chooses to move to his daughter Lucy who lives on the countryside in a smallholding. As a reader you do not know much about Lucy. You know that David did not have a very close connection to her which gives you the feeling that he has no control of the relationship to his daughter. The aim of him moving to Lucy was for him to start over. The reason why he chooses to go to her might be because she is the only family he has. By having said that one could argue that he is a lonely man. He seeks refuge in his daughter hoping for some peace in his chaotic life. His agency fades away when David turns from a respected man to someone who needs peace and quietness. When he decides to go to Lucy his agency gets weaker.

The choice he made when moving to Lucy had disastrous consequences for him and Lucy. That choice is also what makes his agency fade but it never disappears entirely. In the middle of the novel David gets badly abused by three men. They also rape Lucy. The event breaks down the little contact David has with Lucy. For the first time in the novel one gets the feeling that David has empathy and father-to-child feelings for Lucy. Mike Marais has written an article called *J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace and the Task of the Imagination* where he examines the novel from several aspects. About the rape of Lucy and David trying to care for her Marais states that “[t]he imaginative task that Coetzee assigns his protagonist is to learn ‘to be the woman’. He must sympathize with his daughter and, as is implied by the parallel between the two rape scenes, Melanie Isaacs” (Marais 2). Marais claims that David raped Melanie, the student, and so when Lucy is raped David has to think about how he as her father

can comfort her at the same time as he is aware of people thinking that he is a rapist, although he does not see himself as one since he chooses to think of himself not as one. He is not conscious about the fact that Melanie might think differently. He stays proud of himself and his affair with the women. His pride is what helps him gain his agency after the incident when everything else he had is lost.

After the incident at the smallholding David chooses to care for Lucy and want what is best for her. To this she does not agree. She shuts him out of her life and the two have to start over once again. They are now back at where they were when David first came to Lucy. David tries his best to get into Lucy's mind whereas she shuts him out the more he tries. "Never yet have they been so far and so bitterly apart. He is shaken" (112). David decides to go back to Cape Town for a while after realizing that Lucy and he do not get along very well. That is yet another choice he makes in the process to getting closer to her again which is a choice that again strengthens his agency. He receives a letter from her that she has written some time after the rape occurred. David insists that Lucy needs to leave the farm for a while in order to think and recreate herself.

... 'the road I am following may be the wrong one. But if I leave the farm now I will leave defeated, and will taste that defeat for the rest of my life. I cannot be a child for ever. You cannot be a father for ever. I know you mean well, but you are not the guide I need, not at this time (161).

The two talk to each other on the phone and one day Lucy tells David that she is pregnant by one of the three men who raped her. David takes that very seriously, saying he will support her and tries to understand. He returns to live with Lucy after some time. At this point in the novel David has no power at all over his own position. If he had then he would have chosen not to be a grandfather. He probably would have chosen to keep his position as a professor at the university and he would have continued treating women as possessions. At that time he has no other choice than to accept Lucy's choice and learn to deal with it.

Only a few times does David have power of his own position according to me. In the novel he feels that everything he does from the very beginning is based upon his own control and choices which is true in the sense of him carrying out his life the way he wants it to be but in the long run he has no power whatsoever of what is happening to him or to Lucy. In the end his only power is the power he has as a victim. Everything he used to be in control of turns into a position of weakness, shame and disgrace which makes his agency fade. In a

way David leaves everything he was behind and he changes into someone who follows the rules that are set in the place where Lucy lives. He lets Lucy decide what she thinks is best for her although he dislikes it.

What kind of child can seed like that give life to, seed driven into the woman not in love but in hatred, mixed chaotically, meant to soil her, to mark her, like a dog's urine? ...Standing against the wall outside the kitchen, hiding his face in his hands, he heaves and heaves and finally cries (199).

He gives up his former life, the life he thought was right for him. He does all this to spend time closer to his daughter whom he loves more than he thought possible. By doing that he does not lose his agency. The choice he makes when leaving all he used to be behind is a sign of weakness and his agency is not as strong as it was in the beginning.

## **2.1 Protagonist agency as narrative drive**

### **2.1.1 David Lurie**

The story in *Disgrace* is brought forward by David Lurie and his agency. That is what determines the story and brings the narrative onwards. The very first words in *Disgrace* are “for a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well” (*Disgrace*: 1). This sets the foremost important issue in David's life throughout the story. Sex matters to him not only to himself but it also becomes a matter later on when Lucy is raped. One can therefore say that David's interest in sex in the beginning brings the story forward to him starting the affair with Melanie Isaacs and later on to Lucy being raped since it was David's affair with Melanie that brought him to Lucy. David thinks that he is in control of him starting an affair with Melanie but he is not since he moves. The affair works as a narrative drive as does the consequences of him moving to Lucy as well as the rape. The choices that he makes also function as narrative drive since he chooses to move to Lucy which leads to the three men visiting them. David also chooses to leave Lucy for some time and during that time the reader only get to know what happens in his life. You do not know what goes on in Lucy's smallholding. David's agency is therefore bringing the story forward more than anything else because the reader follows his life, reads about his actions and his agency.

Only sometimes does David have power of his own position. He can not control the things that happen to him and Lucy. The things he used to be in control of turns into a

position of weakness, shame and disgrace. The narrative still circles around David so although it is not the lack of power he has of his own position that function as a narrative drive the story is still brought forward by what is happening to David which makes it fair to say that it is his agency overall which drives the story forward.

## **2.2 The Political Situation's effect on David Lurie in South Africa**

*Disgrace* takes place in Cape Town in South Africa where the view is that it is seen better to live in the city compared to the countryside. This is shown in the novel where the educated people live in the cities working in institutions, like the university where David is a professor, and the people living on the countryside spend their days trying to take care of their smallholdings and farms. The political situation and Apartheid in South Africa in *Disgrace* is not very obvious in the novel as a whole. There are other factors that affect David Lurie as a white man. It is, though, clearly an issue in the incident that happened to David and Lucy in her smallholding. One can begin by discussing the fact that it was three black men who came and abused David and raped Lucy. By doing so the novel brings out the tension that apparently exists between black and white people in South Africa in the novel. One possibly thinks that it is the white man who is privileged due to Apartheid but in *Disgrace* it is shown that neither David nor Lucy are privileged in terms of the incident. As discussed in the beginning of the essay the most common problems occur when black people are seen as colonial subjects where white people try to rule and control them and their minds. The case in *Disgrace* during post-Apartheid in South Africa is, as discussed earlier, that David Lurie has lost some of his privileges as a white man and the black people try to adjust to their freedom. This is shown when the black men in the novel appear to be eager for revenge and it happens to David and Lucy.

David tries to talk to Lucy after the rape about what happened. The discussion continues as follows:

This has nothing to do with you, David. You want to know why I have not laid a particular charge with the police. I will tell you, as long as you agree not to raise the subject again. The reason is that, as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone. 'This place being what?' 'This place being South Africa' (112).

I argue that the issue for Lucy is that she thinks she will never be believed if she decided to report the rape to the police which is why she is stubborn about not doing so. It is a private matter since she does not want to share any deeper thoughts with David. They have not had a close relationship to one another before the incident and I think that Lucy wants to keep it that way even more after the incident. This hurts David badly. "Never yet have they been so far and bitterly apart. He is shaken" (*Disgrace*: 112). The power that David once held when working in the city as a professor, the social power he felt he had added to his agency is all gone when the incident occurs and when he realises that Lucy is drifting further and further away from him. Agency comes with social power and if you lose one you lose both, that happened to David.

Another issue concerning the effects on David in South Africa is the tension between the powerfulness of black people and white people in *Disgrace*. It is two white people, both educated and landowners, who are being attacked by three black people, strong and perhaps angry due to post-Apartheid in South Africa. They all have power but in different areas.

Right after the incident David tries his best to come up with a good suggestion to why it happened to him and Lucy. He is desperate to find an excuse and someone to blame to clear his own conscious.

It happens every day, every hour, every minute, he tells himself, in every quarter of the country. Count yourself lucky to have escaped with your life. [...] A risk to own anything: a car, a pair of shoes, a packet of cigarettes. Not enough to go around, not enough cars, shoes, cigarettes. Too many people, too few things. What there is must go into circulation, so that everyone can have a chance to be happy for a day. That is the theory; hold on to the theory and to the comforts of theory. Not human evil, just a vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant. That is how one must see life in this country: in its schematic aspect. Otherwise one could go mad. Cars, shoes; women too. There must be some niche in the system for women and what happens to them (98).

I claim that this quote is what best explains how David is affected by the political situation in South Africa at the time being. The black people who always wanted what the white people had can not have it since there are not enough resources. If the black people now have what

the white people always had it is at the expense of the white. If so, the black people win and David loses.

### **2.3 Protagonist analysis of Okonkwo**

Okonkwo is a respected man. The people in the village Umuofia think highly of Okonkwo. He is the most powerful man among all. Not only is he powerful in himself but also in his appearance.

He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look. He breathed heavily, and it was said that, when he slept, his wives and children in their out-houses could hear him breathe. When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody (Things Fall Apart 3).

One gets the impression that in the first part of the novel he is in control of his life and everybody that is involved in it in one way or another. He has three wives whom he provides with food. He also has children with them all and he controls them. He never once comforts them or has conversation with them eye to eye. The conversations and comforting occur between the wives when Okonkwo is absent. This is shown in *Chinua Achebe, The Man and His Works* by Rose Ure Mezu when she explains how the wives function as protectors to “one another under a heavy-handed husband such as Okonkwo” (Ure Mezu 27). Okonkwo tends to see his wives thoroughly as the mothers of his children which is the way he thinks it should be and therefore he decides to live after that norm. His agency is determined by him believing strongly in himself and he sees himself as a very powerful man who is able to control everybody who is near him.

Okonkwo is a violent man full of anger who thinks that war is a good thing. Being the leader of a village is for him an honourable commission in which he sees opportunities to express his power in terms of being violent and aggressive. The origin of his anger might come from the fact that he is ruled by what his father stood for. Everything his father was, Okonkwo tries not to be. In *Chinua Achebe*, David Carroll develops Okonkwo’s obsession about his father.

From the first, Okonkwo is in the grip of his father’s failure. Unoka has not achieved any kind of status in the tribe by the usual means of wealth or titles. He

is a gentle, improvident man, most happy when playing his flute, relaxing with the villagers, and recalling his happy boyhood (44).

Unoka did not have enough money for a big man to have and when he died he had debts to a number of people. This is the opposite of Okonkwo who thinks highly of money. With his father's failure in mind Okonkwo tries his hardest to be all his father was not. The lack of anger and violence in Unoka might incite Okonkwo to be angry and violent for two. He is famous as a successful wrestler and "to crown it all he had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars. And so although Okonkwo was still young, he was already one of the greatest men of his time" (6). Added to the above, my opinion is that Okonkwo is in control of everything in his life except himself, his feelings and his temper which means that he has agency. I think this is shown when Achebe writes "He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists" (3).

Okonkwo believes strongly in himself and thinks his decisions are the right ones. His position as the husband of three wives, the leader of Umuofia and a great man is completely made by himself. He dislikes his father's kindness and has therefore no power whatsoever of his own position. This goes hand in hand with the above : that he wants to be everything his father was not. Consequently, he seems to think that by anger and emotionlessness people will see him as someone powerful, which they do. He might try to show that he disagrees with his father by being aggressive towards others and by doing that he shows that he is in control of his own position as the great leader and clansman he actually sees himself as.

The choices he makes are determined by his stubbornness. Tanure Ojaide and Joseph Obi discuss Okonkwo's character in *Culture, Society, and Politics in Modern African Literature*. "[...] Okonkwo is seen as a celebrated, ambitious, and active participant in the community whose progress is suddenly marred by tragedy [...]" (Ojaide/Obi 23). Okonkwo accidentally kills a clansman which leads him into exile. He chooses to return to Umuofia after seven years not too prepared for the missionaries' entrance in Umuofia. He is certain that he no longer has the same place as the leader of the village. He also chooses to dislike and fight against the missionaries. While some people of the tribe welcome the missionaries and Christianity, Okonkwo tries his hardest to remain who he was before he was sent into exile. "Perhaps I have been away too long," Okonkwo said, almost to himself. "But I cannot understand these things you tell me. What is it that has happened to our people? Why have

they lost the power to fight?’” (128). He might believe that his will to keep on living the life as the village lived before is also the people’s will. When he realizes that it is not he decides not to live the life that has entered his village. Furthermore, Okonkwo chooses to commit suicide. “Then they came to the tree from which Okonkwo’s body was dangling, and they stopped dead” (151).

Okonkwo switches from being in control to feeling there is nothing left to fight for. Everything he once was he realises is now lost. After seven years away from his people and village they are now completely changed into strangers. Okonkwo ends his life in a disgraceful way leaving all he was behind and he lost the agency that he had due to occurrences he could not control.

### **2.1.2 Protagonist agency as narrative drive - Okonkwo**

The story in *Things Fall Apart* is brought forward by Okonkwo and his agency; his control of his own life, the choices he makes and the power he has of his own position. According to me, the very first words in the novel explain what is important to Okonkwo throughout the story. “Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat” (3). The most important issue to Okonkwo in the story is his fame, his strength and his reputation which he has to maintain among the people in the village. This becomes a matter in the novel as Okonkwo’s determination as a strong and powerful leader later bring him into exile. His violence works as a narrative drive as does him being in exile for seven years. The choices Okonkwo makes when killing the clansman and fighting against the missionaries is what brings him into committing suicide. The reader gets to know Okonkwo’s disinterest for the new people in the village but we also get to know a little bit about what other people in the village think of the missionaries.

There were many men and women in Umuofia who did not feel as strongly as Okonkwo about the new dispensation. The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umuofia (130).

This shows that it is not only Okonkwo's life that brings the story forward, it is also other people's lives in the village.

Okonkwo is in control of everything in his life except himself, his feelings and his temper. It is therefore his stubbornness to be the greatest of men that forces him to take his life. The narrative circles around Okonkwo and it is him that you as a reader get to know the best. This is clearly shown when Okonkwo is sent to exile for seven years. The story still concentrates on Okonkwo and the seven years is covered in only 28 pages of the novel's 152 pages. I argue that Okonkwo's agency is bringing the story forward more than anything else because the reader follows his life, his actions and his agency all the way from being the great leader of Umuofia, into exile and back to the village again where he faces his downfall.

### **2.1.3 The Political Situation's effect on Okonkwo in Nigeria**

*Things Fall Apart* takes place in the village Umuofia in Nigeria. In the beginning of the novel this is a society ruled by its own leaders and inhabited by its own people. In the first two parts of the novel's three parts the reader gets to know the customs and routines of the people in the village and to me it seemed quite nice and the people who lived there seemed satisfied. The political situation in *Things Fall Apart* is shown clearly. Okonkwo spent seven years in exile and when he returns to Umuofia it is transformed in the shadows of the missionaries.

Umuofia had indeed changed during the seven years Okonkwo had been in exile. The church had come and led many astray. Not only the low-born and the outcast but sometimes a worthy man had joined it. Such a man was Ogbuefi Ugonna, who had taken two titles, and who like a madman had cut the anklet of his titles and cast it away to join the Christians (127).

One can begin by discussing the fact that the missionaries completely changed Umuofia not only with new buildings in forms of churches and schools but also within the people in the village. This creates issues within Okonkwo. He has difficulties in trying to understand and accept the fact that he is no longer the powerful and respected man. Seven years in exile did not at all change him in the way that his village and people changed. "Perhaps I have been away too long," Okonkwo said, almost to himself. "But I cannot understand these things you tell me. What is it that has happened to our people? Why have they lost the power to fight?" (128). Okonkwo does not want to see and experience the fact that the people that he usually had the power over now seems confident with the changes that the missionaries brought.

“Thus while Okonkwo was destroyed, Umuofia’s culture was merely disturbed [...]” (Ojaide/Obi 31). Furthermore, Okonkwo does not want to see that he has fallen under the category of being a colonial subject. The colonial process that the white missionaries brought to Umuofia makes the black colonial subject powerless. They lose a sense of self and are ruled by the new ideas, religion and buildings that the missionaries establish.

I argue that it is a combination of being a colonial subject and not being able to fight against the missionaries, not being strong enough and not being sufficiently determined that forces Okonkwo into committing suicide. Ojaide and Obi state that it is “[...] The confrontation between Umuofia and colonial authority that precipitates Okonkwo’s death” (Ojaide/Obi 2002: 23). With this I agree. In the beginning of the novel, Okonkwo was the strongest authority in Umuofia but towards the end he loses all his powerfulness and therefore his agency since it was his power that maintained it.

#### **2.4 Comparison of the protagonists’ agencies**

In the first part of *Disgrace* and *Things Fall Apart* the protagonists David Lurie and Okonkwo are both in control of their lives. They have respect of different kinds in the places they live. David Lurie has respect in the sense of being a professor at the university and Okonkwo in the sense of being the big leader of the village where he lives. They seem to think that they are in control of everything in their lives which is not the case. David chooses to begin an affair with one of his students, something he thinks he can control but it turns out he loses the grip on the situation. This leads to him leaving Cape Town and leaving his life. Okonkwo thinks he is in control when he accidentally kills a clansman and is later sent into exile meaning leaving his life. The two protagonists leave the places where they feel secure and powerful because they make mistakes.

The time away from their hometowns bring negative changes to them both. David Lurie has to experience abuse and his daughter’s rape, something that makes him change into wanting to be a true father. He changes from being a selfish person into a caring, tender father. He gives up everything he once was just to spend time with his daughter, the only person who means something to him. Everything that he cared about earlier, his job as a professor, his entitlement to women and his way of living are gone when he realises that he loves Lucy and wants to spend the rest of his life with her in her smallholding. Mike Marais writes about David Lurie and that “his own needs, desires, feelings, predilections and predispositions are totally immaterial. To sympathize, Lurie must lose, indeed sacrifice or offer, himself (Marais 4). This is what happens when he finally sees what is important in life.

To become the new, better man David goes through a number of changes that are good for him since he behaved badly but one wonders what David himself thinks about the changes. “The truth is, he has never had much of an eye for rural life, despite all his reading in Wordsworth. Not much of an eye for anything, except pretty girls; and where has that got him? Is it too late to educate the eye?” (218). The reader does not get to know whether or not David educates the eye. All we know is that he changes his lifestyle and decides to stay with Lucy and the expected baby that the rape resulted in.

Okonkwo has to experience a big change in his village, a village he feels is his alone and so are the people in it. He changes from being an aggressive and powerful man into a man who feels there is nothing left to live for and he commits suicide. In *The Story of a Man and his People: Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart* Ernest A. Champion says that “it is truly an ironic end, signifying the conflict of a man who stood inflexible, believing he was defending a heritage, while even his last act in defence of a system proves an abomination” (277). Okonkwo thinks war is a good thing and perhaps the moment when Umuofia decides not to go to war is what determines Okonkwo to commit suicide. “As he lay on his bamboo bed he thought about the treatment he had received in the white man’s court, and he swore vengeance. If Umuofia decided on war, all would be well. But if they chose to be cowards he would go out and avenge himself” (145).

They both surrender. What is remarkable about the two protagonists in this sense is that they both start off by being two strong, powerful and unbreakable men with strong agency who turn into two weak, mistake making men and they become the kind of men that they never imagined themselves to become. They sacrifice their beliefs in what a complete life is and replace it with despair and death. David still has agency left since he decides to keep on struggling but Okonkwo’s agency disappears when he commits suicide. The next section will deal with the protagonists’ agencies as a narrative drive and it will also show how the stories are pushed forward by their agencies.

### **2.1.3 Comparison of narrative drive**

Both *Disgrace* and *Things Fall Apart* are brought forward by the protagonists’ agency meaning their control over their own lives, the choices they make and the power they have of their own positions. Their agency functions as a narrative drive. This is shown in different ways in the novels. In *Disgrace* the reader wholly follows David Lurie’s life. It is his interest in women and sex that brings him to the affair with Melanie and later to moving to Lucy. David thinks that he is in control of the affair but he is not. In the end he has to suffer for the

rape of Lucy and he begins to feel that he has no control of his relationship with her which he has not. It is David's life, agency and actions that bring the story forward.

In *Things Fall Apart* the reader follows Okonkwo during almost the entire novel but there are some exceptions when the reader sees what the other men and women in Umuofia feel about the missionaries. Okonkwo's violence works as narrative drive and it is what brings him into exile. It is his life, agency and actions that bring the story forward.

Both David Lurie and Okonkwo are in focus in the novels which makes it fair to say that their agency functions as narrative drive. David's fascination with sex rules him and his agency and Okonkwo's fascination with violence and aggression rules him and his agency. It is also those fascinations that bring the protagonists down. They start off by being strong and respected men and end with giving up everything they believed in. They do this in different ways. David gives up his life, the life he thought was right for him to spend his time closer to his daughter whom he loves more than he thought possible. Lucy has clearly shown where she stands in life, she chooses to keep the baby that the rape resulted in. David has troubles understanding her choice but he gives in and begins to live a life that is as far away from his former beliefs as possible, according to me. The story is pushed forward by David's agency and ends with him surrender. Okonkwo tries his best not to let the missionaries rule over him but he fails. The novel circles around Okonkwo and his agency and in the end he has to face his downfall and surrender, as David. Okonkwo commits suicide; David begins living a life in his daughter's shadow.

#### **2.1.4 Comparison of the Political Situation's affect on the Two Protagonists**

David Lurie and Okonkwo are affected by the political situations in the novels in different ways and there are different aspects that influence them. For David Lurie in *Disgrace* there is a matter of loss of agency and power after the incident at the smallholding and not really a matter of political consequences like in *Things Fall Apart*. David experiences an issue between black people and white people and he realises that in post-Apartheid South Africa both black people and white people are powerful. The white people held the most power in South Africa which is why David was privileged. The black people try to adjust to their freedom which they received whereas the white people try to defend themselves and keep the power that they always had. After the rape David wants someone to blame in order to protect himself from the powerful men who did it. By doing that he loses all power and becomes powerless to himself, his agency and his life.

For Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* it is colonialism and him being a colonial subject that makes him powerless. The missionaries' arrival in Umuofia takes away Okonkwo's power and he tries to understand that he is not the leader anymore. He realises that he can not fight against the missionaries' rampage which leads him into death. He loses all authority and power.

The foremost similarity between David Lurie and Okonkwo is that they both experience a tension between black people and white people in the countries in the novels. They do this in different ways. David does not fit into the category of being a colonial subject while Okonkwo does. David is ruled by the power of shame and wanting someone to blame. He has no trust in the South African society after what happened to Lucy when he realises that the police will not do anything. Okonkwo is ruled by the power of colonialism and being a colonial subject. He struggles with the issue of once being a great leader into being someone meaningless who has lost all his power due to something new, different and odd. The foremost difference between David Lurie and Okonkwo is that even though they both experience political situations they are affected by it differently. In *Disgrace* and South Africa David is a man who loses both his power and agency. In *Things Fall Apart* and Nigeria Okonkwo is a man who becomes a colonial subject. This happens against their wills and leads them into giving up themselves, their agency and life.

### 3. Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to examine the agency of the protagonists David Lurie in *Disgrace* and Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*. That is, who are in control of their lives, who make choices in some directions and if they have power of their own positions. The essay also examined the protagonists' agency as a narrative drive and saw how the stories were brought forward. It also searched for evidence of how the political situations in the novels affect the protagonists' actions and whether the protagonists are positioned as colonial subjects or not. By analysing David Lurie and Okonkwo I have been able to find answer to these questions.

David Lurie is a character who is in control of his life. He lives it in a way that is right to him and does not really care about other people. The choices he makes are also right to him. He chooses to start the affair with his student, a choice that shows to be wrong. He has control of his own position in the first part of the novel. He is a determined and respected man in the beginning which shows that his agency is strong. Furthermore, the first part of the essay shows how David's agency functions as narrative drive. It does this in the way of David's life being the centre of the novel. It is him the reader follows and it is his agency, actions and life that brings the story forward. The political situation in the novel affects David. He is not seen as a colonial subject as it is described in the introduction of the essay but he is affected by the political situation in terms of losing his privilege and power due to post-Apartheid. He also is upset by the inactivity among the South African police after the incident.

The second section of the essay shows the agency of the protagonist Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*. He is a character who is in control of his own life in the first part of the novel. He rules the village where he lives and the people look up to him. This changes when he accidentally kills a clansman and is sent into exile. All his power and respect disappears and when he returns to his village after seven years he no longer is in control. His agency is lost. Okonkwo's agency function as narrative drive since the novel focuses on him and his agency. Even though seven years pass by in the novel the reader only knows what happens to him. The essay also shows how the political situation affects Okonkwo. He loses all he was to the missionaries who get to his village. He becomes a colonial subject and is no longer in control of anything in his life. He cannot live with the truth that he has transformed into just another man who needs to be changed and he ends his life.

Okonkwo's experience of being a colonial subject represents a common situation in the British Empire. David Lurie's experience is not a common situation since Apartheid is unique to South Africa. *Disgrace* shows examples of loss of privilege, power and

natives trying to adjust to their new freedom. Okonkwo sets an excellent example of a free, strong, respected and powerful man who faces downfall as a consequence of colonialism and the struggle for powerfulness amongst black people and white people in Nigeria. David Lurie is a respected, determined, strong and well known man who faces downfall as a consequence of post-Apartheid and the struggle for power amongst both black and white people in South Africa.

#### 4. Works cited

##### Primary Sources

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. 1958. London: Penguin Classics, 2001.

Coetzee, J.M. *Disgrace*. 1999. London: Vintage, 2000.

##### Secondary Sources

Carroll, David. *Chinua Achebe*. New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1970.

Champion, Ernest A. "The Story of a Man and his People: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*". *Negro American Literature Forum*. Ed. Winter. 1974. Jstor. Vol. 8, No. 4. P. 272-277. 6 March 2007. <http://jstor.org>. Path: Chinua Achebe and *Things Fall Apart*.

Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louise Gates Jr., ed. "Apartheid". *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African American Experience. The Concise Desk Performance*. Philadelphia: Running Press, 2003.

Leach, Graham. *South Africa*. London: Routledge, 1986.

Lomba, Ania. *Colonialism/postcolonialism*. London: Routledge, 1998.

Marais, Mike. "J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the Task of the Imagination". *Journal of Modern Literature*. 29 February 2006. P. 75-93. 6 March 2007.

[http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal\\_of\\_modern\\_literature/v029/29.2marais.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_modern_literature/v029/29.2marais.html)

McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.

Mezu Ure, Rose. *Chinua Achebe, The Man and his Works*. London: Adonis & Abbey Publishers Ltd., 2006.

Ojaide, T & Obi, J. *Culture, Society, and Politics in Modern African Literature*. North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2002.

Van Der Elst, Jacques. "Guilt, reconciliation and redemption: *Disgrace* and its South African context". *A Universe of (Hi)Stories: Essays on J.M. Coetzee*. Ed. Liliana Sikorska. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2006. 39-44.

Worden, Nigel. *The Making of Modern South Africa*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2000.