



## ANIMALS AS A CENTRAL ECOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL FEATURE IN J.M.COETZEE'S *DISGRACE*

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### ABSTRACT



The present paper focuses on the study of J.M.Coetzee's one of the most significant novels, *Disgrace* with special reference to the animal ethics. The paper argues that Coetzee demonstrates the animals as an important ecological and ethical feature. It also marks the connection between ecological vision and Coetzee's ethical attention to the 'non-human other'. The paper examines how animal act as a metaphor for the cruel treatment we impose on each other and the suppressed guilt associated with the discrimination of apartheid. Among all animals inhabiting Coetzee's fiction, dogs in particular have a noteworthy presence. The paper shades some light on the novel to show how an ecological sense of Coetzee is also evocative of the cramped conditions of black African homelands.

**Keywords:** *Ecology, Ethics, Ecocriticism, Post colonialism, Postmodernism, Non-human.*

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The ecosystem is an association of the animals, plants, and micro organisms that withstand themselves in the same area or environment by performing the activities of living, feeding, reproducing and communicating. It is an association that exists between all the components of an environment. It includes plants, animals, fish (marine life), soil, water & people.

The relationship that human establishes with animals (The non-human others), imaginatively and materially characterize the degree to which we have understood or fail to understand our participation and duties towards them. Coetzee's new kind of animal inhabited fiction recognizes that the animal is the aboriginal presence in the structure of human politics and, more crucially, that animality marks the point of our most intense participation in an expansive, much-more-than-human world of living being.

The essential ecological notion is that everything is connected and nothing is separate. Ecological concerns have been the subject of literature for a long time. Ecology is the study of the interaction between the environment and its organism. With the publication of *The Lives of Animals* (1999), *Disgrace* (1999) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), Coetzee brought the issue of animal rights as a part of ecological apprehension in his fiction.

The questions of animal being and animal rights figure prominently in the flood of critical response that has followed the publication of *Disgrace* (1999), which has become in short time Coetzee's one of the most discussed books. This bringing into focus of the animal focus is partly due to, and also justified by, the publication, also in 1999, of the lectures titled *The Lives of Animals*, material that was consequently assimilated in *Elizabeth Costello*.

*Disgrace* is significantly marked by animal analogies that one only seemingly casual. As in commonly the case in literary works, and indeed in everyday speech, animals provide the standard for the description of human experience. Thus, David Lurie, one of the important characters of the novel, very promptly announces that the 'totem' of his sexual character is 'the snake' (Coetzee.2). This early

shallow anthropological reference of the symbol immediately reminds us of how deep the animal correlation does in human self-understanding. This kind of animal writing has been fully acknowledged by critics. They have been established as essential elements in Coetzee's texts.

Such contribution of Coetzee in *Disgrace* suggests continuities between his fictional thought on matters such as meat-eating and vegetarianism and more overtly philosophical concern of animal lives by Derrida, Agamben, and many others. As Marianne Dekoven says,

When read as a coherent narrative of personal salvation, rather than as a characteristically undecidable, ethically ambiguous postmodern novel. J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* clarifies into an argument for the necessary co-presence of middle-aged women and non-human animals, in the context of the tectonic shifts in the structure of racist colonialism, as possible agents or at least figures of positive change(847).

It is a scholarly task of understanding South African environmental realities from the ecocritical and animal studies perspectives. There is a need of protecting animals from further destruction and deprivation brought about by weakly considered public policy and abusive private ownership of natural resources.

The intensified focus on the animal allows Coetzee to write in a zone of interaction between socio-political and ecological concerns, to elaborate an ecologically oriented ethics that sharpens the critique of modern political regimes that dominate and exploit fellow beings both human and non-human. By giving thoughtfulness to the animal being with analysis of the more orthodoxly different social and political provinces of human experience, Coetzee excellently condemns, "The dominance of instrumental reason as a means of justifying authoritarian behaviour...both within and beyond the (human) species". (Huggan.750)

The novel in its early occurrence does not press beyond earlier works with respect to the ethical and political attention of the relationship between animalism and humanity. The early use of animal figures serves only to prepare the ground for later,



more searching reflections which first arise in the debate with Lucy, in the period after her father's academic disgrace. Lucy in 'Disgrace' in a conversation with her father symbolically uses animals to refer her humiliating situation of disgrace and degradation after being gang-raped by black men.

Lurie realizes his new life as that of a dog. Lurie, like her daughter Lucy learns to accept humiliation and brutalization as part of the historical guilt of his ancestors. He and his daughter, as White South Africans, pay a price for a history of racism against and suppression of black African people. The personal history of both father and daughter is stained with the colonial guilt of apartheid. They know now that they should lead a disgraceful life like that of a dog. The plan of Lucy to surrender her land to Petrus, greedy African worker supports her in this time of changed power relations. The following conversation takes place between Lurie and his daughter Lucy:

'How humiliating', he says finally. 'Such high hopes, and to the end like this'. 'Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start a ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.'

'Like a dog.'

'Yes, like a dog.' (Coetzee.205)

In *Disgrace*, human desire is expressed in terms of animal bodies. Animals for Lucy and her father illustrate human shame. Lucy has to accept the humiliation of being a wife of Petrus to accept having an illegitimate child. Lurie accepts the degradation of living among unwanted animals and having to leave the intellectual realm of university life. In the same way, he has to manage with an aging body with "bowed shoulders and skinny shanks" (150). In this novel dogs symbolically represent the dehumanization and humiliation associated with apartheid and painfully suffer at the hands of humans.

Lurie buries the six dogs killed by the three invaders by dropping them into a hole. This is his second actual encounter with animal bodies. One

dog with a "hole in its throat still bares its bloody teeth" (110). Lurie sees the aftermath of violence on his own body that gets burned and mauled, that of his daughter, and the corpses of dogs. Further human/animal encounter is that of the two sheep Petrus keeps for a party tethered next to a stable. Lurie thinks they should be tied, he tells Petrus, "where they can graze" (123). He thinks that "Sheep do not own themselves, do not own their lives" (123) because humans use them.

For Lurie, Petrus should not bring the animals to where the people who will eat them can see them (124). In fact, he transfers them to where they can graze near the dam "where there is abundant grass" (123). The next day when he discovers the animals back in the barren area near the stable, he thinks of such country ways in terms of "indifference, hardheartedness" (125). In a sense, animals bring about an ethical awakening in Lurie. He begins to identify with animals by seeing them as his existential peers and bodily equals.

At the end of *Disgrace*, Lurie gives up a dog he has developed an empathy with for a lethal injection. Considering Lurie and his daughter's many-sided disgrace in this novel, one can argue that this act is symbolic. They have no future in this post-apartheid South Africa if their disgrace is complete now, except that of the diseased or unwanted dogs which are disposed of. The end of the novel brings us back to the dogs. Lurie helps Bev on Sunday with a session of killing. Such an act delivered to maimed unwanted dogs is for him a form of "love" (219). He takes one young and disable dog out of the cage and the dog licks him: "Bearing him in his arms like a lamb, he re-enters the surgery. "I thought you would save him for another week," says Bev Shaw. "Are you giving him up? " Yes, I am giving him up." (220).

According to Michalinos Zembylas (2009), such an act of giving up the dog is "symbolic of relinquishment of desire" and acceptance of "responsibility for the Other" (225). It is as if Lurie surrenders the desiring human body and embraces the sentience of being with animals. Previously, he stood facing the sheep at a close distance but now, he carries the dog in his arms. Lurie becomes one with animals in the process of caring for unwanted dogs.



In its initial expressions, David's insufficiently thoughtful attitude towards animals is typically compromised by darkly suggested analogies with his nature towards other human beings. The attitude of David towards women seems quite similar, as is demonstrated by his occasional rude and unoriginal "animalization" of Soraya, and more particularly by his later reaction to Melanie. David fetishes Melanie's body to a very notable degree, dwelling upon her girlishly slim hips, her perky breasts; one may say that he evidently like her, or at least some parts of her.

David's initiation to a much more inclusive envisioning of the community of essential beings with his experience of atrocity in the human world-atrocity in which he is inescapably implicated both as the perpetrator and as the victim. His change of heart arises out of desperation-indeed; it develops on the far side of his despair. David commits both his sympathetic feeling and his ethical reasoning to the plight of animals because he has lost all faith in the possibilities of an exclusively human kindness. As Don Randall says,

Coetzee's ecology demands that social and political issues be examined within a broader field of concern. It calls upon readers to look beyond the human, and in this action of looking beyond, the social and political value of Coetzee's work becomes evident (223).

The animal discrimination has a deep and detailed history in the legitimating discourse of social system of discrimination and subordination. In Coetzee's declaration of his ecological demonstration through *Disgrace*, he uses the animals as the victims of greed and abuse. Such uses are not to be remeasured, limited, and corrected but denounced.

The othering of nature and its creatures in time of political conflict is very common. Trees get burned, animal gets killed by machine guns, and many perish because of the destruction of their natural habitat and food resources. The diversity and vivacity of animal life expect acknowledgement from us by drawing attention to the otherness and inferiority of animal life.

Coetzee's composition with the proximity of humans and animals stems from the historical and political context of his novel. It is a history of injustice

where the denial of human rights reduced people to the figurative status of animals. The counter violence reduced others to the same figurative status of disgraced animals. In a post-apartheid South Africa, the indifference of apprehensive human relations and the mistreatment of animals are similar. Victims and culprits of violence have the same contribution in a dehumanized existence. Thus, Coetzee's postmodern conception of human/animal bodies and their degradation establish ethical and political anxieties. Don Randall (2007) writes that

"Coetzee's writing registers and then counters this atrocious modernity by opening and extending the ethical bounds of human community, by envisioning animals as fellow beings deserving the consideration and protection that more typically are accorded only to the human being" (209).

Coetzee's ethic political vision is inclusive like postmodernism. The author uses the body to convey a message about the physical difficulties of humans and animals alike. It is the body that nags, desires, and gets violated. It is also the body that gets old/sick, suffers, and dies. Coetzee has extended the ethical and political orientation of his fiction by comparing the sufferings of humans against animals. In *Disgrace*, feeling into the existence of another body seems to have a disarming ethical force with the power to reform those who empathize and politically reform those who transgress.

## CONCLUSION

Animals and plants can always be understood in politically pertinent terms and equally understood in the light of the novel's times. Coetzee's vision records and increasing affinity with the animal world and inseparability of all from of life: humans, animals and plants. For Lucy, in a conversation with her father about animals in *Disgrace*, the life we share with animals is the only with no higher realm. After a change of same kind, her father feels sympathy for the lot of animals for their lack of privilege in his country, a post-apartheid South Africa. Coetzee's *Disgrace* records this dreadful modernity by opening and elaborating the ethical bounds of human community and animals.

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