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‘They can smell what you are thinking’: Existential Animalization in J.M Coetzee’s *Disgrace*

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Abstract:

Animal studies have credited a wide ranging significance over a past few decades in the genre of world literatures. In alignment with the emerging cognitivism towards queer theory and racial sensibility, the idea of animalism too has gathered a methodological framework of thematization and analysis. Therefore, the objective of the present research is to examine the function of animals in human lives, the peculiarity that two different species share with each other and finally the transformation of perspective that contact within the two can bring forth. The primary text used to accomplish the proposed rationale is J.M Coetzee’s distressing yet heart rendering novel ‘Disgrace’. The seminally clinching story of David Lurie and his repentance through animals is capable of attracting worthy critical appreciation and readership. Moreover, the presence of various nonhumans throughout the narrative effectively engineers a semantic world of confliction and convergence, subject to reconstititional figurations and amendments. Further, the research looks forward to present an evaluative study of textual phrases and other phenomenal interpretations by academicians, both antiquated and contemporary. This will subsequently highlight the dialogism of the novel whereby the silenced recessive sufferers of the story are endowed with voices, gathering a retrospective notice for themselves and their viewpoint. In short, Coetzee’s architected masterpiece embodies a rebellion, constantly striving towards an egalitarian relationship between animals and human beings along with the society’s dire need to establish a selfless communion between the two species.

Keywords: animal studies, cognitivism, animalism, species, Disgrace, clinching, nonhumans, confliction, convergence, textual, dialogism, retrospective, egalitarian, selfless, communion

‘The mode of consciousness of nonhuman species is quite different from human consciousness. There is a strong argument to be made that it is impossible for a human being to inhabit the consciousness of an animal, whereas through the faculty of sympathy (fellow-feeling) it is possible for one human being to know quite vividly what it is like to be someone else’.

(May 2004,

Animals, Humans, Cruelty and Literature

A rare interview with J.M Coetzee)

Coetzee's post-apartheid and subtly racist novel 'Disgrace' holistically testifies to this emphatic persuasion towards nonhuman selves. Through multiple encounters with non human species (especially dogs), the central focalizer David Lurie is compelled to reconfigure the physicality that he shares with the latter. This further allows him to accentuate a fluid demarcation between the notions of human and animal suffering, a contact-zone featuring the ethical awakening of the promiscuous professor of Romantic poetry. In other words, the narrative endeavor transcends the metaphorical cliché of representativeness and in turn approaches towards the post humanist idea of unraveling the common aspects of existence itself. Thus, it is only through reexamining a semblance with the life of animals that David Lurie is able to comprehend the ever transforming world and his own helpless position in it. Lucy's articulative stand point validates this reversal:

"...There is no higher life. This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals" (Coetzee 74)

And this is what David needs to understand, a caveat underlined by her daughter, one of the preponderant concerns of the present narratorial journey.

The exhilarating dilemma of the novel concerns itself with the reverberating presence of animal imagery, beginning with a whimsical portrayal of animalistic mobility and sexual indulgence of David with women half his age. Be it the prostitute Soraya or his dark student Melanie, David's promiscuity can be described as predatory.

'Intercourse between Soraya and himself must be, he imagines, rather like the copulation of snakes' (Coetzee 2-3) while his enforced mating with Melanie engenders a victimizing relationship between a 'rabbit' and 'fox', former victimized by the latter. However, the need of the hour is to adumbrate a more graphic reality of physical presence as opposed to the reiteratively figurative mentions which obliterate the nonhuman essence of being. Jacques Derrida in his seminal text 'The Animal Therefore I am' while interpreting his cat's mysterious gaze emphatically pens down:

"...the cat I am talking about is a real cat, truly, believe me, a little cat. It isn't the figure of a cat. It doesn't silently enter the room as an allegory for all the acts on the earth, the feliness that transverse myths and religions, literature and fables." (Derrida 7)

Here, Derrida warns his readers against establishing any homogeneity within a particular animal species and in turn look forward to multitudinous panoply of varied nonhuman beings. Therefore, the ontologically determined category of 'the animal' requires an exhorting dissolution, dismantling its connotative singularity. In the similar vein, Coetzee's text echoes this multiple undercurrent that effectively characterizes the nonhuman species with a dominant portrayal. Besides this, the author with irrefutable efficiency aims to demonstrate the contemporary socio-political equation between the two races in the transmutably dynamic South African world. Animals, in this regard act as active catalysts in highlighting their paradigmatic churning, the spectral turnover which their lives will subsequently attempt.



The first mention of nonhuman species is observed in chapter seven of the narrative whereby the context of real animals (dogs) comes into picture. David Lurie while trying to acquaint himself with his daughter's lifestyle and familiar sustenance in the countryside, Lucy with a blunt shrug remarks about the continual presence of dogs, a species that is deterrent towards crime and thus allow her to live safely among the contrastive race. Here too, the real animals are recognized with their plurality in regard to their different breeds 'Dobermanns, German Shepherds, ridgebacks, bull terriers, Rottweilers' (Coetzee 61) etc. are all watch dogs. In other words, the preliminary presence of dogs enacts within the premise of harbored eloquence, always alert on board with the purpose of catering protection to their fellow masters. This idea goes in alignment with the Biblical concept of animals as 'help meet' for 'the man' before the creation of 'the women'. Here, man is created as superior to 'every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air' (Genesis 18-19) and this is the very purpose to which animals in the beginning are stooped to, that is the safeguards to human race. However, the textual course soon contests this ideology by illuminating the undue exploitation of animals for human needs and at this evocative moment enters the pangs of suffering to which this nonhuman race is liable to.

At this point, Jeremy Bentham's propositional idea towards animal sensitization is worth considering. Benthamite idea of 'animal suffering' gathers incredible importance in deconstructive literature so as to manifest a subsequent turnover of the ongoing mechanical animalism. This further allows for difficult yet attainable transgression on part of the psychologically disturbed persona that finally culminates in his relinquishment of desire and acceptance of responsibility towards his fellow creatures. However, the trajectory towards this realization is rather desperate and uncompromising that requires a minute textual analysis, taking into account both human and nonhuman animals.

Lurie's relationship to animals, to a fair degree, is ambiguous. His primary interest in animals or their presence is unbothersome and critical, a topic that could never belong to his taste or liking. While discussing about his prospects of volunteering at Bev's animal clinic, his attitude reflects a sharp dismay towards the crippled folk. Such a reprimanding judgment acts as directly proportional to Lucy's declarative helpless which lowers down these nonhuman creatures to the position of nothingness and identity loss. This is something to which Bev's worthless animals are stooped to, whom Lurie will subsequently put to death by the end of the narrative.

Moreover, in adherence to this primary temperament towards animals along with his boastful racial pride, his first interaction with Petrus is as follows:

"You look after the dogs, he says, to break the silence" (Coetzee 64)

This radically confirms his epistemological comprehensiveness of the black race, oppressive and demeaning to the very core. However, to Lurie's surprise this very 'dog-man' Petrus will emerge as the most powerful character as the novel terminates and on the other hand, Lurie himself will

be rendered powerless, approaching towards the realm of non-signification and existential angst. According to Deconstructive critics Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the above discussed insignificant existence of David Lurie is in affinity with the idea of 'becoming animal', a world where the dichotomy between human and animal selves is difficult to arrive at, where both stand 'deterritorialized' transcending all limiting definitions and attainments.

But before arriving at this phenomenological finality, it is important to illustrate the onerous mobility of Lurie's conscious emotiveness and how his character achieves behavioral moderation by the end of the narrative. David's primary attentive observation towards a nonhuman species is projected when one night; he lies down in the bulldog bitch Katy's cage and soon falls asleep. His inclination towards the mourning creature can be efficiently captured in the following phrase.

"He squats down, tickles her behind the ears. 'Abandoned, are we?' he murmurs." (Coetzee 78)

The above idea of abandonment brackets both Lurie and Katy in one slot that further impress on the insignification and neglect of the two different yet interconnected species. Lurie's professional solitude is direly consequent of the infeasibility of his returning back to his city lifestyle. His suspension from University of Cape Town, ransacking of his house and finally his vanishing sexual appeal act as prime contributors to this. In short, the above telepathy that he shares with animals will further opinionate towards a more conscious discovery of 'animal within' and it is only after this incident that Lurie finally decides to help Bev at her animal welfare clinic.

In addition to this, Lucy's rape at the hands of three black men in the middle of the novel dismantles the white libidinal exclusiveness of Lurie. His Eurocentric modernity will collapse in no time thus thingifying his very being. Besides this, Lucy's silence will render him more uncomfortable and anxious about his receding hegemony finally landing in Petrus's court. Now, Lurie's new life will reduce him to the status of an animal, the ancestral guilt that will prone him to subsequent debasement. Coetzeeian critic Shadi N. Neimneh in his research article "Coetzee's Postmodern Bodies: Disgrace between Human and Animal Bodies" rightly authenticates the following analysis:

"Coetzee's play with proximity of humans and animals stems from historical and political contexts of the novel. It is a history of violation and injustices whereby the denial of human rights reduced people in the figurative status of animals and counter violence reduced others to the same figurative status of disgraced animal" (Neimneh 6)

The above phrasal articulation efficiently includes both blacks and whites, human and nonhuman beings under one umbrella. From hereon, Lurie reverse journey towards introspective comprehension begins in the workable human-animal world of which he thrives forward to. It is at Bev's animal clinic that he will discover his association with animals and their suffering. As opposed to Petrus, the black prerogative, Lurie now performs the role of 'dog-man' in the service



of diseased and deceased animals. Several instances in the body of the narrative validate this propensity. For instance, Lurie will sympathize with the two sheep whom Petrus ties over a barren land for slaughter. He will wish if the poor animals could graze but their sole value is a utilitarian one, with their flesh having an edible value.

Further to this, Lurie's act of sharing his Byron opera with unwanted dogs adds an edge to his astonishing resonance whereby this inter-species communion achieves a pedestal of optimal worth. This in turn challenges the hierarchical perception of the west that is the static positioning of God, man and beast in a row, a sanctified dominion that empowers humans to brutalize and exploit the species counter to them. Darwinian theory of 'origin of species' dissolves the above supposition thus relegating it to the status of a mere conjecture. Therefore, the determinative relationship between humans and animals can be premised on egalitarian values of consolative understanding and inclusive geniality. Moreover, Bev's comment on the smelling powers of animals yet again interrogates the authority of the focalized narrative as well as disrupts the repulsive relation between human and nonhuman beings. It also highlights the significance the latter's communicative profoundness, a conscious awareness of their upcoming fate and how their disgrace and suffering adds on to Lurie's own unsocial passive and powerless spectatorial that is watching the disgrace of dying animals. In short, Lurie's change of perception can be accounted to intuitive and physical experiences with nonhuman species as opposed to what is rational and scientific.

Next, the notion of animal fetish and edibility is worth elucidation. In this case, a comparative analysis between Coetzee's novel 'Disgrace' and his 'Priceton Lectures' can be conducted. Bev's statement about animal exploitation through brutish consumption of their body parts can be conveniently compared to what the animal rights activist Elizabeth Costello retorts in Coetzee's 'The Lives of Animals'.

"You ask me why I refuse to eat flesh. I, for my part, am astonished that you can put in your mouth the corpse of a dead animal, astonished that you do not find it nasty to chew hacked flesh and swallow the juices of death wounds" (Coetzee 26).

Plutarchian vegetarianism as formulated by Costello in the above phrase reflects the utter commodification of nonhuman beings, yet again reiterating the idea of 'Humanimalia' whereby Homo sapiens are not at all uneasy to consume the flesh of their fellow species. Coetzee too exercise the similar view point. In one of his interviews, when asked about his vegetarianism, he articulates the following:

"Yes, I am a vegetarian. I find the thought of stuffing fragments of corpses down my throat quite repulsive, and I am amazed that so many people do it everyday" (Satya 1).

Therefore, animals in the novel function as an endangered species, their lives remorselessly erased by human beings, both in terms of metaphorical comparability such as animalistic desires of Lurie in the first few chapters of the novel and their slaughter at the hands of people like

Petrus. This fact is in proportion with their reckless brutalization of nonhumans at the time of Lucy's rape. Lurie's act of digging a grave for six dead dogs is one of its exemplars. Thus, the idea of dogs as protectors of mankind is contested to the very core as they are the ones who face physical extinction at the hands of the latter. In short, animals feature a subsidiary existence in the lives of human beings, always connected to the notions of unwantedness, solitude and finally death.

This very repugnance is portrayed in Lucy's initiative of accepting what is in store for her and looking forward to begin her life anew "With nothing...No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity...like a dog" (Coetzee 205). It simply belabors the fate of animals in our society, beings that can be wiped off from the face of this planet without poignancy. Their birth is as unnoticeable as their death. This is one of the foremost reasons why dog owners have dropped their diseased and crippled dogs at Bev's clinic whereby the latter puts them to painless death using lethal. Moreover, it is the Kafkaesque feature of death that the carries weightage in regard to this narrative, dying like a dog, insecure, unepistemological and helpless.

Lurie in the final part of the novel is reduced to similar crisis. Now, he identifies with nonhuman creatures and recognizes them as equal partners in suffering, with a gloomy future in post apartheid South Africa. At this point, both his physical and emotional life intersects and overlaps with animals, both species vulnerable to megalomaniacal humiliation. This is something what the disgraced academic trainer needs to learn and understand, the continuous drooping down of his white masculine grandeur, his own daughter Lucy being misaligned and preposterous towards his phallic domination and finally the existence of animals, towards which he maintains benevolence as opposed to primary disinterest.

The closing lines of the narrative too substantiate the above underpinning. His final act of 'giving up' the crippled Driepoot, denotes his act of coming to terms with the harsh realities of life, his lack of role or decisiveness in Lucy's affairs, perhaps a direct feminist challenge on the part of his daughter who aims at dissolving the focalized perspective of her father. In other words, Lucy's defloration is her own business; her story that is completely beyond Lurie's hegemonic narrative, the descriptive enactment of which his part of narration will never undertake. He will comprehend this declarative assertion on her part and the significance attached to it only at the end of the novel. Therefore, his act of surrendering Driepoot to the hands of death signifies relinquishment of his prestige, identity and false conscience. In a way, he gives up his past paranoia and instead realizes his utter desolation in the new regime.

Altogether, Coetzee's 'Disgrace' critically demonstrates the animalization of experience on the part of David Lurie. With coloration of animals nearly on every page of the novel, either in the form of recurrent epitomes or as realistic observants of human actions and circumstances, they are endowed with anthromorphic faculty of appreciation (Driepoot response to Lurie's Byronic



opera) and service (watch-dogs at Lucy's farm). In addition, it is through the disgrace of dogs, their destined end through which Lurie both understands and overcomes his own disgrace. Thus, the idea of disgrace emblemizes a cosmic importance that includes all animals (human and nonhuman) under one roof.

And this is where the crux of the anecdote lies, a reality towards which not only Lurie but the entire human race requires to bear testimony. Humans are in no way superior or inferior to animals but just different when it comes to the values of reasoning, communication and bonding. Therefore, the nonhumans too should have similar rights as those catered to the non animal species, the humanoid right to life and equal protection before the eyes of law. Peter Singer's too provides a similar assertion, "the fact that [some] beings are not members of our species does not entitle us to exploit them, and the fact that other animals are less intelligent than we are does not mean that their interests may be disregarded" (Singer 1). In a nutshell, both humans and nonhumans (all categories of animals and beasts) are two sides of the same coin created by God and no species has a right to obfuscate the existence of the other and if such heraldic dissociation is practiced, a contrition (equivalent to Lurie's) need to be comprehended in order to make the society a better place to live in.

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