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Ananya Bose
Lecturer, Jalpaiguri
Government Engineering
College, Jalpaiguri, West
Bengal, India

Treatment of animals in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

Ananya Bose

Abstract

J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* exposes the moral issues of animal rights and their ethical treatment. This article questions the portrayal of animals as significant characters in the novel, as real as their human counterparts, whose intelligence and faculties of having morals or having a soul, reveals similar emotions shared by humans and animals, such as suffering, sacrifice and grief and looks into the possibilities of human redemption through service to animals. It is in this way that the novel allows David Lurie, the protagonist, who had fallen to disgrace, to regain his moral legitimacy without being 'reformed' as he finds his place among the dogs, whose dignity in death he protects. Thus the animal is used here as a medium which by its innocence, displaces guilt in the protagonist and helps him achieve a state of equilibrium.

Keywords: Suffering, disgrace, animal rights, empathy

Introduction

J. M. Coetzee, one of the most important writers of our time, takes up the issue of human exploitation and abuse of animals in his novel *Disgrace* where the protagonist's ill treatment of women and indifference towards animals is treated with social opprobrium. Later he, unreflectively, attempts to empathize and relate in different, dignified ways to his environment and creates a space for himself somewhere between grace and disgrace. Although not typically as a sort of *analogon* where one emphasizes on bodily similarity between one and the other as the motivation or source for empathy but as Edmund Husserl says in *Ideas II* that a tactile experience, touch rather than vision, which is characterised by 'double sensation' in that the touched object touches back and the touching organ is related with what is touched. The protagonist experiences a kind of conversion to a heightened state of moral awareness through his empathy to the plight of animals, especially dogs.

David Lurie falls from a position of authority within the establishment to that of an outcast. His sense of empathy for animals and other oppressed creatures awaken, as it seems, after he loses his status. The reason behind Lurie's fall from grace to disgrace is an improper affair which he has with a student, Melanie Isaacs. David evokes the concept of violation through animal metaphors of predator and prey. When he reflects upon his rape of Melanie Isaacs, he sees one of his sexual experiences - the affair involves forced sex - as, "Not rape, not quite that but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close in on its neck." The news of the affair soon becomes public and he is removed from his position. Later, David imagines his colleague Farodia Rassool's characterization of his sex with Melanie in similar terms. She describes it as "abuse of a young woman," and he wonders if she sees him as "a shark among the helpless little fishies." Animals are also invoked in David's self-pitying contemplation of castration: "They do it to animals every day, and animals survive well enough."

David describes his situation later to Bev Shaw saying: "Not just in trouble. In what I suppose one would call disgrace." (85) To escape from Cape Town he decides to visit his daughter Lucy, who runs a farm and a kennel in a remote rural area. Lucy introduces him to Bev Shaw, who runs the animal refuge where David comes to work as a volunteer. Initially, he is indifferent to the predicament of the animals; he says: "I just find it hard to whip up an interest in the subject. It is admirable, what you do, what she does, but to me animal-welfare people are a bit like Christians of a certain kind. Everyone is so cheerful and well intentioned that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging. Or to kick a cat." (73)

Correspondence
Ananya Bose
Lecturer, Jalpaiguri
Government Engineering
College, Jalpaiguri, West
Bengal, India

Initially David is unsure about volunteering at Bev's clinic. He says, "It suspiciously sounds like community service. It sounds like someone trying to make reparation for past misdeeds." (77)

During his many discussions about animals with Lucy and Bev, David remains generally sceptical of their contentions. Tension arises between Lucy and her father when their discussion turns to their different values and beliefs regarding animals. Lucy apprehends her father's disapproval of her way of life, she senses that her father probably want her to invest her energy in the arts and find a 'higher life'. She says, "They are not going to lead me to a higher life, and the reason is, there is no higher life. This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals...to share some of our human privilege with the beasts."(74) She explains that she tries to follow Bev in devoting her work to the care of animals. To this David replies, "We are of a different order of creation from the animals" and says kindness toward animals should not be motivated by guilt. David initially considers animals as "other." Although animals may appear to have complex qualities, David feels humans are "Not higher, necessarily, just different."

However, when David is living at his daughter's, he grows close to a particular animal, Katy the bulldog, which is abandoned at Lucy's kennel. He speaks to the dog of her abandonment, something David shares. He has been rejected by women, who no longer find him physically attractive; by the university where he made his career; and by the society in general. Inside Katy's kennel, David is calm enough to fall asleep on the ground next to the dog. This comfort signifies a shift in David. The gap between himself, the intellectual scholar and disciple of Wordsworth, and the animal "other," which he thought lacked a soul and intelligence, is closing. Lying on the ground with an abandoned female dog, David is beginning to humble himself and open his mind to new ways of thinking and being in the world. In one of his sessions with Bev, he observes about the community of animals, "'They are very egalitarian, aren't they,' he remarks. 'No classes. No one too high and mighty to smell another's backside.'"

The father-daughter duo discuss the question of whether animals have souls, with David reminding Lucy of the centuries-long debate on the subject by the Church Fathers, who said that they do not possess a soul and even though they did it was tethered to their body which perished with the death of the body. Lucy says, "I wouldn't know a soul if I saw one." (79) David however adheres to a Platonic ontology when he claims that we are all souls and were so before our birth as a body. After this discussion, David shows the first sign perhaps of his changing sensitivity when his attention turns to Katy. He finds himself and the bull dog in a similar situation, "abandoned". Katy points out, "The irony is, she must have offspring all over the district who would be happy to share their homes with her. But it's not in their power to invite her. They are part of the furniture, part of the alarm system. They do us the honour of treating us like gods, and we respond them by treating them like things." (78) After this moment he decides to give Bev a call and volunteer at the animal shelter. Initially, he remains skeptical of Bev's ascription of sensitivity and intelligence to animals. She tells him while holding the animals he should "Think comforting thoughts, think strong thoughts. They can smell what you're thinking." - an idea David rejects.

David had once considered castration as a way to deal with his own unsatisfied sexual desires. This idea takes a real shape when he sees a goat with a damaged scrotum at Bev's clinic. He had also entertained the idea that death was a solution to the problem of living with unfulfilled desires. This idea also takes a shape as the clinic practices euthanasia on the sickly animals. Thus David can be and is vulnerable with Bev because he can relate to the job that she has taken upon herself. It is to Bev that David admits his state of disgrace for the first time. It is the identification of his own suffering seen as a shared condition with the goat that leads to David's *metanoia* or change of heart. Later, he tried to comfort Bev by saying, "Perhaps he has already been through it. Born with foreknowledge, so to speak. This is Africa, after all. There have been goats here since the beginning of time. They don't have to be told what steel is for, and fire. They know how death comes to a goat. They are born prepared." (83-84).

As a result of his own suffering, David Lurie undergoes an undoubted *metanoia*. In his inward journey from being the victimiser to a victim, not only does the presence of animals play a significant part, he also uses the metaphor of dogs to explain his own situation. Recollecting the fate of a golden retriever that would be beaten regularly by its owners for getting excited upon seeing a bitch, Lurie says, "There was something so ignoble in the spectacle that I despaired. One can punish a dog, it seems to me, for an offence like chewing a slipper. A dog will accept the justice for that: a beating for a chewing. But desire is another story. No animal will accept the justice of being punished for following its instincts." (90) David finds justification in giving death to alleviate the pain of the poor creatures at the clinic, or the poor golden retriever or as he would consider for himself.

One of the first signs of David's transformation is evident when he displays sensitivity to the sheep tied in Petrus's yard shortly after his own assault by the locals. David is affected by the bleats of two young, black-faced sheep that he sees Petrus keeping tied up on a bare patch of a ground. The sheep will be butchered and served to guests at the party the latter has decided to give to celebrate his new status as a landowner. David is irritated by the noise caused by the sheep; he even considers purchasing them to save their lives, even though he tells Lucy, he still doesn't "believe that animals have properly individual lives." He unties them and tugs them over to the dam side, where there is abundant grass; the sheep then drink leisurely and begin to graze. It is pointed out, "Sheep do not own themselves, do not own their own lives. They exist to be used, every last ounce of them, their flesh to be eaten, their bones to be crushed and fed to poultry." (123) He points out the position of domesticated animals and the involvement of human beings in their governance. Animals are comprehensively controlled by modern states. Every aspect of their lives, their confinement and transportation, their reproduction, their ownership and sale, their killing, is minutely decided by an authority or a human agent. Despite this understanding, a bond seems to have formed between him and the two Persians, he does not know how. He reflects and considers the qualities of Bev Shaw that makes her communion with animals easy. In a moment, he too questions himself whether he was becoming like her. Thus, David Lurie, awakening to this reality of suffering bodies,

realizes the possibility of human communion with this pain in a community of suffering beings. However, in spite of their ethical awareness of animal suffering, Coetzee's characters only achieve passive awareness they are not a part of an awakened community engaged in political action, instead they remain a common average person who does not try to rise above their own emotional capacity. David is aware of his job at the animal shelter, which is to comfort animals who are being euthanized and to dispose of their bodies, he understands that most people bring their animals to the clinic as a convenient way of getting rid of them, the appropriate word for which would be *Lösung*, the German word for solution, like *Endlösung*, the Nazi term for the 'final solution', which draws a parallel between human treatment of animals and the Holocaust.

David commits himself to his job with no thought of absolution, either for himself, for the human race, or for the animals. He only displays a sense of commitment to relieve the animals of their pain, while not believing in any higher rationalization for such acts. He makes his intention behind joining Bev Shaw very clear in the beginning: "I'll do it. But only as long as I don't have to become a better person. I am not prepared to be reformed. I want to go on being myself. I'll do it on that basis." (77) It is his determination to make sure that the dogs' corpses are treated with dignity in the cremation process. When the workers strike the dogs' stiffened limbs with shovels to make them fit in the oven's feeder trolley, he intervenes, feeling that such thrashing deprives them of dignity at death, and he takes it upon himself to handle each body individually, respectfully.

Dogs play a crucial role throughout the novel; dogs that need to be castrated, that breed regardless of their numbers. Lucy once remarks that dogs still mean something, yet during the attack on the farm the guard dogs were not able to protect Lucy and Lurie, in the same way that Lurie, as Lucy's father, failed to protect her. It is also in this moment that all the guard dogs are shot in their cages. They were the healthy dogs, good breeds, young dogs that still had value as "watchdogs". These dogs would have been encouraged to breed. Their killing is symbolic of the 'death' of Lurie's own prowess as a man. The only dog that is not killed is Katy, the abandoned one. The two dogs Lurie is closest to are Katy, the abandoned one, and 'Driepoot', the three-legged, deformed one. Both are symbolic of Lurie's fallen and rejected state: "A shadow of grief falls over him: for Katy, alone in her cage, for himself".

As the novel progresses Lurie shows more and more affinity and identification with the dogs. He ultimately sees himself as unwanted and redundant. It is not surprising that, at the end of the novel, in the bare compound behind the building he makes a nest of sorts, where he spends his time with the doomed dogs, also perhaps waiting for a similar fate for himself. There is one he has come to feel a particular fondness for. It is a young male with a withered left hindquarter which it drags behind it ... no visitor has shown an interest in adopting it. Its period of grace is almost over; soon it will have to submit to the needle." The novel ends with Lurie deciding to put an end to the life of the deformed dog, to engage in one of their sessions of *Lösung*. He knows he could probably delay his end by a week but eventually the day will come, when perhaps he will carry him in his arms, into the operating room of Bev Shaw and caress, prepare his body for the needle, whisper to him and support him in the moment when bewilderingly, his legs buckle; and

then when the soul is out, fold him up and pack him away in his bag, and the next day wheel the bag into the flames and see that it is burnt up. This moment of pointless animal sacrifice, conceived as a betrayal of a devoted companion, serves to particularize the otherwise abstract mechanized slaughter of millions of animal companions that happens every day in animal shelters worldwide. In her study *Animal Victims in Modern Fiction*, Scholtmeijer notes that a deliberate ritualized sacrifice of an individual animal tends to trigger guilt in human participants-unlike in mechanized mass slaughter. To assuage the guilt, "mechanisms of justification must be deployed," Scholtmeijer stipulates. That Coetzee abjures such justification is what makes the killing of the dog in *Disgrace* so ethically unbearable for many readers. The guilt hangs palpably there but Coetzee does nothing to assuage it. The symbolism in Lurie's act of 'giving up' points to his own defeat and social deformity.

The last chapter of the novel has several moments of significance. Lurie questions his competence as a soon-to-be-grandfather. He thinks he will probably score lower than average as a grandfather as he lacks the qualities of equanimity, kindness, patience. Again, it is palpable that Lurie has indeed changed at least with regard to the animals, as "He has learned by now, from her, to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love" (219). This ability to "love" the animals is an improvement in his character, but whether that is sufficient to redeem him is a different question. At the end of the novel he decides to give up on his favourite doomed dog, "Driepoot" and it may be read as Lurie's final acceptance of his own doomed existence. Out of attachment to this particular dog, David would selfishly keep him alive, despite the dog's crippled body. However, in giving him a loving, painless death, David is valuing the dog's dignity, even his soul, over his own desires. David is giving something of himself up, too. He is giving up the part of himself that had a problem with sex. He is giving up the man who sought higher meaning through literature, the man who perhaps identified with the dog whose natural instinct was punished to the point that he was shamed by it. If there is a possibility of redemption for David within that, it is that he can let the dog go with love and companionship.

Coetzee's protagonists often grow an intense sensitivity towards animal suffering and loss of dignity. The association occurs most obviously in *Disgrace*, over whose narrative course David Lurie's attitude towards nonhuman animals alters considerably. Also, the writer's protagonists are somewhat similar to the protagonists in Kafka's narratives. They are somewhat men of achievement, an individual who is capable of coming to terms with his own imperfections and is capable of a sensible recognition of his limitations.

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