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**Beyond Humanity: Moral Decline and the Disparaged Communication of Animals in *Disgrace***

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the complex depiction of animals in J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*, highlighting that their role and treatment showcase the protagonist's moral deterioration and reflect the ethical downfall prevalent in post-apartheid South African society. Viewed through animal ethics and posthumanist theory, the research explores that the overlooked communication of animals reflects human alienation, emotional detachment, and societal degradation. The article contends that Coetzee employs animals not just as helpless victims, but as quiet observers of the collapse of empathy, exposing profound insights about power, violence, and moral obligation in a divided society.

**Keywords:** Animal Ethics, Empathy, post-apartheid, Silence.

J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* vividly illustrates the deterioration of ethics, human shortcomings, and changing power relations in South Africa after apartheid. One of its most striking and disturbing aspects is the depiction of animals particularly dogs not as mere background characters but as key moral figures in a world lacking empathy. David Lurie's hesitant interactions with animals at the clinic and crematorium reveal a parallel moral universe in which empathy is absent, and language proves ineffective in connecting different species and identities. The dissertation explores how this collapse in communication among humans and animals, and among humans themselves uncovers a profound spiritual and societal deterioration.

More than just allegories, the animals in *Disgrace* act as quiet channels for moral exploration. Coetzee's meticulous, frequently distressing portrayal of their pain provokes contemplation on the significance of being accountable in a society where language, authority, and advantage have traditionally oppressed the most defenseless. David Lurie's fall from intellectual pride to emotional modesty is closely connected to his experiences with these silent creatures. This paper contends that through the lens of posthumanist and ethical theories, *Disgrace* questions anthropocentric ideas of morality and presents readers with a stark depiction of humanity's inability to heed both itself and others.

In *Disgrace*, animals act as significant moral indicators, reflecting both the ethical decline of post-apartheid society and the personal evolution of David Lurie. The quiet anguish of animals particularly dogs reflects the muted human voices of the narrative: the helpless, the wronged, the forsaken. Coetzee contests human-centered views by highlighting animal suffering as morally important, urging readers to reflect on dignity and empathy outside the human sphere.

The novel intricately explores the moral decline of David Lurie, a fifty-two-year-old academic whose intellectual arrogance and emotional disconnection make him both a byproduct and a critic of a deteriorating ethical landscape. Lurie's decline starts with his improper relationship with a student, Melanie Isaacs. His initial absence of regret and refusal to sincerely accept fault illustrates a profound sense of entitlement stemming from both gender and educational privilege. He admits without remorse, stating, "I was enriched by the experience" (*Disgrace* 52), a remark that highlights his lack of moral insight. For Lurie, individual yearning and creative liberty take precedence over the truths of consent, vulnerability, and power disparities. His ethical perspective is viewed through a Romanticized lens, separating human behaviors from their moral outcomes.

Lurie's sense of self crumbles solely when he is removed from his institutional height and compelled to confront the harsh realities of manual work, country existence, and animal pain. Deprived of the frameworks that upheld his power, he starts to confront the moral landscape of humility and compassion areas that had escaped him in his academic sphere. Yet, his transition is not straightforward or redemptive in a typical manner.

Although he starts to experience unease and internal conflict particularly in the vet clinic, where he helps put down dogs he finds it hard to express a revised moral perspective. His moral development is revealed not by bold declarations but by quiet acts of service, implying that in Coetzee's universe, ethics are more about being, understanding, and perseverance than about words. As Lurie slowly surrenders his entitlement, the novel examines not only his individual decline but also the wider inability of a post-apartheid society to rethink human accountability.

Lurie's early apathy towards animals slowly transforms into a deep, nearly reverent acknowledgment of their pain. His role at the animal clinic alongside Bev Shaw where he assists in euthanizing unwanted dogs serves as a backdrop for an unwelcome moral awakening. A strong manifestation of this change is evident when Lurie insists on granting even the undesired dogs a sense of dignity in their passing: "He does not want to be the one from whom the dogs cringe, the one they fear. He wants to be like Bev Shaw, to whom they submit with trust" (*Disgrace* 143). This yearning is not based on sentimentality but on a profound ethical awareness of collective fragility. Coetzee depicts animals as quiet sufferers whose deaths are not just overlooked but accepted, representing a wider societal indifference and ethical insensitivity.

A significant moment takes place when Lurie contemplates the bodies he transports: "He helps her with the new incinerator. They put the dead dogs into plastic bags, slide them into the fire. A dog's corpse is not offensive to him. A dog's corpse is only a dog's corpse. It is a relief to find he can breathe freely" (*Disgrace* 146). However, this "relief" is temporary and misleading. Lurie's involvement in the ending of these lives haunts him, and over time he ceases to view their deaths as ordinary. His attempts to make sure the dogs are not callously abandoned but instead cremated with compassion and care indicate a quest for atonement, if not salvation. This quiet interment transforms into a deed of ethical restoration, opposing his prior moral oblivion.

The novel similarly juxtaposes the dignity of humans with that of animals. Although human characters frequently display cruelty or ethical ambiguity, the animals in *Disgrace* embody quiet resilience. Lurie is especially affected by the aging dog that lies "gazing at him intently" while he gets ready for its euthanasia: "He does not understand what he is doing, yet he does it. For all of them. For the dogs" (*Disgrace* 219). This service, devoid of justification or significance, indicates that ethics is found not in comprehension or authority, but in compassion and attentiveness.

Animals in *Disgrace* are not supplementary symbols; they are fundamental to the novel's moral perspective. Coetzee compels readers and Lurie to face the essence of moral conduct through their quiet anguish: empathy without expectation, respect without acknowledgment, and support without understanding. J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* provides an insightful critique of human-centered values by maintaining a strong emphasis on human-animal relationships, particularly within the post-apartheid South African setting.

The novel serves as a platform where posthumanist ethics focused on shifting the human from the center and reconsidering human exceptionalism are clearly demonstrated. David Lurie's slow moral enlightenment is closely connected to his experiences with animals, particularly through his employment at the animal clinic and his relationship with Bev Shaw's euthanasia work. These scenes challenge the conventional divisions of human/animal, logic/emotion, and control/submission.

Posthumanist theory, especially as expressed by academics such as Cary Wolfe, argues that human identity is not an independent, self-sufficient entity but is instead shaped through its connections with non-human others. In *Disgrace*, Lurie's closeness to the dying dogs beings deprived of dignity and speech compels him to face a degree of vulnerability and moral obligation that was lacking in his interactions with humans. Cary Wolfe notes, posthumanism "forces us to rethink not just the human in relation to the animal, but the human in relation to itself" (Wolfe, 77). Lurie's change is therefore not based on rational thought, but rather on emotional, physical expressions of care interring the burned bodies of dogs with a gentleness that sharply contrasts with his previous mistreatment of Melanie. His quiet involvement in this ceremony transforms into a moral act of modesty.

By portraying animals as entities deserving of ethical consideration, *Disgrace* urges readers to contemplate the limits of the moral community. The novel asserts that ethical responsibility extends beyond humanity; it is a vast, delicate duty that requires hearing the unheard and taking action without expectation of gain. In this regard, Coetzee's writing does not simply lament the decline of humanity, but points to a revitalized, posthuman morality of coexistence.

At the beginning of the novel, Lurie is a man of language, draped in scholarly power and verbal finesse. His manipulation of language, particularly in his connection with Melanie Isaacs, serves as a form of control. Yet, as his life deteriorates after the university tribunal, the assault on Lucy, and his period at the animal shelter Lurie increasingly faces situations that resist expression. Jane Poyner states that, "Lurie's work at the clinic, though seemingly menial, becomes a ritual of atonement, marking his transition from detachment to compassionate engagement" (Poyner 124). In times of trauma and sorrow, words fall short, and silence emerges as the sole honest reaction. Lucy tells him, "*What happened to me is mine... It's not a secret, but it is private*" (*Disgrace* 112). Her unwillingness to narrate or clarify compels Lurie into a role of passive observer an unfamiliar and uneasy position that requires ethical restraint instead of action.

Quietude also saturates Lurie's encounters with animals, especially at Bev Shaw's clinic. The dogs he puts to sleep cannot communicate, but their pain is clear. His choice to remain with their bodies awaiting the incinerator, treating them kindly in death transforms into a gesture of quiet solidarity, acknowledging their mutual vulnerability. As Susan VanZanten Gallagher observes, "Coetzee's ethical vision compels us to embrace a listening that does not presume comprehension but acknowledges alterity" (Gallagher 178). *Disgrace* encourages readers to embrace an ethics characterized not by speaking, explaining, or exerting control, but by listening: to silence, to suffering, to that which cannot be simplified into meaning. By accepting this silence, Lurie discovers a route not towards redemption in a religious or heroic manner but towards humility, responsibility, and a delicate type of grace.

In *Disgrace*, J.M. Coetzee dismantles traditional ethics based on rational dialogue and moral assurance by elevating silence as a significant form of ethical interaction. In the protagonist David Lurie's evolution from a man dependent on articulate speech and intellectual dominance to one who hears, cares for, and recognizes suffering without seeking justification Coetzee reshapes the journey toward redemption. The novel implies that genuine moral responsibility emerges not from power but from the silent act of observing.

This emerging ethics of listening especially to unheard voices, personal struggles, and non-human pain requires humility and acknowledgment of the constraints of language. By silently observing Lucy's agony and the unspoken distress of animals, Lurie faces the moral obligation to honor otherness without taking it over. Derek Attridge observes that, "Lurie's ultimate ethical awakening comes not through intellectual argument but through acts of care and surrender to the suffering of others, especially animals" (Attridge 176). Redemption, thus, appears not as a return to past standing or moral certainty, but as an acceptance of vulnerability and an acknowledgment of ethical ambiguity.

In this reimagined ethical framework, Coetzee encourages readers to rethink the importance of listening not merely as a passive action, but as a deliberate and transformative expression of care. *Disgrace* serves as a powerful literary reflection on how silence can transform into a realm of moral presence, and how genuine listening can act as a means of redemption.

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