

JM Coetzee's Alternative Ethics for Human and Non-human World in *Disgrace* and *The Lives of Animals*

- Namrata Nistandra

Abstract: *Disgrace* (1999), Coetzee's first novel to be set in post-apartheid South Africa, weaves multiple themes together. The country is going through a profound phase of transition where the power struggles have now reversed. Apartheid has officially been put to an end; but the whites are now at the receiving end. The novel is an ironic take on the new multi-cultural society where far from peace and reconciliation new forms of bitterness are emerging. David Lurie is a university Professor who is made to leave his job because he has seduced his student. Unwilling to compromise because he believes in the rights of 'desire', he seeks refuge in his daughter's smallholding in the country. The vulnerability of the whites in the new order is brought home to him in a nightmarish disaster where Lucy, his daughter, is gang raped by three black men while he is assaulted and locked in his own house. The aftermath of this incident and Lucy's choices raise important questions of survival in a violent society. Coetzee also questions the marginality and abuse of animals under human rule. This theme occupies more and more textual space as the novel progresses.

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The South African society is a distorted society. Ravaged by decades of apartheid, there is an air of hatred, power-grabbing, and revenge for the past atrocities. Land and its ownership are highly sensitive issues and an ugly social reality is the eviction movement whereby white farmers are violently evicted from their farms by squatters. Crime rate is touching abnormal proportions because of poverty and corruption. "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... Not human evil, just a vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant" (*Disgrace*, 98). The novel defies the image of country life as one of harmonious existence. Country life is no longer a blissful co-existence of human and non-human elements, rather a sordid picture of ruthless competition. *Disgrace*, thus, turns out to be an anti-pastoral novel in which farmers like Petrus are steeped in evil machinations and intrigue.

Racial and gender politics work together to degrade women. Lucy realizes that her violation had very deep roots; it had nothing to do with her being a woman. She thinks that the wrongs of the historical past are visiting her and she has to pay a price in order to live. "They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors" (158). What first seems to be a random act unfolds as a deliberate ploy to

throw Lucy out of her land. Lucy realizes her vulnerability and agrees to be Petrus's third wife. She suffers disgrace and shame because in a patriarchal society, the victim suffers the consequences of violation.

Lucy's attitude to her trauma cannot be readily explained. She refuses to share her experience with her father, does not take any legal action against the perpetrators of crime and refuses to leave the countryside. She chooses to keep the child even when the seed has been thrown in her in hatred. She passively resigns to her fate by accepting marriage to Petrus; a marriage that is the price she has to pay to live on her own land. Lucy emerges as a Jesus-figure by offering the other cheek to be slapped. She chooses suffering over any other possibility of a new life.

The violence is an outcome of hatred for the Other. In his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance speech, Coetzee underscores the problem of the failure of love in South Africa. He attaches great significance to the legal opposition to miscegenation in early apartheid legislation. He shows how the passing of a series of acts made marriage between black and white illegal. This led to "the denial of the desire to embrace the 'Other', and a fear of the reciprocal embrace" (qtd in Head 66). In the same speech, Coetzee also refers to Alan Paton's novel *Cry the Beloved Country*, and the day of reckoning prophesied by one of the black characters given the whites' failure to love: "I have one great fear in my heart, that one day when they are turned to loving we will find we are turned to hating" (97).

Non-violence is akin to the feminine qualities of caring for the less privileged, loving them and sharing whatever one has with them. Lucy lends a helping hand to Bev Shaw who runs a clinic for animals from the old premises of the Animal Welfare League. Shaw painfully realizes that fighting for the rights of animals is a losing game because animals do not count on the nation's priority list. She believes that humans must share some of their privileges with animals and give them a life worth living; rather than treating them like objects. It is ludicrous that human beings consider themselves superior to animals. Bev Shaw works actively for restoring some kind of dignity to the lives of animals. Working at the clinic, even David Lurie discovers a bond with neglected, malnourished dogs. Lucy's heart is wounded when her pets are killed in the assault. Her sensitivity to animals increases after her violation. She turns vegetarian and finds it impossible to sleep in a room where offal, bones and butcher's meat is kept. Coetzee's reaction to the reviews of the novel shows an inherent bias in the way the novel has been interpreted. Even when the animals figure prominently in the work, critics have given them lesser importance than other themes. In Coetzee's opinion, these reviewers "mirror the way in which animals are treated in the world we live in, namely as unimportant existences of which we take notice only when their lives cross ours" (Dawn and Singer 110).

Coetzee problematises the issue of male sexuality in the novel. David Lurie's seduction of Melanie Isaacs, his student, may not make him an evil man but does make the reader feel that some kind of transgression, some misuse of authority has taken place. Lurie pauses for a while to

think that he is messing up a child's life but he cannot come out of the temptation. Coetzee complicates the problem as the girl is coloured and the seduction takes place in Lurie's daughter's room. The thoughts of castration often haunt Laurie after the incident. Later in the novel, the abnormal aspect of male sexuality is manifest in the form of gang rape. As the narrative unfolds, Lurie is able to transcend his own self and come to terms with his desires by making himself responsible for the Other i.e. diseased, dying and neglected animals.

Coetzee's focus is on the oppressiveness inherent in heterosexuality. Lucy defies the conventional gender roles assigned to women by society. She prefers to shun male company and lives life on her own terms. She is a lesbian who explores female companionship with Helen. Lurie imagines that the girls are happy together but his presence might be keeping them apart. He is not happy with Lucy's choice but he dare not question her. When Lurie sees her daughter suffering, he realizes that perhaps women would be happier living in one another's company. Coetzee's position here is analogous to that of many feminists who see heterosexuality as a social construct based on the premise that the needs of men come first. Even lesbianism is primarily seen as a sexual interaction but it is much more than that. Adrienne Rich talks about the 'lesbian continuum' in which she includes not only social acts but "many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical support..." (648).

Coetzee's criticism of the violent society and his vision of an alternative social order have strong ecofeminist leanings. Ecofeminism looks at the way the attitudes toward women and earth are intertwined. A glance at history tells us that there was a time when women enjoyed power in society. Patriarchy that is so well entrenched today is 5000 years old. Women were held in high regard in the Neolithic settlements prior to the Bronze Age. It was also the time when Earth was revered. The transition from hunting to agricultural phase coincided with the denigration of earth and women. As pointed out by Rosemary Radford Ruether, this phase brought a new sense of land as owned by the family head, passed down through a male line of descent. The possession of women, slaves, animals, and land all got symbolically and socially linked together ("Ecofeminism"). Western culture's nature/culture dichotomy too links woman with nature and man with culture. The western notion of 'progress' and 'development' has resulted in the death of the "feminine principle." Vandana Shiva maintains that this model is inherently patriarchal as it is based on nature's destruction and women's subjugation.

Ecofeminism is the union of 'deep ecology' and feminism. Deep ecology believes that the richness and diversity of life forms contributes to the flourishing of human and non-human life on earth. As Ruether points out, the ecofeminist ethic means that we need to discover our actual

reality as latecomers to the planet and our utter dependence on the great life-producing matrix of the planet in order to learn to reintegrate our human systems of production, consumption and waste into the actual patterns by which nature sustains life. Ecofeminist culture seeks to reshape our basic sense of self in relation to the life cycle. All racist, sexist, classist and anthropocentric assumptions of the superiority of whites over blacks, males over females, managers over workers, humans over animals and plants must be culturally discarded. Ecofeminism is a part and extension of feminism. Ecofeminism continues the progression within traditional feminism from attention to sexism to all systems of human oppression such as racism, classism, ageism and heterosexism. It also recognizes that naturism, i.e., the exploitation of nature, is also a result of the logic of domination. Ecofeminists strongly believe in the concept of caring and in biological egalitarianism i.e. all species have inherent worth.

In the novel, Lucy and Bev have absorbed the ecofeminist ethic. Lucy bonds instinctively with Nature and Mother Earth. "Lucy's bare toes grip the red earth, leaving clear prints. A solid countrywoman, embedded in her new life" (62). The flora and fauna are of great significance in her life. She takes ample care that nature's meagre resources are not wasted. She considers herself fortunate that the wild geese pay her annual visits. She has learned to live an independent life, growing crop and keeping dogs in the kennels. But her confidence and independence have no significance in the patriarchal set-up. Farmers like Petrus yearn for sons as they think that it is a burden to have daughters. Here Coetzee exposes the oppression at the heart of the genre of the farm novel. Women are confined to the domestic sphere and sidelined as marginal because land ownership is in the hands of men.

Coetzee's alternative to violent society is explicitly expressed in his non-fiction *The Lives of Animals* (1997). Elizabeth Costello is the protagonist of *The Lives of Animals* and of the eponymous novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). The character Elizabeth Costello shares interesting parallels with the author J M Coetzee that makes us think that Costello is Coetzee's alter ego. Like Coetzee, Costello is a retired Professor and an aging novelist from a former British colony in the Southern hemisphere. Coetzee's views and personal choices reveal his passionate concern for animals and the way humans treat them. Coetzee is vegetarian. He is a patron of Voiceless, an Australian organization that gives grants to animal protection groups. He is also a patron of the Australian Association for Humane Research, an antivivisection group. He has also affiliated himself with some campaigns of PETA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. All these concerns are reflected in his later fiction and non-fiction.

In both *The Lives of Animals* and *Elizabeth Costello*, Costello is a well-known Australian novelist who is invited by Appleton College to deliver the annual Gates Lecture. She chooses to speak on a "crime of stupefying

proportions”: the abuse of animals. She criticizes philosophers like Kant who place extraordinary emphasis on 'reason' as the guiding principle of the universe. Humans think that they are justified in abusing animals because the latter do not have the faculty to understand the universe. Descartes opines that an animal lives like a machine. It does not think, hence it is second-class. Costello compares the tortures inflicted on animals to the horrors of concentration camps. She thinks that viewing the animals as 'Other' and closing our hearts to them makes us cruel. “If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life” (35). Her views clash with her daughter-in-law Norma's who believes that animals are just biological automata. Mrs Costello talks about Rilke and Ted Hughes in her discourse.

Coetzee's alter ego cites the work of Jonathan Swift and raises the question if it is atrocious to eat human babies, why it isn't atrocious to eat piglets? She also responds passionately to Prof. O'Hearne's statement that animals are imbecile. She asserts that this is a profoundly anthropocentric view and rather the experiments conducted by humans are imbecile. O'Hearne's argument is that animals fail to see death as humans do. So, it is legitimate to kill animals as their lives are not as important to them as humans' lives to them. Costello refutes this argument by urging the audience to see how the whole being of an animal struggles against death. “...I urge you to read the poets who return the living, electric being to language; and if the poets do not move you, I urge you to walk, flank to flank, beside the beast that is prodded down the chute to his executioner” (65). In this book, Coetzee attempts to unite aesthetics and ethics, as Amy Guttman points out in the introduction “Coetzee stirs our imaginations by confronting us with an articulate, intelligent, aging, and increasingly alienated novelist who cannot help but be exasperated with her fellow human beings, many of them academics, who are unnecessarily cruel to animals and apparently (but not admittedly) committed to cruelty” (5).

Mrs Costello's perspective creates conflict in her personal and professional sphere. She does not get along with her daughter-in-law who dismisses her exhortations as mere food fads. She detests Costello's moralizing about vegetarianism and interference in the children's food habits. Costello's analogy of cruelty to animals to the Third Reich offends Abraham Stern, an aging poet. He refuses to break bread with her and writes a note to her expressing her anguish. Coetzee's inclination towards vegetarianism is also revealed in a 1995 essay “Meat Country.” In this essay, he accepts that eating meat is the way of the world in the animal kingdom. Desiring to eat flesh might be human nature but the possibility fills him with revulsion and disgust. Coetzee describes his visit to the meat hall in this manner: “No longer does the air hold the scent of melons and peaches. Instead there is a smell of blood and death, and all the

exertions of the smiling assistants behind the counters to scrub and sterilize will not chase it away” (qtd in Dawn and Singer 112). Coetzee expresses amazement at the thought that so many people stuff fragments of corpses down their throats everyday and they do it with ease.

Disgrace raises the questions of moral psychology and morality and suggests a glimmer of hope to redeem the diseased South African society. Even if there are no signs of imminent social change; there is solace in knowing grace in a life of disgrace. Adriaan van Heerden considers Coetzee's exploration of the concept of disgrace as a singularly significant contribution to moral psychology as this concept has not been discussed much in western philosophy. More emphasis has been attached to the concept of guilt and shame. Guilt, shame and disgrace are related concepts and they indicate a pathological relationship between the individual and society. All these are the consequences of damaged social fabric. For Heerden, one function of guilt, shame and disgrace is that they act as mechanisms for policing social harmony (45). Though shame and guilt are sometimes used interchangeably, they are very different from each other. From the Christian perspective, guilt is a godly sorrow that results in repentance and salvation. It arises because of violation of one's internal values. Guilt is an awareness tinged with remorse. The Bible attaches great significance to guilt because it brings a change of heart and paves the way for reconciliation with God. Shame is a consequence of violation of cultural or social norms. It is a feeling of embarrassment to be avoided or borne silently.

The ideal of any society is to achieve social harmony. In his memoir on Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Desmond Tutu gives importance to *ubuntu* as contributing to social harmony. This concept incorporates the high ideals of reconciliation, humanity and brotherhood. People with *ubuntu* are “generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate. They share what they have” (Tutu, 34). Social harmony can be achieved only if we participate in community life and operate in relations of interdependence. Tutu further explains that people with *ubuntu* do not feel threatened because of the prosperity of others. Such persons know that they belong to the greater whole and that their own worth is diminished when other people are humiliated or oppressed. This concept underscores that nobody can live in isolation; the essence of being human is to believe in this interconnectedness. The concept of *ubuntu* has a special significance in the African culture where it is given religious dimension. Persons with *ubuntu* are venerated in society. Nelson Mandela points out that such people consider their pursuit of money in terms of its contribution to the wellbeing of community. Stenlake JWT Samkange highlights the three maxims of Ubuntuism that shape this philosophy. The first maxim states that to be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish respectful human relations with them. The second maxim asserts that if one is faced with a decisive choice between wealth and the

preservation of human life, then one should opt for the preservation of life. The third maxim believes that the king owes his status and powers to the will of people under him. ("Ubuntu") This concept does not encourage individualism; it expects all members of society to strive toward the highest virtues upheld by society. These virtues include maintenance of social harmony and the spirit of sharing. The philosophy can be summed up in these words: "I am a human because I belong. I participate. I share."

Disgrace created a lot of controversy when it first appeared in South Africa. People thought that its theme of black on white rape sent a wrong signal at a time when Truth and Reconciliation Commissions were being set up in South Africa to promote racial harmony in society. Adverse reaction to the novel is supposed to be responsible for Coetzee's decision to leave South Africa for good and his move to Australia. But the novel is a nuanced text that explores the suffering of humans and non-humans in times of violence. Its theme of grace while living in disgrace; feeling responsibility for the Other and belief in non-violence make the novel transcend its immediate context and generate echoes of the universal.

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