

VAGE SYMPATHY TOWARD ANIMALS IN J. M. COETZEE'S DISGRACE

Szu-Han Wang

Faculty of Language Centre, National United University, Taiwan

ABSTRACT: *This report tends to focus on human-animal relationship by discussing how subversively the protagonist, David Lurie's attitude toward animals changes, and how his attitude reflects life and ecological philosophy in Disgrace, which presents the chaos and complicated phenomena in South Africa society involving male-female, father-daughter, white-black, city-country, and human-animal relationship. Referring to life philosophy, there is no option but submission in living beings' route to death. In other words, there is no apparent difference between the existence of animals and human beings especially when facing formidable or unavoidable external forces. Through writing materials concerning animals as creatures abjectly suffering from pain, captivity and death at the hands of humans, Coetzee provides readers space to imagine how animal beings might feel at the moment of torture instead of delectation. However, transition of David's attitude toward animals from indifference to solicitude, and from solicitude to euthanasia elucidates how animal living and dying could be looked upon in human society and logic of ethic.*

KEYWORDS: Disgrace, J. M. Coetzee, Eco-Criticism, Philosophy, Sympathy, Ethic

INTRODUCTION

Reading strategies have been divided into “aesthetic reading” and “non-aesthetic reading” (Womack 107). The former strategy designates readers pay heed to what occurs while reading; the latter technique expounds readers take notice of knowledge or information that still remain after reading. For discussing the materials relating to ecological (animal) questions, instead of appreciating artistic writing technique, this paper pays attention on practical material from human experience in the light of “non-aesthetic reading.” In Coetzee's work, readers not only grasp the issue, physical slaughter of animals by humans but also conceive the interrogation of humanity. In *Disgrace*, as a result of being accused of sexual attentions on a student, the protagonist, Lurie gives up his occupation and leaves for the countryside to learn how to get along with her daughter (Lucie) and to adapt to the country life—taking care of animals, taking planting as leisure activities, and going to the market on Mondays. For spending his vapid life, Lurie lets caring for animals as a regular job to dispose of animal corpses in the veterinary clinic of Bev, a good friend of Lucy's and a fanatic lover of forsaken animals. Howbeit, his attitude towards animals shifts and he becomes an animal carer “much more intimately involved with other animal's deaths at the hands of human” (Tremaine 594).

The relationship between humans and animals falls on the one of the powerful and powerless, and the dominator and dominated. To Lurie, who never senses the existence of animals, ego intensely occupies his mind while facing the other animals' physical incompleteness because when people “perceive the face of the other,” they cannot ethically “suspend responsibility for other beings” (Womack 116). Similarly, humans and Nature's relationship also react in the model mentioned above. Harmony between men and Nature has been gradually disappearing owing to rapid development of human material society “upon foundations provided by a single

kind of knowledge, scientific or otherwise” causing distortions (Evernden 103). Considering themselves as rational victors, people make use of advanced technique and technology which take them to a utilitarian world but also might bring them disasters. In this plot, Lurie feels shocked when Petrus finishes plowing the field with agricultural machines in only few hours which never happened ten years before in Africa. Technology has totally replaced manpower and has speeded up exhausting nature resources.

Initially, for reluctantly working in the veterinarian clinic, Lurie and Lucy dispute about the issue that looking after animals should be taken as an inferior job or not. In the early part of Lurie’s country life, he has freed himself from the character he feels accustomed to play in his urban teaching life, a dominant white bourgeoisie without a heart of sympathy toward creatures in Nature. To an individual, feeling willing to coexist with others or not usually depends on how civilized one’s living circumstance is. That is to say urban and rural life respectively supplies contrary points of view toward life. In the capital, Lurie lives as an intellectual who regards life as nothingness and has lost himself. Particularly when being embroiled in a scandal with a student, he refuses to repent publicly on account of his unconscious internal arrogance—disregarding his harming others and immersing himself in human desire until feeling shocked to learn that her daughter, as a woman, is raped on the farm. By contrast, in countryside, simple and pure life brings him introspection accompanied by rethinking the essence of life. Resulting from frustration in resuming his job in university, Lurie lives a new life by driving to the farm and pays more and more sympathy on animals he originally neglected in Lucy’s farm and Bev’s clinic.

In *Disgrace*, “animals can be found on virtually every page” and “they are often in the process of becoming lost, neglected, abandoned, attacked and burned. Animals fare badly in a world in which they ‘do not own their lives’ and in which ‘they exist to be used’” (Herron 474). Besides, the problems of stray dogs and his daughter’s being raped remind Lurie the weakness and helplessness of creatures who/which can never control destiny on one’s own. No matter how much one makes effort in rescuing oneself by sacrificing dignity, unavoidable suffering still exists. It is the reason why Lurie and Lucy choose the natural rule, to be obedient and live on in degradation, like animals.

After witnessing how local inhabitants treating animals, Lurie perceives that in the world, existence of life is tantamount to torment, and the distinction between superior lives (humans’ lives) and inferior ones (animals’ lives) is meaningless. At the beginning, Lurie feels confused about his and Lucy’s life status and even cannot comprehend that why Western civilization is superficial and hypocritical to Lucy, who raises flowers and vegetables and has a kennel for homeless dogs, regarding returning to original and natural living style is authentic and profound. Nevertheless, Lucy’s father finally gets the answer that human and animals have no difference. In this way, on the land, there is no so-called superior status in animals, white or black people. Possessing new philosophy toward life and ecology, he makes discourse to Lucy,

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 the animals. That’s the example that people like Bev try to set. That’s the example I try to follow. To share some of our privileges with the beasts, I don’t want to come back in another existence as a dog or a pig and have to live as dogs or pigs do under us. [. . .] Lucy, my dearest, don’t be cross. Yes, I agree, this is the only life there is. As for animals, by all means let us be kind to them. But let us not lose perspective. We are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, necessarily, just

different. So if we are going to be kind, let it be out of simple generosity, not because we feel guilty or fear retribution. (74)

Although Lurie points out that there is no hierarchical discrimination in human and animals' life, people are still "of a different order of creation from the animals." It has expounded why the male protagonist finally takes it for granted to supply animals mercy killing without concerning if animals have right to choose to survive on earth. As what Plumwood expounds, anthropocentrism constructs animals by applying the rule of "the One and the Other"—Nature and animals exist as Other in relation to mankind; women live as Other in relation to men; the black survive as Other in relations to the white (106). Nevertheless, after going through horrific events of robbery and daughters' sexual harassment on the farm, Lurie tries to break the rule of "the One and the Other" in his cognition of life philosophy—all creatures are equally innocent and mortal. Consequently, animosity equals nothing. Such intellect prompts him to abstain from investigating casualties that had ever threatened him and Lucy's life although he probably recognizes those happen as a result of historical disgrace, apartheid.

Lurie's most significant responsibility is to help animals get rid of physical torture. For lightening bitterness of incurable animals, euthanasia becomes the only itinerary to finish their lives but this had ever disquieted Lurie, who asserts that euthanasia means the loss of life dignity. Gradually, he naturally throws animal corpses into crematory and "saves the honour of corpses because there is no one else stupid enough to do it" and feels "curious that a man as selfish as he ought to be offering himself to the service of dead dogs" (146). At final part of this novel, Lurie throws a dog getting along with him for one week into crematory by himself without any agitation. It is incomprehensible for readers to image that a character who had ever tried his best to soothe a ship on the verge of death finally murders animals without mental undulation. Humanity ultimately crosses criteria of morality.

In virtue of colonial influence, a superabundance of stray dogs drag out their lives in Africa. Explained by Coetzee, "They are white people's dogs. Unnamed and largely undifferentiated, they function in post-apartheid South Africa as part of an apparatus of deterrence (including electrified fences and guns) designed to control the blacks" (60). These watchdogs are not a new phenomenon in South Africa "but one which testifies to the general state of anxiety about crime" owing to immorality of racism and apartheid (Kossew153). In human-centered world, dogs are taken as tools during colonial period to control the black by the white who define animals as non-human machines, like what Evernden proposes,

Animal are not treated as subjects—and therein lies one of the reasons that we are often offended by comparisons between ourselves and other animals. "Animal" is, by convention, the name of a thing, an object, a clever machine. To say one is animal-like is to say that he is thing like, a mere object, or that he behaves like a machine, with no awareness or initiative. Of course, it is equally insulting to the animal. (77)

Animal euthanasia, an issue concerning ethic for dealing with seriously sick dogs, represents one of significant segments in this novel to express how human beings treat animals (as the other) in dealing with their pain by finishing animals' life in the way of painless analgesia for ceasing their intense suffering. Different from euthanasia, unnatural death caused by external factors, natural death is suffering and extraordinary arduous for animals to stand in the remains of life. Nevertheless, turning to the aspect of mankind, who would never be treated with euthanasia unless becoming moribund patients, humans permanently put themselves in distinct

positions from animals due to human-centered awareness, and ignore that people belong to Nature—actually possessing same status with animals. The perspective of destructing surplus stray animals with euthanasia in *Disgrace* reminds us of again criticizing “Francis Bacon’s dictum that nature should serve man or Rene Descartes’ insistence that the animal feel no pain” (Shepherd 3). It should be seriously criticized that men rather than animals know what death is so it is still equitable to sympathetically murder animals without resulting in their pain.

CONCLUSION

The arrangement of animal issues in Coetzee’s writing contributes a reflecting and deeper concern about suffering and death of living beings to readers. Animals can never impartially obtain equal status with mankind in human society. In mercy killing, no one can make sure if the murdered creature embraces consciousness with panic that its life is forced to discontinue; no one can confirm if it indeed departs from pain with ease and dignity; no one can testify if animal euthanasia assuredly origins from human sympathy. At this moment, what matters is not constricted in an anesthetic but sanctity and respect toward lives.

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