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Beyond Metaphor: Animal Suffering and Human–Animal Relations in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and its Film Adaptation

1 Pushpalatha V G*& 2 Dr. P. Kiruthika

1 PhD Research Scholar (F/T), Department of English, Periyar University Centre for Postgraduate and Research Studies, Dharmapuri - 635205, Tamil Nadu, India

2 Assistant Professor, Department of English, Periyar University Centre for Postgraduate & Research Studies, Dharmapuri - 635 205, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* (1999) has received a lot of attention from scholars from all over the world in connection to topics of violence, guilt, power, race and the ethical problems of post-apartheid South Africa. However, the animals in the novel are seen in relation to human suffering, to social violence and to the apartheid guilt of the protagonists. The film adaptation of *Disgrace* (2008) changes this in a significant way. Because of the nature of the medium animals are presented in a more concrete way than in the novel and their suffering becomes visible in a more intense way. This study wants to focus on the representation of animals, animal suffering and human-animal relationships in Coetzee's *Disgrace* and in the film adaptation of this novel. By using a qualitative textual study by means of close reading this study wants to examine descriptions of animals, interactions between animals and humans, narrative moments in which animals are present as well as filmic representations of animals. The starting point of this study is formed by the concepts of human-animal relationships, animal ethics, representation of animals, animal othering and a position beyond anthropocentrism. This study argues that the animals in *Disgrace* should not be reduced to symbolic versions of human suffering. Their vulnerability, their dependence on humans and their exposure to violence of humans, in short, their otherness, forms the basis of the ethical demand that is addressed to humans in the novel. This demand is even more clearly pronounced in the filmic version of the novel. The film transforms the suffering of animals presented in the novel into concrete, visible bodies and actions. By reading *Disgrace* from a position beyond anthropocentrism this study tries to shift the attention from what animals mean for humans to the suffering of animals as such and to the demand for ethical recognition of this suffering.

Keywords: Animal Ethics, Human-Animal Relationships, Animal Suffering, Animal Othering, Anthropocentrism, *Disgrace*

Introduction

Literary depictions of animals have increasingly become a crucial cite for questioning the boundary between the human and the nonhuman. In narrative fiction, animals often appear as companions or victims. They can also be symbols, property, or figures through which human experience is articulated. This raises an ethical question: When animals figure in narratives of human violence and suffering, are they recognised as vulnerable beings in their own right, or are their experiences used mainly to throw light on human concerns? This question matters especially in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), where animals hold a constant yet

complicated position within a narrative shaped by violence, power, vulnerability, responsibility and ethical failure.

Much critical attention around *Disgrace* has centred on its treatment of post-apartheid South Africa, racial tension, sexual violence, guilt and the uneasy link between individual responsibility and historical violence (Beyard & Keramatfar, 2018; Kanchana, 2023). Animals are often read within these frameworks: abused and neglected creatures become metaphors that mirror the degradation, vulnerability, and moral consequences tied to human and apartheid histories. Such readings are important because Coetzee deliberately juxtaposes human and animal suffering. But reading animals mainly as metaphors for human guilt can also narrow the frame. The animal then becomes valuable only to the extent that it says something about humanity.

This problem shows up sharply in *Disgrace*, where David Lurie's gradual involvement with animals slowly unsettles his assumptions about human superiority and control.

“A dog-man, Petrus once called himself. Well, now he has become a dog-man: a dog undertaker; a dog psychopomp (Coetzee [Chapter 16, page 120])”.

Lucy's relation to the farm animals, Bev Shaw's work at the animal clinic and the treatment of unwanted dogs generate scenes in which animals are not just narrative symbols but vulnerable bodies exposed to human choices. The novel repeatedly returns to questions of care, ownership, abandonment, killing, and responsibility, blurring the boundary between human and animal suffering and inviting an ethical understanding of animals as beings whose vulnerability cannot be fully contained by human meanings.

The 2008 film adaptation directed by Steve Jacobs adds another dimension to this issue. Cinema does not just reproduce Coetzee's textual representation. It turns animal bodies, gestures, spaces and suffering as visual experience. That shift matters as the adaptation opens a way to ask how the ethical meaning of animal suffering changes when it moves from literary narration to cinematic visibility.

While existing scholarship offers valuable readings of animals in relation to symbolism, violence, ethics and post-apartheid conditions the link between animal representation and the question of animals' ethical standing remains underexplored, especially when the novel and the film adaptation are read together. This article examines how *Disgrace* represents animal suffering and human-animal relationships beyond a strictly anthropocentric frame. This article examines how *Disgrace* and its 2008 film adaptation represent the suffering of animals and human-animal relationships beyond a strictly anthropocentric frame. In both forms of the text the animals have an ethical significance that extends beyond their use as metaphor for human guilt. By focusing on the vulnerability of animals and the human structures that determine their lives and deaths both the novel and the film elaborate and challenge greatly the prevailing anthropocentric reading of animal suffering.

Literature Review

Ethical and political concerns with the presence of animals in J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace* have been a subject of scholarship for a long time. Animals in general and dogs in particular are at the center of critical consideration of the novel. In the majority of studies dogs are read through the lens of post-apartheid politics and guilt and are seen as either dehumanized others or as figures of marginalized groups of human subjects. A few studies of the novel explore the theme of “becoming animal” in the protagonist David Lurie’s growing relationship with the animals on the farm where he has taken up residence after losing his job as a professor of literature. In these readings Lurie’s growing closeness to the animals culminating in his role as euthaniser of the dogs on the farm marks his transition into a dog-man (Herron, 2005).

“Lurie himself later reflects, "I was not prepared for the degree to which it would

change me" (Coetzee [Chapter 6, page 64]).”

Other readings of the novel explore its postmodernism and its adoption of posthumanist theory in order to challenge the dominant anthropocentric reading of suffering, death and embodiment in the novel. In these studies the animals function as catalysts for Lurie's transformation, a transformation that ultimately has positive implications for his daughter Lucy and for the future of the country in general (Neimneh, 2014). A very small number of studies of the novel draw on feminist animality studies in order to read Lucy's alliance with the animals on the farm positively as a way of a return to ethics and of a possible hope for the future of the country in the aftermath of apartheid (Patil & Joshi, 2022). Furthermore, with the exception of a few very recent studies of the novel, there is a lack of scholarship on the novel's 2008 film adaptation by Steve Jacobs and there is a particular lack of comparison between the literary work and its filmic adaptation with respect to the novel's characteristic representation of animals and their suffering (Glenn, 2011). It is this particular lack that the current study intends to address.

Methodology

The study employs qualitative textual analysis through close reading of J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* and its 2008 film adaptation directed by Steve Jacobs. While the novel functions as the primary literary text, the film serves as a complementary visual text that reconfigures the narrative for the screen, with particular attention to scenes of animal suffering and human-animal encounters.

Within the selected scenes and descriptions of human and animal characters and their perceptions the analysis focuses on the moments when animals are depicted in vulnerable situations as well as in situations of care and of ownership and of abandonment. Their suffering and death are analysed within the framework of human–animal relations, of animal ethics, of representation of animals, of animal othering and of positioning beyond anthropocentrism. Rather than treating animals solely as symbols of human suffering or historical trauma, the close reading identifies points at which the animal's body and experience acquire ethical significance independent of their metaphorical function.

The study also explores the 2008 film version of the novel and attempts to clarify in which ways the visual representations of the animal's body and suffering differ from the novel's representation. The study aims to prove how *Disgrace* can be read both as a literary text and as a cinematic text that questions the anthropocentric view of animals and their position within human ethical systems.

Theoretical Framework

This study looks at *Disgrace* and its movie through the linked ideas of human–animal relationships, animal ethics, representation of animals, animal othering and a stance beyond anthropocentrism. These ideas give a structure to study how animals are placed in human-centred systems and how books and films can either support or challenge those placements.

Human–Animal Relationships

Human–animal relationships encompass the diverse ways in which humans and nonhuman animals encounter one another: through companionship, care, ownership, labour, dependence, abandonment, and violence. These relationships are structurally asymmetrical, organised by unequal distributions of power. In *Disgrace*, human agents routinely determine where animals live, whether they receive care, and whether they live or die.

"I don't want to come back in another existence as a dog or a pig and have to live as dogs or pigs live under us." (Coetzee [Chapter 8, page 61]).

Attending to these dynamics makes visible the ethical responsibilities that arise from human control over animal lives. Animal ethics concerns the moral consideration owed to animals on the basis of their sentience and vulnerability. Moving beyond instrumental evaluations that judge animals solely by their utility to humans, an ethical approach asks how human actions shape animal lives and whether animals merit independent moral attention (Singer, 1975; Regan, 1983). In *Disgrace*, acts of care and acts of violence stand

in stark tension, rendering responsibility toward animals a central moral problem. The treatment of unwanted dogs and Bev Shaw's work with injured animals are especially significant, as they foreground the concrete consequences of human choices for animal lives.

Representation of animals is about how books and movies build the presence of animals. Animals may function as symbols, metaphors, characters, victims, friends or real beings. A rigorous reading must attend both to what animals signify within a narrative and to how their material vulnerability is rendered.

Animal othering means treating animals as different from people and therefore leaving them out of equal moral care. The human-animal split has long backed the idea that humans are better by saying animals lack human language, thinking, awareness or moral power (Wolfe, 2003). In *Disgrace*, this split breaks down because animals feel weak while people control their bodies. Looking at these moments through animal othering helps the study see how animals get pushed aside in centred systems. A perspective that moves beyond anthropocentrism refuses to place human interests, experiences, and values at the centre of moral and interpretive concern. This stance does not ignore human suffering; rather, it questions why animal pain should be legible only through its relevance to human feeling (Wolfe, 2010). Adopting this framework allows the animals in *Disgrace* to be read as beings whose vulnerability matters in its own right, not merely as symbols of apartheid or human guilt. It shifts the critical question from "What do the animals mean to people?" to "What does the representation of their pain require us to recognise about animals themselves?"

The Animal Clinic as Ethical Site: Novel and Film

The animal clinic functions in both J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and its 2008 film adaptation as a key site for tracing David Lurie's ethical transformation. However, each medium constructs this space in formally distinct ways that shape its ethical impact. The novel presents the suffering and killing of animals in a restrained, matter-of-fact tone, resisting overt emotionalisation.

"This restraint is evident when the narrator notes, "Its period of grace is almost over; soon it will have to submit to the needle" (Coetzee [Chapter 24, page 174]). "The novel's closing exchange captures this starkly: Bev Shaw asks, "Are you giving him up?" and Lurie replies, "Yes. I am giving him up" (Coetzee [Chapter 24, page 178])."

By contrast, the film amplifies the affective weight of euthanasia scenes through silence, close-ups, extended takes, and a minimally intrusive soundtrack. Close-ups of the animals' eyes, in particular, invite viewers to inhabit the animals' perspective, risking a more anthropomorphic identification than the novel's unsentimental narration allows.

A study through the ethical frameworks of Peter Singer and Tom Regan, these formal differences become ethically significant. Singer's emphasis on sentience and the equal consideration of interests, and Regan's insistence on animals' inherent value as subjects-of-a-life, help clarify how each text registers animal suffering and affords animals moral standing (Singer, 1975; Regan, 1983). The novel's austere style keeps the ethical problem open and unresolved; the film's visual emphasis on bodily vulnerability and its restructured ending produce a stronger sense of closure around Lurie's moral reckoning. In this respect, the adaptation does not merely translate the novel's content but recalibrates its ethical ambiguity into a more visually and emotionally resolved form.

Conclusion

This study has argued that *Disgrace* and its 2008 film adaptation present animal suffering as a concern that cannot be fully contained within interpretations of animals as metaphors for human or apartheid guilt. Although the animals are closely connected to the novel's concerns with violence, vulnerability, power and responsibility their suffering also gains significance through their own embodied vulnerability. The treatment of dogs the practices of care and euthanasia and David Lurie's changing relationship with animals reveal the unequal power through which human beings determine the lives and deaths of nonhuman beings. Such

representations complicate the human-animal hierarchy. Expose the ethical consequences of treating animals as disposable or subordinate beings. The film adaptation extends this concern by making animal bodies, gestures, vulnerability and suffering visually perceptible. In moving from description to cinematic representation the adaptation does not simply reproduce the symbolic function of animals in the novel it creates a more immediate encounter with their physical presence. Reading the two texts together therefore shows that animal suffering can function at the time within the historical context of human violence and as an ethical issue concerning animals themselves. The central conclusion of this study is that *Disgrace* challenges an anthropocentric reading of animal representation. Its animals should be detached completely from the human and political context nor reduced to reflections of human guilt. Instead, their presence creates a space in which human responsibility toward nonhuman life becomes visible. This reading contributes to animal-centred criticism by showing how literature and film can question established boundaries between human and animal suffering and encourage a broader understanding of ethical recognition, beyond the human.

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