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SOCIAL TREATMENT OF ANIMALS IN LANGUAGE & LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

A variety of historical, philosophical and theological traditions have contributed to the way animals are treated in a society both tacitly and explicitly. This paper will explore how animals are treated in various cultural context with regard to language and literature given that animals are excluded from discussions of language and power as they are not, themselves, participants in their own social construction through language. Animals are voiceless beings and thus an inquiry into how to understand and give voice to others experience that seem impervious to our means of understanding; how to attend to difference without appropriating or distorting it. In addition to this, the coercive power used to oppress animals depends completely on the consent of the human population, who explicitly or implicitly agree to the way animals are treated linguistically. Language plays a role in the oppression and exploitation of animal population due to the manufacturing of consent within the human population. This paper will further look into moral aspects of animal treatment in language and 19<sup>th</sup> century literature and investigate how they impact animal life. This study will aim to answer the following questions: How does language, influence and how animals are socially constructed, treated in the dominant work of John Maxwell Coetzee

Keywords: Linguistics, Animal Studies, Literature, JM. Coetzee

In this section I will analyze two novels written by John Maxwell Coetzee, namely: *The Lives of Animals* and *Disgrace*. Through these two novels I will portray an increasing awareness of animals in Coetzee's work. In this section, I intend to analyze and put forth the importance of the presence of animals in Coetzee's work. In addition to this, Coetzee has given the central position to animals in these two novels on a linguistic level as well which further this indicates how animals are gaining significance and importance in literary texts as well.

In the first novel *Disgrace*, I will show how there is a radical shift in the character of Lurie from treating animals in a barbaric manner to becoming their savior.

In the novella *The Lives of Animals*, I will analyze the two lectures given by Elizabeth Costello who is the protagonist in the novel and how her relationship with the other characters in the novel impact her ideas about the animal world.

In the beginning of the novel, *Disgrace* the protagonist of the novel, David Lurie, comes across as a despicable character, one who abuses and humiliates animals and women on a linguistic level and is of the view that animals do not have a soul and are put in the society for fulfilling the human needs by exploiting them. Lurie is a professor who fulfils his sexual appetite by exploiting his university students against their will. He considers women and animals as objects existing merely in the structure of the society to gratify his selfish sexual needs. As the plot advances in the novel there comes an instance when Lurie looks at a pair of tethered sheep and says to himself, 'They exist to be used, every last ounce of them, their flesh to be eaten, their bones to be crushed and fed to poultry.' (J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*, p. 123). However, in due course of time he is charged with a case of a sexual assault from his student and thereafter expelled from the university, that is where his character goes through a transformation and he experiences a breakthrough in his relationship with the way he treats both animals and women. In the first part of the novel there exist no real animals, but animals are often used in metaphors. For instance, Lurie describes his love making with Soraya as similar to that of snakes: 'Intercourse between Soraya and himself must be, he imagines, rather like the copulation of snakes: lengthy, absorbed, but rather abstract, rather dry, even at its hottest.' (Coetzee, *Disgrace*, p.2-3).

In the first part of the novel, before David moves to the country, the animal references are most often used in a sexual or in a predatory situation. For instance, when Melanie has sex with Lurie in his flat it is described as follows from David's view point, 'Not rape, not quite like 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 on its neck' (Coetzee, *Disgrace*, p. 25). David places himself again in the role of predator and Melanie and other students are seen as prey. He seems to think of Melanie as a prey animal, mostly referring to her as either a bird or a dove who can be easily exploited. Lurie always thought to himself that women and animals are not capable to stand up for themselves and his this thought made him pay a heavy cost as when he was leaving the committee he was surrounded by students and reporters. He is not the hunter now, but the hunted. 'They circle around him like hunters who have cornered a strange beast and do not know how to finish it off' (Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 56). This incident leaves an indelible mark on him as role reversal takes place in his life and he finds himself as the prey. There is a radical shift in his character as he moves to stay with his daughter in the countryside because that is where he confronts a wide presence of animals. Lucy, his daughter begins to notice how animals start impacting Lurie in a surprising manner. For instance, the same two sheep whom he had disregarded previously have now become indispensable to him. 'I am disturbed,' he says, 'I cannot say why' (Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 127). We as readers realize that there is a bond beginning to establish between Lurie's own struggle to cope up with his reality and the plight of animals. In addition to this, Lurie notices a dog who's been abandoned by his owner and his heart melts for that creature. Inevitably he thinks in retrospect, how he would abandon animals on a linguistic level and then on a physical level. The pain he undergoes looking at the plight of that dog resembles his own pain of getting excluded from the society and for this reason he begins to view animals in a different light altogether. He further comes into contact with animals when he begins to work at the animal refuge and that is where he comes into contact with both alive and dead dogs.

Coetzee makes his readers contemplate that the lives of animals in *Disgrace* do not seem to be their own. They are controlled physically and linguistically by humans and they do with them as they will. Tom Herron also notes about the animals in *Disgrace* that, 'While animals can be found on virtually every page of *Disgrace*, they are often in the process of becoming lost. Neglected, abandoned, attacked, burned — animals fare badly in a world in which they 'do not own their lives' and in which 'they exist to be used' (Tom Herron, *Disgrace*, p.123).

As the plot of the novel progresses and Lurie comes in contact with a wider range of animals, it is in that moment that he begins to think about the ill treatment of animals and he philosophizes on them having a soul. In addition to this, he makes a crucial demarcation in his mind as he begins to think about the possibility of animals not being different from human beings. This is where Coetzee dismantles the boundaries of Lurie's fixed self and the difference between human and animals slowly begins to fade as when he works at the animal refuge he starts to see all animals from the perspective of not being unintelligent but from the

perspective of compassionate, kind, and intelligent beings who's capabilities are not different from the human race. Lurie no longer believes that animals, and especially dogs, are soulless. He describes what happens when he along with his daughter's friend, Bev, euthanizes a dog whom Lurie loved and he gives up on that dog. He says, 'Something happens in this room, something unmentionable: here the soul is yanked out of the body; briefly it hangs about in the air, twisting and contorting; then it is sucked away and gone' (Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 219). Lurie gains ground on the fact that soul is not something which exists exclusively for humans as all living creatures have life and experience the limit of pain in an equal measure.

Herron thinks the animals and the deliberation about their souls show that David has gone through a transformation of character at the end of the novel. Herron says about *Disgrace*, 'For a man so 'corroded' with 'skepticism' (Coetzee, *Disgrace*,102) to consider seriously the lives, deaths, and passage of souls of fellow disgraced beings is, as Coetzee's 1993 Nobel citation suggests, to 'capture the divine spark' in humans and in other animals.

Tom Herron seems to believe that Coetzee in *Disgrace* does not debase humanity, by awarding animals the same standing as humans, but that he might award animals the same "divine spark" as humans have. Herron points out animals speak to humans and humans in turn can reciprocate kindness, sympathy and love. Animals are used in a very descriptive manner in the novel and Coetzee has been successful in making animals an increasingly critical part of his works by reworking on the constitution of the human being as Coetzee has also been able to shift the focus for what it means to be human for a human being by working and citing the animal as the entry point of the entire discussion. There are no animals in the novel as the title suggests and yet *The Lives of Animals* focuses on animals, Elizabeth Costello chooses not to talk about literature but about animals instead. In the novel she gives two lectures about animals. Costello is very compassionate and adamant about animal rights and compares practices like the bio-industry to the holocaust. She herself is a vegetarian and is sensitive about other people eating meat around her: 'The children are eating separately because Elizabeth does not like to see meat on the table, while Norma refuses to change the children's diet to suit what she calls 'your mother's delicate sensibilities'' (J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, p.16).

The unconventional way in which *The Lives of Animals* was first conceived and the similarities between the protagonist of the novel and the author are other interesting points to discuss.

Coetzee was invited by Princeton to contribute to the Tanner Lectures. In the introduction to

*The Lives of the Animals*, Amy Gutmann says about the lectures and Coetzee's attribution to them, 'Like the typical Tanner Lectures, Coetzee's lectures focus on an important ethical issue – the way human beings treat animals – but the form of Coetzee's lectures is far from typical Tanner Lectures, which are generally philosophical essays.' (Coetzee, *The Lives Of Animals*, p.3)

Coetzee does not give a lecture about animal rights like Elizabeth, he does include her lecture about animals within his story. This does seem to imply that Coetzee has an interest in animals, ethics and through his story he is adding new insights into this subject. Of course, the story is fictional and thus one cannot conclude that the author Coetzee believes anything of what the characters of the story believe. However, choosing animals as the subject of Elizabeth's lectures and the debate does imply that animals and ethics is something Coetzee finds crucial.

Costello gives two lectures in *The Lives of Animals* and the book revolves around these two lectures. The first lecture is called "The philosophers and the Animals." Costello describes the place animals have in our world and our behavior towards them. She believes that the way we treat animals is similar to the way the Jews were treated in World War II and in her opinion there is no word like, 'reason' as 'reason' is a human invention and hence there is no main and significant division between human beings and animals.

She further claims that there is no limit to the imagination of humans: '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' (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, p.35). Costello wants to tell her readers that literature and language is a medium through which imagination is

possible on a large scale as through studying literature, even the field of Animal Studies gains prominence as language gives voice to the animal world. The theories in Costello's lectures do not go uncontested as after her first lecture someone from the audience asks Elizabeth what is the point of her lecture? Should everyone for example become a vegetarian? Elizabeth does not have an answer. She does not want to give principles about how we should treat animals. All that she says is: "open your heart, and listen to what your heart says" (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, p.37).

The second lecture, "*The Poets and the Animals*." Costello talks mostly about how poets have described animals in their poems. She tells her readers that poets describe animals not from the outside but try to get inside the animal. They imagine themselves as an animal and describe the animal's point-of view in their poems. Elizabeth mentions about a poem by Hughes, which she uses as an example: 'By bodying forth the jaguar, Hughes shows us that we too can embody animals – by the process called poetic invention that mingles breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will. He shows us how to bring the living body into being within ourselves. When we read the jaguar poem, when we recollect it afterwards in tranquility, we are for a brief while the jaguar. He ripples within us, he takes over our body, he is us' (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 53). This point reflects back as to what she claims in her other lecture that there is no limit to what one can imagine oneself into. Elizabeth portrays in this lecture that through the medium of language, and especially poetry, that one can image oneself in other beings, such as animals.

The lectures that Elizabeth Costello delivers and the points she cites in them do not go uncontested. Professor Thomas O'Hearne contests Costello's point and opposes her on critical points as made in her debates. His first point is that; current animal rights philosophies are a new Western concept and those ideas have been around for less than a hundred years. He states that it is presumptuous of the Western world to impose these ideas on other regions and cultures, who have their own beliefs about animal treatment. Costello agrees with O'Hearne's arguments. However, she adds that kindness to animals and keeping of pets is universal to humans as well. She argues further as she thinks it is 'appropriate that those who pioneered the industrialization of animal lives and the co-modification of animal flesh should be at the forefront of trying to atone for it' (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, p.61). Wendy Doniger, writes about the arguments made by O'Hearne and Elizabeth that she would 'like to make a stronger case for the non-Western religions, though not as strong as most animal lovers generally assume' (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, p.93). Doniger continues with explaining that one of the reasons for vegetarianism in Hindu or Buddhist religion is their belief against violence and their belief in reincarnation: 'Nevertheless, the logical assumption that any animal that one ate had to have been killed by *someone* led to a natural association between the ideal of vegetarianism and the ideal of nonviolence toward living creatures. And this ideal came to prevail in India, reinforced by the idea of reincarnation and its implication that humans and animals were part of a single system of the recycling of souls: do not kill an animal, for it might be your grandmother, or your grandchild, or you.' (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, p.97)

The second point of discussion in the debate is whether animals should have rights themselves or that humans should be bound by rules regarding the treatment of animals. According to O'Hearne, animals cannot claim or enforce or even understand those rights all by themselves. Costello replies that she does not believe animals are imbeciles, but that we judge them by our own standards, which is an argument similar to what we have seen in the paragraph about her first lecture. Humans do not understand the intelligence of animals but that does not make the animal stupid.

The third point of debate is whether animals understand death as we do. According to Professor O'Hearne animals do not understand death as we do and therefore their death has less meaning than ours. Elizabeth objects to this statement. She says that animals in a death struggle fight against it with their whole being and their entire body revolts against it. This shows that death for animals is just as important as it is for humans. Especially since it follows the argument she made in her first lecture: the animal's body is an animal's entire being.

Costello feels the need to become the voice of animals. One reason might be that she feels a closer bond towards animals because she is disconnected from the people around her. The question of language is

featuring in the background throughout as animals cannot speak our language and animals are positioned in our society through the medium of language. Elizabeth's handicap of not being a good public speaker is again similar to that of animals; they cannot express themselves publicly to humans. Animals cannot demand if their rights are respected or they have rights in the first place. Elizabeth shares similarities with animals and although she is a bad speaker, she can speak up for herself and others. Her choice to speak out for the voiceless, a group that is in some way similar to her, is not surprising as Costello's speaking out for the animals is in a way Costello is speaking out for herself.

Through her two lectures; *The Lives of Animals* first came into being. In the two lectures the main argument Costello gives is that she talks about her ideas on the treatment of animals, especially animals that are used for consumption. She compares the way western society treats animals to the way the Nazis treated the Jews. She also claims that it is not exclusively the treatment that is at fault but also the lack of empathy that humans seem to portray in relation to animals. She tries to deconstruct reason as a way to divide humans and animals and suggests a new way of empathizing with animals, namely through embodiment. In addition to that, she talks about how poets have managed to portray animals as they are. Coetzee does not only give Elizabeth a voice in the debate on animal rights but also allows others to speak. For example, after her first lecture there is a question about what the point of her lecture is, which is one question she cannot answer. What is also important in *The Lives of Animals* is the story between the lectures as Costello can at least speak up for herself, and try to explain herself to others. However, animals cannot and they need a spokesperson for them. In *The Lives of Animals* the focus is on animals, their linguistic treatment and how they are similar or different from humans. Coetzee gives his audience numerous ideas about animals but he never gives one singular viewpoint. However, giving animals such a huge focus does show that animals and ideas that have been used in philosophy, literature and language are crucial to him.

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