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DAVID LURIE'S IMPENDING TRANSFORMATION THROUGH DOGS IN "DISGRACE"

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ABSTRACT

J. M. Coetzee's "Disgrace" is not only about post-apartheid South Africa it also allegorises David Lurie's growing empathy for the dogs. In my paper I will try to establish a parallel between David Lurie and the animals used in the novel and see whether Coetzee was able to question the notion of speciesism or not. In different ways dogs are shown in the novel. When Lurie goes to Bev Shaw's animal refuge he repels. Later the same place becomes his refuge too. He becomes the 'dogman', a title that Petrus used once. Can we say then that the position and hierarchy between coloured and white people altered after the end of apartheid? If so, what about the position of the dogs (or animals for that matter)? In "Disgrace" violence against animal is shown in vivid details. Sometimes they are killed, sometimes they are given lethal thereby complementing Lucy's sarcastic words, "On the list of nation's priorities animals come nowhere". Lurie's racism and its connection with animal complicate the situation. It is also interesting to note how dogs help him to create music. David Lurie in his absolute abandonment finds solace in the dogs and music. Dogs' response to the opera symbolically represents empathy between two species. All these arguments will be developed in my paper.

Keywords: Post-apartheid, racism, speciesism, violence.

Coetzee in "Disgrace" symbolically places professor David Lurie with dogs. Lurie's empathy for the dogs grows only when he is cut off from everything. He has lost his job, couldn't save Lucy from the rapists and the father-daughter relationship is at stake. At this point he connects himself with dogs. When everything was alright Lurie couldn't even think about caressing other animals. He even found Bev Shaw's animal refuge filthy and unhygienic. But later the same place becomes his refuge too. He willingly goes to help Shaw. There he finds that in Bev Shaw's centre the animals are not only cured. It's also the place for giving lethal to the incurable animals. In response to Lurie's question "You don't mind?", Bev Shaw replies, "I do mind, I mind deeply. I wouldn't want someone doing it for me who didn't mind". (85) This whole notion of giving drugs to the incurable animals is problematic. Shaw thinks she is escorting them to death. Here the pattern becomes ritualistic. In the whole process Bev Shaw seems to be a priestess helping the dogs in purgatory. But do we really have the right to kill animals like this? It is not only an ethical or moral question. It is anthropocentrism of some sort which supports the human-animal binary and creates a hierarchy within species situating human beings above all therefore Bev Shaw thinks it is her duty to give the animals a painless death without any hesitation. She assumes that they want death even when the gestures suggest they don't. Taking decision for another species itself suggests speciesism, the notion which will be questioned by Coetzee later in the text.

Gradually Lurie becomes a “dogman” which itself is a symbol for the changing relation between the white people and the coloured people in postapartheid South Africa. He comes to a position which was once Petrus’s. But what about the position of the animals other than human beings? During the whole paradigmatic shift in the post-apartheid period “animals come nowhere”. But only through this shift David Lurie gains sympathy for the dogs. As Tom Herron points out it “occurs only when David is finally forced to abandon all that had hitherto sustained him as a white, liberal, libidinous academic.” (471) His loss of different identity markers helps him to connect with the dogs. He becomes primitive. Herron suggests that Lurie’s empathy grows to such extent that he becomes an animal. In that Kafka’s influence is noted. Lurie’s constant comparison of the animals and the coloured people, complicates his state of “becoming an animal”. “His racism emerges in his persistent zoomorphism.” (488) Especially during the rape of Lucy he projects certain animal characteristics upon the rapists. But at the end he realises “it is a new world they live in”.

There are lots of violence against animals in the text. Especially the brutal murder of the dogs of Lucy’s kennel is significant. All the dogs that are killed are watchdogs, white people’s dogs and they are killed by coloured men. This episode allegorises the change of power pattern. It is also significant to show how in the power politics of human being other marginal species are victimised. In contrast to the horror of the apartheid, the solidarity between different animals in Bev Shaw’s camp exemplifies the hollowness of human race.

Every Sunday Lurie and Bev Shaw euthanize the dogs and the next day he carries the carcasses to incinerator. Every time he does that, he becomes uncomfortable. “The more killings he assists in, the more jittery he gets.” (142) He even cries once. At this point we find a complete transformation of David. The same David cries who once told Lucy “we are of a different order of creation from the animals.” (74) Here the disgraced Lurie recognises the dog’s disgrace of dying. The whole episode of putting the dead dogs into the flame is vividly described and it is ritualistic in nature. He puts the bodies in plastic bags, carries them to the flame and burns them one by one. He wants them to rest in peace.

“Animals and art provide the substance of Lurie’s new existence.” (108) At the end of the book we see David Lurie working on his long-awaited project, an opera called “Byron in Italy”. He conceived it “as a chamber play about love and death, with a passionate young woman and a once passionate but now less than passionate older man.” But the plot doesn’t work out and he changes it to the tale of Teresa and dead Byron. Finally, he decides to “bring a dog into the piece” keeping Driepoot in mind. “In the early stages of composition animals have featured largely as ornament and as metaphor”, but later “they cease to be merely ornamental and come to actually constitute its form.” (485) The dog is fascinated by the sound of the banjo, he in fact reacts to David’s music. It is often assumed that only human beings are gifted with creativity and culture. Robert Bringhurst suggests that bird’s songs also have cultural tradition. Coetzee is here challenging the western speciesist beliefs about others. He shows how music connects two different species by breaking all the boundaries. Music becomes that symbolic boat of Noah where different species coexist.

To conclude, “Disgrace” deals with many things including post-apartheid South Africa, question of gender, rape and so on. But among all these, the dogs’ presence is allegorically significant. Only when Lurie is confronted to the dogs, his disgraced self finds solace. Derek Attridge points out that the novel does not give solution to the animal question rather “it conveys or produces an experience-beyond rationality and measured productivity-of their value”. (109)

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