

Compassionate Pedagogy and Other Forms of Lives in the Light of J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

M. Shakhawat Hossain

Senior Lecturer, Department of English, North South University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that compassion towards animals from a human is likely, when one thinks about animals and their suffering. For the dogs that are abandoned and eventually euthanized, David Lurie, the protagonist who now works at an animal welfare clinic, cries and also feels compassionately, which he never felt before. As David drives back to his home after spending a day at the clinic, “he actually has to stop at the roadside to recover himself. Tears flow down his face that he cannot stop; his hands shake. He does not understand what is happening to him. Until now he has been more or less indifferent to animals” (Coetzee 142-143). Moreover, David feels sorry for the two sheep that are grazing now, but that will be slaughtered in two days for a party. Two days later, at the party, when he is served two mutton chops, which come from the sheep that were alive just two days ago, he fails to eat the chops (Coetzee 131). He finally, once a professor of Byron, becomes a dog-man, “offering himself to the service of dead dogs” (Coetzee 146). For him, honoring dog corpses is better than teaching literature. The protagonist David Lurie, thus, challenges the whole notion of pedagogy, probably because pedagogy often overlooks the sufferings of the nonhuman living creatures. In other words, as the paper argues, thinking can instill compassion in humans for other forms of lives, and the roles of texts and pedagogy can be instrumental in this case.

The fact that animals or in Jacques Derrida's expression “nonhuman living creatures” (48) have emotions as well as can feel pain is usually ignored by humans and their texts. Human treatment of nonhuman animals not only in real life but also in texts seems to almost always create a hierarchy between the two, making the former superior and the latter inferior. In the age of humanism, when all truths are questioned and God is dead, humans themselves have become gods. “Nietzsche calls on humans to ... step into the vacuum created by the death of truth, of God” (Leitch 760). These humans who replaced God have subjected nonhuman animals to tremendous torments. Yuval Noah Harari notes, “massive increases in human power ... usually caused immense misery to other animals. ... We [Humans] are consequently wreaking havoc on our fellow animals and on the surrounding ecosystem” (465-466). While most contemporary texts reflect such havoc on nonhuman animals, J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, published in 2000, seems to challenge the hierarchical state between humans and nonhuman animals, as well as defy the latter's inferior state. The text rather shows that compassion towards nonhuman animals from a human is likely, especially when an individual starts thinking about the nonhuman animals and their suffering, as is the case with the protagonist David Lurie.

Humans at large seem almost not thoughtful about nonhuman animals or their suffering. Such human ignorance conceals the fact that nonhuman animals are even alive. Even though they breathe and have pain receptors or central nervous system – just like humans, nonhuman animals seem practically non-existing. The concealment of nonhuman animals also means there are crimes only against humans, not against nonhuman animals. Derrida rightly notes, “Do we [humans] consent to presume that every murder, every transgression of the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” concerns only man ..., and that, in sum, there are crimes only “against humanity”” (48)? In other words, as Derrida shows, not only murdering humans, but also slaughtering nonhuman animals is a crime. The idea of injustice does not apply to humans only, but also to

nonhuman animals. Coetzee, thus, confronts his readers to the idea of compassion for other forms of lives. He shows that a thinking human is also supposed to think about other forms of lives, which have emotion and feel pain. Thus, the always already focus on only humans is questioned in *Disgrace*.

The thought process of the protagonist David Lurie about nonhuman animals and their suffering begins after he has been asked to resign from his professorship at the Cape Technical University and after he resorts to his daughter Lucy's countryside residence in Eastern Cape's Grahamstown. At present David starts listening to Lucy's ideas about nonhuman animals. In fact, David is aware of Lucy's love for animals from her childhood, and "He has nothing against the animal lovers with whom Lucy has been mixed up as long as he can remember. The world would no doubt be a worse place without them" (Coetzee 72). At Grahamstown Lucy makes her living "from the kennels, and from selling flowers and garden produce. Nothing could be more simple" (Coetzee 61). Lucy feels sorry for one abandoned bulldog bitch Katy, whom she keeps in a cage in her kennel. Lucy states, "Poor old Katy, she's in mourning. No one wants her, and she knows it. ... They [dogs] do us the honour of treating us like gods, and we respond by treating them like things" (Coetzee 78). David agrees to this statement and is critical of ideas that are not compassionate to the nonhuman animals: "The Church Fathers had a long debate about them [dogs], and decided they don't have proper souls" (Coetzee 78). As the conversation between the father and daughter continues, Lucy wants to keep the bitch, even if no one will adopt her. Lucy does not want to euthanize Katy, and "A shadow of grief falls over him [David]: for Katy, alone in her cage, for himself, for everyone" (Coetzee 79). The conversation demonstrates that the protagonist feels compassionate for another form of life. He also seems to understand the seriousness of his daughter's feelings for nonhuman animals. Immediately at the end of this conversation over Katy, David agrees to take a new job as an assistant to Lucy's friend Bev Shaw at the local animal welfare clinic. Probably the conversation empathetically ignites his thoughts for the nonhuman animals, so he says to his daughter, "I'll go and help Bev Shaw" as well as asks her, "When shall I start" (Coetzee 79)?

David's thought process regarding nonhuman animals continues, especially when he becomes Bev Shaw's assistant at the animal welfare clinic. In order to inspect the condition of a patient goat, Bev Shaw directs David to fasten its legs. "The goat, a fullgrown buck, can barely walk. One half of his scrotum, yellow and purple, is swollen like a balloon; the other half is a mass of caked blood and dirt. He has been savaged by dogs" (Coetzee 82). Bev Shaw understands that the chances of the goat's survival are very little. "She collects herself and gets her feet. 'I'm afraid it's too late,' she says to the woman [the owner]. 'I can't make him better. ... you can leave him with me. I can give him a quiet end. He will let me do that for him. Shall I? Shall I keep him here'" (Coetzee 83)? But the owner woman does not agree to the euthanasia process. She takes her goat out. The new assistant David observes the situation and asks, "What was that all about" (Coetzee 83)? Instead of a cruel slaughtering for its meat at the hands of its owner, Bev Shaw in reality wanted to offer the goat a peaceful end to its life. But now she feels defeated when the owner takes the goat out, apparently for a slaughtering, for the meat. She "hides her face, blows her nose", and replies to David, "'It's nothing. I keep enough lethal for bad cases, but we can't force the owners. It's their animal, they like to slaughter in their own way. What a pity'" (Coetzee 83)! In other words, slaughtering nonhuman animals appears as an unkind execution, just like murdering humans. Referring to Jeremy Bentham, Derrida notes that "the question is not to know whether the animal can think, reason, or speak, etc. ... The *first* and *decisive* question would rather be to know whether animals *can suffer*" (27). In other words, pain is prioritized over all else, and Bev Shaw in *Disgrace* hesitates to accept such a painful fate for the animals, which ultimately touches David's heart, too. People with kind hearts for animals are rare, but here is Bev Shaw, as Coetzee portrays. As Bev Shaw's sorrowfulness for nonhuman animals touches David's heart, he thinks "Bev Shaw, ... [is] trying, absurdly, to lighten the load of Africa's suffering beasts" (Coetzee 84). Such stream of consciousness shows that David is probably going through a transcending stage, having compassionate corners within him for the nonhuman animals.

Moreover, David even rethinks about eating nonhuman animals' flesh for food, showing an utmost form of compassion. Petrus is an assistant from the locality to Lucy, and he is about to throw a party "[b]ecause of the land transfer. ... It's a big day for him" (Coetzee 124). For the party Petrus brings in two young sheep, who "are tethered all day beside the stable on a bare patch of ground", giving them almost no chance of drinking water or grazing (Coetzee 123). As David insists to tug "them over to the damside, where there is abundant grass", "[t]hey are for the party," says Petrus. "On Saturday I will slaughter them for the party. You and Lucy must come" (Coetzee 123). The invitation with references to the sheep disturbs him. Feeling compassionate towards the sheep, when Petrus is not around, David unties and takes them to the damside, allowing the sheep to drink and leisurely graze. He goes through the following stream of consciousness and feels regretful:

"They are black-faced Persians, alike in size, in markings, even in their movements. Twins, in all likelihood, destined since birth for the butcher's knife. Well, nothing remarkable in that. When did a sheep last die of old age? Sheep do not own themselves, do not own their lives. They exist to be used, every last ounce of them, their flesh to be eaten, their bones to be crushed and fed to poultry." (Coetzee 123)

Thoughts about the lives of the sheep seize David. Humans, as a living being, can choose the direction of their lives, but animals, as another living being, can they choose their lives, too? Humans own themselves, but who own the lives of animals? He keeps pondering about the upcoming brutal ending of the lives of the sheep: "Presumably they have until Saturday morning, two days. It seems a miserable way to spend the last two days of one's life" (Coetzee 125).

David even thinks about buying the sheep from Petrus and saving their lives, although he is aware that with the current animal-industrial complex simply buying the sheep may not be good enough. "He has thought of buying the sheep from Petrus. But what will that accomplish? Petrus will only use the money to buy new slaughter-animals, and pocket the difference" (Coetzee 126). It is true that the current structure has normalized brutality on the lives of nonhuman animals, and brutality will only be replaced by brutality. Such brutality takes place because of – as Kathleen Stachowski rightly notes – "the enormity of the animal industrial complex, its long reach into our lives, and how well it has done its job normalizing brutality toward[s] the animals whose very existence is forgotten". But, at least, David has started thinking about the slaughtering and suffering of the nonhuman animals. What is significant here is the thought of saving the lives of animals that has entered his conscience. Readers then find David admitting a bond that has developed between him and the sheep as well as other nonhuman animals: "A bond seems to have come into existence between himself and the two Persians, he does not know how. The bond is not one of affection. It is not even a bond with these two in particular, whom he could not pick out from a mob in a field. Nevertheless, suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him" (Coetzee 126). Such bond, such compassion may develop as a result of one's willingness to think, and in this case, about the nonhuman animals and their suffering. David even reminds that one has to enter into the life of a nonhuman animal, and "[o]ne has to be a certain kind of person, perhaps, with fewer complications" (Coetzee 126). No wonder, he refers to his daughter Lucy here, who leads a simpler life as well as who does not eat any meat. His daughter becomes his idol.

Consequently, two days later, at the party, when David is served two mutton chops, which come from the sheep that were alive just two days ago, he fails to eat the chops (Coetzee 131). As he is given a plate and holds it, some disturbing thoughts grasp him: "I am going to eat this, he says to himself. I am going to eat it and ask forgiveness afterwards" (Coetzee 131). At this stage the restlessness, the tension within the protagonist is very high. He feels guilty, too, for being part of the system that almost completely ignores the suffering of the nonhuman animals. Eventually, he passes on the plate without eating the chops (Coetzee 131). At this moment, David goes beyond the hierarchy between the human and nonhuman animals, he himself becomes a human animal, and it seems not unnatural for him to feel compassionate for the nonhuman animals. This passing

from the human to the animal makes David feel the suffering of the nonhuman animals and ultimately makes him kind towards the latter, just like Derrida theorizes in the *The Animal That Therefore I am*: “I move from “the ends of man,” that is the confines of man, to “the crossing of borders” between man and animal. Passing across borders or the ends of man I come or surrender to the animal, to the animal in itself, to the animal in me” (3). In other words, humans are animals, too, and, as the paper argues, thinking can instill compassion in humans for other forms of lives. In any society however the nonhuman animals’ slaughtering and meat are normalized, one can still become aware of the price nonhuman animals pay for such food, and, thus, one can become compassionate towards them, only when one starts thinking about their suffering, just like David.

David seems to be a fine example of a thinking creature, who goes through changes. His love does not revolve around one specific kind of nonhuman animals anymore; he now rather feels related to all nonhuman animals, and of different types. Also, as time passes, his feelings for the nonhuman animals becomes quite frequent and regular. A whole life of indifference towards nonhuman animals probably triggers this frequency, lest it is too late to be kind to them. Readers then find him feeling absolutely tormented for the dogs that are abandoned and eventually euthanized at the animal welfare clinic, where he is the one, who assists Bev Shaw do the job. “[H]e is the one who holds the dog still as the needle finds the vein and the drug hits the heart and the legs buckle and the eyes dim” (Coetzee 142). David cries and also feels compassionately for them, which he never felt before. As David drives back to his home one Sunday evening after spending a day at the clinic, “he actually has to stop at the roadside to recover himself. Tears flow down his face that he cannot stop; his hands shake. He does not understand what is happening to him. Until now he has been more or less indifferent to animals” (Coetzee 142-143). No matter however hard one’s habit becomes because of the indifference towards nonhuman animals, one can still break at any time. After all, humans are emotional animals, too. “Habit hardens: it must be so in most cases, but it does not seem to be so in his [David]. He does not seem to have the gift of hardness” (Coetzee 143). Habit may harden over time, but compassion can unlock anytime.

Finally, David’s respectful treatment of the dog corpses at the time of cremating shows how compassionate he has become towards nonhuman animals over even a short passage of time. David notices that the workmen are indifferent towards the dog corpses while loading them for the furnace. “[T]he workmen began to beat the bags with the backs of their shovels before loading them, to break the rigid limbs. It was then that he [David] intervened and took over the job himself” (Coetzee 144-145). Apart from being an assistant at the animal welfare clinic, he now takes up the job of a dog-man, just to honour the dogs for one last time. Every Monday he comes to the crematorium with his bags of dog corpses, does his work, and then goes back (Coetzee 145). “Why has he taken on this job” (Coetzee 145)? For Bev Shaw? For the sake of the dogs? He does not know, yet he concludes that he has taken it on “For himself, then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing” (Coetzee 146). In other words, David has discovered a new world within himself, a world where nonhuman animals are treated respectfully and compassionately, whether dead or alive. A Byron professor has now become a dog-man. For him honouring corpses is even better than teaching literature at a university. He feels, “there are other people to do these things ..., even the Byron thing. He saves the honour of corpses because there is no one else stupid enough to do it. That is what he is becoming: stupid, daft, wrongheaded” (Coetzee 146). Apparently clear, David is becoming as simple and compassionate as his daughter Lucy. Humanism, the idea that humans are the center of the planet, seems now at stake, in case of David. The human in *Disgrace* becomes a posthuman. The posthuman feels the pain of nonhuman living creatures, as well as understands that they have emotions, can think, and have a right to live, just like the human animal.

Humans live in a world where their condition is improving, but animals’ deteriorating. “In the last few decades we have at last made some real progress as far as the human condition is

concerned, with the reduction of famine, plague and war. Yet the situation of other animals is deteriorating more rapidly than ever before" (Harari 465). In a scenario like this, Coetzee's compassionate treatment of other forms of lives remains optimistic and exemplary. David's transformation from an indifferent person to becoming a compassionate individual signifies his emergence as the posthuman, transformation that transcends the human-animal binary and that establishes David as a Derridean animal.

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