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The Dogs of Disgrace: Animal Suffering and the Posthuman Rewriting of Subalternity

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Abstract

Subaltern Studies has traditionally argued and fought for the rights, inclusion, and representation of the marginalised, suppressed, and voiceless humans. From Antonio Gramsci to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the primary focus has always been the human life form. With the rise of posthumanist thinking, human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism have been going through unprecedented criticism and interrogation because of their exclusion and exploitation of non-human entities. The very question as to who counts as subaltern has been problematised now because the supremacy, centrality, and boundary of humans are losing their grounds. The forcefully created line separating humans from the non-human has blurred. At this point, humans and non-humans have started sharing subalternity in a human-animal continuum. Thus, this paper reframes subalternity in the light of posthumanism by re-examining the representation of animal life in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999).

Set in post-apartheid South Africa, the novel presents animals, especially dogs, as subaltern beings marginalised by institutional regulation, disposability, and routinised violence. The paper constructs a posthuman subaltern framework by closely reading the sections that involve animal care, euthanasia, and expendability. The enforced silence of the animal world exposes the limitations of the human-centred discourse that is premised on voice, agency, and resistance. Drawing on posthumanist theories of Rosi Braidotti and Cary Wolfe, in dialogue with Subaltern Studies, the paper shows how Coetzee destabilises human exceptionalism by reframing and reorienting the Subaltern Studies discourse towards a more inclusive, representative, and just understanding.

Keywords: Subaltern studies, dogs, animal life, posthumanism, marginalisation.

Introduction

Subaltern Studies as a field emerged as a critical intervention to eradicate the issues of forced marginalisation, voicelessness, and oppression of people or groups of people. It sought to foreground the problems faced by people due to irrational and unscientific grounds in religion, gender, race, caste, ethnicity, language, complexion, geography, and economic status. Influenced by the scholarship of Ranajit Guha and Eric Stokes, the Subaltern Studies Collective, or group, convened scholars from South Asia and beyond to interrogate and dismantle the discrimination and violence inflicted upon people for being or belonging to any of the aforementioned categories that are not part of the mainstream or central group (Singh, 2025, pp. 1-2). The collective was anti-essentialist at its core, and it aimed to talk about history from below rather than the narratives formulated by the educated elites. Notable scholars, like Antonio Gramsci, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, David Arnold, and many others, have significantly contributed to this field. They have opened a new area of knowledge system where theory intersects with practical ground reality. Therefore, the challenging and long-standing question of literary theory being out of touch with real-life issues was somehow, and somewhat, ironed out to a certain extent.

However, despite its radical challenge to the elite narrative and discriminatory politics, subaltern studies have primarily focused on the human subject. It has, thus, knowingly or unknowingly, remained anthropocentric and humanist. We have stepped into a posthuman age marked by unprecedented technological, ecological, and scientific shifts, where new forms of marginalities are rising their heads (Braidotti, 2013, p. 50). Therefore, limiting subaltern politics exclusively to human subjects is untenable, biased, and exclusive.

This paper argues that J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) compels us to rethink and reconfigure the subaltern framework by focusing on a new and radical form of marginality in terms of the non-human animal world and particularly the dogs. The novel shows the dogs as radically marginalised, oppressed, and systematically silenced by institutional control, disposability, and routinised violence. The text unsettles the humanist assumptions and politics of subalternity by asking fundamentally challenging and rigorous questions of progressiveness, amelioration, and upliftment that are premised on voice, resistance, and agency. Set in the post-apartheid backdrop, the text situates animal suffering and brutality in the wider power politics circulated among humans alone. By adopting a posthumanist framework, this paper argues that the dogs in *Disgrace* can be read as the new non-human subalterns, who have been bureaucratically silenced, tortured, and sent to the periphery. The paper also reads the animal marginality as a failed humanist project and thus demands an ethical response grounded not in representation but in vulnerability and relational responsibility.

By juxtaposing and amalgamating posthuman theories, mainly of Rosi Braidotti and Cary Wolfe, and subaltern theory, this paper contends that *Disgrace* articulates a posthuman ethics that questions anthropocentrism, speciesism, and human exceptionalism. To solve the humanist bias, the paper attempts to theorise posthuman subalternity as an addition to subaltern politics and asserts that subalternity and precarity have always been shared across species, whether human or non-human. Finally, by investigating the text's representation of animal care, euthanasia, and disposal, the paper proposes a posthuman subaltern politics, which, according to the posthumanists, is an embodied and relational condition of exposure to power rather

than a position secured through speech and resistance.

Methodology

This article conducts a posthuman close reading of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. It draws on the philosophical work of Rosi Braidotti, Cary Wolfe and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of epistemic violence. The article examines how the text portrays disposability, institutionalised violence, and helplessness across species by closely reading key scenes involving animal care, euthanasia, and disposal. The article aims to juxtapose human and animal suffering at the structural level and to challenge the human-centred assumptions of the classical subaltern discourse.

Analysis

Subalternity and the Limits of Humanist Discourse

Spivak, in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", asserts that the subaltern, particularly marginalised groups, firstly lack the ability to speak in the mainstream dominant discourse and secondly, when they decide to speak up, their voices are often appropriated, distorted, misrepresented or silenced. She popularised the term "epistemic violence", whereby dominant narrative discourses like imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism systematically erase subjectivity, agency, and speech (Spivak, 1988). Therefore, it echoes the Subaltern Collective's proposition that subalternity is not merely a condition of oppression but a structural position from which voice and speech cannot be recognised or heard. With the help of Spivak, the Collective questions the dominant epistemological framework that is augmenting and perpetuating the segregatory and discriminatory politics. It aims to unsettle and deconstruct the hegemonic discourse (Singh, 2025, pp. 1–2).

While this framework has been instrumental in critiquing hegemonic patriarchal and colonial power structures, it falls short of being inclusive enough to accommodate and speak for the non-human entities and beings. Consequently, this framework demonstrates that subaltern politics has been humanist since its inception. As a result, it has been interested in giving a voice to the voiceless humans alone. It gave importance to the human privileges of voice, reason, and self-representation. However, it became exclusive to the actually voiceless and non-resistive non-human beings, who cannot participate in linguistic or rational discourse. As they cannot be a part of the dominant discourse by linguistically expressing themselves, they are strategically and permanently sidelined from the central narrative. The situation becomes even more problematic when we learn from posthumanist scholars that the humanist model is inherently exclusive, not only because it is based on the premises of human speech, voice, language, and representation, but also because it is defined in advance in a humanistic manner (Wolfe, 2010, p. 66).

Posthuman theorists like Rosi Braidotti challenge this anthropocentric framework of assuming features like agency, subjectivity, and ethical values to be exclusively human attributes. She argues that posthumanism asks for a reconceptualisation and reconfiguration of our socio-political relations with the inanimate, non-linguistic, non-human world. She emphasises this reconceptualisation because, according to her, our relations with the non-human world are based on interdependence, vulnerability, and embodiment rather than autonomy, agency, and mastery. In her 2013 book *The Posthuman*, Braidotti writes:

> We need to devise new social, ethical and discursive schemes of subject formation to match the profound transformations we are undergoing. That means that we need to learn to think differently about ourselves…The posthuman condition urges us to think critically and creatively about who and

> what we are actually in the process of becoming. (Braidotti, 2013, p. 20)

Through these lines, she challenges a fixed, rational, and bounded human subjectivity. Therefore, from this perspective, it can be argued that subalternity and marginality cannot be confined to human subjects alone. It must be expanded to include the non-human lives that are often rendered disposable within the biopolitical regimes.

Dogs as Posthuman Subaltern: Bare Life and Biopolitics

By foregrounding animal suffering amidst a post-apartheid narrative deeply concerned with power, violence, and moral responsibility, Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) exposes human-centred subaltern politics by inviting a posthuman discourse of marginality. Animals, particularly dogs, occupy the primary subaltern position. In Bev Shaw's clinic, they are rendered voiceless, disposable and subjected to routinised institutional violence. The human-made biopolitical regime that Foucault has talked about was reflected in Bev Shaw's clinic, which became a key site for examining and terminating the dogs. It is all the more surprising because non-human dog lives were managed by human beings. The dogs that were brought for treatment were categorised, euthanised, and finally disposed of. The entire process was carried out with nearly bureaucratic efficiency. Coetzee writes about the painful process:

> With a pencil-light she is peering down the throat of a young dog that looks like a cross between a ridgeback and a Jackal. Kneeling on the table a barefoot child, evidently the owner, has the dog's head clamped under his arm and is trying to hold its jaws open. A low, gurgling snarl comes from its throat; its powerful hindquarters strain. Awkwardly he joins in the tussle, pressing the dog's hind legs together, forcing it to sit on its haunches. (Coetzee, 2000, p. 71)

We are not surprised to learn from Bev Shaw that medicine did not ease the pain of the dogs. It also hints at the brutality of the entire process. She asks David, "There's an abscess here from an impacted tooth. We have no antibiotics, so – hold him still, boytjie! – so we'll just have to lance it and hope for the best" (Coetzee, 2000, p. 71).

Giorgio Agamben has theorised such a phenomenon as "bare life", where individuals are stripped of their socio-political status, leaving them without any protection (Agamben, 1998, p. 10). He observes that in contemporary society, the biological dimension of life (zoe) is prioritised over the lived experiential dimension (bios) (Agamben, 1998, p. 12). It results in a "bare life" situation that reduces life to mere biological existence, devoid of any autonomy and rights. In this case, the dogs can be argued to have a "bare life" as their existence is solely biological, which undermines their potential to have a meaningful life. Their lives are replete with vulnerability and exploitation. Agamben, thus, writes in *Homo Sacer* (1998):

> Instead the decisive fact is that, together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, bios and zoē, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction. (Agamben, 1998, p. 12)

Interestingly, Coetzee points out the hypocrisy of humans when they try to justify the killing of the dogs, as in the words of Lucy:

> The trouble is, there are just too many of them,' says Bev Shaw. 'They don't understand it, of course, and we have no way of telling them. Too many by our standards, not by theirs. They would just multiply and multiply if

> they had their way, until they filled the earth. (Coetzee, 2000, p. 75)

David's utterance here has crucial substance because he is pointing to the logic of surplus. The dogs are deemed too many to be cared for, nurtured, and saved. Moreover, they do not add so-called value to the capitalist system of production. Therefore, there appears to be no harm in eliminating them. This logic of surplus exacerbates the systematic and institutional elimination and exclusion of dogs, as they do not contribute to the means of production and instead create problems that disrupt the system. Their lives are considered unproductive and burdensome. We can draw a parallel to the human subalterns in terms of the Dalits, the untouchables, and the lower-caste people, who are, in a similar vein, considered and labelled as unproductive and burdensome, and a superficial, unscientific, and irrational logic of surplus is created to justify the subjugation and killing of them. Although the human subalterns can speak and voice their grievances, they are not given a position to voice their opinions, and even if they do so, they are either appropriated or distorted. Consequently, the situation worsens for non-human beings, such as dogs, who are biologically excluded from linguistic and speech circles. The dog's inability to participate in the linguistic circle and resist their suffering makes them a paradigmatic subaltern in the posthuman framework. Significantly, the dogs' silence does not actually make them trivial and unworthy. In fact, it highlights the failure of both humanist and subaltern projects to include non-human beings in the socio-political circle, as these beings lack linguistic abilities and the capacity for speech. It reveals the inadequacy of both the theories that equate agency and subjectivity with speech. Although the dogs cannot speak, their helplessness places an ethical duty on us. Cary Wolfe argues that ethical responsibility has to be reconfigured beyond speech, reason, and subjective narrative (Wolfe, 2010, p. 116). Therefore, the posthumanists reclaim that these human attributes are mistakenly thought to be exclusive to humans alone. The animals, too, have agency and subjectivity, and their linguistic incapability should not prevent them from being part of the mainstream discourse, which is itself founded on shaky and assumed reality. In *What is Posthumanism* (2010), Cary Wolfe draws extensively on Derrida and argues for animal rights and justice:

> In Derrida as in Diamond, the vulnerability and, ultimately, mortality that we share with nonhuman animals, and the compassion that they elicit—what Diamond characterizes as the capacity to be harmed, but also to be "brought up short" of inflicting harm on another by recognition of that capacity—lie at the core of the question of ethics: not just mere kindness but justice. (Wolfe, 2010, p. 116)

Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* that in biopolitical regimes, violence, imprisonment, socio-political ostracisation, extermination, and ultimately killings are bureaucratically perpetuated with a far-fetched and forced rationale (Foucault, 1978, p. 72). He argues that biopower is a technology of power that sanctions the control of entire populations, including their body, sexuality, and birth (Foucault, 1978, p. 147). The case of the dogs in Bev Shaw's clinic exemplifies a similar situation. For example, the violence inflicted upon the dogs is warranted because it is institutional. The clinic frames the inhuman and painful process of euthanasia as a rational, humane, and necessary one. Biopolitical control and normalised violence determine which lives to preserve and which to eliminate without consequence. Thus, Gareth Cornwell argues in his essay titled "An Image of Animals: Speciesism in Coetzee's *Disgrace*":

> The 'euthanasia' practised at the clinic is therefore an entirely human enterprise in which humans decide which dog is to die and when it is appropriate for this

> too happen. The dogs do not ask to die. They are not even consulted. What can their angels of death possibly claim to know about them and their suffering that entitles them to take their lives? (Cornwell, 2008, p. 135)

The institutional logic acts in such a discreet manner that it successfully masks violence under the guise of care and nurture. This process transforms the killings into a bureaucratic task. As a result, their deaths are not mourned. They are, in fact, treated as waste. Therefore, this perspective dismisses the burden of any moral or ethical urgency.

Ethics, Vulnerability, and David Lurie's Transformation

Intriguingly, David initially actively participates in this system with moral and psychological detachment and refers to the process as a solution to a practical problem. He almost gets himself involved in a debate with Lucy about the hypocrisy of the animal welfare trusts and people at large. He opines:

> It's admirable, what you do, what she does, but to me animal-welfare people are a bit like Christians of a certain kind. Everyone is so cheerful and well-intentioned that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging. Or to kick a cat. (Coetzee, 2000, p. 65)

However, Coetzee tacitly complicates the psychological and moral world of David when he starts feeling discomfort and internal restraint with the casual disposal of animal bodies. We notice a significant ethical shift in David when he insists on personally transporting the bodies of the dead dogs to the incinerator. This gesture signifies giving in to a system that denies animals dignity even in their deaths. The disposal of the bodies as "rubbish" unnerves him (Coetzee, 2000, p. 161). Coetzee shows the moral conundrum of David and writes:

> He had thought he would get used to it. But that is not what happens. The more killings he assists in, the more jittery he gets. One Sunday evening, driving home in Lucy's kombi, he actually has to stop at the roadside to recover himself. Tears flow down his face that he cannot stop; his hands shake. (Coetzee, 2000, p. 123)

This event is all the more surprising because we see a complete shift in David's personality, who was beyond retribution after he was found guilty of sexual misconduct with his university student, Melanie Isaacs. He did not own up to his crime and acted as if he had made a minor mistake. Moreover, when he took refuge in his daughter Lucy's land away from Cape Town and started working in Bev Shaw's clinic, we observed David to be entitled, aesthetically detached, and having an anthropocentric attitude. While arguing with Lucy about the unimportance of Bev Shaw's job and her clinic, he retorts:

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. (Coetzee, 2000, p. 66)

David's ethical transformation is crucial to the text's posthuman intervention. His fall from academic and social privilege could not change his personality and perspective. However, his interaction and involvement with the dogs significantly alters him and turns him into a morally, socially, and politically better person. Thus, while fighting with past decisions and present engagement with the dogs, he becomes a new person, who becomes aware of his mistakes. Thus, Coetzee writes through the omniscient writer:

> He does not understand what is happening to him. Until now he has been more or less indifferent to animals…He assumes that people from whom cruelty is demanded in the line of duty, people who work in slaughterhouses, for instance, grow carapaces over their souls. Habit hardens: it must be so in most cases, but it does not seem to be so in his. He does not seem to have the gift of hardness. (Coetzee, 2000, p. 123)

David had a different relationship with the dogs because he knew that he would not get anything as such from them. Unlike his relationships with humans mediated by power, desire, and language, his relationship with the dogs was entirely pure and organic. Thus, his bond with the dogs and animals at large was grounded in care and without any expectation of reciprocity. We can argue that David had the posthuman realisation that ethical responsibility does not depend on others' ability to respond or acknowledge it. Braidotti asserts that posthuman ethics is not exactly about reciprocity. It is about accountability shared within vulnerable conditions spread across species (Braidotti, 2013, p. 15). Therefore, David's decision to help Bev Shaw from euthanising to disposing of the dogs signals a shift from mastery to service.

One of the key criticisms of subaltern studies is how the educated elite class appropriate the voices of the downtrodden. While discussing "epistemic violence", Spivak argues that the dominant grand narrative rewrites and appropriates the actual conditions of the subalterns, resulting in distorted and filtered narratives about them (Spivak, 1988). However, David does not try to appropriate the non-human subalterns. This is because he does not see his acts as something really philanthropic. Rather, he witnesses and tries to save them. He does not try to provide a voice to the voiceless dogs while witnessing their suffering. Therefore, he remains attentive without appropriating it.

Shared Precarity: Humans and Animals in Disgrace

Arguably, *Disgrace* collapses the rigid boundary between the human and the animal by bringing in shared vulnerability and precarity. Coetzee situates both humans and animals within the structures of vulnerability and exposure to violence. Prativa Poudel argues in the introduction of her article, "Unintentional Animal Violence in Novel Engel's Bear and Coetzee's Disgrace," that we need to shun our preconceived notions about self-proclaimed superiority and differences from the animal world (Poudel, 2025, p. 12). Thus, as a starting point, she asks us to recognise our common animality and mortality with other species, acknowledge the unique yet diverse essence of all life, base ethical responsibility on vulnerability rather than ability, and maintain an ongoing openness to an infinite, transcendent duty of care (Poudel, 2025, p. 10).

For instance, Lucy's rape by three men at her home changed her life forever. Astonishingly, she chooses silence, withdrawal, and passivity instead of retaliation. Her reactions after the horrific incident echoed with the dog's reaction to being euthanised and expended. We can argue that Lucy's enforced voicelessness structurally resonates with the dogs' voicelessness. Lucy chose silence, maybe because she would rather not participate in a system that, instead of promising justice, would drag her into an exploitative maze. Her acceptance of suffering parallels the dogs' lack of choice within the oppressive system. However, it should be noted that the analogy is structural and not experiential because in both cases we observe a shared regime of vulnerability.

David's trajectory also reinforces this shared precarious condition. His fall from the academic position and loss of social value and privilege gradually strip him of humanist

privilege. While assisting in the euthanasia of the dogs, he realises that he shares a form of kinship with them that is based not on identity but on a distributed precarity. Therefore, his decision to personally carry the dead dogs to the incinerator is an acknowledgement of their shared vulnerability.

Thus, in this process of taking care of the animals, David aligns himself with the lives that cannot speak, but at the same time demands ethical intervention to alleviate their situation. Carrol Clarkson argues for the likeness of humans and animals to do away with the rigid boundary between the human and animals. He contends that in Darwin's natural framework, humans and non-human animals exhibit genealogical continuity and share essential biological conditions of birth, reproduction, and death, a continuity emphasised in *Disgrace* through Bev Shaw's focus on animal mortality (Clarkson, 2003, p. 80).

Thus, Coetzee destabilises the traditional subaltern framework that privileged speech, action, and performance in an overt way. Rather, he gave us a new model where resistance is shared with silence and endurance. This is so because both Lucy and the dogs were silent endurers. Their actions challenge the representational politics and show marginality as a bodily condition rather than a discursive position. Posthumanism as a theory argues similarly. It posits that subjectivity, agency, and autonomy are interdependent phenomena. Hence, the convergence of human and non-human vulnerability resonates with the posthuman thought of relationality and interdependence. Braidotti reiterates that posthuman ethics is this acknowledgement of a shared existence rather than a fixed, sacrosanct, solo subjecthood (Braidotti, 2013, p. 40).

Conclusion

By juxtaposing human and animal suffering in a way that breaks the boundary between them, we can rightly argue that Coetzee formulates a new form of posthuman subalternity. The extension of the traditional subalternity framework to include the non-human entities, like animals, in this case, dogs, tries to build a new subaltern model that is all-inclusive, all-encompassing, and just. *Disgrace* shows that not only subjectivity but also subalternity cannot be fixed and stable. The dogs' and Lucy and David's shared precarity and distress destabilise human exceptionalism and speciesism. The text also argues that the linguistic inability of the dogs should not prevent them from being a part of the mainstream dominant discourse. It reveals how our theories fail to adequately include non-human entities. Coetzee articulates through the dogs that subalternity need not always be through speech, voice, and resistance, thereby constructing a posthuman ethics that challenges the anthropocentric assumptions about voice, agency, and socio-political value. Therefore, by situating the dogs as the new non-human, silent, subaltern other, the paper uncovers the insufficiency of subaltern and representational politics at large. It demands a posthuman ethical response grounded in attentiveness and responsibility. In the final analysis, *Disgrace* expands the scope of subaltern politics by reimagining marginal narratives in a more-than-human world. It poses difficult questions to the scholars to reconsider the boundaries and position of the biologically silenced non-human entities and asks for a reframing of the subaltern theory itself.

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