

Animal Subjugation and Human Disgrace: Power and Violence in Coetzee's *Disgrace*

Dr. M. Bhuvaneswari

Assistant Professor & Head, Department of English, Saranathan College of Engineering, Thiruchirappalli –12.

Dr. A. Desiree Ann

Assistant Professor of English, Holy Cross College, Tiruchirappalli –2.

Dr. K. Yesodha Devi

Associate Professor of English, Thanthai Periyar Government Arts & Science College, Tiruchirappalli – 23.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63001/tbs.2024.v19.i02.S2.pp495-498>

KEYWORDS

Power, Violence,
Animal Subjugation,
Post-Apartheid South Africa,
Ethical Transformation,
J.M. Coetzee
Received on:

20-10-2024

Accepted on:

19-11-2024

Published on:

22-12-2024

ABSTRACT

In this paper we examine how J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* exposes the failure of traditional power structures through the personal collapse of David Lurie, a white academic whose authority unravels after he exploits a student. The novel combines sexual misconduct, institutional failure, and post-apartheid racial dynamics into an extensive critique of human entitlement. As Lurie begins working in an animal clinic, his encounters with voiceless, dying dogs reveal an ethical realm outside language and control. The care he extends to animals—though it offers no redemption—marks a shift from dominance to humility. The novel shows a strong connection between the fall of human power and the ignored suffering of animals. It suggests ethical awareness emerges not from authority but from the capacity to witness and bear pain without defence.

INTRODUCTION

J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) is a booker prize winning novel set in post-apartheid South Africa. The novel portrays the collapse of traditional power systems and the emergence of new moral dilemmas. The protagonist, David Lurie—a middle-aged professor, faces a disintegration of his structured life following a sexual scandal. His dismissal from the university pushes him into deeper conflict with a society that no longer upholds the authority he once enjoyed. "He lives within his income, within his temperament, within his emotional means," but this balance soon proves fragile. Lurie's relationship with a student, Melanie Isaacs, ends his academic career and reveals the imbalance at the heart of his worldview. His authority as an older white male disintegrates in a culture that has begun to confront its historical inequalities. Later, at his daughter Lucy's farm, Lurie encounters a quieter, more unsettling form of power—one rooted in silence, refusal, and survival. Lucy, after suffering a violent assault, declines to pursue legal recourse, stating, "I have no protection." Her decision shows a shift in how power is owned, transferred, or relinquished. The novel also foregrounds animals, whose fates echo the human experience of abandonment and voicelessness.

Lurie, once indifferent to their pain, begins assisting at a rural animal clinic. "He is prepared to do the dirty work: carrying carcasses to the incinerator, and at the end of the day scraping out the cages, hosing down the floors." These acts show a subtle change in how he encounters suffering—not as a problem to resolve but as something to witness and endure. Coetzee does not offer any grand redemption. Instead, he exposes the quiet undoing of inherited privilege and the uncertain beginnings of moral awareness. The novel asks what kind of life remains when authority fails and dignity must be rebuilt not through power, but through small acts of care.

Power and Its Disintegration

Power, in *Disgrace*, appears first as entitlement. David Lurie begins as a man who believes he has mastered his world. "He lives within his income, within his temperament, within his emotional means." This phrasing reflects his daily routine and highlights his confidence in managing his desires and controlling his surroundings. He considers himself a man who can navigate society without excess, without apology. Yet the surface of this order masks a deeper reliance on male privilege, academic status, and the assumption that personal urges can be managed without consequence.

In his arrangement with Soraya, a sex worker, Lurie sees a model of harmony. "He finds her entirely satisfactory. In the desert of the week Thursday has become an oasis of *luxe et volupté*." This indulgent view, couched in poetic reference, shows a man who believes that pleasure can remain private, structured, and separate from real-life messiness. Even when that arrangement ends, he turns to another woman without reflection. "If he wanted a woman he had to learn to pursue her; often, in one way or another, to buy her." Lurie's treatment of desire as merely transactional reveals his deep-seated assumption of having power over women.

When he pursues Melanie Isaacs, he sees himself not as a predator but as a man carried away by passion. He appeals not to reason, but to fate. "Because you ought to," he tells her when she asks why she should stay. "A woman's beauty does not belong to her alone." In those words, Lurie casts himself as a figure who interprets beauty as public property, something he has a right to access. "She does not own herself," he insists to himself, applying a logic of possession to her body and her consent. Even when she resists, he reasserts his narrative: "He does not cease to hold to them." His refusal to see the situation as abuse continues through the university hearing. When asked to apologise, he rejects the terms of reconciliation. "I am being asked to lie," he says. "It would mean pretending." For Lurie, accepting guilt would be a betrayal of the identity he has constructed—a man who follows Eros, who lives beyond convention. "I became a servant of Eros," he declares, turning a violation into a literary moment. His resignation, made without contrition, marks the start of his formal removal from public authority.

Outside the university, Lurie's disintegration intensifies. On his daughter Lucy's smallholding, he enters a world where his old forms of power mean little. Lucy handles the land and her affairs without depending on him. After they are attacked by three men, Lurie wants to restore order through law. Lucy, however, refuses to report the rape. "What happened to me is a purely private matter," she tells him. "I have no protection." Her statement marks a direct challenge to Lurie's belief that the law serves justice and that justice still centres men like him. Lucy's response baffles him. He pleads, "You are letting them walk all over you." But Lucy does not see her silence as surrender. She sees it as a way of surviving in a landscape that has shifted beneath them. Her decision to stay on the farm, even after the rape, shows a quiet but absolute claim to agency. "I will do whatever I have to. That is the price one has to pay for staying on." In this context, power no longer associates with speech, visibility, or assertion. It rests instead in endurance, in staying grounded despite violence. Lurie finds himself increasingly powerless. Petrus, Lucy's neighbour, begins to take a stronger role in her life. He offers to marry Lucy, not out of affection but as a means of protection. Lurie, reduced to a bystander, can only watch as the terms of power shift around him. "He is the one who is weak. He is the one who must learn to bend." This admission comes late, and it signifies one of the few moments where Lurie recognizes that the rules have changed and that he no longer writes them.

His question—"What is being asked of me, as a father?"—remains unanswered because it belongs to a world that no longer exists. He can no longer lead, shield, or define others. Even his language fails. He who once corrected student grammar now stands voiceless before a daughter who will not be consoled and a society that no longer bends to him. The disintegration of Lurie's power reflects the breakdown of a colonial and patriarchal worldview. He loses not only his job but also his social position, his cultural confidence, and his philosophical certainty. In Coetzee's novel, power does not end with a dramatic fall. It unravels slowly, through silence, resistance, and the fading of inherited privilege.

Sexual and Structural Violence

Violence in *Disgrace* operates on multiple levels. Coetzee does not frame it only as physical aggression but also as an abuse of position, the silencing of others, and the breakdown of trust in institutions. This theme mainly focuses on David Lurie's relationship with Melanie Isaacs. Although he presents it as a moment of passion, the novel does not allow the reader to ignore the reality of coercion. Melanie is his student. When she resists, Lurie does not stop. "Nothing will stop him." These four words strip the moment of ambiguity. Her passivity, her silence, and her

distance reveal a profound discomfort. "She does not resist. All she does is avert herself: avert her lips, avert her eyes." This is not mutual desire—it is quiet submission under pressure.

Lurie refuses to view his actions as rape. At the disciplinary hearing, he calls it a private matter and insists on his right to remain unchanged. "I was enriched, I was overflowed." He speaks of personal awakening, while the committee speaks of responsibility and harm. This clash reveals a larger conflict: between self-justifying individualism and an emerging demand for accountability. The committee members are not cruel. They offer him every opportunity to apologise. "Are you sorry?" they ask. He responds, "No." He does not consider remorse necessary because he believes that confession, if not sincere, becomes "a lie, an apology concocted to save face." His refusal marks the moment when personal shame becomes public disgrace.

Melanie, who says little throughout the novel, expresses her discomfort through absence. She drops out of the course, disappears from Lurie's life, and leaves behind the silence of the damaged. But silence also becomes a powerful response from Lucy. After her rape, she chooses not to name her attackers. "I have no protection," she says, rejecting the legal system altogether. Lurie urges her to go to the police. Lucy refuses. "What happened to me is a purely private matter." Where Lurie views rape as a crime demanding legal action, Lucy sees it as a brutal message from the land she inhabits—one she must decode on her own terms.

Her decision unsettles Lurie because it reverses the expected response. He cannot understand how Lucy, once free and independent, now chooses silence and even submission. "You are letting them walk all over you." Lucy replies, "Yes. I am letting them walk over me." She understands her position not as a collapse of strength but as a new form of survival. The violence done to her cannot be undone. She does not seek revenge. She accepts that in this new South Africa, justice may no longer look like justice once did. The violence that shapes both Melanie and Lucy's stories is not isolated. It reflects deeper failures in post-apartheid society. When the university cannot protect Melanie, and when the police cannot protect Lucy, the novel shows how institutional systems—education, justice, governance—struggle to offer protection in a fractured country. Even the act of seeking safety begins to appear naïve.

Violence, in this context, becomes both a personal trauma and a political reality. Lurie, once dismissive of fear and suffering, now finds himself exposed. "I am the one who is weak. I am the one who must learn to bend." This is not just personal defeat; it is a reckoning with a society that no longer guarantees control or coherence to men like him. Coetzee does not present violence as a climactic event followed by resolution. He shows how it continues to shape behaviour, decisions, and silence. Both women, in their own ways, withdraw from systems of protection that failed them. Their refusals to speak—Melanie's withdrawal, Lucy's quiet endurance—speak more powerfully than direct accusations. The novel refuses to give violence a clear meaning. It exists not to be understood but to be borne.

Lurie's experiences with Melanie and Lucy expose the limits of his authority and the failure of institutions to shield individuals from harm. Following these events, the novel shifts into a different nature. Power no longer resides in speech or action but in silence, endurance, and quiet acts of care. Lurie, stripped of his professional identity and paternal certainty, enters a space where he confronts vulnerability on a new scale. This space is not defined by human relationships alone. It extends to the lives of animals—creatures without words, without protection, and without status. In Coetzee's world, the treatment of animals becomes a mirror that reflects the ethical failures of human society. What Lurie cannot repair in his life, he begins to face in the cages, the kennels, and the incinerator room.

Animals as Symbols of Subjugation and Ethical Reckoning

Animal treatment takes on moral importance in the second half of the novel. After losing his academic title and personal assurances, David Lurie begins to engage with suffering that no longer speaks, demands, or accuses. He volunteers at an animal welfare clinic, where animals are brought in to be sterilized or put down. What begins as menial work soon turns into an act of silent witnessing. "He is prepared to do the dirty work: carrying

carcasses to the incinerator, and at the end of the day scraping out the cages, hosing down the floors." These tasks do not offer restoration or dignity; they only prevent more harm. Still, Lurie accepts them without complaint.

Lurie's work with animals becomes a site of quiet transformation. There are no dramatic conversions, no declarations of empathy—only a man slowly learning to respond, in silence, to suffering. He begins to stay after hours, helping the clinic assistant Bev Shaw with the corpses. "He helps her because he has nothing better to do. He helps her because he finds it easier to do the job than to refuse." Coetzee offers no heroism in these moments. The work is monotonous, grim, and repetitive. Yet within this repetition, a different kind of awareness grows—one grounded not in theory, but in proximity to pain.

Lurie's handling of animal bodies forces him to face helplessness in its purest form. "There are simply too many unwanted animals; and too few people who care." That sentence, delivered without moral weight, shows the novel's clearest indictment of neglect—not just toward animals, but toward any life judged unnecessary. The dogs he carries to the incinerator have no names, no histories, and no advocates. Their deaths leave no mark. Yet Lurie insists on treating their final moments with respect. "He saves one or two for her. For the rest he is the one who puts the packets into the fire and waits for the fire to do its work." He becomes a caretaker not of life, but of death—a man who has nothing left to control except the dignity with which others pass out of the world.

This quiet labour contrasts sharply with his earlier efforts to defend power through language. Once he justified his actions with references to poetry, seduction, and Eros. Now he acts without words. Even his attempts to work on his opera about Byron lose momentum. The drama of high emotion begins to fade. What remains is small, unglamorous, and slow. "It is not for the sake of the dogs. It is for his own sake." This admission does not weaken the gesture. But, it shows that in the absence of public standing, Lurie chooses to attach meaning to private, difficult acts.

In the novel, animals are not metaphors in the usual sense. They are not symbols to be decoded. They suffer, and their suffering does not serve anyone's enlightenment. Lurie cannot save them. He cannot save Lucy. He cannot even save himself. But he can carry the weight of his failure. That is what remains. "He does it all. He bags the corpse, seals the bag, affixes the label, signs the register, carries the bag to the freezer, returns to the theatre." The repetition of these tasks reveals the burden, not the redemption, of care. Here, animal subjugation reflects past injustices and questions how far human empathy can go. The novel gives no answers to suffering and offers no final judgment. Instead, it shows a man learning to behave with basic decency in a world without praise, reward, or forgiveness.

Lurie's time at the animal clinic marks a turning point in his relationship with power. What he once exercised through speech, position, and desire now dissolves into actions that carry no recognition. His care for animals does not restore balance, nor does it redeem his earlier failures. Instead, it introduces a different register of responsibility—one that emerges in silence, in labour, and in the recognition of another being's helplessness. Through this, Coetzee draws attention to the link between human disgrace and the quiet suffering of animals. As Lurie begins to understand his own undoing, he moves closer to the larger question at the heart of the novel: how do power, violence, and the human-animal divide shape our capacity to live ethically?

Intersections of Power, Violence, and Animality

The novel does not treat power, violence, and animal subjugation as separate concerns. Instead, it blends them together into a complex ethical terrain. The novel begins as a story about a man's sexual misconduct. Later, it broadens into an examination of how authority, dominance, and the ability to harm or protect flow across human and non-human lives. The novel resists clear divisions between categories. In Coetzee's world, the same factors that lead to cruelty against animals also support social hierarchies and gendered violence, and they contribute to a general lack of concern for suffering.

David Lurie experiences these connections most directly through his own collapse. Once a man who sought control over women through desire, he later witnesses his daughter submit to a form of surrender he cannot comprehend. Lucy's rape and her

subsequent decision not to pursue justice dismantle every framework he relies upon. "Yes, I am giving him what he wants," she says of her attacker's protector. "In another time, in another place it might be held to be a risk — to offer a woman shelter and then to take her — to assert his right of access to her. But this is the risk you run." Her voice, calm and measured, strips the situation of its horror. She perceives what has happened as a direct manifestation of her position within a new social order. Her resolution to remain, to exist under the power of those who violated her, becomes a profound act of resistance through endurance.

Lurie's attempts to respond fall short. "What is being asked of me, as a father?" he asks, but no role remains for him to fill. This inability to protect, intervene, or impose language over trauma runs parallel to what he encounters at the clinic. There, animals arrive already broken, abandoned, or marked for death. They do not cry out for help, and they do not accuse. "There is no salvation," Lurie realizes. "No God's laws. All that remains is the scene of a crime." His failure with Lucy mirrors his growing understanding of animals: he cannot fix what is broken, but he can choose to witness it without turning away.

Throughout the novel, Coetzee questions the efficacy of traditional humanism. Language, education, and rational thought prove inadequate shields against brutality. Lurie, formerly a professor of Romantic poetry, discovers that his erudition provides no bulwark against disgrace. "Words are not my trade," says Bev Shaw, who operates the animal clinic. Yet it is Bev, not Lurie, who expresses compassion without requiring intellectual justification. The novel suggests that authentic ethical existence may originate not in rhetoric but in deeds—in the choices one makes beyond public scrutiny. In the novel, power undergoes transformation. It transitions from academic institutions to rural landscapes, from formal systems to private negotiations, from masculine dominance to female agency, and from articulation to reticence. But even as authority shifts, the underlying violence endures. It permeates bodies, haunts memory, and shapes decisions in the aftermath of trauma. The animals, voiceless and unacknowledged, symbolise the burden of this violence. Their deaths attract no attention, yet they become the measure of Lurie's evolving consciousness. By the end of the novel, Lurie abandons justification and explanation. He simply acts. In one of the final scenes, he prepares a disabled dog for euthanasia. "He opens the cage door. Come, he says. It is time." These words carry no grandeur, only quiet acceptance. This modest gesture, characterized by restraint and tenderness, becomes his ultimate offering. He relinquishes authority and embraces mercy.

In combining the social with the intimate, and the human with the animal, Coetzee's novel leaves the reader instead with a question: in a world without clear hierarchies, how should one live—with others, with oneself, and with those who cannot speak?

CONCLUSION

In *Disgrace*, J.M. Coetzee dismantles familiar structures of power and exposes what remains beneath authority, control, and justice. The novel reveals, through David Lurie's fall, how dominance—once sustained by gender, social position, and knowledge—can quietly erode. Yet this is not merely a story of personal failure. Lurie's undoing reflects larger disruptions in post-apartheid South Africa, where inherited hierarchies collapse and violence takes on more intimate, ambiguous forms. Violence rarely appears as direct force; instead, it emerges through silences, absences, and failed systems. Melanie's withdrawal and Lucy's stoic endurance communicate more profoundly than explicit accusations and challenge conventional frameworks of justice and protection. Animal suffering emerges as the novel's most enduring ethical concern. Lurie's care for the dogs he helps euthanize does not redeem him. Nor does it restore what he has lost. But these actions show that a different form of dignity survives—in patience, in attention, and in the refusal to turn away from pain. Coetzee concludes with humility rather than resolution. Thus *Disgrace* examines existence without control, reward, or illusions. It suggests that ethical life begins not in dominance, but in the quiet decision to carry suffering without defense.

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