



Posthumanist Reflections in J.M Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) and Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (2001): Alternative Environmental Ethics of South Africa and Japan

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Abstract: This paper aims to investigate the ways in which notions of posthumanism are portrayed and sustained in the post-apartheid South African literature, *Disgrace* (1999) by J.M. Coetzee and the Japanese animation, *Spirited Away* (2001) by Hayao Miyazaki, reflecting on alternative environmental ethics. Posthumanism aims for propelling future sustainability by considering what concepts of humanism did to the world, structurally and discursively. Transgressing the binaries of nature and culture, human and non-human, animated and inanimated, posthumanism accredits the archipelagic performances beyond modes of positioned identities and their modes of othering. However, as its current main concentration is still on Western countries, its frameworks and outcomes are constrained within Western narrations, ideologies and contexts. This paper, therefore, attempts to transgress this corpus and its epistemologies by looking at two narrations from South Africa and Japan. As a result, the paper attempts to further develop the framework of posthumanism by extending its foci onto Japanese and South African contexts.

Keywords: posthumanism, ecocritical reading, J.M Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*, environmental ethics

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Introduction

The primary goal of this paper is to destabilize Western basic assumptions, regarding nature as a place and a collective entity, separated from the realm of humans and to posit, instead, the fact that the binaries between nature and culture, humans and nonhumans, animate and inanimate are socially constructed to cover the ongoing connections and commitments between them. This idea, however, can be found in many cultures from Japan and South Africa. Therefore, by employing an ecocritical reading and with an attempt to support and extend the scope of

posthumanism and further deconstruct this kind of binarism, this paper investigates how posthumanist notions are equipped in two selected narratives, *Spirited Away* (2001) from Japan and *Disgrace* (1999) from South Africa and how they are able to contribute to a posthumanist future that propels alternative environmental ethics of sustainability.

What is Posthumanism?

Posthumanism aims to re-describe the concepts of Western humanism, resulting in destabilizing Western thoughts of human bodily and cultural boundaries. This includes sustaining the fact that the rational and bounded humanist subjects are re-inscribed as emerged within environmental relations that materially and discursively flow. This flow is a result of the material-discursive entanglements of all kinds of agencies, consisting of humans, nonhumans, and inanimate matter. These entanglements constitute phenomena in which material bodies and meanings entail one another. The feminist physicist and philosopher Barad (2007) names this phenomenon as “spacetime mattering” in which matter and discourse emerge through and in relations to one another. This also refers to the fact that space and time are not given factors, but rather are constructed by agentive actors in their material-discursive entanglements.

Posthumanism currently concentrates on many different directions. For instance, posthumanism of Haraway (1985) and Hayles (1999) focuses upon the notions of “techno” or “cyborg” in order to undermine classical humanist assumptions, concerning the supreme status of human beings. To do so, they intermix technology and the organic together. Posthumanism also pays attention to the animal studies and is intensively developed further within this field. Derrida (2002), Wolfe (2010), Haraway (2008) and Weil (2012) to name a few write about human companion species and reallocate humanity in the same continuum as other animal species. Their shared argument is that humans are a species in the whole ecosphere. Therefore, humans and animals should be considered as “companion” species rather than in the oppressive sense of masters and slaves. Apart from the mentioned scopes, posthumanism also looks into the notions of ecological ontology. Through the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Westling (2011) argues that humans play roles as part of many kindred species even if it is no doubt that humans are immensely influential. This, however, highlights the fact that humans belong to the earth and are never separated from other species around them. Humans are vibrant bodies, pulsing in harmony with the whole environments.

Coming along with ecological ontology that prefers harmonization with the environments, posthumanist notions of new materialisms state otherwise. With its new material turn, new materialisms stress the relationships between humans and the rest of nature in the stage of “without harmony”. Through the works of Barad (2012), Alaimo (2010), Bennett (2010), Coole and Frost (2010) and Iovino and Oppermann (2014), this posthumanist material turn highlights the ways in which human bodies co-constitute and co-emerge within the dynamic material processes that establish the realm of agents of “agential realism” (Barad, 2007) in which humans are entangled with the rest of nature in the forms of randomness and beyond human controls. Consequently, posthumanism questions human bodily as subjects or categorical boundaries in order to reconfigure them with an intention to overcome radical anthropocentric and binary humanist assumptions of classical Western antiquity. This is to say; there is no longer any ultimate boundary between humans and the rest of nature. There are no more absolute borders, but rather species relationality that does not always have harmony. As Sullivan (2014) argues, “we can see ourselves—when aided by the ecology of colour—as vibrant bodies pulsing without harmony yet fully within the energetic patterns of ecological and cultural intra-actions that make up the biosphere” (p.83).

Nevertheless, there is one crucial notion that is still overlooked by many posthumanist critics. This notion is “non-hierarchical difference-ness”. Even though the posthumanist scholars, in particular Barad (2007), have touched upon the ideas of diffraction that mark the limits of the determinacy and contest the permanency of boundaries; and thus, are parts of differential entanglements, she has not engaged, and instead, effectively sidestepped the analytical challenges, posted by the hierarchical power consolation within the categories of race, colonialism and slavery that differences are configured (p. 381). The notion of difference or “difference-ness”, therefore, needs to be considered and reconceptualised in a less-hierarchical manner. As Jackson (2013) argues, “posthumanism’s past and, arguably, ongoing investment in Europe as standard-bearer of “Reason” and “Culture” circumscribes its critique of humanism and anthropocentrism because it continues to equate humanism with Enlightenment rationality and its peculiar representation of humanity” (p. 673). Jackson, moreover, posts a significant question, drawn from Wynter (2003): “might there be a (post)humanism that does not privilege European Man and its idiom? (p. 673). Attempting to respond to this question, I proceed to demonstrate the ways in which the following narrations from Japan and South Africa reveal notions of less hierarchical difference-ness by looking into the entanglements between agentic actors and see how the difference-ness strengthens the connections and commitments between the actors in the narratives, constituting alternative environmental ethics of the world that are both harmonious and incongruous at the same time.

Reflecting Posthumanism and Environmental Concerns in Spirited Away (2001) and Disgrace (2000)

Spirited Away (2001) is a Japanese animation film about a mysterious world and childhood by Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki of Studio Ghibli. The film’s narration follows the adventure of a ten-year-old girl, Chihiro Ogino, who steps into the realm of gods and spirits along with her parents. Within this mystical world, her parents break the rules and are cursed and turned into pigs. To save her parents, Chihiro faces a number of challenging circumstances and with assistance from her spirit friends and co-workers who are portrayed in anthropomorphic form, she grows up from being a spoiled girl to be an understanding and responsible young woman.

Through the series of Chihiro’s adventure, the material-discursive entanglements between Chihiro, the human, and environmental spirits can be found. This entanglement reveals the negotiation between the symbolic capitalism and alternative environmental ethics that emerge through the remembrance of the forgotten memories. The symbolic capitalism is represented by the witch, named Yubaba, who runs the bathhouse for gods and spirits. After her parents are turned into pigs, Chihiro tries to run away from the dimension. Unfortunately, she cannot reach the entrance tunnel and her body is becoming transparent. Then the river spirit, named Haku who has forgotten his past and his real name, finds her and offers her a fruit of this realm to eat so that she will not disappear. Haku then suggests her to ask for a job with Yubaba in order to stay in this realm and to not be turned into animals. These scenes reflect on the situations in the physical reality in which in order to stay in the current capitalist communities, one has to find a job and work. In the world of capitalism and under its banner of “freedom”, one still has been forced indirectly to follow its rules. Chihiro goes to see Yubaba with her own free will, yet that is because she has no other choice, but to work in the bathhouse to stay in this dimension. As an exchange for the work contract with Yubaba, Chihiro loses her real name and is known as “Zen”. From this point onwards, Zen is Yubaba’s “commodity” and works for her. Zen then possesses “labour-power”; and thus, becomes part of this represented capitalist world.

Yubaba possesses a large amount of materialist greed and even if she shows great love and care for her own son, her son is still the second priority after gold and money-making. This can be seen

in the scene in which Haku comes to negotiate with Yubaba to release Chihiro and her parents to the human world.

Yubaba: Still alive?! What is it you want?

Haku: You still haven't noticed that something precious to you has been replaced.

Yubaba: Don't get fresh out of me, young man. Since when did you talk that way to your master.

With wide eyes, the first thing Yubaba examines is the gold, laid in front of her. After that, she moves to look at her son and finds out that the son who has been with her all this time is not her real son. She is so shocked and then the gold turns into dirt. That makes her become even crazier and search for her son. Haku then goes to her and offers a deal to help Chihiro and her parents.

Yubaba: What did you do with my baby?

Haku: He is with your sister.

Yubaba: Zaniba!?! Very clever, Haku. I get it. You get my baby back for me, but with a price. So what do you want?

Haku: Tear Zen's contact and I want you to send her mother and father back to the human world.

Yubaba: Fine, but on one condition. I get to give Zen one final test. If she fails, she is mine. (Miyazaki, 2001,1:42)

Yubaba controls her workers at the bathhouse by stealing their real names and renaming them. This is a spell she uses to prevent them from breaking free from her work contracts. This is a "forgetting-making" business that influences the whole narrative. This business, however, does not only exist in the realm of gods and spirits. Miyazaki also illustrates that it is part of the human world too. It is still a mystery whether the human world's capitalism influences the capitalism in this realm of gods, as capitalism is very much a humanist concept. Miyazaki never answers this question in the film. However, from watching the film, it is not difficult to draw an idea that these two worlds are interconnected. They entangle and contour one another.

Alternative environmental ethics, nevertheless, emerge when Chihiro remembers her first encounter with Haku. She remembers that she was saved by him and Haku is the spirit of the Kohaku River. This then leads to the reason why Kohaku ended up serving for Yubaba. Kohaku, as the guardian spirit of the Kohaku River, had lost his home, as the river no longer existed. The river has been destroyed and replaced for the sake of the area development. As Chihiro says, "they filled in that river, it's all apartments now" (Miyazaki, 2001, 1:54). He was lost and had nowhere to go. However, when he remembers his real name and his place, he breaks free from Yubaba and is able to leave the bathhouse. The spirit of the Kohaku River is free from the materialist greed since then and this is because of Chihiro's remembrance of their past connection.

This situation refers to the anthropocene as much as it implies to the forgotten environmental relations in the society during the blooming capitalist industrialization. When Chihiro remembers the existence of the Kohaku River and her experience with it, the environmental relations of the past are resurfaced, and therefore, sustained. Consequently, this remembrance resurfaces human interconnectedness to the natural environment. It reminds humans that the natural

surroundings have its own life, and thus, possesses agency with abilities to act and respond that may emerge in the forms of spirits. Miyazaki portrays the spirits with anthropomorphism to highlight the mutual dependence and closeness between humans and nonhuman nature that also possesses personhood, as do human beings. As Bennett (2010) argues, anthropomorphism can be used to counter anthropocentrism by illustrating the similarities and symmetries between humans and nonhumans (p. xvi). This is a posthumanist notion that *Spirited Away* presents.

This posthumanist notion, furthermore, has been expanded when Miyazaki demonstrates the difference-ness in a more positive light. In *Spirited Away*, the difference-ness is shown in the forms of contrasting physical bodies among characters. Kamachi, for instance, appears as having six hands and two legs. He closely resembles spiders. Other characters, except for Lin and Kohaku who appear in the human form, also have bodies that resemble animal species. Chihiro is shocked at first at this difference-ness, yet she learns to live with it and later realizes that the outer physical appearance does not determine the value of beings. She does not feel shocked when she finds out that Kohaku is a flying dragon and she faces the No-face with calm posture without fear. Through this portrayal, Miyazaki implies that the difference-ness, especially that concerning visual sensation, does not devalue those who possess it. The matter of heart and inner mind is more precious and help people look beyond the long established hierarchical difference-ness towards the less hierarchical difference. This is a difference-ness that *Spirited Away* inflicts in the audience's mind and even when the film ends and the light comes up, it is still flowing and encourages the audience to look at the world differently and indeed in a more positive light.

This contesting hierarchical difference-ness, moreover, is expressed in the written literature from South Africa, particularly *Disgrace* (1999) by J.M Coetzee. *Disgrace* is set in the context of the changing South Africa from the apartheid era to the post-apartheid. It depicts the ways in which a white South African copes up with this transformation. The story is narrated through the white South African professor of English, David Lurie, who quits his position due to the disgrace he conducts by forcing his student to sleep with him. He then retreats to the smallholding, belonging to his daughter, Lucy Lurie, where he encounters social changes and the existence of nonhuman nature that he cannot refuse to acknowledge anymore.

During his time at Lucy's smallholding, David spends plenty of time with animals, especially with dogs. In *Disgrace*, dogs transparently possess agentive power and have been tied to the colonial past as one of its legacies. In the first part of the novel, dogs are not considered as "companion" of human characters. Rather, they are meant to be security guards to protect the properties and the status of white South Africans. As Lucy affirms, "dogs still mean something. The more dogs, the more deterrence. Anyhow, if there were to be a break-in, I don't see that two people would be better than one." (Coetzee, 2000, p. 60). While relying on the histories of European settlers in Africa who applied both dogs and guns to expand their territories and enslave black people, Coetzee (2000) also points out the fact that dogs mean more than metaphorical conceits. "Dobermanns, German Shepherds, ridgeback, bull terriers, Rottweilers" (p. 61) are the culturally specific "meanings" that make the certain dogs "readable". In turn, these meanings inflict those, categorized as such, with racist discourses, forcing them to participate in the white discourse of slavery in the colonial time and the white discourse of fear with respect to black people in the post-apartheid time.

While these meanings exist in order to highlight the power of whiteness, dogs in *Disgrace* are "real", literal animals who act and respond as well as offer humans "services" and are treated and killed by them. As Wright (2010) argues, dogs also "function as literal animals, as characters, and as beings who, like their human counterparts, have suffered twofold as a result of the colonial project of empire and one of its omnipresent consequences, environmental devastation (p. 57). This is the point where alternative environmental ethic emerges. Coetzee (2000) projects that Lucy

and her dogs relate and connect to each other as “watchdogs [...] working dogs on short contracts: two weeks, one week, sometimes just a weekend. The pets tend to come in during the summer holidays” (p. 61). With this statement, Coetzee depicts that the agencies of dogs are similar to the agencies of humans, regardless of different physical bodies and capabilities, because these agencies are determined and formed by their encountering relationship.

While Lucy posits her understanding of dogs through her observation, at the same time, dogs determine their actions and roles in this smallholding and engage in the contract that they see appropriate. Drawing from this, the position of dogs as a binary against humans is contested. As a result, the position of dogs is lifted to be on a par with humans. When inserting the politics of “whiteness”, dogs then become figures to protect white privilege pretty much in the same way in which white humans stand to maintain their privilege and identity. At this point, the hierarchical difference, maintained since the colonization, is no longer valid. Rather, this less hierarchical difference-ness is sustained and so does the similarity, concerning personhood, between them.

Unlike *Spirited Away*, *Disgrace* is very much the novel that propels the rights of animals and insists on the personhood of animals. This can be seen, especially through the encounters and conversations between David and one particular female bulldog, named Katy. Among other dogs, she is the only dog that is referred by “her” instead of “it”.

He enters her cage, closes the door behind him. She raises her head, regards him, lets her head fall again; her old digs hang slack. He squats down, tickles her behind the ears. ‘Abandoned, are we?’ he murmurs. He stretches out beside her on the bare concrete. Above is the pale blue sky. His limbs relax. This is how Lucy finds him. He must have fallen asleep; the first he knows, she is in the cage with the water-can, and the bitch is up, sniffing her feet. ‘Making friends?’ says Lucy. ‘She’s not easy to make friends with.’ ‘Poor old Katy, she is mourning. No one wants her, and she knows it. The irony is, she must have offspring all over the district who would be happy to share their homes with her. But it’s not in their power to invite her. They are part of the furniture, part of the alarm system. They do us honour of treating us like gods, and we respond by treating them like things.’ They leave the cage. The bitch slumps down, closes her eyes. (Coetzee, 2000, p. 78)

Here, the hegemony of David as a human is considerably contested, especially when he and Katy share the same position as being abandoned. When David lies down beside Katy, he does not think of her as an inferior animal entity, but as a companion. This is why he does not protest when Lucy asks him whether he is making friends. Instead, he answers, “[she] is not easy to make friends with” (Coetzee, 2000, p. 78). This is the point where the gap between David and Katy is narrowing down. David’s attitudes towards animals are changing. Drawing from these, *Disgrace* evidently reflects on a posthumanist contest against the hierarchical order of rationality between humans and animals, transforming it into alternative ethics of animal rights.

Conclusion

Alternative Environmental Ethics of South Africa and Japan and the Interconnectedness

Even though *Spirited Away* and *Disgrace* are from different cultures in different regions, they express a similar notion of posthumanism and sustain alternative environmental ethics for sustainability. While *Spirited Away* focuses more upon the experience of childhood that could easily be adapted to the environmental surroundings and the roles of capitalism as an influential feature to determine the relationship between humans and the rest of nature that should be challenged, *Disgrace* emphasizes on suffering, shared in the South Africa environment that is very much affected by the political situation and should be contested. The questions and conflicts

between race and class are central to *Disgrace*; and due to this reason, *Disgrace* seems to be more complex to be read than *Spirited Away*. However, in a similar manner, both narratives proceed to express the environmental issues and have become very influential, especially because of their popularity and awards they received.

Both narratives, furthermore, convey posthumanist notions that have been moulded by socio-cultural issues and this affirms further the interconnectedness within this world on the earth. Posthumanism in *Disgrace* is very much tied and partially shapes and is shaped by the racialized concept of “whiteness”. Thus, alternative environmental ethics in *Disgrace* can be found even with the approach that does not mainly pay attention to any ecocritical reading, such as critical whiteness studies. Likewise, alternative environmental ethics, emerged in *Spirited Away*, can be effortlessly found, as they are there and they are very obvious when nonhuman characters have dialogues of their own. When comparing these two narratives, the interconnectedness of fiction reality in *Disgrace* and the interconnectedness of the fictional magical world in *Spirited Away* distinguish one from one another as much as connect them together. Moving towards the same goal of sustaining environmental relations and the less hierarchical difference-ness, the uniqueness of South Africa and Japan maintain the world with valuable contributions that go hand in hand.

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