
Beyond the Political Allegory: A Study of George Orwell's Animal Farm as an Ecofeminist Text

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Abstract: *Animal Farm has variously been analysed as a farce, a fable, a political allegory and a dystopian allegorical novella. However, this study suspends the allegorical interpretations and focuses on the primary or literal meaning of the text to show how Orwell in Animal Farm highlights animal oppression. Suspension of the allegorical interpretations allows the reader to infer that the novella also brings animal abuse to the limelight besides serving as a scathing satire on Stalinism. The animal characters which represent the gullible and oppressed masses of Russia under the dictatorship of Joseph Stalin and Trotsky also narrate the painful stories of different varieties of domestic animals. Ecofeminism is built on the notion that every kind of oppression and exploitation is in one way or the other way interconnected. Therefore, the leading ecofeminist theorists like Greta Gaard, Lori Green and Devona Harvey treat speciesism or animal liberation theory as a branch of ecofeminism by merging the case of animals with ecofeminist discourse. The study draws upon the ideas of leading ecofeminists and particularly animal rights theorists like Peter Singer and Tom Regan to bring animal abuse to the forefront.*

Keywords: *Ecofeminism, Speciesism, Animal Liberation Movement, Anthropocentrism.*

1. INTRODUCTION

It matters not how man behaves to animals, because God has subjected all things to man's power (Aquinas & Provinc 1981)

Plants exist for the sake of animals, and brute beasts for the sake of man. (Gould, Aristotle: Politics, Ethics and Desirability)

In the light of ideas afore mentioned, it becomes clear that the way feminists trace down the origin of women oppression from creation myths, ancient philosophies and folk literature; animal liberationists also demonstrate that animal oppression is authenticated by the misinterpretations of theological doctrines and that western mainstream philosophy has



licenced it. In other words, ancient philosophies and theological doctrines are not only androcentric but anthropocentric as well. This paper is an attempt to analyse George Orwell's *Animal Farm* as an ecofeminist text. The novella has been read as a satire, a political allegory, a farce and so on but the manifestations of animal abuse within the text have almost been neglected. *Animal Farm* is a perfect example of animal abuse if read from an ecofeminist point of view. Orwell portrays nonhuman animals as the victim of anthropocentric mindset in the same way in which feminists portray women as the victims of androcentric mindsets or anti-racists consider people of colour as the victims of racist mindsets.

Animal Farm, a book that depicts a rebellion of farmed animals against their owners, is largely understood as an allegory for communism, although, while observing a boy whipping a cart-horse, Orwell did acknowledge that "if only such animals became aware of their strength we should have no power over them, and that men exploit animals in much the same way as the rich exploit the proletariat" (Matsuoka and Sorenson

Susan Finsen and Lawrence Finsen for instance justify this point in the *Encyclopaedia of Animal Rights*:

Proponents of animal rights have always maintained that speciesism is analogous to racism and sexism. Some urge that a linkage stronger than mere analogy is crucial to the future success of the movement. (Beckof, *Encyclopaedia of Animal Rights*.53)

Therefore, to come up with an ecofeminist analysis of the text, this analysis suspends the allegorical interpretations and focuses on the literal meaning to identify the elements which highlight animal oppression and natural degradation. Animal rights theory is a branch of ecofeminism as ecofeminism according to Greta Gaard, is a theory that has evolved from various fields of feminist inquiry and activism: peace movements, labour movements, women's health care, and the anti-nuclear, environmental, and animal liberation movements (Gaard 1). Deborah Rudacile in *Encyclopaedia of Animal Rights and Animal Welfare* (1998) assert that:

Animal protection as a social movement is a modern development, arising in England early in the 18th century. Societies for the protection of animals were formed in both England and the United States in connection with the passing of the first animal protection legislation (American Society for the prevention of cruelty to animals; Royal Society for the prevention of cruelty to animals). (Beckof 1)

Though, Debouha calls the animal liberation movement an eighteenth-century phenomenon; the practice of animal oppression and abuse is as old as human civilization. Peter Singer, while tracing out the history of animal rights violation in his book *Animal Liberation* and in many of his lectures starts right from the Hebrew tradition. Singer's arguments against animal abuse highlight the anthropocentric nature of western philosophy, theology and literature. Singer demonstrates how the misinterpretations of theological doctrines embraced by the philosophers like Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant etc. authenticate the animal abuse.

Animal liberation theorists also defend the idea that right from antiquity, animals have been the victims of anthropocentrism in the same fashion in which women suffer from androcentrism or male dominated systems but the issue of animal oppression has always been



neglected and overlooked. Modern animal liberation theorists protest against novel forms of abuse and exploitation done through agribusiness. The case of animal oppression is more curious because they are equally violated by men as well as women and children. Given the consequences of environmental degradation and exploitation of the nonhuman world it may be inferred that the possibility of life on earth is equally dependent on the existence of animals and other inanimate entities as on humans. However, over the centuries, theorists have only been engaged with the exploitation of women, slaves, people of colour and other oppressed groups and the case of animals has been taken for granted. However, the past few decades have witnessed a rapid growth in the field of animal liberation movements. Animal liberation theorists and animal rights activists have made their contribution known through word as well as action. Theorists like Peter Singer and Tom Regan turn the hierarchy upside down by explaining the importance of animals for the sustainability of life on earth. Past few decades have witnessed a rapid growth in this field, a considerable amount of theoretical works have been produced which advocate the fundamental rights of animals. the case of animals has also been fictionalised by writers throughout the world as Christine Townend in *Confronting Cruelty* assert that:

I am sure that as long as our movement continues to grow in this way, there will be a world in which the killing and eating of animals is considered as much a sin as theft, pollution or rape. (*Confronting Cruelty* 10).

Christine Townhead's theoretical ideas regarding animal abuse may be justified by the ideas Orwell puts in the mouth of one of its leading animal characters in the *Animal Farm*. Reflecting on the wretched condition of animals in Manor Farm Old Major (a character in *Animal Farm*) shares his thoughts with the animals and says that:

Man is the only creature that consumes without producing. He does not give milk, he does not lay eggs, he is too weak to pull the plough, he cannot run fast enough to catch rabbits. Yet he is lord of all the animals. He sets them to work, he gives back to them the bare minimum that will prevent them from starving, and the rest he keeps for himself. Our labour tills the soil, our dung fertilises it, and yet there is not one of us that owns more than his bare skin (*Animal Farm* 4).

In the introduction to *Critical Animal Studies* 2018, Atsuko Matsuoka opines that speciesism doesn't mean theorising the relationship of humans and animals but it must be treated as a practice which is socially, economically and politically constructed that supports the relationship of humans with animals.

Animal Farm: An Ecofeminist Text

The novella is set in an animal farm, famously known as Manor Farm, owned by Mr. Jones and the story is told by a third person omniscient narrator. Being an allegory, the novella is dominated by animal characters wherein humans are portrayed as the foils to the animal protagonists. Unlike modern dairy farms or poultry farms, the farm has every kind of domestic animal in it including birds which helps the author to highlight multiple forms of oppression done to the nonhuman world. The opening of the text is suggestive of the negligence and carelessness of the farm owner who is too drunk to remember to shut the pop holes. Meanwhile all the animals in the manor farm can be seen planning a get together at night because "Old Major, the prize Middle White Boar' had had a strange dream on the previous night and wishes to communicate it to the other animals" (*Animal Farm* 1).



Although the animal liberation movement gained impetus quite recently and writers started fictionalising environmental damages and animal abuses only after the emergence of theories like ecocriticism and ecofeminism, Orwell's text appears to be sowing the seeds of resistance against animal abuse long back. In other words, the text signals towards the idea of Orwell being conscious about the abuse of animals long before the emergence of modern animal liberation theories.

Serving as the mouthpiece of the author, Old Major articulates the injustices animals undergo in the Manor Farm for a long time before narrating his dream. The way he explains it to the rest of the animals prepares them for a rebellion and resistance against their oppressor. The opening not only introduces the major animal characters like Old Major, Napoleon, Benjamin, Boxer and Clover but also highlights the multiple ways in which humans abuse animals as well as nature. All the animals represent common masses of Russia whose gullibility is brought to the fore by Orwell and the farm owner represents a political setup that exploits these gullible masses. However, the portrayal of humans as well as animals unveil the truth that humans abuse animals in the same manner in which humans exploit other humans like women, people of colour, destitute, downtrodden and the disabled.

Again, it is the beginning wherein Orwell makes the old major highlight the abuses humans impose upon nonhuman animals. The moment each and every animal in the Manor Farm arrives and makes itself comfortable, the old major shares his experiences before jumping to the main story. Old major's speech in the big barn reverberates the arguments animal liberation theorists make in their articulations. He lists the exploitations and abuses animals go through and the way humans use their bodies as the sources of food, clothing, transport and sport. Old Major points towards the animals one by one to explain how man curtails their freedom and uses them as commodities.

While addressing directly to the cows the Boar explains how gallons of milk produced by them has "gone down the throats of our enemies" (4). Major's views regarding the abuse cows experience in dairies correlate with the theoretical pronouncements put forth by Lori Green in her essay "Dismantling Oppression: An Analysis of the Connection Between Women and Animals," Lori Green observes that:

In order to keep dairy cows in a constant state of lactation, they must be impregnated annually. After her first infant is taken from her at birth, she is milked by machines twice, sometimes three times, a day for ten months. After the third month she will be impregnated again. She will give birth only six to eight weeks after drying out. This intense cycle of pregnancy and hyperlactation can last only about five years and then the "spent" cow is sent to slaughter. (Ecofeminism 73).

Paul Valdo, Michael Fox and Ted Friend have explained the exploitation of cows' experience in modern dairy farms in the similar vein. According to them Modern dairy production is designed to maximize cows' output by manipulating their physiology. In order to allow as much milk to be produced as possible (which involves milking several times per day), each cow is kept in a constant state of pregnancy. A by-product of this process are the veal calves that are, in turn, factory farmed in confined conditions and fed a diet that produces anaemia. Dairy cows, which have a normal life expectancy of around twenty years, are also fed a special diet of chemicals, vitamins, and medicines designed to maximize production. Any individual cow is kept a limited number of years (usually only six or seven



years of their maximum production), at the end of which they are sent to the slaughterhouse. (Beckof)

Orwell signals towards the abuse experienced by chickens when Old Major explains to the hens how their eggs have gone to the markets to fetch money for Jones and his men. Then to the horses whose foals have been “sold at a year old” (4). Whatever Orwell makes Old Major address to his audiences correlates with what animal liberation theorists build their arguments upon. Commenting on the ruthless treatment of chickens in poultry farms Waldau states that:

Poultry is factory farmed in even more intensive conditions. They are kept in crowded conditions and subjected to debeaking. Perhaps most symbolic is the discarding of all male chicks in the process of producing laying hens. These chicks are simply gassed or dumped alive into plastic sacks in which they suffocate. Female chicks are integrated into the extraordinarily deprived conditions of the modern battery-cage system (169).

After hens and cows, the boar addresses the gathering that even pigs are no exception when it comes to cruelty and abuse. He states how the four hundred children that he produced couldn't escape the cruel knives of men. Even the horses and the dogs have no better fate (5)” the old major adds. According to Major, Boxer (the horse) will also be sold out to the knacker the moment its great muscles lose power, when dogs grow old and toothless “Jones ties a brick round their necks and drowns them in the nearest pond” (5). Major concludes his speech and all the animals sing the song titled beasts of England in order to fill their hearts with the wildest enthusiasm...

Beasts of England, beasts of Ireland,
Beasts of every land and clime,
Hearken to my joyful tidings
of the golden future time.
Soon or late the day is coming,
Tyrant Man shall be o'erthrown,
And the fruitful fields of England
Shall be trod by beasts alone.
(Animal Farm 7)

Considering the way, animal liberation movement has gained impetus throughout the world, “Beasts of England ” or the novella itself sounds like an augury of a cornerstone laid by George Orwell in 1945 because the novella is primarily a satire on Stalinism. Through this song Orwell publicizes the suppressed wishes of all the domestic as well as wild animals of the world or advocates the cause of animals.

Meanwhile, the uproar created by the animals awakes Jones, he leaves the bed to check the presence of fox in the yard. His fear for the animals again highlights his hypocrisy because he is likely to kill the fox in order to save the animals. Though the animals inside the barn were also meant for killing, fox was not a commodity, “therefore he seized the gun which always stood in a corner of his bedroom, and let fly a charge of number 6 shot into the darkness” (8).

Old Major dies three nights later after being done with giving most of the animals a different outlook on life. Every animal was rejoicing over the idea of freedom and rebellion, notwithstanding the fact that “they did not know when the rebellion predicted by Major would take place” (9). However, the pigs, comparably more intelligent than the rest of the animals in the farm, expounded the old major's ideas into a concrete system of thought and



named it “Animalism”. Pigs organised meetings to elaborate the principles of animalism to others. Though it was an uphill task at first to inject the idea of freedom inside the brains of animals who were born to be slaves. Some animals for instance refused to be a part of rebellion because they thought that rebellion would cost them a lot but pigs made them understand that freedom is worth more than the things provided by Jones. The rest of the story discusses the ways in which people dismantle the monarchy but indulge in civil wars. It shows how the lust of power gave rise to another form of domination and oppression but the beginning of the novella explicitly articulates the animal oppression.

2. CONCLUSION

Animal oppression is analogous to the exploitation experienced by slaves, black folks and particularly women. It is the moral obligation of theorists and thinkers to fight for the rights of voiceless animals because animal rights are as important as the rights of humans. The environmental damages are also linked to the extinction of animals and insects. Therefore, advocating animal rights is important for the sustainability of life on earth.

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