

ELIZABETH COSTELLO: COETZEE'S PLEA FOR ANIMAL RIGHTS

Tanuja Kumar Nayak
Research Scholar
Ravenshaw University
Cuttack, Odisha

Abstract

The 2003 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, J. M. Coetzee is regarded as one of the most accomplished contemporary writers of South Africa. His writings express an apolitical view point that extends beyond geographical and social boundaries to achieve universal significance. Most of his works address the brutalities and contradictions associated with the South African policy of apartheid. A close analysis of his works reveal Coetzee's concern for a universal social order which respects the existence of all the elements including plants, animals as well as the human beings. Though writing at a turbulent time when South Africa grappled with the turmoil of apartheid, Coetzee's novels are richly informed by issues with wider implications that transcend any narrow geo-political boundary. The present paper proposes to analyze Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) in order to map his thoughts on the issue of animal rights and project Coetzee as a writer who possesses sensitivity enough to accord animals equal importance in his scheme of things.

Key words: J. M. Coetzee, anthropocentric, *Elizabeth Costello*, animal rights

The 2003 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, J. M. Coetzee, is regarded as one of the most accomplished contemporary writers of South Africa. His writings express an apolitical view that extends beyond geographical and social boundaries to achieve universal significance. Most of his works address the brutalities and contradictions associated with the South African policy of apartheid. A close analysis of his works reveal Coetzee's concern for a universal social order which respects the existence of all the elements including plants, animals as well as the human beings. Though writing at a turbulent time when South Africa grappled with the turmoil of apartheid, Coetzee's novels are richly informed by issues with wider implications that transcend any narrow geo-political boundary. One of such important issues that Coetzee writes passionately about is the dearth of human sympathy in the present era and how man has developed a systematic anthropocentric mechanism to gobble up all the available resources without even feeling guilty. The present paper proposes to analyze Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) in order to map his thoughts on the issue of animal rights and project Coetzee as

a writer who possesses sensitivity enough to accord the animals equal importance in his scheme of things.

In Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello* the central character, 'Elizabeth Costello is a writer, born in 1928, which makes her sixty-six years old, going on sixty-seven' (1). We come to know that 'Elizabeth Costello made her name with her fourth novel, *The House on Eccles Street* (1969), whose main character is Marion Bloom, wife of Leopold Bloom, principal character of another novel, *Ulysses* (1922) by James Joyce' (1). She travels around the world and gives lectures on topics including the lives of animals and literary censorship. It may be noted here that Elizabeth Costello is also the main character in Coetzee's academic novel, *The Lives of Animals* (1999). A character of the same name also appears in Coetzee's another novel *Slow Man* (2005).

In *Elizabeth Costello*, through the voice of the protagonist, Coetzee raises certain fundamental questions concerning the rights of animals. Placing J. M. Coetzee in the animal rights issue gets complicated by the fact that his views are expressed through a controversial narrative figure and his alter ego, Elizabeth Costello. As a result reviewers are hesitant to identify her views with that of Coetzee's. However, A closer analysis of Coetzee's writings and utterances provides ample reason to believe that both J. M. Coetzee and Elizabeth Costello share almost identical views on animal rights. The most important evidences of this is in a speech written by Coetzee and delivered by Hugo Weaving, entitled "A Word from J.M. Coetzee," at the opening of an art exhibition and in an interview with Satya to which Coetzee agreed when he was in Denmark to receive the Nobel Prize in 2003.

In his interview with Satya while commenting on animal rights Coetzee says:

Strictly speaking, my interest is not in legal rights for animals but in a change of heart towards animals. The most important of all rights is the right to life, and I cannot foresee a day when domesticated animals will be granted that right in law. If you concede that the animal rights movement can never succeed in this primary goal, then it seems that the best we can achieve is to show to as many people as we can what the spiritual and psychic cost is of continuing to treat animals as we do, and thus perhaps to change their hearts. (qtd. in Northover, 39-40)

In the speech, Coetzee begins by stating that "it is obvious that there is something badly wrong in relations between human beings and other animals" (qtd. in Northover, 40). Besides criticizing the industrialized farming of animals, he also talks of other exploitative animal industries "that we might also call cruel and inhuman but for the fact that inhuman is the wrong word, such practices are all too human" (qtd. in Northover, 40). This is a clear proof of Coetzee's interest in animal rights and the need of treating animals with humaneness.

He also tries to establish a connection between our treatment of animals and the treatment of Jews by the Nazis which echoes the utterances of Elizabeth Costello. He says:

We have already had one warning on the grandest scale that there is something deeply, cosmically wrong with regarding and treating fellow human beings as mere units of any kind. It came when in the middle of the twentieth century a group of powerful men in Germany had the bright idea of adapting the methods of the industrial stockyard, as pioneered and perfected in Chicago, to the slaughter—or what they preferred to call the processing—of human beings (qtd. in Northover, 40).

He continues:

Of course we cried out in horror when we found out about this. We cried: What a terrible crime, to treat human beings like cattle! If only we had known beforehand! But our cry should more accurately have been: What a terrible crime, to treat human beings like units in an industrial process! And that cry should have had a postscript: What a terrible crime, come to think of it, to treat any living being like a unit in an industrial process! (qtd. in Northover, 41).

The above facts provide clear indication to Coetzee's points of view and the views expressed by his protagonist, Elizabeth Costello, is an extension and elaboration of the writer's views. In the chapter 'The Novel in Africa' Elizabeth travels in a cruise ship, *SS Northern Lights*, where she is required to 'offer a short course on contemporary novel' (36). On the board of the ship she meets Emmanuel Egudu, a writer from Nigeria (36). Egudu also addresses the group of passengers and while talking to them about the African novel, he quotes from Paul Zumthor:

"Since the seventeenth century," writes Zumthor, "Europe has spread across the world like a cancer, at first stealthily, but for a while now at gathering pace, until today it ravages life forms, animals, plants, habitats, languages" (45).

The Europe of seventeenth century has become a metaphor for all the industrial civilizations those treat nature just as 'a storage bin of natural resource.' The greedy resource hunger of man is contrasted with the innocent nature of the penguins when Elizabeth Costello visits Macquarie Island. She has read that the same island was a hub of penguin industry in the nineteenth century and cruelly hundreds of thousands of penguins were killed to obtain oil from them. But the descendants of those penguins do not bear any grudge towards the human beings:

Yet their twentieth-century descendants seem to have learned nothing. Still they innocently swim out to welcome visitors; still they call out greetings to them as they approach the rookeries (Ho! Ho! they call, for all the world like gruff little gnomes), and allow them to approach close enough to touch them, to stroke their sleek breasts. (55)

During Elizabeth Costello's visits to Appleton College to deliver the annual Gates Lecture she is free to speak on any topic but she decides to speak on the animals. In her address Elizabeth Costello focuses on the cruel treatment of the animals in the hands of humans. She sets the tone of her address in the following words:

In addressing you on the subject of animals I will pay you the honour of skipping a recital of the horrors of their lives and deaths. Though I have no reason to believe that you have at the forefront of your minds what is being done to animals at this moment in production facilities (I hesitate to call them farms any longer), in abattoirs, in trawlers, in laboratories, all over the world, I will take it that you concede me the rhetorical power to evoke these horrors and bring them home to you with adequate force, and leave it at that, reminding you only that the horrors I here omit are nevertheless at the centre of this lecture. (63)

Elizabeth Costello is not ready to accept any excuse or justification that is generally offered by the people in support of killing animals. For she argues that the horror and cruelty involved in the killing of animals is in no way less than the horror and crime associated with the killing of human beings. She is scathing in her attack against such hypocrisy. She reminds the

killing of several million people between 1942 and 1945 in the concentration camps of the Third Reich—at Treblinka alone more than a million and a half (63). She says the people living around Treblinka said that they did not know what was going on in those camps. It was not only the people of Treblinka but also people from other parts of Germany where thousands of camps were there also told the same thing. The reasons being given by Elizabeth Costello is:

“Not every camp was a death camp, a camp dedicated to the productions of death, but horrors went on in all of them, more horrors by far than one could afford to know, for one’s own sake” (64).

Elizabeth Costello reminds all that the Germans of a particular generation are still hated not because of the expansionist war waged by them. She says:

“They lost their humanity, in our eyes, because of a certain willed ignorance on their part. Under the circumstances of Hitler’s kind of war, ignorance may have been a useful survival mechanism, but that is an excuse which, with admirable moral rigour, we refuse to accept” (64).

In the opinion of Elizabeth Costello:

In German certain line was crossed which took people beyond the ordinary murderousness and cruelty of warfare into a state that we can only call sin. The signing of the articles of capitulation and the payment of reparations did not put an end to that state of sin. On the contrary, we said, a sickness of the soul continues to mark that generation. It marked those citizens of the Reich who had committed evil actions, but also those who, for whatever reason, were in ignorance of those actions. It thus marked, for practical purposes, every citizen of the Reich” (64).

She holds responsible all those people, who ‘did not know,’ for the crime. In her words:

It was and is inconceivable that people who *did not know* (in that special sense) about the camps can be fully human. In our chosen metaphors, it was they and not their victims who were the beasts. By treating fellow human beings, beings created in the image of God, like beasts, they had themselves become beasts. (64)

By referring to the killing of Jews during the World War and holding those people, who ‘did not know,’ responsible for it, Elizabeth Costello prepares her ground to compare the killing of animals taking place every day all around and how most of the so called civilized, educated society simply ignore them by saying that they ‘do not know.’ She says:

Let me say it openly: we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them. (65)

She negates all those voices which would protest at her comparisons between killing animals and the killing of millions of people in Germany by Hitler during the World War. She takes all those philosophers and thinkers into account who try to rationalize the killings of animals hiding behind the subtleties of philosophy. She takes them head on:

And to split hairs, to claim that there is no comparison, that Treblinka was so to speak a metaphysical enterprise dedicated to nothing but death and annihilation while the meat industry is ultimately devoted to life (once its victims are dead, after all, it does not burn them to ash or bury them but on

the contrary cuts them up and refrigerates and packs them so that they can be consumed in the comfort of our homes) is as little consolation to those victims as it would have been – pardon the tastelessness of the following – to ask the dead of Treblinka to excuse their killers because their body fat was needed to make soap and their hair to stuff mattresses with. (66)

Elizabeth Costello is aware of the long philosophical debate on this issue and says: Such a language is available to me, I know. It is the language of Aristotle and Porphyry, of Augustine and Aquinas, of Descartes and Bentham, of, in our day, Mary Midgley and Tom Regan. It is a philosophical language in which we can discuss and debate what kind of souls animals have, whether they reason or on the contrary act as biological automatons, whether they have rights in respect of us or whether we merely have duties in respect of them. (66)

But she is not concerned about the subtleties of philosophical rhetoric. She bluntly expresses that if the organizers of the Lecture wanted ‘someone to come here and discriminate between mortal and immortal souls, or between rights and duties’ they would have called in a philosopher rather than inviting her. What is of importance to her is action on the ground. She does not want to indulge in blank philosophical rhetoric. She summarily rejects St Thomas’s argument that, ‘because man alone is made in the image of God and partakes in the being of God, how we treat animals is of no importance except in so far as being cruel to animals may accustom us to being cruel to man’ (67).

Elizabeth Costello also rejects the theory of Plato and Descartes who in their different ways tried to equate ‘reason’ and the universe and claimed that ‘reason and the universe are of the same being (67). She does not buy the argument that says, “. . . the fact that animals, lacking reason, cannot understand the universe but have simply to follow its rules blindly, proves that, unlike man, they are part of it but not part of its beings: that man is godlike, animals thinglike” (67). This attempt of privileging ‘reason’ is snubbed by her. She tells, ‘Both reason and seven decades of life experience tell me that reason is neither the being of the universe nor the being of God’ (67). She attacks the idea of reason and the idea that man is godlike—the two most harped about USPs of man which, as he claims, mandate him to dominate all others and use them to fulfill his own requirement. She is very precise in her attack:

If the being of man is really at one with the being of God, should it not be cause for suspicion that human beings take eighteen years, a neat and manageable portion of human lifetime, to qualify to become decoders of God’s master script, rather than 5 minutes, say, or five hundred years? (69)

She knows that she is on a sticky wicket and her comments are against the current of the time. However, that does not deter her from telling a spade a spade.

Although I see that the best way to win acceptance from this learned gathering would be for me to join myself, like a tributary stream running into a great river, to the great Western discourse of man versus beast, of reason versus unreason, something in me resists, foreseeing in that step the concession of the entire battle.

Elizabeth Costello exposes the hollowness of reason and terms it ‘simply a vast tautology’ (70). In her speech she tries to expose the naked selfishness and self-centeredness of man by removing the mask of reason which man has been using to justify all his acts of

aggression and horror vis-à-vis all other elements of nature. Man has systematically rendered others powerless and poached their freedom:

In the olden days the voice of man, raised in reason, was confronted by the roar of the lion, the bellow of the bull. Man went to war with the lion and the bull, and after many generations won that war definitively. Today these creatures have no more power. Animals have only their silence left with which to confront us. (70)

Elizabeth Costello also raises questions about the justification of using animals for experiments. She draws the attention of her audience towards ‘animal(s) trapped in the hell of the laboratory or the zoo’ (75). She argues that experiments conducted on the animals reduce them into simply ‘an organism with an appetite’ (73). Commenting on the experiment on an ape called Sultan by Wolfgang Kohler, a psychologist, she says:

At every turn Sultan is driven to think the less interesting thought, from the purity of speculation (Why do men behave like this?) he is relentlessly propelled towards lower, practical, instrumental reason (How does one use this to get that?) and thus towards acceptance of himself as primarily an organism with an appetite that needs to be satisfied. Although his entire history, from the time his mother was shot and he was captured, through his voyage in a cage to imprisonment on this island prison camp and the sadistic games that are played around food here, leads him to ask questions about the justice of the universe and the place of this penal colony in it, a carefully plotted psychological regimen conducts him *away* from ethics and metaphysics towards the humbler reaches of practical reason. (73-74)

Elizabeth Costello tries to drive her point home by citing examples of philosophers like Descartes who like Elizabeth could realize the obvious similarity between man and animal but unlike her did not stand by their own observation. May be they faltered only to flatter the age old anthropocentric philosophy. Elizabeth does not agree with this school of thought and she denounces the attempts made by such philosophers to deprive the animals their right of being. To her all life forms have a right to their lives and all lives should be celebrated. Elizabeth is critical of the methods and practices of privileging of human beings over the animals on the pretext of fictitious ideas like ‘being’ or ‘reasoning’ etc. To her ‘to be alive is to be a living soul. An animal — and we are all animals — is an embodied soul’ (78). Elizabeth claims that Descartes could see this but what she is really unhappy about is, for reasons unknown to her, he chose to deny this. Elizabeth says:

An animal lives, said Descartes, as a machine lives. An animal is no more than the mechanism that constitutes it; if it has a soul, it has one in the same way that a machine has a battery, to give it the spark that gets it going; but the animal is not an embodied soul, and the quality of its being is not joy.

She does not accept Descartes’ explanation. To her it is a blasphemous attempt to deprive animals their fundamental rights to live and absolve man of any guilt of using of killing them for his own purpose. In this context she does not buy the words of Descartes, ‘*Cogito, ergo sum,*’ which ‘implies that a living being that does not do what we call thinking is somehow second-class’ (78). Such kind of logic as propounded by Descartes is grossly anthropocentric which tries to justify the acts of cruelty committed against the animals.

In the opinion of Elizabeth Costello the answer to this problem lies somewhere else. In her words, ‘the question to ask should not be: Do we have something in common—reason, self-consciousness, a soul—with other animals?’ (79). This can’t solve the problem of injustice being committed against the animals. By citing the examples of the death camps Elizabeth tries to remind us that if human beings could kill other human beings without any remorse, what is to be expected with regard to animals. In the analysis of Elizabeth Costello the causes of crime committed in the death camps were not because the victims did not share any similarities with the perpetrators but because the perpetrators and the others who tacitly supported them by not objecting to their crime ‘refused to think themselves into the place of their victims’ (79). As Elizabeth Costello puts it:

The horror is that the killers refused to think themselves into the place of their victims, as did everyone else. They said, “It is *they* in those cattle cars rattling past.” They did not say, “How would it be if it were I in that cattle car?” they did not say, “It is I who am in that cattle car.” They said, “It must be the dead who are being burned today, making the air stink and falling in ash on my cabbages.” They did not say, “How would it be if I were burning.” They did not say, “I am burning, I am falling in ash.” (79)

So Elizabeth’s answer to such callous attitude towards others is ‘sympathy’. She feels the ‘others simply closed their hearts. The heart is the seat of a faculty, *sympathy*, that allows us to share at times the being of another’ (79). So the problems related to animals can also be solved by *sympathy*. In her words it is the lack of sympathy which propels man to commit such horror. She is really shocked to find the large scale killing of animals daily in abattoirs all around and compares this to holocaust. She urges people to have sympathy towards animals and wants people to put themselves in the place of animals and think like animals to understand the grave nature of injustice being perpetrated against the animals. She says:

I return one last time to the places of death all around us, the places of slaughter to which, in a huge communal effort we close our hearts. Each day a fresh holocaust, yet, as far as I can see, our moral being is untouched. We do not feel tainted. We can do anything, it seems, and come away clean.

We point to the Germans, Poles and Ukrainians who did and did not know of the atrocities around them. We like to think they were inwardly marked by the after-effects of that special form of ignorance. We like to think that in their nightmares the ones whose suffering they had refused to enter came back to haunt them. We like to think they woke up haggard in the mornings and died of gnawing cancers. But probably it was not so. The evidence points in the opposite direction: that we can do anything and get away with it... (80)

She is against the killings of animals and advocates for vegetarianism. She herself is a vegetarian. If anyone asks Elizabeth about what led her to become a vegetarian, she has her answer ready:

You ask me why I refuse to eat flesh. I, for my part, am astonished that you can put in your mouth the corpse of a dead animal, astonished that you do not find it nasty to chew hacked flesh and swallow the juices of death wounds. (83)

After her talk, she has to attend a dinner at the Faculty Club. During the dinner the issue of food habits and dietary ban on meat cropped up. One Mr Wunderlich offered to explain away the history of the practice of killing animals for food and how the Greeks overcame the moral scruple associated with the killings:

The Greeks had a feeling there was something wrong in slaughter, but thought they could make up for that by ritualizing it. They made a sacrificial offering, gave a percentage to the gods, hoping thereby to keep the rest. The same notion as the tithes. Ask for the blessing of the gods on the flesh you are about to eat, ask them to declare it clean. (86)

Elizabeth Costello concurs. She even tries to take the argument a little further when she says:

Perhaps we invented gods so that we could put the blame on them. They gave us permission to eat flesh. They gave us permission to play with unclean things. It is not our fault, it's theirs. We are just their children. . . . And God said: Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you. (86)

She tries to nullify the excuses so often offered by people to justify the killing of animals for food and ridicules the claim of so called superiority by the man on which basis he is empowered to decide the fate of other creatures. In a satiric tone she lambasts the lame argument:

We, the managers of ecology . . . understand the greater dance, therefore we can decide how many trout may be fished or how many jaguars may be trapped before the stability of the dance is upset. The only organism over which we do not claim this power of life and death is man. Why? Because man is different. Man understands the dance as the other dancers do not. Man is an intellectual being. (99)

Elizabeth stands for justice to the animals. All the excuses, arguments, rationalizations, and euphemisms are a part of an anthropocentric discourse which tries to perpetuate the atrocities being perpetrated against the animals. But Elizabeth Costello exposes the hypocrisy involved with such discourses. She is not the one to be bugged down. She has the guts to call a spade a spade. There is hardly an answer to Elizabeth's question—"If it is atrocious to kill and eat human babies, why is it not atrocious to kill and eat piglets?" (101). She is ready with her verdict and passes it without mincing many words:

. . . in history, embracing the status of man has entailed slaughtering and enslaving a race of divine or else divinely created beings and bringing down on ourselves a curse thereby. (103)

Elizabeth Costello acts as the spokesperson of Coetzee. Through her Coetzee expresses his concern over a larger ethical issue of justice to all in general and animals' right to life in particular. In *Elizabeth Costello* Coetzee espouses the cause of the animals and calls for a more sympathetic attitude towards them. He is aware of the long-standing intellectual debate concerning different philosophical questions related to the being of animals. But he rejects all the subtleties of philosophy assuming that these are just a part of the anthropocentric project that conspires to absolve man from his responsibilities towards the co-habitants who share the earth with him and on whom he claims ownership albeit without any justifiable reasons. So instead of taking sides with any of these schools of thought, as a true humanist, Coetzee offers 'sympathy' as the true antidote to all intellectual debate and gently nudges the readers to show sympathy towards all life forms. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* can truly be read as a text that makes an

appeal to the readers to listen to their heart without engaging themselves in intellectual rationalization in so far as the question of animal rights is concerned.

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