

Empathy as a Step to Divinity: A Study of Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*

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ABSTRACT

The present article explores how wilful ignorance could lead to lack of empathy on the part of humans in relation to other humans and species. It also brings out how Coetzee has succeeded in stretching human reason and imagination further to appreciate the sanctity of life of one and all. He probes the answers to the critical question through portraying the real and imaginative interaction among animals, mortals and imaginary immortals in literature. Coetzee's novel seems to be a crusade for the defenceless animals and humans against the victorious and tyrannical humans. The wilful ignorance of anguish of life—be they animals or humans and cynical reasoning is bereft of understanding and cripples human empathy that alone can lift humanity from its present state to angelic state.

KEYWORDS:

Tyrannical; Cynical; Human empathy; Humanity.

Human beings are endowed with reason, imagination, feelings of sympathy and empathy. Rationality makes human as human and distinguishes him from animals but now man has ceased to be rational when his selfishness conflicts with the wider interests of society. He has enslaved other creatures, other tribes, other classes and other nations directly or financially. His historical progress has become meaningless when butchery is justified in the name of religion, democracy or socialism. If war, slaughter, torture, sharing the spoils are what make us what we are, are not animals whose capacity for violence is finite better than us?

Costello is a novel of ideas which presents a conflation of "real and fictional worlds"¹. The novel also discusses in detail, sophisticated, and Socratic manner the limitations of realism, borders among primate, man, history and angels. Different characters deliver ideas through their

speeches reminiscent of those in Jack London's novels. It appears that the novelist has so much to convey that he has adopted novel form. The latter moves the platform and engages the reader through the movement of story and life of characters. The novel uses the technique of interruption or what Brecht has called 'alienation' technique that involves and interrupts the spectators while watching the drama. The novel is meant for rapture and rupture of consciousness. Michael Moses writes, "we are at once within and without the 'story' and are never allowed to settle comfortably into the conventions of either a purely realist or postmodern fiction."

David Attwell states that South Africa seems to have brought out degrees of suffering, a sense of the body in history, that is remarkable in Coetzee's work and in particular account of what it means (ethically, and aesthetically) to live with

difference, or alterity and his writing focuses on human failures of communication.

Jane Poyner refers to “tension in Coetzee’s writing- both in fiction and essays- between the private and public spheres.” and draws our attention to “scrupulously orchestrated ethical position” through Coetzee’s paradoxical work that raises debates on the role of intellectual and his refusal to make his politics explicitly or publicly known.⁴ Marais argues that Coetzee’s fiction “self-consciously prioritizes the literary text’s relation to an otherness beyond history”

In the novel *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee writes about the limitations of realism, the dependence of African Novel on European experience, the need for parity of animals with human, the justification of evil in history and the power of Eros that links the mortals with the immortals – The story of Orpheus in Greek mythology and the tale of Psyche and Anchises. Here we can find parallels in Hindu mythology which tells about Savitri who followed the Lord Yama, the lord of death to get her husband’s life back and the destruction of Manmadha (Cupid, angel of love) by Lord Shiva angry over Manmadha’s efforts to kindle love in him towards Parvati, the daughter of Himavanta.

The present critic thinks that Coetzee is not antithetical to history or literature but pushes both of them to their utter limits to give us a new truth regarding the limitations of human reason and imagination and the need for going beyond those limitations. To him, the individual is at once bound and free as is shown in his works such as *The Life and Times of Michael K*, *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Elizabeth Costello*. In *Elizabeth Costello*, he exposes the hollowness of human-centric worldview and the wilful ignorance of human links with animal world. In fact humans are so horrible that they have forgotten their humanity in turning a blind

eye to the horrors of history. The present article explores how wilful ignorance could lead to lack of empathy on the part of humans in relation to other humans and species. It also brings out how Coetzee has succeeded in stretching human reason and imagination further to appreciate the sanctity of life of one and all. He probes the answers to the critical question through portraying the real and imaginative interaction among animals, mortals and imaginary immortals in literature. Coetzee’s novel seems to be a crusade for the defenseless animals and humans against the victorious and tyrannical humans. The wilful ignorance of anguish of life—be they animals or humans and cynical reasoning is bereft of understanding and cripples human empathy that alone can lift humanity from its present state to angelic state

The Consequences Wilful Ignorance

Costello refers to the ‘wilful ignorance’ (Elizabeth 64) of the educated Germans and others who have failed to guess, understand or stop the massacre of the Jews during the second world war. She denigrates the similar wilful ignorance towards the slaughter of animals going on in abattoirs around them in the present times. Michael writes that Coetzee:

endeavors to represent not only the aesthetic consequences of our theoretical breakthrough (breakdown) , but also to dramatize its moral implications..

...his novel asks us to reconsider ancient philosophic questions in the light of our postmodern state: what are the proper-just and ethical – relations among gods, men, and animals? .. if we are truly beyond good and evil, then how do we address... “the problem of evil”?

Elizabeth’s speech at Appleton College in the United States some time back

causes a severe backlash in the press because she has compared the defenseless animals with the holocaust. She has been called a fascist by a woman. She is now invited for a speech at Amsterdam. When she read a book by Paul West (A real life figure and a fellow writer of Coetzee), She has felt it obscene, West has gone into the dark chambers of the mind of the hangmen who gave their accounts of the victims before their execution. She felt that the book had to be hidden from maidens and children.

Obscene, not just the deeds of Hitler's executioners, not just the deeds of the block man, but the pages of Paul West's black book too. Scenes that do not belong to the light of the day, that the eyes of maidens and children deserve to be shielded from (159).

To Elizabeth, the numbers of the victims whether hundreds of thousands or twenty millions didn't count. "A sparrow knocked of a branch by a slingshot or a city annihilated from the air; who daresay which is the worse?" (159). She turns skeptical about the ennobling quality of writing or reading. She thinks probing the evil soul would not leave a writer unscathed. Her ideas have begun changing after reading of Paul West's book. She has lost her certainty in the improvement of people after reading or writers who would venture in to the dark territories of the soul always return unaffected.

Elizabeth Costello says in her speech that the criterion of thinking whether an animal has a soul is uncomfortable. She contrasts fullness of being with a consciousness of a human as "a kind of ghostly machine thinking thoughts" (78). She criticizes experiments on animals in confinement and questions, "Do we have something in common- reason, self-consciousness', a soul-with other animals?" (79). The horror of the concentration camps is not being

empathetic towards victims and closing their hearts: "They didn't say, 'How would it be if I were in that cattle car?' They didn't say, 'It is who am in the 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 didn't say, "I am burning, I am falling in ash" (79).

Elizabeth says that if writer could empathize with her fictional character, it would also be possible to empathize with a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster. She ends up her lecture pointing out the remorselessness of the persecutors and the silent such as Germans, Poles and Ukrainians and their 'wilful ignorance'.

She remembers a personal incident in which she has been treated in a brutal way by a stranger with whom she had gone along with. That has remained buried in her secretly and without any artistic expression. She had spoken in the meeting (which included Paul West) that a writer who probed the depraved depths of a despicable character would not come out unscathed.

Reason no excuse for perpetrating slavery

Elizabeth Macfarlane in her article "Elizabeth Costello and the Ethics of Embodiment" writes that:

the dipping from one state into another (embodiment of a character and emerging out of that embodiment), one being into another, is at the heart of both *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man* 7.

Macfarlane also writes that the author and the character are held in a suspended state engaged in the task of embodying each other and the purpose is "to create and imagine otherness, to renew an subvert perspective, to see things again, through faculty of sympathy."

Costello, in her speech on philosophers and animals refers to western philosophers such as Plato,

Aquinas and Descartes who emphasized reason of humans as bringing them nearer to God. She refers to intuitive Ramanujan, an Indian mathematician brought to England and who died due to uncongenial climate, diet and academic regimen. She queries whether Ramanujan would have been better if left alone and nearer to god than western reason tried to help him. Is the author attacking the perception that animals bereft reason and other humans given to intuition are to be uplifted by so called civilizers? Then certainly Coetzee is taking cudgels on behalf of the vanquished creatures and nations. He is criticizing the Whiteman's burden. He refers to an experiment on a chimpanzee on an island and chimpanzee is subjected to the tests of thinking capacity in the state of utter starvation.

Costello refers to what the primate might have thought about human experiments withholding her food and about home from which it had been fetched as a captive. The author is indirectly mocking the holding of reason as the criterion to decide other's humanity or creatureliness if Costello is his alter ego. In the style of Milan Kundera, he is querying the presumption of those Westerns who are ready to act like gods in a universe that has chosen only them to show their domination.

In the same chapter we find an after dinner discussion on vegetarianism among academicians after Costello's speech. Some say that is born of moral concern. Gandhi has adopted vegetarianism to keep his promise made to his mother before going abroad, not to self-declare power through dietary restrictions as elite. Costello says that mothers can have a good influence on their children and her habit is to save her own soul.

To the argument that good and bad happen to insets and animals which are unaware, unreflective, Costello says:

They have no consciousness therefore .Therefore what?

Therefore we are free to use them for our own ends? Therefore we are free to kill them? Why? What is so special about the form of consciousness which we recognize that makes killing a bearer of it a crime while killing an animal goes unpunished? (90)

Wunderlich, a philosopher says, "Babies have no self-consciousness, yet we think it a more heinous crime to kill a baby than an adult" (90). Here it seems that Costello appears symbolic of mother earth. Her son is professor of physics, the embodiment of reason to know the secrets of nature. She says, " I often wonder what thinking is, what understanding is. Do we really understand the universe better than animals do?" (90) Here Coetzee is undermining the very foundations of western thinking that sees man with reason as superior to other creatures. Empathy is difficult because one can't be a Martian, bat or ape or another human being. But literature develops sympathy and empathy to an extent and no wonder Costello in the novel is a writer but not a physicist.

A person in the audience questions her whether she wants an end to meat eating, farm factories, experiments benign on animals or killing of animals in a more humane way. Later the discussion goes on dietary prescriptions such as cleanliness, shame, food habits of family, exclusion of meat eating as an exercise of power as elite in India. Norma, the daughter-in-law of Elizabeth says that human reason is superior to reason of any other animal. She opposes Elizabeth's relativism and dismisses squirrel's worldview. John, the Professor of Physics remarks that human reason to an outside observer may seem as trivial as squirrel's worldview to human.

Elizabeth, in her speech remarks that every being fights for its life and only human gives more importance to abstraction. Humans also fight for their life with consciousness as salmon that fights

for its life with its own 'consciousness'. The variation in the level of consciousness is seen as justification for suppressing others--creatures or humans. The imperialists or colonizers have used their superior magnitude of resources, organization, propaganda and physical force to establish their hegemony over the ex-colonies and animal world.

Elizabeth opposes the notion that man has right to kill other creatures for his physical or psychological needs. The present critic thinks that if man is at the level of intermediate between beast and angel, he can raise to be angelic or godly not by limiting or killing his imagination but by learning how to live without harming other creatures. Elizabeth says that we treat animals like prisoners of war and subject them to ill-treatment and death. Coetzee is criticizing that non-vegetarianism is a relic of the primitive period. Elizabeth says that humans unlike jaguars can survive on soya beans. The real and notional superiority of man over animals decides their treatment of the other. The colonized people were also treated no differently but this fact doesn't appear strikingly in Coetzee's consciousness. The debate between Elizabeth, John and O'Hearne, a professor of philosophy revolve on different reasons assigned for butchering the animals. John says that we despise and treat them with contempt because they can't fight back. "I was taken on a drive around Waltham this morning," Costello says in one of her lectures. "I saw no horrors, no drug-testing laboratories, no factory farms, and no abattoirs. Yet I am sure they are here. They must be." (Elizabeth 65)

Nikil Saval notes that Costello has acquired knowledge about the cruelty done to these creatures without needing to see it happen. This is a kind of knowledge that has nothing to do with visibility. The point Nikil makes is that empathy doesn't require direct visualization of the pain of

other creatures and mere recognition is enough to do so.

Empathy with angels and antipathy towards animals.

In the chapter on Eros, Coetzee mentions the myths of Psyche and others to write about connections between angels and mortals. He wants to convey that man is trying to become an angel through meeting with them but he forgets his beastly origins and scorns other creatures. "Can we be one with a god profoundly enough to apprehend, to get a sense of, a god's being?" (187- 188)

Gods may be real or imaginary but our fellow creatures are real. Coetzee says that:

the gods were inventors of death and corruption but with one or two exceptions, shied away from them. They are not prepared to prepare the price. They are not omniscient. They specialize in humankind because of what we have and they lack; they study us because they are envious (189).

Gods are envious of humans because "it is we who live the more urgently, feel the more intensely" (189)

In Hindu mythology, these immortals seek the help of mortal kings and their physical prowess to win battles against demons and to sustain their kingdom and prosperity. Indra (The counterpart of Zeus) seeks the help of kings such as Pururava, Dasaratha, Dushyanta. If immortals are so powerful, why have they sought help from mortals?

Through reflections of Elizabeth, The novelist points out that we have more empathy towards angels to the extent of meeting, mating and transmigrating into their beings. The gods are envious of human feelings, their erotic life and the glimpse of the life beyond. We feel more akin to the angels but not the fellow creatures. Elizabeth's consciousness seems to be part of the author's consciousness in spite of the veil of fiction. We come to know

the novelist's understanding of the extent and limitations of our empathy. In her earlier criticism of Paul West's novel, we find Elizabeth against the empathy with the evil but here the limitations of human imagination that thinks of raising to divinity but numb about the destruction of life, dignity and freedom of animals to which we accord lower status. David Lodge sees in Elizabeth and Coetzee a disillusionment with the cultural value attributed to literature and a kind of restiveness at being regarded as world-famous author. 10

Different justifications are provided in favour of ill-treatment of animals—animal rights consciousness is a part of human rights consciousness and of recent origin, western or even Anglo-Saxon. It may not be compatible with the beliefs of the natives; since animals are not persons, even potential persons, they can't enjoy legal rights like the fetuses; Elizabeth responds that tests designed to find the intelligence of animals are imbecile and they speak in a different language. Camus's horror as a child over the killing of chicken by his grandmother made an abiding impression on his mind that made him pen an article against the guillotine. His article later led to the abolishment of capital punishment in France.

Another argument is that animals do not understand death as we do. The human fear of death is based on 'collapse of imagination' (Elizabeth 109). The latter is absent in animals and the equation of a butcher who slaughters a chicken with an executioner who kills a human being is a grave mistake. In reply, Elizabeth says that she keeps no truck with such philosophy. O' Hearne says, "You can be friends neither with a Martian nor with a bat for the simple reason that you have too little in common with them"(110).

Later on Norma, wife of John and daughter -in- law of Elizabeth comments that the latter has been trying to turn her private fad into means of exercising power

over whole community. She criticizes Elizabeth for trying to save the animals, virus to stock her Brave New World. Mikita Brottman in her article "Four Legs Good: Animals and the Posthuman" writes in reference to Coetzee:

For the writer, embodiment and inwardness are essential tools, and also the best way to know—or to imagine—what it's like to exist in a post-human body, to think with a post-human brain. 11

David Lodge refers to the criticism that Coetzee was offering an extreme argument without taking full intellectual responsibility in his denunciation of treatment of animals through his protagonist Elizabeth. David Lodge comments that Elizabeth sees that man's domination over animals in the form of making them captives, subjecting them to painful experiments and raising them to kill them on an industrial scale has been due to unjustified privileging of man, reason, self-consciousness in contrast with value of existence in "fullness of being" which animals enjoy in their natural state.¹² We humans are under the control of space and time. Technology and globalization have helped us overcome these limitations to an extent. But religion, culture and lack of imagination limit our perception and we disbelieve the reality and the Other. When other creatures, nations and countries were vivisected, Americans and Europeans remained unperturbed. But 9/11 jolted them out of complacency, turned them more aggressive and suspicious and less rational. They haven't developed introspection and retraced their steps from the state of inhumanity to real humanity. Human are humans only in bounds of their times and interests. The values of enlightenment have given way to rapacity and profit making. The world has become a slave to Capital and the rest of the creatures are mere captives. Equality is seen as

'impractical' and 'tyrannical' but inequality is feasible and republican

History has chosen the victors who have failed by their own standards. They need to understand that now people are asking them in intelligible language to be human means to cease to be violent and not to do to others what you don't want to befall on you. The recovery of rationality, sympathy and empathy are the need of the hour. The yearning for creature comforts must yield to the comfort of all creatures. All the collective entities such as religion. Culture, nationalism and globalization have to be tested on the anvil of the welfare of one and all. This is not sentimentalism or propagandistic humanism but rationalism and real. History has become unbearable when it served only the privileged and it has inspired when equality has been cherished. The problem of evil is the

problem of selfishness at any cost. In the absence of freedom and equality, humans cannot remain as human.

Apart from the struggle for existence, the theoretical justification of reason as basis for subordination of animal creatures can hardly be justifiable. Can Reason be seen as monopoly of humans or advanced nations and be used to justify using other nations or species as slaves to one's own economic prosperity? Can self-interest be flaunted as Reason? Amartya Sen, in his work *The Idea of Justice* refers to Buddha's argument in *Sutta-Nipata* regarding the perspective of obligations of power which states that:

since we are enormously more powerful than other species, we have some responsibility towards other species that connects exactly with this asymmetry of power. 13

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