




Shattering Dietary Taboos in Post-Pandemic Era: Human-Animal Interaction in J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello**

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Abstract

Many conspiracy theories and worst-case scenarios have been produced about the COVID-19 pandemic. With a reductionist approach, this new coronavirus disease outbreak has been regrettably confined to the simple matter that humans are exposed to viral pathogens of certain wild animals. However, the global reasons and outcomes of the present outbreak should not simply be correlated with the physiologies of a group of animals but with human activities subject to wanton consumption, interference with living spaces, intense commercialization and, particularly, dietary habits. Thus, reconceptualizing pandemics as a multidimensional "ecological crisis" posing a threat to the future of human and nonhuman beings rather than a "disease" endangering human welfare seems to become the sole prerequisite for a significant policy shift in the relationship between humans and animals. With this in mind, the eponymous protagonist of the novel, Elizabeth Costello, a vegetarian like her creator, gives the traces of an ecological philosophy which reinforces the notion that it is not the sheer scientific productivity driven by the rationalization but the reconsideration of animal-human interactions that can prevent post-pandemic era from recurring outbreaks. In the novel, through her understanding of environmental ethics, J. M. Coetzee's vegetarian and writer protagonist provides discussions that help rethinking literature as one of the guiding disciplines that can offer new insights into the natural habitat of animals. This study intends to handle how Coetzee's thoughts on vegetarianism and human-animal interactions can become an ethical model for the future world in dire need of a post-pandemic paradigm shift.

Keywords: J. M. Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello, Vegetarianism, Pandemic, COVID-19.

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Pandemi Sonrası Dönemde Beslenme Tabularını Yıkma: J. M Coetzee'nin Elizabeth Costello Romanında İnsan-Hayvan İlişkisi

Öz

Covid-19 pandemisi üzerine günümüzde ekolojik artalandan yoksun çok sayıda komplo teorisi ve kötü durum senaryoları üretilmekte ve bu yeni salgının ortaya çıkışı, indirgemeci bir yaklaşımla, insanın sadece vahşi hayvanların viral patojenlerine maruz kalması olarak açıklanabilecek basit bir meseleye indirgenmektedir. Fakat sadece bir hayvan grubunun fizyolojisi ile ilişkilendirilmesinden ziyade, salgının küresel çaptaki nedenleri ve sonuçları tamamıyla insan aktivitesi, eylemi, davranışı, kapitalizm, tüketim kültürü, doğa algısı, yaşam alanlarına müdahale, ticarileştirme ve özellikle yeme alışkanlığından kaynaklı bir hayat biçiminde aranmalıdır. Böylece, pandemiyi sadece insan refahını tehdit eden bir "hastalık" olarak değil, insan ve insan olmayan tüm canlıların geleceğini tehdit eden çok yönlü bir "ekolojik kriz" olarak görmek, pandemi sonrası dönemde hayvan ve insan etkileşiminde radikal bir politika değişikliğine gitmenin yegâne ön şartı olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır. Bu noktadan hareketle, yaratıcısı J. M. Coetzee gibi kendisi de bir vejetaryen yazar olan başkarakter Elizabeth Costello, pandemi sonrası çağda salgınların yinelenmesinin önüne geçebilmenin, büsbütün rasyonalizme dayalı bilimsel üretkenlikten çok insanın hayvanlarla olan münasebetini yeniden gözden geçirmesiyle mümkün olabileceği düşüncesini destekleyen bir ekolojik felsefenin işaretlerini verir. Eserde, Coetzee'nin vejetaryen ve yazar başkarakteri, sahip olduğu çevre etiği anlayışıyla, hayvanların doğal habitatlarına yeni bakış açıları kazandırabilen yol gösterici disiplinlerden birisi olarak edebiyatın yeniden değerlendirilmesine yardımcı olabilecek tartışmalar ortaya koymaktadır. Bu çalışma, pandemi sonrası ivedi bir paradigma değişikliğine ihtiyacı olan geleceğin dünyasında, Coetzee'nin vejetaryenlik ve insan-hayvan etkileşimleri üzerine olan düşüncelerinin nasıl bir model olabileceğini ele almıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: J. M. Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello, Vejetaryenlik, Pandemi, COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus pandemic, the most recent one of the outbreaks ravaging humanity throughout its history, has been leaving lingering marks on humans both physically and psychologically. It has become a subject of many scientific researches employing various ways to generate clinical and laboratory data in an attempt to prevent the virus from reaching more devastating dimensions. At the time of writing, people have great expectations for some vaccines just developed in Europe and Asia, and these vaccines are conceived as the only definite solution to the recent dramatic crisis humanity has faced. In the not far distant future, it will most likely be seen that this conception is part of a temporary solution functioning like a band-aid that paves the way for imminent global environmental crisis, along with recurrent viral mutations. At this critical juncture, labelling the novel coronavirus outbreak as a human-induced environmental crisis would become increasingly significant in terms of averting this misconception that leads to seeking for haphazard factors free from humans in the roots of the pandemic. On the other hand, those who are relatively more conscious about the emergence of the coronavirus believe in the mistaken assumption that the virus causing COVID-19 is solely related to a certain group of wild animals and Far Eastern cuisine. Indeed, these assumptions are characterized with a reductionist outlook and they constitute a challenge to understanding the reality beyond the crisis.

A growing body of research, which focuses on eating wild animals only, has long implicated this assumption that the dietary habits of human beings might cause a worldwide threat. In a renowned 2007 scientific article in *Clinical Microbiology Reviews* published by the American Society for Microbiology, for instance, the scientists simply indicate a regional culture of consumption although they predict that humanity will face some fatal viral variants:

The presence of a large reservoir of SARS-CoV-like viruses in horseshoe bats, together with the culture of eating exotic mammals in southern China, is a time bomb. The possibility of the reemergence of SARS and other novel viruses from animals or laboratories and therefore the need for preparedness should not be ignored (Cheng, Lau, Woo & Yuen, p. 683).

Although further parallel evidences support that being exposed to viral pathogens of the wild animals, particularly through increased consumption, puts social health in immediate jeopardy, the remedy of the problem must be sought not in limiting the consumption of exotic mammals and wild animals like bats, pangolins, civet cats, snakes and rats or in marketing vaccines to stimulate human bodies to develop antibodies. The permanent solution must rather include a series of environmental reform efforts aiming to rearrange human-animal interactions and dietary habits as indicated by ecological movements and vegetarianism. To put it differently, among the problems with human attitudes towards animals are the exploitation, commercialization and commodification of animals and the excessive interference in their living spaces. Thus, reconceptualizing pandemics as multidimensional “ecological crises” posing serious threats to the future of human and nonhuman living beings rather than simply “plagues” endangering human welfare and economic progress seems to become the sole prerequisite for a major policy shift in the relationship between humans and animals.

With this in mind, the eponymous protagonist of J. M. Coetzee's novel, Elizabeth Costello, a vegetarian like her creator, gives the traces of an ecological philosophy which reinforces the notion that it is not the sheer scientific productivity driven by the rationalization but the reconsideration of animal-human interactions that can prevent post-pandemic era from recurring outbreaks. Her approach

problematizes human discourses and actions that justify the exploitation and domination of animals and the consumption of animal flesh. J. M. Coetzee's author-protagonist Elizabeth's ethical discussions raise vital environmental issues in the novel that might help reimagine the function of literature as one of the leading disciplines and promote a distinct understanding of animals' natural habitats. This study explores how Coetzee's approach to the relationship between humans and animals might serve as an ethical background, in an effort to highlight an environment-friendly post-pandemic world.

Identification and the Extended Self

Among the personal and authorial attitudes that lie at the core of the South African writer J. M. Coetzee's fictions is his extensive identification and empathy with nonhuman animals. It is readily apparent that this distinguishing characteristic of the author has a significant influence on his dietary habits and his works. In an interview reprinted and translated by *SATYA*, Coetzee confirms that he is personally a vegetarian and finds eating meat disgusting: "Yes, I am a vegetarian. I find the thought of stuffing fragments of corpses down my throat quite repulsive, and I am amazed that so many people do it every day" (Engström, 2004). In the novel, the protagonist and novelist Elizabeth Costello voices the author's thoughts on vegetarianism as well as the treatment of animals through interpreting the relationship between humans and animals in a broader philosophical and ethical sense.

Particularly in the chapters entitled "The Lives of Animals," Elizabeth articulates a clear ecological standpoint by manifesting her disturbance from the ecological design established for human welfare. She attempts to express various ecological concerns in order to secure environmental justice for animals. A sense of compassion and sympathy with nonhuman living beings becomes the character's primary principle in depicting the mutual relationship between humans and nonhuman animals. Her approach indicates that she most probably refers to self-realization, which is among the most important doctrines of deep ecology. With its inspirational roots in some ecocentric Eastern religions such as Taoism and Zen Buddhism and in Spinoza's pantheistic philosophy, deep ecology movement contains some ecocentric principles¹ devised by Arne Naess and George Sessions who draw attention to the need for a radical change in values, lifestyles and perception. Self-realization is the very core of the movement that underpins these principles. According to Naess (2008), "[w]hatever the differences between beings, increased self-realization implies a broadening and deepening of the self" (p. 82). This concept refers to the process of freeing oneself from self-centrism and extending one's self in order to connect with and embrace all beings. As a result of seeing ourselves in the other, argues Naess (2008), "[t]he requisite care flows naturally if the self is widened and deepened so that protection of free nature is felt and conceived of as protection of our very selves" (p. 92). Elizabeth postulates this kind of identification with nonhuman species by making references to the contemporary moral philosopher Thomas Nagel (1974), who, in his paper "What is it like to be a bat?," states that human beings fail to understand the perspective of any other organism due to different mental faculty and experiences: "I want to know what it is like for a bat to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task" (p. 439). However, Elizabeth disavows Nagel's ideas and says: "his denial that we can know what it is to be anything but one of ourselves seems to me tragically restrictive, restrictive and restricted" (Coetzee, 2003, p. 76). For Elizabeth, there is no need to

¹ For more about the basic principles, see the eight point list of deep ecology published in numerous works including Devall, B. and Sessions, G. (1985), *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, pp. 63-77; and Naess, A. (1995), *The Deep Ecology: Eight Points Revisited* in Sessions, G. (Ed.), *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century*, pp. 213-21.

139 ____ *Shattering Dietary Taboos in Post-Pandemic Era: Human-Animal Interaction in J. M. Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello* have the cognitive mechanism of a bat's mind to understand a bat. In an ecological sense, identification with nonhuman beings is a prerequisite for developing a sense of self that transcends the dimensions of the human body and mind and for overcoming the dualism between human and nonhuman beings. Unlike Nagel's mechanistic worldview evoking Cartesian duality of mind and matter through externalizing human mind from nonhuman realm, identification is the accurate triggering force that can reconstruct an organic wholeness. Elizabeth emphasizes this oneness in her response to Nagel:

What is it like to be a bat? Before we can answer such a question, Nagel suggests, we need to be able to experience bat life through the sense modalities of a bat. But he is wrong; or at least he is sending us down a false trail. To be a living bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being. Bat being in the first case, human being in the second, maybe; but those are secondary considerations. To be full of being is to live as a body-soul (pp. 77-78).

Although the focal point of Elizabeth's argument is not the bat but animals in general, the discussions linking the current outbreak to the bats prove Elizabeth's assumptions to be right. Recent researches indicate that the bats are most probably the source of the Sars-Cov-2 virus (Zhou et al., 2020, pp. 270-73). Regardless of what animal the virus originates from, the present outbreak should invoke a more felicitous question for the researchers: if, as Costello claims, people made an effort for developing identification and empathy rather than concentrating on how they were different from animals to justify the system of hierarchical exploitation and did not commodify nonhuman animals by making them a vital part of the consumption habits, would this pandemic cost more than two and a half million lives? It is beyond doubt that humans cannot know precisely which animals will be the potential source of another possible global pandemic; however, the ultimate solution may lie behind Elizabeth's invitation to the self-realization or the extended self that cuts across the boundaries of reason: "[...] open your heart and listen to what your heart says" (p.82). She invites her audience to confront the dichotomy between reason and emotion and believes that only an ecologically self-realized individual who can truly think and feel like a bat overcomes this dichotomy.

Biospheric Egalitarianism

Deepening the notion of identification through a philosophical basis for biospheric egalitarianism, the idea that "all things in the biosphere have an equal right to live and blossom" (Devall and Sessions, 1985, p. 67), Elizabeth makes a controversial analogy between the victims of the Holocaust and the slain animals. Though this comparison creates discomfort at first glance, Elizabeth seems to invite her audience to adopt a holistic approach to killing a living being. Emphasizing that she does not provide a rationale for the Holocaust, Elizabeth tells her audience about the language used for this comparison:

"They went like sheep to the slaughter." "They died like animals." "The Nazi butchers killed them." Denunciation of the camps reverberates so fully with the language of the stockyard and slaughterhouse that it is barely necessary for me to prepare the ground for the comparison I am about to make. The crime of the Third Reich, says the voice of accusation, was to treat people like animals (pp. 64-65).

Her intention is not to diminish the ongoing effects of the sufferings in Nazi camps but, in an ecological context, to emphasize the situation in “stockyards” and “slaughterhouses” where animals have not suffered any less than humans.

Implied in this broad theme is her commitment to biospheric egalitarianism, which, by providing an insight into the intrinsic values of all beings, reserves the right to live not just for human beings but for all forms of life. In so doing, Elizabeth considers both ‘human/human’ and ‘human/animal’ dichotomies as equally destructive and evil which act in such a way as to affect each other: “We need factories of death; we need factory animals. Chicago showed us the way; it was from the Chicago stockyards that the Nazis learned how to process bodies” (p. 97). Indeed, the link between violence and the meat industry is not unfamiliar to the literary world. Elizabeth recasts what Upton Sinclair (1906) once wrote in his novel, *The Jungle*, which relates the oppression of animals to that of humans in the Chicago stockyards. Correspondingly, David Wood (2005), in his *The Step Back*, focuses on this connection advocating the necessity for an equal judgement: “If the industrialisation of killing was first perfected on cattle, and then applied to humans, we have not an obscene analogy, but an obscene piece of history” (p. 49). That is to say, what brings disgrace is not to associate animal slaughter with human slaughter but, rather, to consider one less noteworthy than the other. Egalitarian respect for living means being equally disturbed by the deaths of all living beings. Regarding this industrialization of killing animals as “the pandemic animal slaughter,” Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2015) draw attention to the disjunction between the attitudes toward the deaths of living beings: “While torture, killing and eating are the actual processes involved, we routinely dissociate slaughter involving animals from that involving humans, and our eating of animal flesh from human flesh, confirming such dissociations in the everyday language we employ” (p. 155). A sense of ecological awareness and biospheric egalitarianism is necessary to understand what lies behind Elizabeth’s analogy which is grounded on the sanctity of existence and survival. In this sense, making no discrimination between human and nonhuman lives, while at the same time worrying about the right to live, manifests itself in an ecological principle that intends to enhance positive sustainability by referring to diversity and richness.

Vegetarianism

When coupled with her ideas on vegetarianism, Elizabeth’s ecological references to all-encompassing identification and biospheric egalitarianism become more complementary to each other in reconsidering some human habits on the practical pathway towards the post-pandemic world. She is a strong proponent of vegetarianism and expects everyone around her to comprehend the ethics lying behind vegetarian dietary practices. When she is asked the reasons behind her food preferences, Elizabeth responds by referring to the Roman philosopher Plutarch’s essays on eating animals:

‘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’ (Coetzee, 2003, p. 83).

She believes that it is a supremely illogical question. If there are two groups of people who differ from each other in terms of their approaches to eating nonhuman living beings, those who must put a plausible explanation are not vegetarians but meat eaters.

The content of the arguments put forward by these groups will inevitably include either a legitimized anthropocentric attitude or a defensive ecocentrism. Coetzee, at this point, develops similar

141 ____ *Shattering Dietary Taboos in Post-Pandemic Era: Human-Animal Interaction in J. M. Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello* arguments between the anthropocentric and ecocentric discourses, the latter of which is generally charged with having a misanthropic outlook. It is seen in the novel that Elizabeth comes into conflict with her son, John, and his wife, Norma, due to her thoughts on dietary preferences. Norm accuses her of being elitist and misanthropic:

'The ban on meat that you get in vegetarianism is only an extreme form of dietary ban,' Norma presses on; 'and a dietary ban is a quick, simple way for an elite group to define itself. Other people's table habits are unclean, we can't eat or drink with them' (p. 87).

Elizabeth, in response to the allegations, comes up with some explanations identical to those of the proponents of ecological movements. First, she refers to Gandhi's autobiography in which he was sent to a "great meat-eating country" (p. 88), England, she tells, where he faced difficulties in establishing social relations with English people. The fundamental argument in her reference is that "Gandhi's vegetarianism can hardly be conceived as the exercise of power. It condemned him to the margins of society" (p. 88). Refusing the association of vegetarianism with elitism, Elizabeth, thus, implies that she has always been marginalized due to her vegetarian dietary habits. Secondly, in response to John who says "[y]ou wouldn't want to put a jaguar on a soybean diet" (p. 103), Elizabeth draws attention to the pointlessness of his comparison: "Because he would die. Human beings don't die on a vegetarian diet" (p. 103). The rationale behind her response seems to be grounded on such concepts like "vital" and "non-vital" needs which point to the third principle of deep ecology: "Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs" (Naess, 2005, p. 68). For Elizabeth, comparing a carnivorous animal to a human would be inappropriate in terms of environmental justice because eating meat is not quintessentially vital but an arbitrary preference for the latter. John, however, tenaciously insists on telling her how animals deserve to be eaten: "But [humans] don't want a vegetarian diet. They like eating meat. There is something atavistically satisfying about it" (Coetzee, 2003, p. 104). John is right, indeed, when he lays bare the human-centred thought on satisfying some needs through the exploitation of animals. Yet, this anthropocentric approach, or in John's words, "brutal truth" (p. 104), is one of the most fundamental environmental matters creating severe conflicts between human and nonhuman beings. According to the environmental ethics theorist Paul W. Taylor (2011), the reconciliation of this conflict can come about through the differentiation of "basic" from "nonbasic" human needs (pp. 269-80). This point of view is echoed in deep ecologist Naess's (2012) suggestion that "[h]umans only inhabit the lands, using resources to satisfy vital needs. And if their non-vital needs come in conflict with the vital needs of non-humans, then humans should defer to the latter" (p. 91). Establishing a strong ecophilosophical background, Coetzee, thus, vindicates Elizabeth through ecological arguments underpinning her vegetarian diet and invites the readers to give "the vital needs of non-humans" precedence over their arbitrary needs.

Speciesism

Following Costello's lecture, the president Garrard hosts for dinner where the participants from the university contribute to the discussion on the issues of cleanness and uncleanness of animals. In response to Garrard who expresses his ideas on dietary prohibitions, Wunderlich argues that "[i]t all has to do with cleanness and uncleanness," which "can be a very handy device for deciding who belongs and who doesn't, who is in and who is out" (Coetzee, 2003, p. 85). It is also, adds John, "shame" (p. 85) that differs animals. Wunderlich agrees but insists that "[a]nimals have unclean habits, so they are excluded" (p. 85). On the other hand, Olivia, the wife of the president, does not find this way of thinking

concrete enough and claims that “[a]nimals are creatures we don't have sex with - that's how we distinguish them from ourselves” (p. 85). This intellectual dispute over dietary prohibitions proceeds with Norma who refutes Olivia's argument: “But we eat them [...] We turn their flesh into ours. So it can't be how the mechanism works. There are specific kinds of animal that we don't eat. Surely those are the unclean ones, not animals in general” (pp. 85-86). In any case in which the guests present the anthropocentric perspectives regarding the distinction between humans and nonhuman animals, the fundamental point of the arguments refers to the biblical laws about the clean and unclean food, which are used as a means of justification for this distinction. In a similar vein, Wunderlich relates animal slaughter to divine rituals in which humans expect to have the divinely approved flesh: “Ask for the blessing of the gods on the flesh you are about to eat, ask them to declare it clean” (p. 86). Regarding how the discussion proceeds, it appears that the author prepares the ground for Elizabeth's portrayal of the theological background in which eating meat, she believes, is rooted. Eating meat, according to her, is closely connected to divine permission; that is, human beings created gods in order to take the permission to eat animal flesh, holding them responsible for the ethical consequences (p. 86). Highlighting the justification of eating meat and delineation of clean animals as aestheticized commodities in religious and philosophical dimensions, Elizabeth endorses the view that the anthropocentric theological discourse regulates how humans make distinctions among animals and eat the flesh of so-called clean animals.

Considering eating habits as a social construction, Elizabeth, thus, appears to adopt a different approach to the classification and categorization of animals, namely the speciesism, from the other characters in the novel. The imaginary boundary between the clean and unclean animals, for Elizabeth, is drawn by human beings and the anthropocentric notion that determines the difference between the edible and inedible animals based on cleanliness does not make sense in nature. An animal is an animal, or more precisely, a sentient being having its own attributes like a human being. In the present case, Elizabeth addresses the reductionist view behind this distinction:

The problem is to define our difference from animals in general, not just from so-called unclean animals. The ban on certain animals — pigs and so forth - is quite arbitrary. It is simply a signal that we are in a danger area. A minefield, in fact. The minefield of dietary proscriptions. There is no logic to a taboo, nor is there any logic to a minefield - there is not meant to be. You can never guess what you may eat or where you may step unless you are in possession of a map, a divine map (p. 86).

However, Norma claims that this kind of rationale has nothing to do with the anthropological approach to which Elizabeth applies. As a professor specialized in philosophy, Norma connects dietary prohibitions and food taboos to behavioural sciences and claims that “[t]he French eat frogs. The Chinese eat anything. There is no disgust in China. [...] So perhaps it's just a matter of what you learned at home” (p. 87). Indeed, it is essential to the understanding of Coetzee's thesis to recognize that the essence of the disagreement between Elizabeth and Norma is based on the wide divergence of approaches to living beings between the mainstream philosophical thoughts permeated with reductionism on the one hand and the ecological movements marked by an emphasis on holism, on the other. Such conventionalist approaches based on speciesist discourses find ecological ones didactic. Norma, who accuses Elizabeth of being disturbingly moralistic, seems to develop a discourse on eating meat that regards it as a cultural manner legitimizing speciesism. Carol J. Adams explains this defensive

143 ____ *Shattering Dietary Taboos in Post-Pandemic Era: Human-Animal Interaction in J. M. Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello* manner of animal eaters with the concept of "discursive power" imposed by the dominant culture (2018, p. 4). She claims that vegetarians are charged with being didactic when they talk about animal eating due to "the discursive control exercised by the dominant flesh advocating culture" (p. 4). In the discussion on dietary prohibitions, Elizabeth, who still insists that the problem resides in the concept of cleanliness (Coetzee, 2003, p. 87), attempts to deconstruct the material and discursive distinctions among living beings. She believes that this is not a moral conviction but "a desire to save [her] soul" (p. 89).

While Elizabeth focuses on wholeness and interconnectedness in detecting the human perception of animals, Norma's approach bears a resemblance to how people handle species during the present outbreak. Some experts around the world find it adequate to call for a global ban on the consumption of wild animals only, but worse comes from the director general of World Health Organization (WHO) in a media briefing: "when these [wet] markets are allowed to reopen, it should only be on the condition that they conform to stringent food safety and hygiene standards. Governments must rigorously enforce bans on the sale and trade of wildlife for food" (T. A. Ghebreyesus, 2020). The speculation pertaining to the misperception that only wild creatures, or "unclean" animals, harbour viral pathogens and their trade and consumption must be banned obscures a more elemental point. Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus, known as MERS-CoV, for instance, is a zoonotic virus transmitted from domesticated camels to humans. Consequently, the illusion that, as Elizabeth states, "clean" animals are edible and "unclean" ones are not, and that eating certain animals must be banned while the consumption of others are permitted may not prevent future pandemics from recurring. One of the ways of maintaining ecological sustainability that enhances human and nonhuman welfare seems to lie behind Elizabeth's holistic ecological philosophy disavowing speciesism.

Industrial Factory Farming and Commodification of Animals

Along with the appearance of the fact that the initial source of COVID-19 pandemic is a wet market in Wuhan, the places such as factory farms, abattoirs, livestock markets and pet shops in which animals are tortured and exploited for capitalist industrial purposes have been thrust into the limelight. However, this focus of public attention has been on a shallow point because these concentration camps have only been presented as places which potentially harbour zoonotic viruses transmitted from animals to humans. This is a logical fallacy based on the conviction that these places are the mere reasons of contagious diseases but not the results of a more serious process of enslaving, exploiting and slaughtering for arbitrary needs. Regarding this correlation between the appearance and reality, if the ultimate goal is to overcome ecological problems including outbreaks, then it is necessary to promote the public awareness and understanding, as Elizabeth does, of the very root of the crisis.

In the beginning of her lecture, the conditions of slaughterhouses, Elizabeth tells, will be central to her speech. She clearly aims to disclose the reality behind the walls of these places. According to Elizabeth, "abattoirs," "trawlers," "laboratories" and "production facilities" surrounding all parts of the world cause the "lives and deaths" of animals to be exposed to "horror" (Coetzee, 2003, p. 63). She prefers to call production farms as "production facilities" (p. 63), which indicates that these institutionalized capitalist houses functioning as cruel means of industrialism and market capitalism go far beyond what their names suggest as there are horrifying slaughters that take place in them. Elizabeth clarifies her attitude to animal industry concentrating on its expansionist and destructive extensions:

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 (p. 65).

While the coronavirus poses a serious threat to economies, claims the lives of humans and causes people to self-isolate in their homes, the policy makers are supposed to see the treacherous conditions of factory farms and animal markets in the same way with Coetzee who highlights the animal abuse on an industrial scale. His protagonist, however, seems not to abandon herself to despair about the struggle of Western culture with these abusive practices that are most likely to create more serious ecological crises: "I do think it is appropriate that those who pioneered the industrialization of animal lives and the commodification of animal flesh should be at the forefront of trying to atone for it" (p. 107). The reason why she tends to be cynical about the liberation of animals throughout the novel is related to the human frailty in developing an environmental ethics and raising awareness to make associations: "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" (p. 80). Her thoughts on morality and consciousness show parallelism with the ethical concerns raised by some philosophers and ecologists on animal related issues. For example, people are "ignorant of the abuse of living creatures that lies behind the food we eat," as Peter Singer (2002) manifests in his *Animal Liberation*, "[w]e buy our meat and poultry in neat plastic packages. It hardly bleeds. There is no reason to associate this package with a living, breathing, walking, suffering animal" (p. 95). Similarly, Greg Garrad (2004) claims that for a peasant having "pre-modern sensibility, the fondness and the slaughter are not contradictory" (p. 139). He adds that "[i]t is only through industrialisation that most animals are removed from everyday life, and the meat production process hidden away. Once marginalised in this way, the few animals still visible to us can be only human puppets" (p. 139). The huge gap between the unthinkable and suppressed visual imagery of an animal commodified, enslaved and tortured in factory farms, abattoirs and livestock markets and the enticing visual images of fresh meat on the signboards of steak houses can only be closed through developing a sense of ethics as well as the ability to associate eating meat with a suffering animal. In the fictional dimension, while it is Elizabeth who invites her audience to make this connection, the accomplishment of bridging this gap in real life might urge Coetzee's audience to rethink who are to blame for the coronavirus. In Elizabeth's words, "a being whose life and death are in the hands of another" (Coetzee, 2003, p. 156) cannot be the basis of any ecological crisis but the victim of excessive human intervention and exploitation.

Sympathetic Imagination

Also worthy of attention is that the issues of dietary habits and animal ethics find a spokesperson in an author-protagonist, which, in the novel, attaches the role and function of literature and of artist who is able to dissolve the borders between himself/herself and his/her object to the widening scope of environmental movements. Despite her cynicism about the outcomes, Elizabeth's endeavour to instill the ethical principles behind her vegetarianism in her audience and her food habits in her grandchildren, whom she tells stories "about the poor little veal calves and what the bad men do to them" (pp. 113-114), seems to be analogous to that of Coetzee who aims to raise public awareness through his pen. In response to the question whether his writing will alter human attitude to animals, Coetzee says: "I do not imagine that a single, rather difficult book will change the world in that respect,

145 ____ *Shattering Dietary Taboos in Post-Pandemic Era: Human-Animal Interaction in J. M. Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello* but perhaps it will make some small impact" (Engström, 2004). His remark gives the impression that he is pessimistic about gaining mass appeal for his work's moral point but not hopeless about the impact it will create.

The evidence that he can achieve this impact as an author may be the instillation of linking above-mentioned "identification" to "imagination," namely sympathetic imagination, in the audience, and even in those who believe that animal mind is radically different from the human mind. As echoed in Elizabeth's lecture, "there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination" (Coetzee, 2003, p. 80). To postulate this thought, she pays attention to her novel, *The House on Eccles Street*, in which she creates a fictionalized character named Marion Bloom, the wife of Leopold Bloom in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, who, she tells, never exists. Based on her sympathetic identification with Marion Bloom, Elizabeth states that:

If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life (p. 80).

This statement of Elizabeth seems to be a product of Coetzee's instructional method which demonstrates how sympathetic imagination might evoke both empathy and sympathy, helping human communities reconsider their relationship with animals as well as their menus while setting a dinner table. As a matter of fact, in the novel, there are sequential steps of ethical teaching beginning with Coetzee's commitment "to know quite vividly what it is like to be someone else" (Engström, 2004), flourishing in Elizabeth's thought of her "way into the existence of a being" (Coetzee, 2003, p. 80) and ending with the belief that "if we press ourselves or are pressed" (p. 77), all human beings can achieve this ideal.

CONCLUSION

Even the short-term consequences of the COVID-19 have undoubtedly shown that the need for an immediate action and a paradigm shift in humans' approach to nonhuman living beings have never been so urgent. Humanity, however, seems to avoid facing the underlying facts and comprehending what really the root cause of the outbreak is. As a result of the guidance of scienticism permeated with the illusion of progress, modern society has acquired some misconceptions about the root cause of the pandemic and the permanent struggle with this crisis. Some of these are as follows: the virus has passed to humans from exotic animals and therefore exotic animals should be kept away from human spaces; the fundamental problem grows only out of the Far Eastern food culture; all industrial animal farms and wild animal markets can continue to produce and trade under the supervision of public watchdog organizations with regulatory powers over the sector; the fight against the pandemic can be given by developing effective vaccines and the virus threat will eventually end following the inoculation of the majority of society.

A new report, entitled *Is the next Pandemic on our Plate?* by Compassion in World Farming (2020), based on the interdependent relationship among industrial animal farming, dietary habits and pandemics suggests that "[m]aintaining and further embedding a flawed food system based on the overproduction and consumption of animal products will lead to further pandemics, dangerous levels of climate change, undermine antibiotics and degrade soil fertility" (p. 21). According to the report,

people are supposed to establish an “alternative food system” not based on meat consumption, which “can deliver a wealth of public goods and help to keep ourselves, our planet and the animals we share it with safe into the future” (p. 21). Reddy and Saier (2020), on the other hand, claim that humans “can expect far more serious epidemics and pandemics in the near future, as many viral and other pathogenic vectors are made homeless due to the loss of virtually all wild animals, resulting from hunting, deforestation, environmental degradation, and anthropization” (p. 7). In this context, it becomes evident that human mobility and activity as well as overpopulation are the factors that trigger such environmental crises like pandemics.

These causal ecological facts attach the environmental ethics behind Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* to the issues of dietary habits and human-animal interactions, incontestably demanding a reconsideration in the post-pandemic era. Revisiting the novel in the light of present pandemic conditions indicate that the ecological principles in Elizabeth’s lectures concerning vegetarianism and animal rights can help mapping out a new route for the future world in dire need of a rearrangement of values among species. To put it another way, in contradistinction to the extant social misconceptions, the ethical discourse provided by Elizabeth attempts to lead the audience to the conclusion that all animals have the right to live as humans do, they are humans who intervene in natural habitats through domination, a vegetarian lifestyle is a necessity for both human and animal welfare and each place in which animals are imprisoned and tortured is a death camp based on the capitalist commodification of animal flesh. These elements of the novel are subsumed by a return to the focus on the fact that the real threat does not come from wild animal population but, rather, from the current human thoughts, mobilities and activities. Moreover, as a profoundly egalitarian novelist, identification with nonhuman animals is at the core of Elizabeth’s being. She offers the power of sympathetic imagination in literature as an ethical model for humans to approach the ecological issues including pandemics through existing in another’s body, which would then necessarily shatter dietary taboos by means of choosing vegetarianism and reorganize human-nonhuman relationships to cease animal abuse through kindness and compassion.

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