



## SUBVERSION OF SPECIESISM IN J. M. COETZEE'S ELIZABETH COSTELLO

J. M. COETZEE'NİN ELIZABETH COSTELLO ROMANINDA TÜRCÜLÜĞÜN YIKIMI

Ersoy GÜMÜŞ



Öğr. Gör. Dr., İstanbul Üniversitesi, Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu, ersoygumus@yahoo.com.tr

### Abstract

*Speciesism, a term coined by English philosopher Richard Ryder and disseminated by Peter Singer with his book Animal Liberation (1976), expresses the discrimination which is basically caused by being a member of a certain species. However, in his approach Singer primarily defies the bias which claim that mankind has higher moral worth than animals, and as such he asserts that human beings owe moral obligations to animals. Instead of focalising such cognitive differences as faculty of reasoning or discourse between mankind and animals, Singer brings the similarities between these two species to the fore. Thus, enunciating a utilitarian view, he argues that as animals have the ability to feel pain or suffering, they should be given equal consideration. Similarly, in his book Elizabeth Costello, J.M. Coetzee explores the lives of animals and opposes to the discrimination that animals are made live through due to their species. The protagonist of the novel, Elizabeth Costello who is also an author, is against all form of maltreatment and exploitation of animals. In this context, by grounding on Singer's notion of speciesism, Costello, who is invited to give lectures at Appleton College, subverts the principles of speciesism by voicing against the use of animals as food, test subjects, or as in the form of any goods. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore how Costello undermines the basic notion of speciesism through her lectures in which she attempts to examine different perspectives and approaches on animals from Aristotle and Descartes to modern era.*

### Öz

*Bir terim olarak İngiliz düşünür Richard Ryder tarafından ortaya atılan ve Peter Singer'ın Animal Liberation (1976) kitabıyla yayılan türçülük ifadesi belirli bir türün üyesi olmaktan kaynaklanan ayrımcılığı ifade etmektedir. Ancak, Singer kendi yaklaşımında insanların hayvanlardan daha yüksek manevi değere sahip olduğunu iddia eden ön yargıya karşı çıkar ve bu yüzden insanlığın hayvanlara karşı manevi yükümlülükleri olduğunu öne sürer. İnsanlar ve hayvanlar arasında ki düşünme ve konuşma gibi bilişsel farklılıklara odaklanmak yerine Singer bu iki tür arasında ki benzerlikleri öne çıkarır. Bu yüzden, faydacıl bir bakış açısına sahip olan Singer, acı veya ağrıyı hissedebildikleri için hayvanlara gereken önemin verilmesi gerektiğini savunur. Benzer şekilde Elizabeth Costello romanında J.M. Coetzee hayvanların yaşamlarını inceler ve hayvanlara ait oldukları türden dolayı dayatılan ayrımcılığa karşı gelir. Kendisi de bir yazar olan romanın ana karakteri Elizabeth Costello hayvanların uğradığı her türlü kötü muamele ve istismara karşı çıkar. Bu bağlamda, Appleton College'da konferans vermeye davet edilen Costello, Singer'ın türçülük anlayışını temel alarak hayvanların besin, denek, ya da herhangi bir biçimde mal olarak kullanımına karşı çıkarak türçülüğün ilkelerini sarsmaya çalışır. Böylelikle, bu makalenin amacı konferanslarında Aristotle ve Descartes'tan modern çağa kadar hayvanlar üzerine farklı bakış açılarını ve yaklaşımları inceleyen Costello'nun türçülüğün temel kanısını nasıl yitirdiğini incelemektir.*

### Makale Bilgisi

Türü: Araştırma makalesi  
Gönderildiği tarih: 7 Ağustos 2022  
Kabul edildiği tarih: 7 Kasım 2022  
Yayınlanma tarihi: 20 Aralık 2022

### Article Info

Type: Research article  
Date submitted: 7 August 2022  
Date accepted: 7 November 2022  
Date published: 20 December 2022

### Anahtar Sözcükler

J. M. Coetzee; Elizabeth Costello;  
Türçülük; Hayvan Hakları; Peter Singer

### Keywords

J. M. Coetzee; Elizabeth Costello;  
Speciesism; Animal Rights; Peter Singer

### DOI

10.33171/dtcfjournal.2022.62.2.13

## Introduction

Throughout the chronicles of both law and philosophy, there has been little or no opposition to the idea predicating that animals do not possess moral and legal status. The underlying reason for such an assumption is that animals are seen to be lacking certain features for status, some of which are capacity of reasoning, ability of language, and morality. One of the earliest philosophers who agrees with such an opinion is Aristotle who in his *Politics Book I* has an anthropocentric

position as he believes that there is a hierarchical order between plants, animals, and mankind. More clearly, since the time when animals came into being, plants have started to serve animals. Likewise, animals are seen to be for the benefit of human beings who use them as food, clothing materials, or different instruments (Aristotle, 1998, p. 13). Besides, René Descartes, having a similar human centred claim, postulates that there are two basic differences between men and “brutes” (Descartes, 1996, p. 4). The first is that there is no brute which could “use speech...as we do when placing our thoughts on record for the benefit of others” (Descartes, 1996, p. 35). The second difference indicates that though there are “certain things” at which brutes may perform better than human beings, they do not rely on “knowledge” to act; contrarily, “the disposition of organs” directs them in their actions (Descartes, 1996, p. 31). Descartes particularly draws upon the first difference as he stresses that every human being, even idiots, can arrange some words together so as to explain their thoughts; however, “there is no other animal ... which can do the same” (Descartes, 1996, p. 35). For him, this clearly signifies that animals have no reason at all.

Contrary to Aristotle and Descartes, one of the philosophers indicating that animals have certain rights is David Hume, who also asserts that the ability of reasoning between animals and humans is similar. According to Hume, faculty of reasoning has two main types which are demonstrative and non-demonstrative reasoning. While the former refers to the discovery of the link between different ideas such as in mathematics, the latter, which is casual reasoning, stands for the discovery of fact through experiences. Also, Hume claims that animals are capable of reasoning even if it is only in the second form as by relying on their senses that they are capable of inferring some facts and such inferences mostly depend on “past experience” (Hume, 1999, p. 62). Consequently, he believes that animals and humans are similar to a certain degree in terms of capability of inferring, understanding, and learning as “knowledge of this relation is not attained by reasonings a priori”; on the contrary, it absolutely derives “from experience” when certain objects are found to be “constantly conjoined with each other” (Hume, 1999, p. 20). Hume also implies that not only humans but also animals perform conscious actions in order to derive pleasure and prevent pain. Therefore, Hume is of the view that humans owe moral obligation to animals, as well as being against the prejudice purporting that humans have higher level of moral worth.

Having been disputed since the early ages, ethical and legal issues about the proper position of animals and their rights have become a bone of contention again in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in which ecological issues started to draw the attention of humanities scholars intensively as both issues related to animals and environmental concerns are regarded as an indispensable premise of human studies. It was Richard Ryder, who first addressed the animal issue in 1970s by coining the term speciesism. Then in 1976, the Australian philosopher Peter Singer, an advocate of animal rights, published his canonical work *Animal Liberation* in which he popularized and disseminated the term, which is defined by Oxford English Dictionary (2010) as the “*discrimination against or exploitation of certain animal species by human beings, based on an assumption of mankind’s superiority*” (p. 1415). Based on this, speciesists claim that human beings do not hold any moral obligation to animals mainly because animals are not included in the moral community, and this legitimizes why people kill, eat, enslave, or abuse animals. In its broader form, speciesism can be defined as a belief in which one species is esteemed and seen as morally more significant than the others; thus, it epitomizes a prejudice, bias, or irrational discrimination against animals.

In *Animal Liberation*, Singer (2015) explains that though the word speciesism does not sound “*attractive*” at all, he uses it to describe the “*prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interest of members of one’s own species and against those members of other species*” (p. 35). Being against all forms of ill-treatment or abuse of animals, Singer (2015) compares racism and sexism with speciesism so as to explain the latter concept as he claims that in case of a conflict between different races, racists disregard the principle of equality as they are more prone to give “*greater weight to the interests of member of their own race*” (p. 38). Likewise, sexists do the same for the sake of their own sexes. He adds that, not differently, “*speciesists allow the interests of their own species to override the greater interests of members of other species*” (Singer, 2015, p. 38). Singer posits that the attitudes and practices portrayed in racism or sexism are not different from those observed in speciesism. Although it is noteworthy to mention that speciesism, sexism, and racism “*are not mere analogues*” (Ashcroft. et. al., 2007, p.198), Singer is by no means the only critic to make such a comparison as Jacques Derrida, for example, also remarks that “*racism is actually predicated on speciesism, species being the philosophical and instrumental premise of racism*” (Ashcroft. et. al., 2007, p. 198). By emphasising this similarity between racism and speciesism, Singer opposes all unequal perspectives

of racists and speciesists which make him to put forward that “*all animals are equal*” (Singer, 2015, p. 28).

The idea of equality has been proposed by several philosophers before Singer; however, many of these philosophers have not embodied the members of all species. Nonetheless, Jeremy Bentham was one of the very few philosophers who did bring about such equality among all species as he claims that there may come a day on which it may be realized that “*the number of the legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the os sacrum, are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate*” (Bentham, 1879, p. 311). He also undermines that the idea which claims that ability of reasoning and/or discourse sets “*the insuperable line*” between humans and animals by comparing “*a full grown horse or dog*” which is “*more rational*” and “*more conversable than an infant of a day, or a week, or even a month, old*” (Bentham, 1879, p. 311). As a consequence, Bentham states that “*the question is not, ‘Can they reason?’ ‘Can they talk?’. But, Can they suffer?*” (Bentham, 1879, p. 311). As such, Bentham specifies that what gives all beings the right of equality is suffering capacity, or more precisely “*capacity for suffering and enjoyment or happiness*” (Singer, 2015, p. 36).

Similarly, Singer claims that the idea of equality should not be determined by either physical characteristics or abilities of entities; on the contrary, he believes that “*the capacity for suffering and enjoying things is a prerequisite for having interests at all*” (Singer, 1976, p. 76). Elaborating on this, Singer points out that it is not reasonable for a human being with a higher degree of intelligence to exploit another human being who has a lower degree of intelligence; as such, the level of intelligence cannot entitle humans to make use of nonhumans and “*the limit of sentience*” should be the base for the interests of all living things (Singer, 1976, p. 77). However, Singer’s utilitarian perspective is partially different from that of classical utilitarians who believe that “*pleasure was intrinsically valuable and pain alone was intrinsically not valuable*” because Singer, holding a modified version of utilitarianism “*known as ‘preference’ and ‘interest’*,” explains that both pain and pleasure are vitally significant as they are what “*humans and nonhumans desire or seek to avoid*” (Francione, 1997, p. 77). Therefore, having a utilitarian perspective, Singer states that what comprises a basis for equality is not whether animals are able to talk or reason, but it is their suffering which is similar to that of human beings. Therefore, he signifies that should there be any signs of suffering, there cannot be any “*moral justification*” which can hinder suffering from taking into

consideration (Singer, 2015, p. 38). Thus, equality principle should be claimed since both humans and animals are similarly prone to suffering. Furthermore, Singer brings *pain* to the fore as it is the basic symptom of suffering and he describes pain as “*a state of consciousness, a ‘mental event’*” which makes it unobservable yet true (Singer, 2015, p. 40). As a result, according to Singer’s frame of speciesism, pain and suffering are the chief factors to advocate animal rights.

In many of his works, J. M. Coetzee, South African-Australian writer, represents the marginalized and oppressed characters who are mostly the victims of colonial or patriarchal ideologies. Similarly, through his fictional persona in the novel *Elizabeth Costello*, which is about a famous aging Australian writer of the same name who travels from one destination to another and gives academic lectures on various topics, Coetzee challenges the traditional views regarding animal lives and rights. In an interview, Coetzee indicates that he has not particularly accentuated the relation between humans and animals in his works except two chapters in *Elizabeth Costello* – Lesson 3 and Lesson 4. Therefore, this article attempts to discuss how Coetzee subverts speciesist discourse by voicing against the exploitation of animals in any forms including the use of animals as source of food or clothes and agents of vivisections in his work *Elizabeth Costello* by analysing the aforementioned chapters and tries to position Costello in the animal rights debate.

### **Anti-Speciesist Discourse in Elizabeth Costello’s Lectures**

“...I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed [...] by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering” (Coetzee, 1992, p. 248).

As a writer who strongly challenges all forms of oppression, J. M. Coetzee believes that the representation of animal issues and their consciousness is arduous in literary works as he claims the role that animals represent in literature is peripheral which is mainly due to their subsidiary or incidental roles in social hierarchy. However, Coetzee remarks that though human beings have capacities to develop empathy innately, they just tend to make up excuses to justify their cruelty against other entities, both animals and humans as he says mankind has developed “*physics, social, and philosophical mechanisms*” which are seen to be useful in order to get through slaughtering animals (Satya, 2022). In almost the same way, human beings tend to legitimize their cruelty if they kill other human beings in wars. However, none of these mechanisms can justify the torture or

oppression inflicted on other beings as long as they have the sense of suffering. Therefore, Coetzee mainly strives to create a change in hearts of people towards animals which may both guarantee the rights of animals and preclude all sorts of cruelty against them. Accordingly, Coetzee through his fictional persona Elizabeth Costello who is a renowned author in his book with the same name harshly criticizes cruel treatment and marginalisation which animals undergo.

First of all, from the very beginning of *Lesson 3*, Costello comes out as a strong advocate of vegetarianism who “*does not like to see meat on the table*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 60). One of the most impassioned controversy regarding animal rights and ethics is that especially in the late capitalism it is unusually rare for human beings to see animals “*in living form*” which implies that animals “*are killed and eaten in huge numbers on a daily basis*” (Ryan, 2015, p. 135). Upon this, highlighting the various ways by which animals are exploited, Carol Adams in her canonical work *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* states that:

From the leather in our shoes, the soap we use to cleanse our face, the down in the comforter, the meat we eat, and the dairy products we rely on, our world as we now know it is structured around a dependence on the death of the other animals (2010, p. 94).

Adams also stresses that the underlying excuse of this can be explained by the term “*absent referent*” which is used to separate “*the meat eater from the animal and the animal from the end product*” (2010, p. 13). As such, from eras in which meat, besides other animal products, was attained through hunting only, humanity has moved into the post industrial age or late capitalism when domesticated animals are kept so as to provide food and different animal-based products. Hence, the discussion on vegetarianism put forward by Costello is significant in post-industrial world as the number of animals slaughtered systematically by human beings so as to satisfy the needs or appetites of human beings has reached its peak (Ryan, 2015, p. 136).

Though it is mostly presumed that eating animals is a primordial habit, Adams opposes this by explaining that meat eating has evolved through four stages. In the first stage, humans were mainly dependent on vegetarian foods, and “*little meat (from small animals or bugs) consumed was acquired with one hands and sticks*” (2010, p. 114). The second and the third stages were about hunting and domestication of animals which increased the amount of available meat and the last stage “*involves the imprisoning of animals*” (Adams, 2010, p. 114). As a

consequence, it becomes obvious that through these stages, human beings have become dependent on meat. Besides, the Greek philosopher Plutarch is one of the earliest apologists of vegetarian-diet who reverses the conventional approach to meat eating by elucidating that it is amiss to ask the reasons which hinder people from eating animals; on the contrary, he brings to the fore that the reasons which led people to start eating meat should be focalised by stating that what strikes him the most is the “*humour, soul, or reason*” which instigated human beings for the first time to touch and reach the “*flesh of a dead animal*” with their mouths (Nussbaum, 2007, p. 154). Likewise, when Mrs. Costello is asked about the reasons which led her to follow a vegetarian diet, her riposte derives from an essay written by Plutarch: “*I 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). Her response carries significance as it reveals the “*fleshly realities*” regarding the source from which meat comes (Nussbaum, 2007, p. 156).

Accordingly, Melanie Joy asserts that in order to justify meat eating, human beings make use of “*the process of naturalization*” which reiterates that they “*are in accordance with the law of nature*” (2010, p. 108). As a consequence of naturalization, meat eaters claim that they simply follow “*the natural order of things*” (Joy, 2010, p. 109). However, Joy stresses that naturalized behaviours “*are constructed by those who place themselves at the top of natural hierarchy*”; thus, these behaviours only serve for the benefits of certain groups (as it was the case in free men exploiting the slaves or men believing in their natural superiority over women) whose sole purpose is to “*justify violence*” for their own sakes (Joy, 2010, p. 109). In contrast to the process of naturalization, also Plutarch claims that the idea describing meat eating as a natural phenomenon is merely a myth by referring to human body as it, having “*no hawk’s bill, no sharp talon, no roughness of teeth, no such strength of stomach or heat of digestion*” does not resemble to the bodies of animals whose nature inclines to “*ravenousness*” (Nussbaum, 2007, p. 156). He also urges that if anyone persists in meat eating, s/he should be able to “*kill what you would eat... without the help of a chopping-knife, mallet, or axe*” and eat it without altering it by “*fire and medicines*” as animals do (Nussbaum, 2007, p. 156). On this, Adams stresses the fact that human beings do not have any “*bodily agency for killing and dismembering the animals we eat*” (Adams, 2010, p. 77). As a consequence, it is claimed that under these conditions no human being feels eager to “*eat a lifeless and a dead thing as it is*” (Nussbaum, 2007, p. 156). Plutarch

underlines that the way in which human beings kill and eat animals or meat is against the rules of nature as they are able to kill animals only by using different tools which are not their innate components. Costello, sharing a similar view to that of Plutarch, draws an analogy between “*human babies*” and “*piglets*” to manifest the fallacy of naturalisation of meat eating by explaining that as killing and/or eating babies evokes horror, doing the same for piglets cannot be approved as something normal (Coetzee, 2003, p. 101). Through such an analogy, Costello clarifies that mankind and animals are members of the same animal kingdom which puts forward the idea that separation or distinction in any forms between these two groups brings out a false representation initially and much suffering ultimately.

An analytic philosopher, Cora Diamond, also indicates that contrary to the common belief stating that pain which animals undergo while being slaughtered is the core cause of vegetarianism, the underlying reason for being a vegetarian is the same motivation which deters humans from killing and eating other human beings. That is, assuming suffering as the core norm which determines the practises by which human beings are expected to treat animals misses the primary reason that causes vegetarianism. Therefore, it is not reasonable to claim that what hinders us from eating humans is only suffering because even if it is assured that there was no direct or indirect suffering caused, human beings would not want to eat their counterparts. This is mainly owing to the fact that human beings are not there to be eaten. Similarly, according to Diamond, the intrinsic motivation behind vegetarianism is that “*a cow is not something to eat*” because human beings and animals share the life (Diamond, 1978, p. 468). Consequently, though suffering may be a reason for vegetarianism to a certain level, it does not and cannot cover all “*deeper ontological and ethical*” roots (Ryan, 2015, p. 130).

At this juncture, Jean Jacques Rousseau proposes that observing the diets that children follow may give clear clues about what is natural or unnatural to eat as their appetite is satiated by vegetables or dairy product, but not by meat to which children are indifferent. Thus, he underlines that “*it is important not to denature this primitive taste and make children carnivorous*” (Ryan, 2015, p. 136). Discussing the roots of meat eating, Wunderlich, one of the guests at the dinner organised by the university in the novel, argues that though the Greeks knew that it was wrong to slaughter animals, they tried to find an excuse for it, which was “*ritualizing it*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 86). In other words, “*they made a sacrificial offering, gave a percentage to the gods*” who were expected to assert that the flesh is

clean, so they could “*keep the rest*” for themselves (Coetzee, 2003, p. 86). Elaborating on the same point, Costello implies that this may explain “*the origin of the gods*” as it is possible that human beings created gods so as to “*put the blame on them*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 86). Finally, John, Costello’s son, believes that concerted efforts made by her mother through classes so as to “*close down the slaughterhouses*” are in vain as he believes that the behaviour which Costello hopes and attempts to alter “*is too elementary, too elemental, to be reached by talk. Carnivorousness expresses something truly deep about human beings, just as it does about jaguars.*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 103). However, though it is generally believed that eating meat is legitimate as it has been a “*part of omnivorous diet at least for two million years*”, Joy claims that the history of an action cannot be the base to justify it. Endorsing this, Joy states that many actions such as “*infanticide, murder, rape, and cannibalism are at least as old as meat eating*”, but this does not necessarily mean that they are justifiable (2010, p. 107). Therefore, justifying meat eating by its long history can be misleading.

Keeping criticising her mother’s view, John points out that it would be unacceptable to “*put a jaguar on a soy bean diet*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 103). Justifying the legitimacy of John’s point, Costello states that jaguars die if they feed on a vegetarian diet whereas this is not the case with human beings (Coetzee, 2003, p. 103). On the contrary, in recent decades, there have been several researches which have proven the “*healthful nature of a complete vegetarian diet*” (Adams, 2010, p. 18). At this very point, it is true that especially in the industrialized world, human beings consume meat “*not because we have to*” but because “*we choose to*” (Joy, 2010, p. 29). Regarding this, John explains that though it is true that human beings can survive on a vegetarian diet, it is something that human beings do not desire for mainly because they enjoy eating meat. He also asserts that though it seems to be “*brutal*”, human beings find meat eating “*atavistically satisfying*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 104), an idea which is also elaborated by Joy who expresses meat eating is “*what we’ve always done, ... we like the way they taste*” (Joy, 2010, p. 29). Therefore, Costello’s argument for vegetarian diet seems plausible as meat eating appears to be a socially and culturally constructed norm, not a necessity. For John, it is also weird that his mother tries to help animals while “*they won’t help themselves*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 104). As such, when Costello is asked if the underlying reason of her vegetarianism is “*moral conviction*” or not, she clarifies that “*It comes out of a desire to save my soul.*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 89-90). Thus, it is a

strenuous effort to keep herself away from cruelty of eating animals which, Costello believes, may purify her soul.

In addition to eating animals, Costello incontrovertibly stands against all slaughterhouses and industrial fields in which animals are seen as merely products or goods that serve for the appetite of human beings. On her visit in Australia, Costello is “*taken on a drive around Waltham*” which looks a pleasing town (Coetzee, 2003, p. 59). Though she does not espy anything which evokes horror such as “*laboratories, factory farms, abattoirs*”, she is quite adamant about their presence as she states “*I am sure they are here. ... They simply do not advertise themselves.*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 65). On this point, it is also argued that establishments which are designated to produce meat are wittingly constructed in remote places to make them “*essentially invisible*” as human beings are not “*supposed to*” see them (Joy, 2010, p. 40). The reason for this is that “*as with any violent ideology*” people should be kept away “*from direct exposure to the victim of the system*” so as to prevent them from “*questioning the system*” (Joy, 2010, p. 40). Costello postulates that any forms of mistreatment of animals in favour of human beings are not only cruel but also selfish. She believes that experimentation on animals which inflict clear suffering on innocent animals is illicit as it is no different from inflicting pain and suffering on human beings. However, it is on this point where Singer and Costello disagree. On the one hand, Singer stands against most of the experimentation carried on animals but not against all of them mainly because he believes “*most animal experiments produce benefits that are insufficient to justify the animal suffering that results*” (Francione, 1997, p. 78). As such, he “*cannot oppose all animal experimentation*” as he thinks if a particular experimentation could directly help curing many humans who are affected by a disease, the use of animals can be justified (Francione, 1997, p. 78). In other words, Singer claims that animal experimentation is permissible on the condition that its advantages outweigh the disadvantages. On the other hand, Costello is sharply against animal experimentation no matter what. Therefore, she addresses the cruelty imposed on animals by stating that she personally does not refer to these places as farms because not only herself but also even the guests there know or at least guess “*what is being done to animals at this moment in production facilities ... in abattoirs, in trawlers, in laboratories...*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 63). In sharp contrast to the utilitarian perspective which advocates minimising negative consequences, such industrial units are the places where animals are mistreated and exploited to provide benefits to human beings. Besides, these places ignore capacities of animals

for suffering which violates the notion of “*equal consideration*” an idea propounding that animals and human beings have a similar and shared capacity when it comes to suffering (Ryan, 2015, p. 121). Thus, Costello levels a verbal assault against these units by stating that humanity is “*surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty and killing [...] ours is an enterprise without end, self-regeneration, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 65). As a result, Costello states that the cruelty and slaughter inflicted on animals in these units can “*rival anything that the Third Reich was capable of*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 65). It is clear that in these industrial units animals are seen as mere objects of which ultimate purpose is to benefit human beings instead of being seen as living things. Referring to the laboratories where animals are used as test subjects, Singer also explains the tragic consequences of experiments on animals as these experiments cause “*distress, despair, anxiety, general psychological devastation, and death*” (Singer, 2015, p. 73).

Costello also argues that human beings treat animals as if they were prisoners of war by referring to the dark ages of zoos when the spectators or visitors in zoos deemed that these animals which are not different from “*prisoners in triumph were there to be insulted and abused*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 104). Highlighting how cruel human beings may be against animals, Costello unveils the “*war against animals*” which is also “*called hunting*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 104). She emphasises that just like prisoners of wars, animals are humiliated, tortured, or exploited tyrannically as human beings “*can cut his throat, tear out his heart, throw him on the fire*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 104). Costello reproaches her listeners and even sometimes reprimands them because of their indifference to all these brutalities by claiming that in these facilities there occurs a new “*flesh holocaust*” each day (Coetzee, 2003, p. 80). As such, Costello blames human beings as they believe that in spite of not resisting such cruelties they do not deteriorate their moral values and they “*come away clean*” no matter what happens in these places (Coetzee, 2003, p. 80). However, even her son John sometimes cannot perceive his mother’s rationale and purpose in her speeches which leads him to ask “*And that is what you want to cure humankind of?*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 104). In response to her son, Costello indicates that though she does not know what she wants to do precisely, she does not “*want to sit silent*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 104) while animals are tortured and exploited in “*laboratory or the zoo*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 75). Consequently, Costello obviously points out that the use of animals for the sake of mankind is unacceptable as it primarily results from speciesism. As a resolution, Regan puts forward that “*the*

*only way to satisfy the rights is the total dissolution of the animal industry*" (1976, p. 348), a view whereby animals in zoos and laboratories may learn "*where home is*" and "*get home*" (Coetzee, 2003, p. 75).

Protesting cruelties which animals are made to live through, Costello draws a striking yet highly controversial analogy between the sufferings of animals used in industrial units and those of Jews murdered by Nazis which causes her to be criticised by both her daughter-in-law Norma and Abraham Stern, an old academic with Jewish origin. However, she uses this analogy in order to persuade those people among her listeners who exploit animals by using animal products that they are as guilty as the Germans who directly or indirectly sided with the Nazis during the Holocaust. Costello starts her discussion by clarifying that "*there is no comparison*" (Coetzee, 2003, p. 66) between Treblinka (an extermination camp during the WW II) and meat industry. However, she expands her argument by stating:

Treblinka was ... 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 a 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 (Coetzee, 2003, p. 66).

Therefore, for Costello human beings who exploit animals for their own sakes are as guilty as those who tortured and killed people in camps. Coetzee, instead of stating that this analogy is not novel and had been drawn by Peter Singer who is also Jewish, intentionally lets Costello be criticised so as to grant these voices or objections to be heard. Singer elucidates that as a consequence of blatant racism, some races have been made subjects of painful experiments. He adds that during the Nazi regime "*nearly two hundred doctors*" most of whom were prominent figures in medical field conducted several experiments on "*Jews, Russian, and Polish prisoners*" (Singer, 2015, p. 137). Though these experiments have been justified by some by reason of their possible contribution to science, the records reveal "*how horrible injuries were inflicted on these 'lesser races'*" (Singer, 2015, p. 137). However, it is equally important to note that in the course of these experiments

there were not any protests which denounced the nature of experiments on human beings. Costello narrates this by indicating that people did not or could not contest the case of Holocaust despite the prevalence of such camps. She elaborates that in Germany there were nearly “*six thousands*” camps which were “*dedicated to the production of death*” and “*horrors*”; however, people around these camps could not “*afford to know, for their own sake*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 64). Thus, she argues that just for their own sakes people did not object to the unethical and savage issues conducted in these camps.

Moreover, after Nazism, experiments on live beings have not been abandoned completely, but they have been moved onto animals. Therefore, Singer claims that the parallelism or similarities between the experiments carried out on the members of some races in Nazi Germany and the experiments conducted on animals today are “*striking*” (Singer, 2015, p. 137). Peter Singer quotes from Isaac Bashevis who controversially claims that today “*in their behaviour towards creatures, all men [are] Nazis*” and the only difference is that today the reports about animal experimentations are written down in “*scientific jargon*” which includes words such as “*frozen, heated, and put in decompression chambers*” (Singer, 2015, p. 137) while the reports about experiments on human beings are more straightforward as they included expressions like “*spasms appeared, respiration increased in frequency, respiration slowed down to three inhalations per minute, breathing ceased, an autopsy was begun*” (Singer, 2015, p. 137). Although the discourse may seem to “*distance us from reality*” the sufferings that animals are exposed to do not vanish (Adams, 2010, p. 96). In the context of both people during Holocaust who did not or could not know what was happening around them and those people today who do not oppose to the ongoing exploitations of animals, Costello indicates that “*they lost their humanity, in our eyes, because of certain willed ignorance*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 69). Though she admits that against cruelties caused by Hitler’s war mentality, ignorance might have seemed to be a worthwhile “*survival mechanism*”, yet “*we refuse to accept*” it (Coetzee, 2003, p. 64). As a result of their ignorance to the ongoing sufferings around them, “*Germans of certain generation*” are described as “*polluted*” as “*in the very signs of their normality (their healthy appetites, their hearty laughter) we see proof of how deeply seated pollution is in them*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 65). By referring to the pollution of certain German generations, Costello implies that human beings who do not oppose to the exploitation of animals today are also polluted as they are in the sense of normality despite all these atrocities animals are exposed to.

Costello also enhances her analogy by claiming that not the victims but the oppressors in Nazi camps “*had become beasts*” mainly due to their cruel treatment to the human beings who were “*created in the image of God*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 65). Thus, Costello claims that due to the connection between “*willed ignorance*” and such ideologies as racism or speciesism, people close both their minds and hearts to the sufferings of others and lose sympathy which “*allows us to share at times the being of another*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 79). As a result of the lack of sympathy, the killers in Nazi Camps did not put themselves into the shoes of victims as they did not think “*How would it be if I were burning?*”; therefore, the killers, treating victims as “*lice*”, were somehow a part of this crime committed against humanity (Coetzee, 2003, p. 79). Costello also indicates that “*as sympathy has everything to do with subject and little to do with object*” it may be possible to “*think the object not as a bat but as another human being*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 79) which will, at least to a certain extent, open the hearts to the oppressions animals undergo. Besides, Costello claims that though there are some people who have such a capacity, some others may lack it, and if the lack reaches an extreme level, “*psychopaths*” who never care others may come up and this may transform the world into hell (Coetzee, 2003, p. 79).

What is more, Costello uses a very provocative language while describing the conditions of people in the camp: “*They went like sheep to the slaughter.*” “*They died like animals.*” “*The Nazi butchers killed them*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 64). Additionally, Costello also claims that stockyards, particularly “*Chicago stockyards*”, were the places where Nazis observed “*how to process bodies*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 97). By using such expressions, she primarily intends to explain that not only treating human beings in such a brutal way is unacceptable but making animals live through such cruelties is also wrong. Additionally, by comparing all brutalities animals are exposed to and the cruelty of slavery, Costello describes animals as “*... our captive herds are: slave population*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 104). As such, she also implies that everything animals do is just for the sake of human kind which turns them into slaves whose “*work is to breed for us. Even their sex becomes a form of labour*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 104). Referring to slave-master relation, Costello states that animals are so low in moral order for some that even “*they are not worth hating any more. We regard them with contempt*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 105). Costello has possibly adapted this analogy from Singer who pointedly states that the USA hanged back the “*civilized world*” to prohibit human slavery in the past and in today’s world the USA once again falls behind to, at least, lessen “*the unrestrained*

*brutalities of animal slavery*” (Singer, 2015, p. 131). The slavery analogy put forward by Singer is particularly significant as it is rooted in history of America, which includes brutalities and atrocities committed against slaves. Similarly, being more than a mere comparison, Costello’s analogy underlines the fact that as the USA was late to justify abolitionist movement in the past, it is now the same with animal rights all over the world as they have not been granted yet.

Costello also expostulates with some philosophers due to their views on animals which mainly claim that animals are unable to reason, an idea which somehow may seem to espouse speciesism. Contentions on animals’ mental abilities and their moral status date back to ancient times. Aristotle, for example, in his *On Soul* claims that a large number of animals are “*without discourse of reason*” (Aristotle, 2018, p. 428). In other words, he believes that animals are unable to think or calculate as they lack logos. In addition, by defining human beings as rational animals, Aristotle implies that the only being with intellect and reason is mankind. Descartes takes this position further as he describes animals as automates which “*act naturally and mechanically, like a clock*” without reasoning (Descartes, 1976, p. 64), and he also postulates that brutes “*have less reason than men, ... they have none at all*” (Descartes, 1976, p. 62). Discussing these, Costello infers that according to St Thomas, Plato, or Descartes as animals lack reasoning, they are unable to comprehend the universe and thus they act and “*follow its rules blindly*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 67). Therefore, animals are seen to be “*part of universe’s being*” which indicates that animals are “*thinglike*” whereas mankind having the faculty of reasoning becomes “*godlike*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 67). Thus, Costello concludes that according to St. Thomas, Plato, or Descartes, the relationship between mankind and animals can be described as a “*hierarchical and a supplementary arrangement*” which valorises human as the “*highest kind of animal ... because of what the human adds to its base animal being*”, which is the capacity of reasoning (Ryan, 2015, p. 50).

In a similar vein, as to animality of mankind, Immanuel Kant believes that human beings surmount “*mere animality*” as they are granted “*reason*” (Ryan, 2015, p. 50). As such, human beings may become genuinely human by overriding its animality which is presented to be a lower fragment of humanity. Hence, holding human beings over animals, Kant claims that any sense of responsibility or moral concerns for animals felt by human beings cannot be direct. In this sense, Costello criticises Kant as she believes that he

has a failure of nerve at this point. Even Kant does not pursue, with regard to animals, the implications of his intuition that reason may be not the being of the universe but on the contrary merely the being of the human brain (Coetzee, 2003, p. 67).

Contrary to all these ideas put forward by different philosophers, relying on her reason and seventy-year experience, Costello vindicates that reason is neither the being of the universe nor the being of God. Contrarily, she claims that reason may be an outcome of “*human thought*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 67). Besides, Costello refers to Descartes’s famous saying “*Cogito, ergo sum*” which makes her “*uncomfortable*” as it, for Costello, signifies that a living being which is unable or incompetent to think belongs to the “*second-class*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 78). In *The Philosophers and the Animals*, Costello foregrounds that Descartes believed that “*an animal lives...as a machine lives*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 78). Descartes also argues that even if animals have souls, they are not much different from the batteries of machines; thus, “*the animal is not an embodied soul, and the quality of its being is not joy*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 78). Criticising Descartes, Costello claims that though Descartes saw, he preferred denying the fact that “*To be alive is to be a living soul. An animal - and we are all animals - is an embodied soul*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 78). Therefore, rather than forming a reason-based hierarchical divide between animals and human beings, Costello puts forward the view of “*fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being*” which creates a sharp contrast with Descartes’s ideas (Coetzee, 2003, p. 78).

Last but not least, Costello underlines that in some of his arguments particularly on reasoning, Descartes was wrong because of the “*incomplete information*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 107). During the period in which Descartes lived, science was not developed enough to examine “*great apes*” or “*higher marine mammals*” which caused Descartes to believe that “*animals cannot think*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 107). Therefore, for Costello the assumption that animals are unable to think or reason in Descartes’s terms solely cannot provide a basis to exclude animals from moral standing. Also, Costello undermines the idea that as animals do not have some certain capacities such as thinking strategically or speaking, they cannot have any moral status in the society. For this, she criticises the experiments which are used to measure the animals’ capacities scientifically as they are thoroughly “*anthropocentric*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 108). Thus, the results of these scientific experiments which claim that “*animals are imbeciles*” are invalid (Coetzee, 2003, p. 108). One of such experiments is the mazes which are designed to

measure the reasoning abilities of animals. While arguing against these mazes in which animals are expected to find their ways, Costello underlines their absurdity by claiming that such experiments neglect the fact that if a researcher who creates these mazes was “parachuted into the jungle of Borneo, he or she would be dead of starvation in a week” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 108). Therefore, Costello states that not the animals that are lost in these mazes during experiments but such “*experiments themselves are imbeciles*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 108). Another point which Costello confutes is the idea that animals are “*too dumb and stupid to speak for themselves*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 108). By telling an anecdote from Albert Camus’s boyhood, she distinctly presents how “*the death cry of*” a hen whose head was cut off by his grandmother can speak (Coetzee, 2003, p. 108). Not being able to get over the impact of this incident, Camus “*wrote an impassioned attack on the guillotine*” in 1958, which played a significant role in the abolishment of capital punishment in France (Coetzee, 2003, p. 108). Thus, Costello asks “*Who is to say, then, that the hen did not speak?*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 108). In this context, Costello refutes that faculties of reasoning or discourse may set the ground for speciesism because, though in different forms or ways, animals have such capacities.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, practically in two chapters of the novel *Elizabeth Costello*, Lesson 3 and Lesson 4, J.M. Coetzee deals with the issues concerning proper place of animals in society and their rights. Basing on Singer’s notion of speciesism, Elizabeth Costello in the novel is depicted as a person who strongly opposes to the all form of maltreatment of animals. At first, she is represented as a character who strongly supports vegetarian diet whereby no animals will be killed to be eaten. By referring to the diet that children naturally follow, she implies that carnivorousness is not an innate behaviour; contrarily, it is learnt in society, and thus it is not an innate instinct to eat animals. Additionally, Costello argues against the slaughterhouses and industrial units in which animals are exploited for the sake of human beings. By referring to pain and suffering that animals are exposed to in these units which are not much different from prisons, she claims that the idea of “equal consideration” is violated and animals are made to live as prisoners under horrible conditions. Finally, Costello undermines the idea which supports speciesism by stating that human beings have some faculties which animals do not have, and thus they can be used for the benefit of humanity. She claims that philosophers such as Descartes or Aristotle, who somehow excluded animals from

moral standing, did not have sufficient research data to prove their views. Additionally, Costello argues that the experiments conducted to define capacities of animals are anthropocentric which makes them defunct. As such, Costello is of the view that there is no scientifically or ethically reasonable data which may make speciesism conceivable. Therefore, through her lectures in which she subverts the ideas that support speciesism, Costello aims to “*open your heart*” to animals and “*listen to what your heart says*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 82).

## References

- Adams, C. J. (2010). *The sexual politics of meat: A feminist-vegetarian critical theory*. New York & London: Continuum.
- Aristotle. (2018). *On the soul*. (J.A. Smith, Trans.). Blacksburg: Global Grey.
- Aristotle. (1998). *Politics*. (B. Jowett, Trans.). Kitchener: Batoche Books.
- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2007). *Post-colonial studies: The key concepts*. New York: Routledge.
- Bentham, J. (1879). *An introduction to the principles of morals and legislation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Coetzee, J. M. (2003). *Elizabeth Costello*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- Coetzee, J. M. (1992). *Doubling the point: Essays and interviews*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Descartes, R. (1996). *A discourse on the method and meditations on first philosophy*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Descartes, R. (1976). Animals are machines. In T. Regan, & P. Singer (Eds.), *Animal rights and human obligations* (pp. 13-19). Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Diamond, C. (1978). Eating meat and eating people. *Philosophy* 53(206), 465-479.
- Francione, G. L. (2003). Animal rights theory and utilitarianism: A relative normative guidance. *Between the species* 13(3), 51-80.
- Hume, D. (1999). *An enquiry concerning human understanding*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Joy, M. (2010). *Why we love dogs, eat pigs, and wear cows: An introduction to carnism*. San Francisco: Conari Press.

- Nussbaum, M. (2007). *Frontiers of justice: Disability, nationality, species membership*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Regan, T. (1983). *The case for animal rights*. California: University of California Press.
- Regan, T. & Singer, P. (1976). *Animal rights and human obligations*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Ryan, D. (2015). *Animal theory: A critical introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Satya. (n.d.). *Animals, humans, cruelty and literature: A rare interview with J. M. Coetzee*. Satya: Vegetarianism, environmentalism, animal advocacy and social justice. Retrieved July 24, 2022, from <http://www.satyamag.com/may04/coetzee.html>
- Singer, P. (2015). *Animal liberation*. New York: Open Road Integrated Media.
- Speciesism. (2010). In S. Wehmeier, C. McIntosh, J. Turnbull & M. Ashby (Eds.), *Oxford advanced learner's dictionary*. (7<sup>th</sup> ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

### Summary

The present study attempts to analyze the South African-Australian writer J.M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello* through the lens of Peter Singer's concept of speciesism. The term speciesism is basically defined as "discrimination against or exploitation of certain animal species by human beings, based on an assumption of mankind's superiority" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010). Through this view, it is claimed that human beings do not owe any moral obligations to animals which legitimizes the use or exploitation of animals in several ways. However, Singer in his canonical book on animal rights, *Animal Liberation*, argues that speciesism is a "prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interest of members of one's own species and against those members of other species" (Singer, 2015, p. 35). As such, he explains that speciesism is not much different from racism or sexism as all these three disregard the principle of equality so as to grant "greater weight to the interests of" one's own race, sex, or species" (Singer, 2015, p. 38). Holding a similar view to that of Jeremy Bentham who believes that "the number of the legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the os sacrum" cannot be the reasons to justify the assumption of humans' superiority or animals' inferiority, Singer points out that the main point to take into consideration is not the faculties of reasoning or discourse but the capacity of suffering which not only human beings but also animals do have. Therefore, this paper sets out to explore how Coetzee through his fictional persona Elizabeth Costello undermines the views supporting speciesism and highlights the idea of "equal consideration" (Ryan, 2015, p. 121).

Coetzee, who is "overwhelmed [...] by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering" (Coetzee, 1992, p. 248), opposes all forms of abuse and exploitation that animals undergo. As such, Coetzee's fictional persona Elizabeth Costello shows up as a person who strongly advocates vegetarian diet and she claims that eating meat and being carnivorous is against the nature of humanity. Her main rationale for this is that human beings need to use several tools or fire so as to kill and eat animals which makes it unnatural. Additionally, by drawing an analogy between human babies and piglets which are the members of the same kingdom, Costello claims that both of these entities are not

there to be eaten. She also adds that human beings do depend on meat eating in order to survive, and thus, killing and eating animals is both cruel and selfish.

Costello also voices against the industrial units where animals are used as subjects so as to benefit human beings. Implying that animals and human beings have a similar and shared capacity when it comes to suffering, Costello harshly criticises all slaughterhouses and industrial units where animals are seen as mere subjects rather than living beings. As a consequence of being seen as subjects, animals are exposed to painful experiments which ultimately cause “*distress, despair, anxiety, general psychological devastation, and death*” (Singer, 2015, p. 73). Therefore, she believes that “*the only way to satisfy the rights is the total dissolution of the animal industry*” (Regan, 1976, p. 348).

Also, Costello refutes the idea that as animals lack some cognitive features such as reasoning and discourse, they are unable to comprehend the universe which makes animal exploitation justifiable. Criticising philosophers such as Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant, Costello states that each “*has a failure of nerve*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 67) when it comes to animals’ capacities. For instance, Descartes was wrong because of the “*incomplete information*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 107) as during his lifetime “*great apes*” or “*higher marine mammals*” had not been examined yet (Coetzee, 2003, p. 107). Additionally, Costello specifies that the experiments which are designed to measure the abilities of animals such as mazes are anthropocentric, and as such they cannot be used to label animals as “*imbeciles*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 108). Therefore, for Costello assumption that animals are unable to reason cannot provide a basis to exclude animals from moral standing.

All in all, by subverting traditional views on animals and their capacities Costello shares Singer’s point of view which states that “*speciesism is a prejudice, bias, or irrational discrimination*” (Singer, 2015, p. 35). As such, Costello is of the view that there is no scientifically or ethically reasonable data which may make speciesism conceivable. Therefore, through her lectures in which she subverts the ideas that support speciesism, Costello aims to “*open your heart*” to animals and “*listen to what your heart says*” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 82) which will grant animals’ rights.