

Interplay of Literary Forms in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*

Tanvir Hasan Malik*
Sharif Rakib Hasan**

Abstract

The intent of this article is to delve into the objectives behind George Orwell's adoption of five literary forms in Animal Farm. The author blends five literary forms together with an inventive panache which lends itself to a new dimension to political writing. The admixture of beast fable, satire, allegory, fairy story and novella brings interesting techniques into play to augment its effects. Each genre contributes its own characteristics and hangs together with others succinctly; and the outcome is a relentless and scathing attack on the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin. This composite of genres vivifies the effects of the author's brainchild to satirize the Russian Revolution and, more importantly, the subsequent distortion of its rudimentary principles.

Orwell is essentially a political writer and was at pains to turn political writing into an art and to forge a new literary genre that would be concise, attractive and would also encourage people to break free from their insular political-mindset. Orwell wrote: "The business of making people conscious of what is happening outside their own small circle is one of the major problems of our time, and a new literary technique will have to be evolved to meet it" (270). To this end, he struck on the idea of amalgamating several literary forms to realize a vehicle for expressing his political thoughts. He fused five such forms: fable, satire, allegory, fairy tale and novella; and the outcome is *Animal Farm* (1945). In order to introduce the facts of the Russian Revolution, he chose the popular fable form with personification of beasts as characters. He picked satire as his primary concern was writing a political book: he wanted to criticize and point out the ills that existed in the Russian communist society under Joseph Stalin. Allegory gave him an opportunity to use symbols copiously and to tell the story of the Revolution not directly, but in an implied fashion. He employed fairy tale in order that he could camouflage the serious message of the book in a format that could pass for a children's book. At last he cast the story in the novella format since the short length of the book would ensure a pleasant reading with its lucid and taut language. His aim was to write a critique of the Russian Revolution and the subsequent distortion of its rudimentary principles but he also encapsulated in his story the characteristics of human revolution.

Orwell opted for the beast fable genre for several reasons. Firstly, the beast fable demanded that he use animals as characters in the tradition of Aesop. The animals could stand for real political personages with their human attributes and behaviour just as in Aesop's fables each and every animal exemplifies and epitomizes basic human characteristics. Orwell's animals are no exception. Moses the Raven's

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Eastern University, Bangladesh

** Senior Lecturer, Department of English, Eastern University, Bangladesh

demeanour lays bare the clergy's slavish allegiance to the state machinery. Benjamin the donkey's intense skepticism is only a manifestation of an incorrigible cynic. Boxer's unflinching devotion expresses the masses' unquestionable faith in their rulers.

The influence of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is also writ large on *Animal Farm* as far as the personified farm animals are concerned. The equine population—Houyhnhymns—in *Gulliver's Travels* can not only speak but also are intellectually far superior to their human counterpart Yahoos; in *Animal Farm*, all the farm animals can talk and some animals are put on a pedestal intellectually in comparison to others. For example the pigs' intelligence is head and shoulders above the general animals who cannot remember beyond the letter A. Even Muriel's (who can read fairly well barring Benjamin) reading skills are poor when pitted against the pigs'. This brings to the reader's mind the distinction between the Houyhnhymns and human in Swift's magnum opus. Jeffrey Meyers says: "Orwell...was undoubtedly influenced by the talking horses in Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels*" (130).

However, the anthropomorphism in the two books does have its differences. The traditional human and equine statures are completely reversed in *Gulliver's Travels* and the intellectually superior Houyhnhymns dominate the inferior Yahoos. There exists a tension between the species i.e. the horses and the humans. The Houyhnhymns' sneering attitude towards the Yahoos and the Yahoos' self-loathing and angst bring the Marxist idea of class-struggle into play. The Houyhnhymns assume the station of the bourgeois here and, the Yahoos, the proletariat. Contrarily, in *Animal Farm*, even though the class-struggle is all too evident, it builds gradually up and is seen to exist in the animal community only—humans do not figure here. The so-called intellectually superior animals take on the bourgeois status and the general animals are relegated to the proletariat position. The tension here is not cross-species but intra-species. The discrimination manifests itself within the animals.

As to why Orwell kept humans out in *Animal Farm*, when it came to class-struggle, is easily understandable: he employed the two sets of animals with human attributes and their actions are but human actions; animals have replaced human beings. Thus, actual human characters would be redundant here.

Secondly, he chose the personified animal characters to avert going into detailed characterization; on the surface, as the characterization concerned animals, they did not have to be delineated elaborately like actual human characters in a novel: the emotional as well as the psychological facets of human characters required little attention so far as character-portrayal went. The character-portrayal of Napoleon and Squealer needed less effort as opposed to the portrayal of human characters in his other novels e.g. there was no scope for inserting John Flory's sense of shame as a social outcast in *Burmese Days* here or Gordon Comstock's inner conflict about whether to give in to or rebel against the inane money-driven capitalistic values in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is all but absent here. This was, at the same time, a device that Orwell worked out to stave off allegations that the portrayal of the protagonists in his novels was rather weak. Jeffrey Meyers writes: "...his creation of characters

was always rather weak, and the flat symbolic animals did not have to be portrayed in depth” (131).

Thirdly, Orwell could convey a moral, like all fables do, through the book. The message is redolent of Lord Acton’s famous comment on the true nature of political power: “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are always bad men” (Cohen and Cohen 1). The same message can also be traced in Orwell’s comments in his essay on James Burnham: “History consists of a series of swindles, in which the masses are lured into revolt by the promise of Utopia, and then, when they have done their job, enslaved over again by new masters” (177). When the animals drive the human beings away from Manor Farm, they are hopeful about the better days awaiting them. Theirs is a hope built on egalitarian principles that their produce would be shared out equally. Nevertheless, little by little, the intellectually superior animals start behaving like their erstwhile master Mr. Jones. Here, the powerful few suppress the powerless masses and this is diametrically opposite to the animals’ initial set of beliefs. The author here wants to communicate the message that power is bound to get corrupt once it is concentrated in the hands of a few. He also wants the reader to be alive to the ills of a totalitarian state. Although not as acrid a criticism of totalitarianism as it is in his *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Animal Farm* can be considered a warning against it.

The author’s personal association with animals also played a part in choosing the genre. He reminisced: “Most of the good memories of my childhood...are in some way connected with animals” (345). He had lived on a farm in Wallington, Herfordshire in the eastern part of England for some time and his experience there comes in handy as far as writing the book went. He even had a goat named Muriel—an animal character in the book. During his stay on the farm and also before and after it, he came to dislike pigs; he especially had a pig that horrified him. He wrote about the pig: “I have tried the experiment of keeping a pig... he is so destructive and greedy...They (pigs) really are disgusting brutes....” (458). This antipathy to pigs is quite evident in the general portrayal of pigs in *Animal Farm*—especially Napoleon and Squealer. Napoleon is these ‘destructive’ and ‘greedy’ attributes incarnate. Snowball’s banishment, appropriation of the idea of the Windmill and assuming the presidency of Animal Farm are just a few examples of his avaricious nature. Squealer’s cunning is manifested in the way he explains away to the general animals every commandment’s violation by the pigs. In order to make sure that the animals are totally tractable, he warns against Jones’s return if the pigs are not in control.

Orwell chose satire primarily in order that he could voice his disapprobation of the Stalinist Era in Russia and the gradual degeneration of basic communist doctrines. First, by relegating the humans to animals, Orwell kick-started his satirical onslaught. Almost every single detail in the novella has its historical parallel that enhances its satirical offensive. From Old Major’s speech, the Battle of the Cowshed to the pigs’ meeting with their human neighbours at the end of the novella—everything has been ‘diminished’ or made to seem ‘ridiculous’. The codifying of Old Major’s teachings by Snowball into the Seven Commandments and their ultimate purposeful distortion one after another hammer the ills home of the Soviet Regime under Stalin. For example, when the last commandment “All animals are equal” (15)

gets changed into “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” (90), the extent of the corruption and despotism in Russia under Stalin becomes obvious. Napoleon’s or Stalin’s devious machinations are satirized.

Religion too has been put under the microscope in *Animal Farm*. When Old Major’s teachings are put into the form of the Seven Commandments, one is immediately reminded of Moses’ assumption of the Ten Commandments from Yahweh on Mount Sinai. The very comparison between these two sets of commandments is an abomination of the Biblical Decalogue and it also undermines its solemn nature. By bringing down the Biblical number of commandments from ten to seven, the author diminishes the value of religious imperatives. Also, when heaven is compared to Sugarcandy Mountain, Orwell ridicules the carrot-and-stick-approach of religion which promises eternal beatification for the gullible masses. Orwell also thinks that because of the innate nature of religion, autocrats and totalitarian rulers will always use to serve their ends and that is why Moses makes his entry to Animal Farm again and is rehabilitated by Napoleon; notwithstanding his anti-religious stance, Napoleon lets Moses live on the farm in opulence.

Orwell also interspersed his disapproval of Marxism in this satire. By comparing Marxism to Animalism, Orwell denigrated it. He differs with Marxist views on some points in the book although it is not an attack on Marxism as such. On the issues of religion and the means to achieve revolutionary goals he criticized Marx. Of all the animals, only Moses sleeps through old Major’s speech. He represents Christianity or the clergy in the book. He does no work, sits idly on a pole and tells stories of a mysterious Sugarcandy Mountain where every animal goes after their death. After Old Major’s death while the animals strive to spread Animalism only he is too stubborn to pay any attention. When the Revolution takes place he vanishes into thin air. He returns later only to be used in the same way by Napoleon as he was by Mr. Jones. Even though he is useless when spoken in terms of practicality, the general public fall for his assertion of life after death. The point Orwell wants to make here is that the general people would always be in awe of the unknown and the mysterious: God. Marx had predicted that after the communist revolution religion would fade away from people’s minds. But here Orwell was of the opinion that some people would always have implicit faith in religion.

The second issue that Orwell satirises Marxism as well as Trotskyism is the way Marx and Trotsky thought the Revolution could be realized. After the Battle of the Cowshed, the hard-working Boxer, when he thinks he has killed a human by accident, says in dejection: “I have no wish to take life, not even human life” (28), Snowball galvanizes Boxer by saying: “No sentimentality, comrade... War is war. The only good human being is a dead one” (28). Orwell criticises the militant, hard-line attitude of classical Marxism and Trotskyism to bring about the Revolution by any means necessary. The goodness and sympathetic strain of Boxer’s character gets choked here by Snowball’s flagrantly materialistic ethos. Snowball exhorts Boxer to shun emotion in all its manifestations and to replace it with callous apathy. “The only good human being is a dead one” here bears special significance since, according to Orwell, it underlines Marxism’s hard-nosed and unfeeling nature. This stance on the author’s part brought him much criticism from the Marxist quarters. Marxist critic

Raymond Williams called Orwell: “a reactionary and a revisionist who made an unacceptable accommodation to capitalism” (69). After the publication of the book Orwell was described by leftists as having run “shrieking into the arms of the capitalist publishers” (Simms 294).

The author also employs the satirical device to infuse some comically mordant effects into the book. These comic effects are mainly of the satirical type-- they amuse but at the same time they cut deep. They “deride” the events in the book. As M.H. Abrams says: “It (satire) differs from the comic in that comedy evokes laughter as an end in itself, while satire “derides”; that is, it uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt that exists outside the work itself” (187). In the book, Snowball “formed the Egg Production Committee for the hens, the Clean Tails League for the Cows, the Wild Comrades Re-Education Committee...” (23). These “committees” clearly satirize or poke fun at the activities Trotsky busied himself with after the Bolshevik Revolution. When a sheep confesses to having urinated in the drinking pool egged on by Snowball and was later butchered along with the other animals, we find this urinating hilarious but the massacre heart-rending. Actually, this confession-massacre satirically alludes to the mass executions called the Great Purges which killed at least three million people in the Stalinist era. Here is one example of one such Purge: “During the 1937-38 purges 8 million party workers were arrested and sent to Gulag labour camps of Tundra and Taiga. Of these unfortunate millions, one million were butchered outright and several millions died in labour camps” (Mital 97). “By 1938 ... about 7 million Purge victims were in the labour/death camps, on top of the hundreds of thousands who had been slaughtered outright. In the worst camps, such as those of the Kolyma gold-mining region in the Arctic, the survival rate was just 2 or 3 percent” (Jones).

The use of allegory gave an impetus to Orwell’s treatment of the October Revolution. Although there had been a clear division between the capitalist West and the communist Soviet Union, during the Second World War the Allied Forces included Russia and the Russians played a crucial part in defeating Hitler. Newsinger says: “When Orwell wrote the book, cooperation between Russia and the West was still the order of the day...” (*Animal Farm Review*). At a time like this it was only natural for Orwell to disguise his tale in the form of an allegory. He could express the happenings not literally, but metaphorically. By drawing exact parallels between actual events and allegorical ones in the book, he could satirize them without attacking them too openly.

Orwell employed allegory for other reasons too. In the allegory itself, he interspersed other little allegories which underlined like Mr. Jones’ feeding Moses with bread soaked in beer. This soaking of bread in beer is an allegory for the workers’ flesh soaked in their blood on which the religious establishment thrives. The Catholic ritual of baptism is brilliantly made use of here. The genre also let him use symbols copiously. Every character in the book or inanimate object was symbolized. For instance, the Farm stands for the Soviet Union, Mr. Jones symbolizes Tsar Nicolas II, Old Major represents Karl Marx, Snowball, Trotsky, Napoleon, Stalin, etc. Symbols gave him a chance to reinforce the significance of each character e.g. the character of Napoleon, though representing Stalin, goes

beyond his personal attributes. Almost all moves on Napoleon's part in the novella may not have taken place in the actual case of Stalin but, once we are convinced the former symbolizes the latter, the latter's negative lineaments are augmented which adds to the satirical effect of the character.

Allegory would also let Orwell write his most impersonal book ever. Flory in *Burmese Days*, Comstock in *Aspidistra Flying* and Bowling in *Coming Up for Air* represent the Orwellian hero who is largely modelled on Orwell himself. This book is the only one where there is no evident Orwellian protagonist with his sense of disorientation, deep distrust in capitalistic values and foreboding for the forthcoming totalitarian spectre. Napoleon or Squealer, although symbolizes humans, can hardly be expected to indulge in ontological dilemmas. They are busy with keeping a materialistic existence- not opposing or criticizing it. As such neither can represent the author's biographical elements. The author is rather an observer of collective affairs than a subjective partaker of the storyline. Raymond Williams says: "*Animal Farm* is unique in Orwell's writing in the absence of an Orwell figure. It is in this sense a more complete projection of his way of seeing the world than anything else he wrote" (69).

Orwell named his book *Animal Farm: A Fairy Story* when it first came out in 1945. Even though he dropped the phrase "A Fairy Story" from the title of the book, the author's inclusion of the genre 'fairy story' bears significance: in the guise of a children's book, he presented a grave denunciation of the distortion of the egalitarian principles of communism in Russia and also anywhere in the world for that matter in the broader sense. Orwell knew all too well that if he was to write a book with talking animals as the characters in it, the best way to call it would be a fairy tale. Structurally, the novella conforms to the criteria of a typical fairy tale. When analysed with Russian formalist critic Vladimir Propp's thirty-one generic functions, the plot of *Animal Farm* conforms to most of them. For example, "trickery" appears when the pigs feed the other animals with concocted stories and arrant lies; "villainy" is evident, on the one hand, in Napoleon and Squealer, and on the other, in the humans' characters; 'struggle' evinces itself in the animals' collective efforts to build the windmill and to work hard to produce a good harvest in the face of immense adversities; 'victory' comes to the animals in the form of their winning the Battle of the ironic twist when the pigs make the other animals their slaves by taking on the humans' place; 'transfiguration' occurs when the other animals, at the end of the book, watch in consternation the pigs' transmutation from animals into humans. Other Proppian functions like 'punishment', 'violation' etc. are also present in the plot of *Animal Farm* (Barry 226).

The author employed the literary form of novella for some simple reasons. First, the short size of the book would ensure that the reader did not get bored of its size and it would also make it possible for the reader to finish reading it within a short time. Secondly, in the post-Second-World-War Europe shortage of printing paper must have been under the author's consideration when he was thinking of the slimness of the book. Because of paper-shortage the book could only be published in a limited number of copies. "Shortage of paper after the World War II restricted the number of copies of *Animal Farm* printed in Britain" (Davison i). Thirdly, the

saleability of the book must have been a concern to the author as well. The novel—less than one hundred-page-long could sell at a cheap price at a time when Europe was reeling under the ravages of the War and buying a book was a luxury. In other words, the genre novella made sure the size of the book was slim and which in turn kept the price low.

Orwell was careful in blending all these genres into a fable-satire-allegory-novella-fairytale and the outcome was a success— both critically and financially. George Woodcock writes: “(Orwell) produced a book so clear in intent and writing that the critic is usually rather nonplussed as to what he should say about it; all is so magnificently there” (192). However, with rave reviews also came searing comments by some critics. A.C. Ward says: “*Animal Farm* received unmeasured praise, but as satire it is naïve and laboured. Its immediate fame may indeed be said to have hung upon one phrase— easily remembered, and doomed to end as a cliché too easily quotable— “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” (85).

The success of the book is also evident in its universality. It may have laid out its plot using the Russian Revolution as its background, but it symbolizes any revolution anywhere, any time in human history. This book becomes relevant whenever or wherever the majority misuse power in order to deceive the helpless minority. David Daiches says: “He was of course thinking of Russia under Stalin but he was also making a more universally applicable point concerning revolutions, the people who make them and the people who take control once they are made” (211). The book thus cannot be attributed to one human struggle only at any given time; it transcends geographical as well as temporal boundaries and, hence, has become universal and timeless.

By amalgamating the five forms, Orwell presented to the world his literary *tour de force*. Beast fable became necessary to him because he wanted to convey a moral; allegory gave him a chance to create a book without having to expose the actual facts; fairy tale provided him with ample opportunities to disguise the serious objective of the book; satire let him voice his reservations about the injustices perpetrated by Stalin in Russia and the form novella gave him a chance to write the book within a short span of time and space. The book’s clear and easy language does not get in the way of conveying its grave message, the symbolism underlines the allegorical form, the talking animals seem totally convincing in the fable and fairy story forms, the slimness of the book ensures a quick reading and the satirical style is in line with the author’s motive. The literary forms, sewn together with flair, enhance the readability of the book.

Works Cited

- Abrams, A.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Bangalore: Prism, 1993.
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002.
- Cohen, J.M., and M.J. Cohen. eds. *The Penguin Dictionary of Quotations*. London: Penguin, 1960.
- Daiches, David. *A Critical History of English Literature*. Vol. 4. London: Martin & Warburg Ltd, 1960.
- Davison, Peter. "Foreword". *Animal Farm* by George Orwell. London: Penguin, 1989.
- Jones, Adam. *Case Study: Incarceration and the Death Penalty*. Gendecide Watch (1999-2002). 6 Nov 2007
<http://www.gendecide.org/case_imprisonment.html>.
- Meyers, Jeffrey. *A Reader's Guide to George Orwell*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1975.
- Mital, Nemisharan. *World-Famous Crazy Despots*. Delhi: Pustak Mahal, 1991.
- Newsinger, John. "Animal Farm (review)". *Europe-Asia Studies*, (Nov 1996). 8 Nov 2007
<<http://netcharles.com/orwell/ctc/docs/afarmrev.htm>>
- Orwell, George. "James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution." *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*. Vol. 4. Ed. Orwell, Sonia, and Ian Angus. London: Penguin, 1968.
- Simms, Valerie J. "A Reconsideration of Orwell's 1984: The Moral Implications of Despair". *Ethics*. Vol. 84, No. 3, 1974.
- Ward, A.C. *Twentieth Century English Literature*. London: The English Library, 1964.
- Williams, Raymond. *Orwell*. London: Fontana, 1974.
- Woodcock, George. *The Crystal Spirit: A Study of George Orwell*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1966.

Animal Farm Summary. On the Manor Farm, a venerable boar named Old Major gathers the animals for a meeting and inspires them to revolt. Although he dies, two pigs, Napoleon and Snowball, vow to continue his work, and lead the others in driving off the unfit, drunken farmer. The pigs of the farm begin to establish a new government where animals have rights. The animals begin to read and write. They use the commandments to educate all the young. Food is plentiful, and the farm runs smoothly. However, when the pigs elevate themselves to positions of leadership, a struggle for power begins between the two successors to Old Major. Napoleon wins by having his dogs chase Snowball off the farm. Animal Farm was written by George Orwell in 1944 to criticize the Soviet Union leaders and their administration represented by animal characters. The objective of this study was to find out the resemblances between the character of Soviet Union leaders at the time the novel was written and those depicted in the novel. In analysing the objective of this study, content analysis was used. The data are the dialogues and other information in the novel concerning the metaphors of characters between the Soviet Union leaders of the 20th century and those in Animal Farm.