

# Animal Symbolism and Political Dissidence: A Comparative Study of Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach* and George Orwell's *Animal Farm*

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## Abstract:

This research paper attempts to make a comparative study between Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach* and George Orwell's *Animal Farm* to examine how animal imagery is used in satirical prose, with special emphasis on political satire. It would also try to study how the literary technique named animal imagery has a significant impact on contemporary readers to interpret political meanings and contexts. The research paper would also try to shed light on the concept of dehumanization, and to delineate how humans are equated to particular animalistic traits, to highlight the corruption and filth entrenched in them. The paper would also try to interrogate how both the texts, can be read as political allegories on The Brexit and on Russian Revolution respectively. In this context, the paper would also try to depict how language becomes a political tool in the hands of the government to propagate their ideology. Through the theoretical framework of Marxism, the paper would study how various state apparatuses have been implemented to ideologically condition its subjects and thus repress them. The paper shall also try to analyze how the powerholders by employing radical policies such as 'Reversalism' in *The Cockroach* and 'Revolution' in *Animal Farm*, conceivably can go to any length to hold on to power. The research paper is governed by the hypothesis that even though both the novels have been placed in different historical contexts yet there is an explicit, if not implicit, critique of the government and the workings of law in it.

**Keywords:** totalitarianism, ideology, political satire, dehumanization, state apparatus

## Introduction:

Humans are often regarded rational beings, superior to other species on planet Earth. Other beings of nature in comparison to human beings are mostly seen as subservient to man. It is often assumed that the basic qualities which make man superior to other animals are his powers to become learned, cultured, and well-mannered because of him being rational. It is believed that man possesses certain 'moral values' which leads humanity towards a progressive and civilized society. However, animals do not seem to have this 'rationality' or a rationalistic tendency. A lack of 'moral code' can be observed within animals when it is seen that they kill for food and for territorial domination. Considering this basic difference, any

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human being might come to the conclusion that there is no relation between man and animals. Whereas, human beings have within them, certain animalistic instincts (impulsive behaviors, primitive reflexes) when it comes to their identity and habitat and certain political ambitions as well. These acts are performed both by men and by animals, but in the case of men, sometimes it happens out of sheer selfishness or a tendency to hold on to power and such. One can say that, man is a tamed 'wild' animal, and his 'wildness' is kept under control by strict moral and social codes.

Figurative language in a work of art implies language which is rich in images and symbols. Earl J. Wilcox implies "imagery, in its basic sense, is a product of literary language. Simply defined, imagery is the impression or impressions, we receive when one or more of our senses are stimulated by language" (Wilcox 186). A single image when used repeatedly by the writer might have an implication of the subject matter that the author wants his readers to focus on.

Animal imagery is an artistic technique which uses seeable representation of animals to present the inert characteristics of characters in a work of art. This technique is used mostly to describe or draw parallels between human beings and animals having certain animalistic qualities. In literature, it can be used as a technique to showcase the associations of humans and animals. When it comes to various cultures and social practices, different animals carry different meanings/interpretations when it comes to their names and traits. The example of the bird owl, when observed carefully it is found that the Owl is seen in a positive light in the West symbolizing knowledge, however in the eastern part of the world it is seen as a bad omen.

Orwell's novel *Animal Farm* and Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach* are two such texts which are entirely based upon the literary technique of animal imagery. Both Orwell and McEwan make use of animal imageries to highlight the contemporary political scenario. Orwell's text can be considered as a cautionary text which alerts the readers as to what might happen if power falls in the wrong hands. McEwan, on the other hand, concentrates on the prevailing political scenario of Britain, which has officially declared its exit from the European Union. Both the writers are concerned with the concentration of power and its abuse. Orwell's text becomes a political allegory which satirizes the political condition of Russia from 1917 to 1945 when the Bolshevik party ruled over U.S.S.R., and McEwan's *The Cockroach* gives an account of how the British parliament is trying to isolate Britain from the European Union, and how the parliament is filled up with 'cockroaches' who desire nothing else but the downfall of Britain.

### **Research Objectives:**

The present study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- i. To focus on the implementation of animal imagery as a satirical and political device in both the novels *Animal Farm* and *The Cockroach*.
- ii. To study how both the texts are symbolic political allegories of the Russian Revolution and Brexit respectively.
- iii. To bring into focus the idea of dehumanization in both the novels through the symbolic association of political figures with animals.

- iv. To examine language and its role as an ideological tool used to manipulate and condition the populace.
- v. To understand both the texts from a Marxist point of view, specifically with regards to class struggle and state apparatus.
- vi. To analyze how both the texts can be viewed as criticisms of authoritarianism and the abuse of political power despite belonging to different historical contexts.

### **Research Methodology:**

The research study undertaken here shall follow a qualitative, interpretative, and comparative methodology with regards to close textual analysis. It examines George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach* through a shared framework to analyse how animal imagery is used as an instrument for political satire and dissentience across distinct historical contexts.

The research will follow a comparative methodology by placing the texts within their socio-political backgrounds, but at the same time focus will be maintained on their literary construction rather than their historical reconstruction. The primary sources are the two novellas which have been purposefully chosen due to their heavy reliance on the use of animal symbolism as an allegorical instrument. The secondary sources will comprise of texts including works on Marxism, the politics of language, which will inform the interpretive lens.

The study is influenced theoretically by Marxist literary criticism, with special focus on class struggle, ideology, and state apparatus. These concepts have been focused on heavily in this paper as they shed light on how ideology conditions all the subjects, how the powerful institutions are represented, and how language has been transformed into a political tool which is heavily used for manipulation rather than communication within the texts.

The research also employs close reading to analyze the concepts of imagery, symbolism, and such. A special focus is given on the idea of dehumanization, where animal imagery in both the texts is used as a metaphor to expose the corruption, filth, autocratic nature of the leaders, and finally doing away with morality and integrity. The study will remain purely analytical, and focus will be made exclusively on the ideological as well as literary magnitudes of the texts.

### **Review of Literature:**

Literary scholarship on George Orwell's *Animal Farm* has understood the novella as a political allegory of the Russian Revolution and also the emerging rise of Stalinism. Earlier, critics mostly focused on the anti-totalitarian stance of the novella. The parallels between Napoleon and Stalin, Trotsky and Snowball, and the corruption of the ideals of the Seven Commandments have been studied extensively.

Raymond Williams, in *Orwell* argues Orwell's writings to be shaped by the suspicion of centralized authority and ideological absolutism. Similarly, Christopher Hitchens, in *Why Orwell Matters* has also analyzed the manipulation of truth using rhetorical language in *Animal Farm* in relation to Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language", where it can

be observed that there is a close connection between manipulation of language and political corruption.

Traditional Marxism has studied *Animal Farm* as an anti-communist novella, however later critics have identified that Orwell's intended target wasn't Communism but the distortion of socialist principles by dictatorial leadership. The novella has also been examined from the Althusserian frameworks, where the role of ideology and the state apparatuses have been identified.

However, it is observed that much of the existing literary scholarship focuses primarily on the historicity, allegorical representation, and totalitarian aspects of the novella. Comparatively, less focus is paid to the function of animal imagery as a structural metaphor for dehumanization, especially when it comes in relation to contemporary literary satirical texts.

Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach* has been largely vocal within the context of Brexit literature. Literary critics have approached the novella based on the model of Swiftian satire, particularly in relation to Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, that reverses Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, where the insect is transformed into a political leader which is the opposite of Kafka's novella. Many critics have identified the novella as a parody of populist economics through concepts such as "reversalism," interpreting it as a parody of economic policies of the country.

Yet, the literary scholarship engagement with *The Cockroach* is very limited because of it being a very recent publication. Most noticeably, the existing scholarship rarely examines the novella through the theoretical framework of Marxism, and it doesn't even focus on the idea of dehumanization through the literary technique of animal symbolism beyond the surface level satire.

Animal symbolism has had a long-standing presence throughout literary traditions from the ancient times to modern dystopian fictions. Literary scholarship argues that animal imagery is often used as a device or technique to expose the primitive instincts which are kept hidden under supposedly civilized societies. However, when it comes to examining animal imagery across different historical contexts- between mid-twentieth century totalitarian critique and twenty first century democratic populism- the literary scholarship remains scarce.

While there is substantial scholarship on *Animal Farm* and continuous growth of commentary on *The Cockroach*, there is limited research that places both the texts within the same framework of animal symbolism and political dissidence. The literary scholarship also remains scarce when it comes to analyzing both the texts through a Marxist understanding of ideology and ideological state apparatuses. Although various critics identify with *Animal Farm's* symbolism and *The Cockroach's* metaphorical significance, none of the literary scholarship has focused on the use of animal imagery in both the texts by the writers, and how the idea of dehumanization is explicitly shown in both the texts.

### **Discussion:**

The story of *Animal Farm*, which at first seems to be a simple story about animals, turns out to be a political allegory where the literary technique of animal imagery is used to portray the

underlying corruption, hypocrisy, deception, political terror of the upper ruling classes in two forms, namely– human or animal. Symbolism, satire, irony, are presented within an allegorical framework, thus making allegory the most important imagery means to present animals as symbols of historical figures (Napoleon as Lenin and Stalin, Snowball as Trotsky); and to pass to the readers the general message that all violent revolutions which initially succeed in overthrowing of totalitarian regimes, in time deteriorate into repressive regimes themselves. These repressive regimes, in turn, use linguistic manipulation as a means of propagating their false ideologies.

Orwell's novel *Animal Farm* beginning shows the character of Old Major, "the prize Middle White boar" (Orwell 5), who has assembled a meeting of all the farm animals to discuss a dream of his which he's had very recently. He narrates his dream to the crowd full of animals listening eagerly to him, and he says that "Man is the only creature that consumes without producing. He does not give milk, he does not lay eggs, he is too weak to pull the plough, he cannot run fast enough to catch rabbits. Yet he is the lord of all animals" (Orwell 7). Then Old Major manipulates the animals to realize that the miseries present in their lives are a result of the tyranny of human beings. If they are somehow able to do away with man, finally the fruits of their labor will belong to them only. He encourages them to "work night and day, body and soul, for the overthrow of human race! That is my message to you, comrades: Rebellion!" (Orwell 8)

Through this speech of Old Major, undertones of communism can be found in a simplified or better yet, in a subtle manner. When we talk about the basic ideals of communism, were penned by Marx and Engels in their seminal work *The Communist Manifesto*. Just like Old Major's declaration, Marx suggested that, if the proletariat were able to take hold of the power which is in the hands of the petty bourgeoisie, then a new world order can be established where the proletariat would live a life full of dignity and peace as well as financial stability. It can be seen that; the character of Old Major is somewhat inspired from Marx and his ideals and how he is able to identify the loopholes present in the capitalist society. However, he is not able to provide any solid solution for the existing problem, and simply goes on criticizing it.

The animals of *Animal Farm* want revolution, freedom from tyranny, and are making efforts to capture the control of Manor Farm from Mr. Jones. Although preparations for the overtaking were being done sincerely by the various groups of animals, they didn't know how and when the capturing was going to happen. The meticulous speech given by Old Major provided a new outlook on life for the 'intelligent' animals living on the farm, i.e. the pigs. The animals, especially the pigs, believed "that it was their duty to prepare for it" (Orwell 12). Soon the readers learn that "the rebellion was achieved much earlier than anyone had expected" (Orwell 14). The rebellion was successful when all the animals together were able to oust Mr. Jones (owner of the farm) off of the farm. The two intelligent pigs Napoleon and Snowball were the leaders behind the rebellion, soon assumed full control over the farm and promised the animals that from now onwards the farm will be run based on the Seven Commandments (Seven Laws of Noah which later on symbolized the corruption of ideals in the novel), most importantly- "All animals are equal" (Orwell 17). Here, Orwell uses the

character of Mr. Jones and draws parallels with Nicholas II, the last Tsar of Russia, whose mismanagements, failures and wartime mismanagement heavily added to the downfall and collapse of monarchy. Because of this, various blockages such as shortages of food and supplies, a famine started to creep across Russia. This led to the Russian Revolution of 1917 which is allegorically represented with the downfall of Mr. Jones.

Thus, begins the taking over of the farm by various animals who assume a variety of roles, most importantly we realize that Napoleon resembles the infamous Stalin, and Snowball is a proper image of Leon Trotsky. Boxer, the horse, is the perfect example of the proletariat, who has his personal slogan- “I will work harder” which he keeps on repeating throughout the novel (Orwell 20). Various committees are set up, and the pigs took the responsibility of spreading literacy across the farm populace. This draws a similarity with the earliest Bolshevik efforts who attempted to organize and administer the populace in a pretty similar fashion. The Russian Civil War also gets depicted in *Animal Farm*, in the form of The Battle of Cowshed, which has some noticeable things as well. The highlights of the battle give us an idea regarding the resemblance of the events in the novel with the events of the Russian Civil War. Instances such as, Snowball emerging as the undisputed military hero; Mollie the horse, running away from the battle scared for its life, resembles the cowardly and selfish Russian upper middle-class; Boxer who is the perfect example of the proletariat, who is ready to follow all the orders of the authority like a loyal soldier, showcases himself as the epitome of military force. His bravery is showcased when the narrator says, “... the most terrifying spectacle of all was Boxer, rearing up on his hind legs and striking out with his great iron-shod hoofs like a stallion” (Orwell 27). The character of Boxer is the closest resemblance to the proletariat, who is always loyal and hardworking, and never complains for once, working himself tirelessly all the time. However, the reward of all the loyalty and hard work is him getting sold off and slaughtered and ultimately turned into glue; meanwhile the leaders of the farm i.e. the pigs live their lavish lifestyle getting drunk on barrels of whiskey. The betraying of Boxer might be seen as a brief ‘allegory within an allegory’ for the concept of Stalinism as a whole. The animal imagery used by Orwell is all too liberal. When the van comes forward to take away Boxer who is trapped inside, one cannot help but revisit all the memories and tortures faced by so many innocent people who were once the diehard supporters of Stalin and his vision of a greater Russia. These innocent individuals were kidnapped just the way Boxer is shown in the novel, and were made to disappear or sent to the Gulag concentration camps.

The infamous conflict between Trotsky and Stalin which happened to be in the early 1920s, is represented in the novel by the windmill argument between Snowball and Napoleon. Napoleon doesn't prefer the idea, and in general, “the whole farm was deeply divided on the subject of the windmill” (Orwell 32). The windmill argument, in many ways, can be seen as the perfect symbolic representation for the decision regarding the expansion of communism into world politics. Napoleon's consolidation of power for himself, and him exiling Snowball from the farm resonates Stalin exiling Trotsky from Russia. Napoleon's nine dogs in the novel symbolize the secret police which worked under Stalin in Russia. The NKVD, and Squealer going around putting the right spin on everything that Napoleon is doing, represents the Soviet Press which was controlled by Stalin throughout his rule. The hens' refusal to lay

eggs and Stalin's command to kill them all, draws a nightmarish parallel to the Great Purge, (between 1936 and 1938) during which mass executions and political repression became normalized under the Stalinist regime. There is "a pile of corpses lying before Napoleon's feet and the air was heavy with the smell of blood, which had been unknown there since the expulsion of Jones" (Orwell 36).

The use and abuse of language in a political manner is an indispensable part of Orwell's imagery. The abuse i.e. language being manipulated by the powerholders and it being used as an instrument of power and control is again one of Orwell's central concerns in the text. There is a close association between insincere, inaccurate, manipulative language and oppressive ideology. When a language is politically manipulated, it is used to propagate lies and make them sound true and acts such as murder are justified, and is intended to hide the truth rather than to express it. Orwell's imagery is particularly active when he explores the ways in which those in power often use rhetoric and language to twist the truth, aiming to gain political and economic control.

The original commandments, set up after the animals' victory and "written on the tarred wall in great white letters that could be read thirty yards away" (Orwell 17), were supposed to keep order within the Animal Farm and prevent animals from following the evil human habits. For a while the rules are unviolated, but as the story progresses, an ironic twist occurs in the original purpose of the Seven Commandments; each rule falls off the wall twisted and mangled, and is secretly replaced with revised maxims. Such conversion is symbolic of the mass media under a smug dictatorship benefitting the privileged few. The first two commandments change into – "Four legs good: two legs better" (Orwell 78). Commandment 4 is changed into – "No animal shall sleep in a bed with sheets" (Orwell 42); Commandment 5 – "No animal shall drink alcohol *to excess*" (Orwell 64); Commandment 6 – "No animal shall kill any other animal *without cause*" (Orwell 54); Commandment 7 – "ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS" (Orwell 78). This is the ultimate example of the pigs' systematic abuse of logic and language, a manipulative idiom meaning that there can be different degrees of equality, therefore directly alluding to the pretentious nature of governments that pretend to adhere to the principles such as equality for all citizens, however in reality, equality is an expensive experience only made available to a small group. Towards the final part of the novel, the ideal of equality underwent an outrageous abuse serving only the interests of a bunch of corrupt rulers.

Animal imagery plays a crucial role in Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach*, where the writer uses the figurative image of a cockroach which alludes to the members of the British Parliament. *The Cockroach* is a rough satire in which an insect, i.e. a cockroach, transforms into a Prime Minister. This short and sharp satire on Brexit is something which knows that it cannot stop it (Brexit) from happening, or change the mind of any reader which supports it. The classical idea that satire can reform the polity has almost lost its appeal in the present context as because the present political scenario is dominated by political shamelessness. This is an era where ministers create their own grotesque self-parodies and flaunt them before their adoring fans. *The Cockroach* doesn't aim in any way to persuade nor to critique. Its intention is to cater to that section of the public which believes that the Brexit project is deranged.

Jim Sams, the central character of the novella, represents the eponymous ‘cockroach’ who has taken over the body of the Prime Minister of Britain (Boris Johnson); “That morning, Jim Sams, clever but by no means profound, woke from uneasy dreams to find himself transformed into a gigantic creature” (McEwan 11). McEwan has a very unique motive when he uses the image of a cockroach. Usually, the cockroach is often associated with filth and dirt, and that is the case with the British Parliament in the present context. The image of the cockroach has a symbolic significance, as it describes how filth and dirt have entered the premises of the Parliament, and no matter what form of resistance comes against them (the Foreign Secretary Benedict St. John), these cockroaches won’t leave until their purpose is fulfilled. In a satirical prose, the purpose of the writer is to mock at and ridicule its target so that, out of shame the character rectifies its mistakes. But such isn’t the case with *The Cockroach* because it doesn’t aim to correct or transform its target. The narrator knows that no matter what happens or how much he tries, Britain’s political scenario will remain the same. In this instance, *The Cockroach* is much closer to Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* rather than Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*. At the same time, we can also claim/assert the fact that, with the use of animal imagery, the human figure in the text is sort of dehumanized. By equating politicians with ‘cockroaches’, perhaps the writer wants to highlight the corruption and filth entrenched within them.

McEwan’s *The Cockroach* can be studied as a political allegory on The Brexit; Britain’s decision to sideline itself from the European Union. Brexit refers to ‘British-exit’. The European Union comprising of twenty-eight countries is an economic as well as a political union. It introduced the concept of free trade among all the member countries as one of its premiere features, meaning goods can now move between these member countries without any restrictions or charges. It also allows free movement of people to live and work in whichever country they choose. As of right now, Britain has stopped being a member of this Union (at 23:00 GMT on 31 January 2020). In the novella, Jim Sams and his fellow cockroaches’ primary task is to institute Reversalism – an economic policy, voted for in a referendum; which reverses the flow of money so that employees pay employers, cashiers pay customers. Trade will be functioned by exporters giving Britain money to take their goods; Britain will in turn pay other countries to import its products and services. “Turn the Money Around” (McEwan 44) became the campaign slogan for Reversalism. Certain economists believed that Reversalism will result in the isolation of Britain from the rest of the world in terms of its trade relations; it will result in a terrible deterioration of the British economy. The Parliament, however, is dominated by Jim Sams’ party members who can go to any length to institute the policy. Their main intention is to witness Britain’s destruction, and its economic downfall. The opposition being less in number, are helpless in this regard, and no matter how much they try to oppose Reversalism, they can’t do a thing about it. These are the cockroaches who, after wielding power, will go to any length to implement their policies. The State acts as a repressive agent whose sole agenda is to dominate its people and implement policies which will result in the deterioration of the country’s economic growth.

Language, in the text, becomes a political tool in the hands of the government to propagate their ideology. It is only through the sheer abuse of language that policies such as Reversalism are instituted in the economy. Manipulative language also becomes a tool to

condemn innocent individuals as guilty. Benedict St. John, the Foreign Secretary, is framed by Jim Sams and Jane Fish in an alleged sexual assault on the latter. In order to eliminate his only opposition, Jim Sams forges a plan with Jane Fish, where he writes an article which “was 2,857 words long” (McEwan 98). “This was a tale of harassment, bullying, inappropriate touching that led by turns to verbal abuse” (McEwan 98), and it happened when St. John was Minister for work and pensions, Jane Fish was his parliamentary private secretary. The article was sent to *The Guardian* and it was published at the orders of the Prime Minister immediately. The letter created much controversy which ultimately led to Benedict St. John leaving the Parliament.

### **Conclusion:**

Although *Animal Farm* and *The Cockroach* comprise of different historical contexts, a safe assumption can be made that these texts are a critique of their respective governments which function as repressive agents rather than following a liberal mindset. Both the texts portray the abuses and atrocities perpetrated by the governments upon the common masses as well as their oppositions. Through the use of animal imagery, Orwell and McEwan have been successful in symbolically portraying the dominant political figures of their times, who were governed by their basic animal instincts. Both the texts depict the dynamic power relations existing within the respective governments and how because of the misuse of power, language has become a political manipulative tool to serve the purpose of the power holders.

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