

# Modernism in Imagination as in J.M.Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello

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**Abstract:** The aim of civilization has been in every culture to touch the acme of modernity. But when looked back from the height it has always been that there is still a greater to height climb. From time to time every inordinate literature has only treated this aspect of the lack of modernization. Modernisation seems is till only is existing in the imagination. For a true modern mind will never be unable to understand the other mind seems is the agenda that J.M.Coetzee has always has addressed in his works.

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Everything is linked to everything else and most importantly the human mind must be linked to the natural world... is the interpretation that one would get when one reads Wordsworth (1770-1850). Romanticism paved way for the intellectual movement which was characterized by heightened interest in nature and whose emphasis was on the individual's expression of emotion and imagination, departure from the attitudes and forms of classicism, and rebellion against established social rules and conventions were marked as modernism. On 3 January 1889, Nietzsche spotted a coach driver beating his horse, rushed to the horse hugged it tight, cried saying he could do nothing to help him. He immediately collapsed, was taken back to his apartment, but he had collapsed mentally..... In 2003 J.M.Coetzee in his Elizabeth Costello makes an analogy between murdered Jews and slaughtered cattle. Many find it beyond understanding. They think that Nobel laureates sometimes write beyond ordinary mind's grasp... they talk for animals that are stupid. The contemporary mind thinks Nietzsche's feeling for animals trivial and Coetzee's theme indecipherable yet we call ourselves modern.

Whether we should be proud of these differences or embarrassed by them is a debatable question. Are we really modern? Are we modern enough to know our weakness? Are we the modern human beings human enough? Do we know what exactly a modern thinking is? Is Taipei modern Toilet diner the themed restaurant in Taiwan really an epitome of modernity?! Is Coetzee completely incomprehensible?! If yes, then are not all the animals for whom raised marginalized? These are some of the seminal questions raised in my paper. Unknown to us, we have somehow acquired the standards of sagacity, ancientness and grandiloquence through the literatures that we read today. Is not even animals are marginalised? Are not children in this modern world excessively marginalised?

Perhaps only a few steps are we away from acquiring that complete civilized state attaining which has always been our aim. But the modernity which is drifting us into a complacency might be modernity that are not ours, or, to put it another way, that there are certain peculiarities about our modernity. It could be the case that what others think of as modern, we

have found unacceptable, whereas what we have cherished as valuable elements of our modernity, others do not consider to be modern at all. Whether we should be proud of these differences or embarrassed by them is a debatable question. Are we really modern? Are we modern enough to know our weakness? Are we the modern human beings human enough? Do we know what exactly a modern thinking is? Is Taipei modern Toilet diner the themed restaurant in Taiwan really an epitome of modernity?!

... When Albert Camus was a young boy in Algeria, his grandmother told him to bring her one of the hens from the cage in their backyard. He obeyed, then she cut off its head with a kitchen knife, catching its blood in a bowl so that the floor would not be dirtied. Coetzee says, 'The death cry of that hen imprinted itself on the boy's memory so hauntingly that in 1958 he wrote an impassioned attack on the guillotine. As a result, in part, of that polemic, capital punishment was abolished in France. Who is to say then, that the hen did not speak? They do speak but do we have the ears to understand it? Do all writers have heart to ink it? Is our consciousness expanded enough to cry for a limping dog? Or are we too just one of yet another pack of animals marking our territories and fighting for our own causes ...?'

The novel *Elizabeth Costello* begins with the common problem that every individual faces while moving from one place to the other, "There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which nowhere, to the far bank is, as yet. It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge. People solve such problems every day. They solve them and having solved them push on..." Is this in any way more different from that of the territory problems that animals face? Coetzee presents this problem of locomotion of animals and human animals from one place to the other almost similar. Yet Human animals do not consider it to be similar rather they make the animals life complex and further call it trivial in comparison.

Elizabeth Costello in the book is a writer, born in 1928, which makes her sixty-six years old, going on sixty-seven. She has written nine novels, two books of poems, a book on bird life, and a body of journalism. By birth she is Australian. She was born in Melbourne and still lives there, though she spent the years 1951 to 1963 abroad, in England and France.

In the spring of 1995 Elizabeth Costello travelled, or travels, to Williamstown, Pennsylvania, to Altona College, to receive the Stowe Award. The award is made biennially to a major world writer, selected by a jury of critics and writers. It consists of a purse of \$50,000, funded by a bequest from the Stowe estate, and a gold medal. It is one of the larger literary prizes in the United States.

On her visit to Pennsylvania Elizabeth Costello (Costello is her maiden name) is accompanied by her son John. John has a job teaching physics and astronomy at a college in Massachusetts...On her visit to this college she asks certain questions which both the reader and the critics find too above the ordinary and unnecessarily making fuss about something to create guilt in people; that is her concern towards animals. But in actuality she was talking about the consciousness in nonhuman animals. Two central Phenomenological questions are raised by her : Can we know which animals beside humans are conscious? Can we know what, if anything, the experiences of animals are like?

Many believe that the novel's import remains ambiguous; partly because of the way it mixes and transgresses generic conventions. *Elizabeth Costello* consists of eight chapters and a postscript. Two of them have been published previously as an independent work, which is

unusual. These were the Tanner Lectures, a series dedicated to the discussion of ethical and philosophical topics, which Coetzee gave at Princeton University in 1997–1998, under the title “The Lives of Animals.”

Instead of delivering conventional lectures, however, he read to his audience a work of fiction, about a distinguished Australian novelist called Elizabeth Costello who is invited to Appleton College, a fictitious institution in Massachusetts, to give the annual “Gates Lecture” and disconcerts her hosts, who expected her to choose a literary topic, by delivering a root-and-branch polemic against the treatment of animals, in zoos, scientific research, and above all in the production of food. This lecture, “The Philosophers and the Animals,” and a talk to the English Department, entitled “The Poets and the Animals,” are followed by debates with members of the faculty, informally over dinner, and formally in a seminar.

The whole sequence of events is seen mainly through the eyes of Elizabeth’s son, John, who happens to be a teacher of physics and astronomy at Appleton College but has previously concealed his relationship to his famous mother, and who is throughout her visit divided between filial loyalty and discomfort at the way her extreme opinions irritate his colleagues and his wife.

Many find it offensive when Costello draws an analogy between the industrial production of meat and the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis. “We are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end...,” she asserts. A senior member of the faculty, a poet called Abraham Stern, absents himself from the dinner in protest and writes a dignified note of dissent. “If Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. The inversion insults the memory of the dead. It also trades on the horrors of the camps in a cheap way.” This exactly is the gulf that as human beings we are suffering. We lack the ability to see the animal’s suffering as our suffering. The anthropocentric self – centeredness is so soaring such heights that human beings find that except him everything else is only secondary.

Elizabeth’s address is a kind elegy for, realism. She reminds her audience of Kafka’s “An Academic Address,” in which an ape who has been captured and civilized gives a brief account of his experiences to a learned audience. The story mimics her own situation (and also anticipates Coetzee’s use of a lecture as fictional discourse) but its meaning, Elizabeth says, is utterly obscure:

There used to be a time when we knew. We used to believe that when the text said, “On the table stood a glass of water,” there was indeed a table, and a glass of water on it, and we had only to look in the word-mirror of the text to see them. But all that has ended. The word-mirror is broken, irreparably it seems. About what is really going on in the lecture hall your guess is as good as mine. (EC 72)

Elizabeth’s audience is not much interested in realism or its obsolescence. John senses that they are disappointed by her address, which contains nothing about feminism or post-colonialism—the isms with which she is publicly associated—and he suspects her hosts are already hoping that the Stowe Award jury will come up with a livelier recipient next time.

To Elizabeth our oppression of animals—keeping them in captivity, submitting them to painful or denaturing experiments, and above all breeding them in order to kill them on an industrial scale—arises from an unwarranted privileging of man and the faculty of reason. It is because we believe animals do not have the power of reasoning and the self-consciousness that comes from it—the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*—that we claim the right to dispose of them in our own interests. She therefore attacks reason as “a vast tautology. Of course reason will validate reason as the first principle of the universe—what else should it do?” (EC 110) The ultimate value of existence is not reason but “fullness of being,” which animals enjoy in their natural state, and compared to which “Descartes’ key state...has...[the] empty feel...of a pea rattling round in a shell.” (EC 27)

Elizabeth cites Thomas Nagel’s celebrated paper “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” and denies his conclusion that the question is unanswerable. If we can imagine what it is like to be dead, if we can imagine what it is like to be a fictitious character, why should we not imagine what it is like to be a bat? The logic is shaky, but she has a very effective shot at imagining what it is like to be an ape subjected to a behaviourist experiment involving bananas placed out of reach:

The bananas are there to make one think.... One thinks: Why is he starving me? One thinks: What have I done? Why has he stopped liking me? One thinks: Why does he not want these crates anymore? But none of these is the right thought.... The right thought to think is: How does one use the crates to reach the bananas? (EC 45)

Elizabeth in the car on the way to the airport at the end of her visit says that sometimes she thinks she must be mad to believe that the people around her are all “participants in a crime of stupefying proportions.... Yet every day I see the evidences.... Corpses. Fragments of corpses that they have bought for money.” (EC 90) She turns a tearful face to him, pleading for reassurance. All he can do is stop the car, take her in his arms, and murmur, “There, there, it will soon be over.” (EC90)It is not clear whether he means this gruelling trip, or her life. .

Her address to the Faculty of Humanities has a familiar resemblance to Coetzee’s lectures: “I...have no message of comfort to bring to you.... The message I bring is that you lost your way long ago.”

The book is not lectures on animal rights, but on the ‘lives of animals’. One of Costello’s arguments is that philosophical reason has prevented us from entering the consciousness of animals. Once we decide that such access is limited, we tend to think that we are entitled to do what we want with such restricted life-forms. Costello mentions Thomas Nagel’s famous paper about the impossibility of thinking ourselves into the mind of a bat. At the same time she says that she has imagined what it means to be a corpse. ‘All of us have such moments, particularly as we grow older. The knowledge we have is not abstract – “all human beings are mortal, I am a human being, therefore I am mortal” – but embodied. For a moment we *are* that knowledge.’ If we can imagine ourselves as dead, why not as a bat? ‘To be a living bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being . . . To be full of being is to live as a body-soul. One name for the experience of full being is *joy*.’ Costello goes on to argue that this is nothing more than the exercise of human sympathy, which novelists of all people must have in abundance. (In the book’s first chapter, Elizabeth’s son defends her against a feminist critic, on the grounds that in different novels she has imagined herself into the being of a man and of a dog.)

Asked about her principles vis-à-vis killing animals, she replies: 'If principles are what you want to take away from this talk, I would have to respond, open your heart and listen to what your heart says.' In Johannesburg, she recalls the religious zeal with which she read Eliot and Lawrence in the early 1950s, and maintains that 'if the humanities want to survive, surely it is those energies and that craving for guidance that they must respond to: a craving that is, in the end, a quest for salvation.' She is aware of 'the overflow, the outflow of our human hearts'.

The entire novel is no idea, it is a justification for our claim to be a modern, it is the need of the hour, it is this reality that every seer of this earth has been trying to sow in the human hearts... to be human and love all living organism as one's own brother. Be it a frog or a snake, a dog or a god how could the human animal which never fails to claim itself as the most sensible of all creations kills and buys and thrives on it? And when a critic calls that it is a farfetched idea and not the feasible humanity then it reiterates on what the author has said, "I...have no message of comfort to bring to you.... The message I bring is that you lost your way long ago." !

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