



Animal Slaughter and Meat Culture in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Eating Animals*

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Abstract

Rapid advancement in science and technology and a shift in the dietary habits of the world population have increased the rate of animals slaughtered for meat. Animal slaughter and factory farming are practices that can lead to devastating environmental consequences throughout the globe. The history of 'meat culture' among a huge number of people can be traced back to the period of industrialization. Over the ages, meat has become an indispensable part of our diet. Jonathan Safran Foer, an American novelist and non-fiction writer, tries to address the issue of animal slaughter and meat culture in his book, *Eating Animals*. He also points to the ecological consequences of meat consumption, its adverse effects on humans, the selective nature of eating meat, the abuse of animals for meat etc. This paper focuses on how Foer has highlighted the issue of animal slaughter and carnism in his non-fiction, *Eating Animals*.

Keywords: Meat Culture, Factory Farming, Animal slaughter, Vegetarianism, Carnism

We are most often ignorant or prefer to be ignorant about the brutal origin of meat that we greedily consume. In his biographical non-fiction, *Eating Animals*, the American novelist, Jonathan Safran Foer voices his concern against the violent practices of factory farming as well as family farming. Foer employs an experimental style of writing in almost all of his novels and *Eating Animals* is his third such experimental book and his first non-fiction. Throughout the book, he talks in favor of vegetarianism and exposes the brutality in slaughter houses and adverse effects of eating meat. The book *Eating Animals*

highlights the vital role that human beings play in developing a sustainable model of dietary practice. Foer encourages people to follow a vegetarian diet and thereby put an end to the violence committed towards animals in the form of factory farming.

Foer begins by pointing out how our lives are closely bound to the food that we eat, how there are memories and emotions tied to food gatherings and special savories served at such gatherings. He brings in autobiographical elements by mentioning about his grandmother who Foer believes is the “greatest chef who ever lived” (2). He attaches the ideal of a happy and compact family life with the memories of delicious culinary items cooked by his grandmother. She fondly cooks food with so much love and serves it to her family. Foer writes about his grandmother’s culinary skills and stories tied to the food that she cooks, “Food, for her, is not food. It is terror, dignity, gratitude, vengeance, joyfulness, humiliation, religion, history, and of course, love” (3). Initial spark that led Foer into being a vegetarian was from his babysitter who, when asked about her dietary choice of being a vegetarian answered that she did not want to hurt animals:

She puts it just like that when I asked her why she wasn’t having any chicken with my older brother and me:

“I don’t want to hurt anything.”

“Hurt anything?” I asked

“You know that chick is chicken right.” (4)

His babysitter never tried to persuade these children to stop eating flesh but Foer and his brother had to rethink about eating meat again. Foer fondly attaches the ideal of a happy and compact family life with the memory of delicious culinary items cooked by his grandmother with love and the human nature of his baby sitter at home.

The birth of his son is what made Foer to ponder upon the food being served, the production of meat, its consumption and the resultant social, cultural and environmental effects. He wants his son as well as the future generations to follow and appreciate vegetarian diet so that no other creatures in the planet will be harmed because of their food preference.

Foer argues that half of the world's population who eat meat are wilfully ignorant about the origin of meat, slaughtering of animals for meat and also the harmful effects of meat consumption on an individual as well as the environment. In the name of factory farming, we breed animals that can never lead a normal life, keeps them caged in unhealthy and unsafe environment, treats them with brutality, and eventually slaughters them for meat. Foer mentions about the statistics in America where more than 10 billion land animals are slaughtered for food every year.

Nick Fiddes, the author of *Meat: A Natural Culture* writes about the popular practise throughout the world of equating meat to food. He says, "Meat is so significant that, all over the world, people describe a 'meat hunger' that is unlike ordinary hunger" (13). "This sort of 'meat hunger' is widely expressed in a variety of ways. Meat is, to many, almost synonymous with 'real food' " (13). Meat is treated as an irreplaceable part of the diet and even substitutes like soya are produced that tastes just like meat and which can give them the satisfaction of eating meat. According to Nick Fiddes, "The range of soya based meat analogues and other substitutes available today testifies to the centrality of the concept of meat, not to its dispensability" (16). Especially in the West, meat has become an indomitable part of every meal, and vegetarian or vegan dishes hardly please their taste buds.

Foer attempts to focus on the selective meat eating practise of men by questioning about why people are reluctant to eat dogs whereas they do not show any such reluctance when it comes to eating other animals like fish, chicken, goat or pig. Foer tells how he would never eat his pet dog George, and that he can never justify his choice, "What justification might I have for sparing dogs but eating other animals?"(17). Foer believes that the primary reason for such a kind of demarcation that we make between certain animals we do not eat and certain other animals whose meat we eat is our degree of closeness to the animals. Foer includes a quote from George Orwell's *Animal Farm* in order to justify his argument, "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" (18). There is a taboo about eating dog meat because dog has always been heralded as a companion of human being, and that one should not eat his companion

animals. The mere thought of eating our pet dog itself sounds gruesome to us as we associate the consumption of dog meat to the consumption human meat. Nick Fiddes comments on this particular paradox in his *Meat: A Natural Symbol*, “Why should someone (who presumably has never sampled it) suspect that poodle meat might taste similar to human flesh? Pet dogs are not human. But they are the next best thing. We exclude pets from our food resources due to their social proximity to ourselves as human” (133).

According to Foer, the second obvious reason for not eating dog meat is that we regard dogs as intelligent creatures capable of feeling and thinking. Human beings are trying to assert their supremacy over other seemingly inferior animals by killing them for meat. It thus seems justifiable to kill animals like chicken or pig or even fish that we believe are inferior to us. But Foer puts forward the question to the readers,

If we were to one day encounter a form of life more powerful and intelligent than our own, and it regarded us as we regard fish, what would be our argument against being eaten?... We care most about what is close to us and have a remarkably easy time forgetting everything else. We also have a strong impulse to do what others around us are doing. (23)

Foer brings in the third reason for human beings being selective in the matter of meat as their tendency to blindly follow the society. We usually tend to eat the meat that society conditions us to eat like chicken, fish, mutton, beef and pork without questioning the selectiveness in the choice being made. Fiddes too voice out a similar opinion in his *Meat: A Natural Symbol*. He says, “We treat pets more like individual subjects than the abstract objects as which we officially regard edible animals – although some species we treat more favourably than others, allotting them a closer relationship to ourselves” (133).

Since continuous slaughter of animals has become a rampant phenomenon throughout the globe, there are high risks of depletion in the number of animal, bird and fish species. Foer compares this situation of violence caused by humans against animals to “wars of extermination” (25). Foer writes, “We have waged war, or rather let a war be waged, against all of the animals we eat. This war is new and has a name: factory farming” (25). The metaphor of the war is well justified because of the extensive killing of animals and violence committed towards them. The carnivorous tendency of human population can be held as the major cause of species depletion among various animals used for meat. Scientists have actually reported

depletion in the number of various animal species caused due to fishing and factory farming. Foer confesses to his readers that he feels shameful about the kind of suffering human beings cause to the world by killing animals for meat:

I felt shame in the death my culture justified by so thin a concern as the taste of canned tuna or the fact that shrimp make convenient hors d'oeuvres. I felt shame for living in the nation of unprecedented prosperity - a nation that spends a small percentage of income on food than any other civilization has in human history - but in the name of affordability treats the animals it eats with cruelty so extreme it would be illegal if inflicted on a dog".(35)

Foer brings attention to the brutal way of breeding chickens in factory farms. Broilers and layers are the two kinds of chickens made exclusively for meat and eggs respectively. Since Broilers are designed only for meat they grow at a faster pace than normal chickens, and their life span too is less as compared to normal chickens. The case of layers too is similarly pathetic. They can perform no other function like normal chickens, apart from laying eggs. Foer also points to the inhumane treatment of layers in factory farms.

Most male layers are destroyed by being sucked through a series of pipes onto an electrified plate. Other layer chicks are destroyed in other ways, and it's impossible to call those animals more or less fortunate. Some are tossed into large plastic containers. The weak are trampled to the bottom where they suffocate slowly. The strong suffocate slowly at the top. Others are sent fully conscious through macerators. (36)

Foer gives the example of the harsh condition in which chickens are kept and killed in KFC, the world renowned brand of chicken. By killing more than billions of chickens a year, KFC, according to Foer, has increased "the sum total of suffering in the world" (51).

Foer also mentions about how certain religions like Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism put forward rules in order to regulate the process of meat eating. The author, Foer himself takes pride in being a Jew, as Judaism insists on following Kosher, the Jewish dietary laws. Foer writes "... the Jewish dietary laws were devised as a compromise: If humans absolutely must eat animals, we should do

so humanely, with respect for the other creatures in the world and with humility. Don't subject the animals you eat to unnecessary suffering, either in their lives or in their slaughter" (53). In spite of such rigid Kosher laws, Foer mentions about a video tape from the world's largest Kosher slaughter in Postville, Iowa, where animals were brutally treated by the plant workers. In such a circumstance, Foer questions about the very concept of Kosher meat.

Foer includes an account of his sneaking into an animal farm at midnight with an animal activist whom he mentions as "C". The sight of the animal farm itself terrifies Foer as well as "C". He finds almost everything apart from the animals in the farm as unnatural and inhumane. The lights are switched on in the farm even at midnight as light is believed to speed up the process of the growth of the broilers. Foer finds the whole setting of the animal farm as scary as this could get the animals scared and agitated. He describes, "There is a mathematical orchestration to the density. I pull my eyes from the bird for a moment and take in the building itself: lights, feeders, fans, and heat lamps evenly spaced in a perfectly calibrated artificial day. Besides the animals themselves, there is no hint of anything you might call "natural" – not a patch of earth or a window to let in moonlight" (68). Foer believes that the world is very much immersed in technological symphony that it cares little about the anonymous lives of animals around. He also notices that there are dead animals and those on the verge of death among animals that are kept in the factory farm, "Some are blood matted: some are covered in sores. Some seem to have been pecked at; others are desiccated and loosely gathered as small piles of dead leaves. Some are deformed" (69). The workers in the farm seem to be unmindful about the fact that these animals too have lives and that one must not treat them with such cruelty and violence.

Foer adds a note from a person who had earlier worked at a poultry plant as a "backup killer" (70) whose work was to kill the chickens that have survived the automated throat slitter. He feels that losing track of everything is the only possible way to stay sane in this cruel world. In spite of killing the animals for food the factory farms keep the animals caged and sick for a long time to favour their business model. Foer asks, "Why is taste, the crudest of our senses, exempted from the ethical rules that govern our other senses?"(72). We choose to ignore the terrifying origin of meat in order to please our gustatory sense. We willingly turn a blind eye to the amount of lives that are harmed and killed for the meat we eat. Foer claims that if we stop to rethink about this whole situation, we will definitely find this as crazy and sadistic.

Foer writes about the ancient and dominant ethic towards domestic animals kept for animal husbandry, the eat with care ethic. The eat with care ethic led to the formulation of several rules concerning the slaughter of animals. According to Foer, this ethic is what led Hindus in India to prohibit the slaughter and eating of cows, Islam as well as Judaism to insist on quick slaughter and similar dietary laws like Halal and Kosher and Russian Yakuts to claim that the animals wanted to be killed. Foer also mentions about the ancient Greek myth of getting consent from animals before slaughtering them. The Greeks sprinkled water on the heads of animals before slaughter and they would interpret the nodding of the animals' heads in order to shake off water as a kind of consent to be killed for the sacrifice.

Foer includes an anecdote of a poultry farmer named Frank Reese who has been farming turkeys for almost sixty years. Frank Reese objects to the whole system of factory farming of turkeys by claiming that they are the product of artificial insemination and can never lead their lives like normal turkeys. He says, "Not a single turkey you can buy in a supermarket could walk normally, much less jump or fly" (87). A huge share of turkeys die in these factory farms every day and the factories burn these turkeys in incinerators. Reese also includes that almost ten to fifteen percent of the turkeys die during the transport to factories. Most industrial birds like chicken and turkeys die every day and paediatricians tell that the meat from these birds can create different kinds of illness among people like juvenile diabetes, inflammatory and autoimmune diseases, early puberty, allergy among kids and asthma. Foer writes, "Kids today are the first generation to grow up on this stuff, and we're making a science experiment out of them" (88). Even foods that come in the label of fresh, free-range, local etc. are equally unhealthy.

The usual problems that animals encounter in factory farms are also discussed by Foer in his *Eating Animals*. This includes problems such as deformed jamming, drugs, stress, filthy rooms, eye damage, blindness, bacterial infections of bones, paralysis, internal bleeding, anaemia, respiratory diseases, twisted legs and necks and other such severe paralysis. Chickens that are infected with such diseases have the potential to create illness among the people who eat meat. It even tastes different but consumers fail to notice that. Foer also mentions about the brutal practice of dragging the birds through an electrified water bath that most likely paralyzes the birds. He notes that, apart from the numerous kinds of illness caused by factory farmed animals, they also contribute to the growth of antimicrobial-resistant pathogens that lead 76 million Americans to become ill from their food annually. Annie Potts, co-director of the New

Zealand Centre for Human-Animal Studies, the author of *Chicken, A New Zealand Book of Beasts* and *Animals in Emergencies* writes in her *Meat Culture*, “There is ample evidence verifying meat consumption is harmful to humans’ health and to the planet...” (18) and yet meat continues to hold a central place on our table.

Foer goes on to explain about the positive aspects of following a vegetarian diet. He writes, “Well-planned vegetarian diets are appropriate for all individuals during all stages of the life cycle, including pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, and adolescence, and for athletes” (113). Dieticians as well as physicians recommend people to follow vegetarian diet as it is proved to be rich in vitamins, proteins, healthy cholesterol and has several health advantages like ability to control lower blood pressure levels and lowers the risk of heart diseases, hypertension and type two diabetes. Vegetarians also have a better body mass index than the people who consume meat.

Stress and anxiety too are normally visible in factory farmed animals .Foer claims that these animals are shaped in such a way that they are incapable of leading a normal life while kept in a natural atmosphere. Even in their artificial settings, these animals face different kinds of stress including aggression, frustration and suffering. Foer gives an example for the phenomenon of stress among pigs in a factory farm, “In fact, it’s not uncommon for pigs awaiting slaughter to have heart attacks or become non ambulatory. Too much stress: the transport, the change of environment, the handling, the squeals from the other side of the door, the smell of blood, the knocker’s waving arms” (125). He also includes reports of piglets being injected with iron and removed of their testicles in order to alter the taste of their meat.

Foer declares in the final chapter of his *Eating Animals* that he strongly feels that there is something terribly wrong in eating meat and also feeding it to one’s family. He says, “To remember animals and my concern for their well-being, I may need to lose certain tastes and find other handles for the memories that they once helped me to carry” (153). Our fondness of meat is never a justification for the violent slaughter of living creatures for meat. Their lives should also be regarded as equally significant as human life and not as something inferior or subordinate. Foer says, “I love Sushi, I love fried Chicken, I love a good steak. But there is a limit to my love” (155). Foer took the hard decision to stop eating meat after witnessing the harsh realities of factory farming and through his non-fiction *Eating Animals*, he prompts his readers to act against this practice of meat eating.

Over the past few millennia human beings are so conditioned to the violent ways of meat consumption that they are negligent of the sheer brutality associated with it. In his non-fiction, *Eating Animals*, the reputed American novelist, Jonathan Safran Foer sheds ample light on the indifference and silence on violence as seen in modern day farming of animals and slaughter houses. In this book he tries to raise the sensibilities of fellow human beings to adopt a humane approach to this topical issue. He also comes out with a model of sustainable life which is in tune with conservation of nature and environment. Foer exhorts people to shun sufferings caused to animals. He holds vegetarian food as an alternative to preserve the rich bio-diversity in nature.

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