
From Liberation to Tyranny in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*

Trilok Nath Prajapati
IACER, Pokhara University
Corresponding Email: arishpra7@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper ponders upon George Orwell's *Animal Farm* through the critical lens of Althusser and Plato's allegory of the cave to portray the subtleness of oppression. Traditionally, the readings of the novella have so far focused on the criticism of the totalitarian regime and the betrayal of revolution, but the focal point of this study circles around the subtleness of oppression and the inability of animals to differentiate between liberation and manipulation. With the help of Althusser, the study dissects the tools that are used by the authority to input oppression into the system without anyone noticing it. And by using Plato's allegory of the cave, the study discloses the illusion people carry from the habit and situation they grow in. Then, this study moves on to the manipulation of knowledge and memory itself with the help of subtle threat and subtle illusion. With this, we capture the value of the vulnerable time after the revolution; we capture the unseen chaos after the revolution that could turn the short relief into a new form of misery if not checked properly. And we also capture the difficulty in seeing these sights and acknowledging them before it is too late to fight back.

Keywords: The cave, Allegory, Subtle, Oppression, Manipulation, Liberation

1. Introduction

The promises of emancipation are always the front page of any revolution. They usually cover the idea of equality, justice, freedom, and liberation from tyrannical regimes. But more often than not, history stands as a witness that these drastic changes simply brew spaces for the new system of domination, which is even more dangerous, as this one is subtle and more sophisticated for the commoner to understand. And this particular loop has been a favorite orchestration of the rich and the powerful from the time immemorial. And George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) allegorizes this very tragedy through the story of a group of farm animals who, with the dream and hope of freedom inspired by the speech of Old major, overthrow the master of the farm. But, with calculatedly laid deception, they were pulled back into enslavement by a new but crueler regime that was supposed to be their leader and friends, making this phenomenon even more tragic.

Animal Farm for the most part has been interpreted as a critique of the Soviet Union's betrayal of socialist ideals. The probable reason behind it could well be that it was written during the time of the second world war and the rise of Stalin himself. But I want to point out that upon deeper study of the novella, the plot underlines a universal theme that is even more tragic and unsettling than the previous study and findings. This new study discloses the cynical nature of power which, rather than bringing in a new system of development and freedom after a revolution, simply reproduces the very

system of tyranny, but this time with the help of hegemony, making it hidden from the eyes of the commoners. To get deeper into the matter, this paper explores *Animal Farm* through the lens of Plato's allegory of the cave with Althusser's idea of Ideological State Apparatuses to disclose how ideological control works as an engine for tyranny. It argues that the inability of animals to realize their oppression shows the devastating impact in pre-revolutionary societies.

Literature Review

George Orwell's *Animal Farm* has been the subject of numerous critical responses, and many of the responses have revolved around political allegory. The most popular and the most dominant interpretation has been the one that positions the novella as an analogy for the Russian Revolution and Stalin's Russia, where he betrays the very foundation of their philosophy and revolution. Scholars such as James Inch, in his article *Communism and Betrayal of Revolution*, argue that *Animal Farm* (2016) "uses the backdrop of a farm to provide an analogy for the events in Soviet Russia that led up to and include Stalin's establishment of a totalitarian regime" (p. 12). Here, in the framework, each animal and event correspond to a historical figure or moment. The pigs are the symbol of the corrupt inner circle of the Soviet leadership, and Napoleon represents Stalin himself.

Even though the given analysis provides an insightful vantage point, it does limit the study of *Animal Farm* to a single historical context. Zinab Hamood Saed (2020) takes a different approach and adopts a psychoanalytical lens and reveals another side to the novella. He states, "how the memories and experiences of childhood control some actions and behaviors" (p. 31). Here, Saed connects the pigs' tyranny to unresolved psychological patterns and also points to the emergence of "ignorance and greediness" as central themes (p. 31). This reading of the novella brings an important depth and opens up a new horizon in understanding the text.

There are other critics who have taken a different approach to explore the novella. Onyemelukwe and Ogbechie, in their article "Imperatives of Political Leadership" (2014), argue that the novella demonstrates how the failure of followership can enable authoritarianism. They observe, "There can be no leadership without followership" (p. 89). This shifts the blame partially onto the submissive nature of animals who empower their oppressors through passivity and also highlights the interconnectedness between the leader and the followers.

Another striking observation comes from David Dawn (2012), who explores the paradox hidden in the novel's most famous maxim: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." Dawn calls this "timeless statement about the gap between principle and practice" (p. 655). This suggests that the language that

we inherit and that is an inseparable part of our day-to-day life and chore becomes, for some reason, a tool of domination and hierarchy. It also suggests that more often than not, the principle that the leader preaches never crosses paths with the practice that commoners want.

This is how researchers have ventured into the novella with different theories and perspectives. And after a deeper study, I have realized that Orwell's *Animal Farm* is yet to be explored through the vantage point of the concept of Plato's Cave from the book *The Republic* along with Althusser's concept of ideology. This approach unfolds the psyche behind the people left behind and asks why they are not able to detect that they are being exploited. It will also unfold why they cannot speak for themselves and in doing so, represent themselves.

Materials and Methods

This study uses a qualitative textual analysis with the help of literary theory. The analysis draws upon Plato's allegory of the cave from *The Republic* to disclose the theme of illusion and ignorance in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Plato's concept of the cave provides a foundation to analyze how an oppression goes unnoticed even if it is destroying the system they once fought for. Furthermore, to understand what put them in chains without even anyone's realization, the study takes shelter in Louis Althusser's theory on ideology from the book *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. And to complement this theory, the study incorporates the idea of hegemony from Gramsci's Selection from *The Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. With the help of the collaborative study of these lenses, the research aims to disclose the relationship among ideology, consciousness, illusion, and oppression.

Finding and Analysis

With the banner of liberation and equality, the animals of *Animal Farm* overthrow Mr. Jones, motivated by the cruelty imposed by him and speech of Old Major. The old major speech and many secret meetings in the farm after the lights goes out, forms an idea that all animals are equal and should never be a subject to human exploitation and thus the revolution began. However, the very revolution that they have longed for, does not result in the emancipation. And the tragedy that unfolds is the whole undoing of the hard-earned revolution coming from within not from without. It is the undoing of the animals themselves. The ideals that lead to the idea of revolution is manipulated and weaponized by the pigs to establish a new regime of domination. This section, from Orwell's narratio explores how the language that pave the way to their freedom becomes a tool to be used by the pig for

the control of the animals of the farm forming an epistemic suppression which the animals are sadly unable to notice.

George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (2024) portrays a revolution that commences with a dream of equality and freedom but gradually transforms into another tyranny. At the beginning of the novella, there is a clear establishment between the animals: "All men are enemies. All animals are comrades" (p. 13). There is simple math on display. Humans are the exploiters and animals are the ones fighting for freedom collectively. However, it is also important to note that the fight is not just for the freedom of the animals but also for the end of any values related to humans: "Whatever goes upon two legs is an enemy. Whatever goes upon four legs, or has wings, is a friend" (p. 14). There is a further agreement that animals should never follow any traits of humans through greed, trade, alcohol, clothing, and hierarchy. So, the revolution is also a moral and social fight.

The gradual collapse of the ideology is the new tragedy on the farm. The pigs subtly reintroduce the same authority the animals condemned. Louis Althusser's (1971) concept of ideology properly conceptualizes this betrayal and transformation. Althusser, in his book *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, argues, "Ideology represents the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (p. 162). This idea helps conceptualize why animals fail to realize the true intent of the pigs and the gradual return of the oppression. The pigs in the novella slowly reshape the animals with the help of propaganda, pride, fear, celebration, and manipulative language. And eventually the animals are no longer capable of understanding their own actual suffering as it is replaced by constructed reality.

One of the examples of this manipulation surfaces during the first harvest: "Let us make it a point of honor to get in the harvest more quickly than Jones and his men could do" (p. 30). Here, animals fail to view labor as labor, as it is framed with pride and competition. Hence, exploitation from the pigs is reconstructed and made to be imagined as a sacrifice they need to make for the sake of revolution and animals. Similarly, Squealer defends and justifies the pigs' exclusive consumption of milk and apples by claiming that pigs in reality dislike them; they only consume them for the sake of the animals and the intellectual burden they have to shoulder (p. 42). Squealer cunningly replaces privilege for sacrifice. Thus, it is not through coercion but through constructed sacrifice that pigs eventually normalize their authority on the farm.

This subtle construction of ideology becomes even more powerful through intimidation and fear. It starts with the abolishment of Sunday meetings but the four young pigs protest, and the dogs sitting round Napoleon let out a deep, menacing growl that immediately silences them (p. 63-64). However, the novella illustrates the

violence alone cannot stabilize the domination the pigs' eyes for. If that is the case, the animals, like before, can revolt, and the pigs will have to surrender just like Jones. So, the violence is cunningly wrapped up in subtle psychological conditioning to make sure that the animals do not even acknowledge the violence as violence. One of the things Squealer repeatedly uses is the fear of Jones coming back to suppress any doubt with a question: "surely, comrades, you do not want Jones back?" (p. 65). This becomes their strongest defense in doubt. Every attack on the system is reframed as the support of Jones and human tyranny, and as a result, this fear dictates them without them knowing it.

Boxer is the most important ideological subject on the farm. His belief, "If Comrade Napoleon says it, it must be right" (p. 65), shows how the ideology has helped the pigs internalize the authority in animals as nothing but natural. Althusser (1971) explains that ideology acts or functions in such a way that it recruits subjects among the individuals (p. 174). And Boxer completely represents this ideological recruitment. Boxer does not have any ounce of resistance. He simply tackles all the hardship and suffering with sheer will and hard work and trust in Napoleon. The ideology has shaped his unconscious. Boxer no longer has a sense of truth and reality; he is completely dependent on Napoleon for any form of realization. Here, ideology works beyond propaganda; it becomes a force that consumes one from the inside mentally and psychologically.

This instigation of ideology in animals is further strengthened with gradual revision of the commandments. The original revolutionary commandments are not completely replaced, but they are slowly modified to benefit the pigs without creating any doubts. The commandment "No animal shall sleep on a bed" becomes "No animals shall sleep in bed with sheets" (p.78). Similarly, "No animal shall kill any other animal" changes into "No animal shall kill any other animal without cause" (p. 103). Then, "No animals shall drink alcohol" becomes "No animal shall drink alcohol to excess" (pp. 122-124). These changes illustrate how ideologies are reshaped with manipulated language just to normalize the domination. And this does not come from open and direct rejection of commandments, but instead they use a well thought reconstruction to make privilege natural.

This is taken a step further as Napoleon is transformed into a heroic figure. Squealer invents false stories about Napoleon's bravery and sacrifice during the battle of the Cowshed, claiming that he cried "Death to humanity!" and fearlessly attacked Jones (p. 93). They completely reconstruct history in their favor to preserve and strengthen their authority. With the control of memory and language, animals slowly lose the ability to understand the difference between truth and propaganda. Althusser

(1971) argues, “The reproduction of labor power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also . . . a reproduction of submission to the rules of the established order” (p. 132-133). Although the animals overthrow the tyranny of humans, the animals produce the same culture of oppression that they once despised and fought against.

Antonio Gramsci's (1992) concept of hegemony is of special help to understand the context. He argues, in his book *Selection from the Prison Note Books of Antonio Gramsci*, “Subalternity and corporative consciousness, hegemony, and the building of the counter-hegemony necessary for the formation of a new historical bloc” (p. xv). The animals are dominated without even knowing about it as the pigs negate their conscious thought that is capable of resisting pigs' authority. The pigs maintain power with violence, but there is also hegemony at the core; as a result, every oppression feels natural. So, the domination thrives with the consent of the victims without them realizing it.

This hegemonic control is visible when animals are urged to celebrate symbolic victories despite their injuries and worsening condition. Orwell (2024) writes, “The animals found it comforting to be reminded that . . . they were their own master . . . they were able to forget that their bellies were empty” (p. 131). The celebration and pride that they carry function as an ideological distraction that negates any reflection.

The final scene of the novella shows the victory of ideological and hegemonic transformation. Orwell (2024) writes, “The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig . . . but already it was impossible to say which was which” (p. 159). The distinction between the oppressed and oppressor is completely erased. The pigs completely merge with the humans and have become indistinguishable from the humans they once despised. And the tragedy is it is too late to do anything about it, and the animals remain passive observers to all this chaos unfolding. Althusser's (1971) statement, “Ideology never says I am ideological” (p. 171), works brilliantly here. Ideology is powerful when it feels natural. Hence, the tragedy here is not corruption or oppression but the inability to realize any of it.

The bigger problem at hand is that the dominated cannot see that they are exploited, and as a result, they consume suffering as if something good will come out of it. In Plato's *The Republic* (2016), he talks about the allegory of the cave. Plato talks about how a human mind functions and can be manipulated. Here, few people are chained in such a manner that they are only capable of facing the far end of the wall. Opposite to this is an existence. And also, behind them is a blazing fire, and in between the fire and those chained people is a raised way where commoners from outside pass by. Here, Plato claims that the shadows they make on the wall, which the prisoners can only view as the real things, and the sound they make are believed

to be coming from the shadow itself. Furthermore, Plato also points out that even if the man in chain is to escape the cave it is difficult for him to grasp the reality and get out of that illusion. The first thing the man has to overcome is the blinding light as he has just walked out of the dark cave. The process is painful, as it hurts the eyes, and one has to squint the eyes till they adjust and only then, is he able to witness the true miracle of nature: blue sky, clouds, rivers, flowers, and the like. And the shadows are no longer reality but mere illusion. (p. 262-265). Now, the question is, are we willing to squint our eyes and welcome the pain that comes with the truth? This incident can be directly compared with the animals on the farm. All the animals in the farm are those captives in the cave who are consistently observing those moving shadows, thinking that's their world. Boxer, one of the most important characters from the novella to understand their dire situation, says, "If Comrade Napoleon says it, it must be right" (Orwell, p. 56). This particular thought is the evidence of epistemic entrapment. Boxer is simply looking at the shadow and considers it a beautiful life. His life is limited to waking up early and scurrying to work. He does not understand that outside that dark cave sits an extremely beautiful world. But in order to achieve that, first he has to break the shackle and believe that there is a better world outside. After that, he has to endure adoption. And only then will the time of joy and freedom come and days of sorrow and struggle pass. But Boxer is not allowed to do that. He is also not allowed to know the other world exists. He only knows what the pigs allowed him to do. So, he is not allowed to understand that he and all the other animals are oppressed with the help of an ideological apparatus created by the pigs to identify obedience as morality and suffering as virtue.

There is one ill-fated moment of Boxer at the end of the novella that will put a clear picture to the depth of the predicament of animals on the farm. A van arrives with a visibly clear indication that it takes old horses to knackers. This terrifies all the animals. But Boxer is already inside the van. Everyone outside is traumatized by the scene. They start calling him to escape but it is already too late for him, and eventually the van vanishes along with weak and exhausted Boxer, who has already given up to his fate that waits ahead (p. 137-138). Now, in a normal circumstance, this is supposed to be a moment of clarity where they realize pigs are their oppressor, not the liberator or their protector as they claim to be. But there is nothing normal about this situation, and there is no clarity for the animals. The whole notion of hysteria vanishes when Squealer comes with his witty words and covers everything with his blatant lies. He claims, "The van had previously been the property of the knacker and had been bought by the veterinary surgeon, who had not yet painted the

old name out. That was how the mistake had risen" (p. 140-141). With this everything is settled. They all take a sigh of relief and go back to their regular life of suffering. After a brief moment, Napoleon gives a speech on Boxer, about his contribution and works ethic. He takes full advantage of the moment and attacks their emotions to take full grasp of them all over again. He explains the death of everyone's beloved Boxer. How peaceful and painless it was. He also brings forth Boxer's favorite maxim; at least that is what Napoleon claims. "I will work harder, and Comrade Napoleon is always right" (p. 118). This particular line is rather cruel in many ways. First, he convinces the animals that if they work hard like Boxer, they will have a peaceful and wonderful retirement life. and their death will be painless. Unlike the time in Mr. Jones's oppression when they never had a time of rest. And death was gruesome, which usually meant they were butchered for meat.

Conclusion

What is a complete revolution? Is it when it finally, after all the sacrifices, dismantles the authority to form a new one? George Orwell scrutinizes this question from within in the novella, *Animal Farm*. And the conclusion, after pondering upon the novella with the help of Althusser, Gramsci and Plato are that revolution is only one step but not the final product. Orwell creatively portrays the vulnerability of people under the new leadership as they trust this new authority from the heart. And this, for someone in power, who has just tasted it, is nothing but an opportunity to establish himself at the throne. And how does he do that? Well, he simply chains the people and makes them look at the wall where that illusions are cast making them believe that is the reality of the society. And how is this chain shackled on them without them fighting for freedom? This is where the curtain of ideology comes in at work. In conclusion, people need to be ready to squint their eyes when need be and question things that are not in order before it is too late if they want to maintain their freedom.

References

- Althusser, L. (2002). *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (B. Brewster, Trans.). Monthly Review Press.
- Dawn, D. (2012). Orwell's Paradox: Equality in *Animal Farm*. *Elh*, 79(3), 655-683.
- Orwell, G. (2016). *Animal Farm*. S.K Books Publishing.
- Gramsci, A. (1992). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (Q. Hoare and N. Smith, Eds. And Trans.). International Publishers.

- Inch, Ja. (2016). Communism and the Betrayal of the Revolution: A Marxist critique of the post-revolutionary manipulation of the proletariat in *Animal Farm*.
- Plato. (2016). *The Republic* (B. Jowett, Trans.). FP Classic.
- Saeed, Z. H. (2020). Analysis of the Animal Farm Novel Using the Psychoanalytical Criticism. *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, 8(3). DOI: 10.33329/rjelal.8.3.30