

# A Study of Animal Farm by George Orwell in the Context of Contemporary Communist Regimes

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## ABSTRACT

While teaching Literature in any language, teachers often are faced with the question of its relevance to contemporary times. Students sometimes ask what the purpose of reading any literature is. In order to emphasize the relevance of literature of any time universally, this study has taken one of the most famous novels by George Orwell, *Animal Farm* which was written as a satirical, allegorical and critique of the aftermath of the Russian Revolution in Communist Russia under Josef Stalin. The authors of the article have evaluated the novel in the context of contemporary Communist regimes with focus on the People's Republic of China and North Korea. The study proves the relevance of the novel to contemporary times.

**Keyword:** Communism, Totalitarianism, Oppression, Discrimination, Subjugation, Conformity

## 1. Introduction

*Animal Farm* by George Orwell is an extremely potent novella which makes sense at several levels. It is deceptively childlike with animal characters displaying human traits and gallivanting around, giving lectures, holding meetings, building structures, walking on two legs and wearing waistcoats and breeches. On another level, it is an effective allegory on the Russian Revolution and its aftermath displaying the enhanced oppression of the Russian people in the Communist regime of Josef Stalin. The novella, also satirizes the Russian Revolution which ended up executing the Czar and his family who were believed to be the symbols of persecution and the implementing a totalitarian regime. It is also a fable with seemingly innocuous animal characters acting out various roles but actually conveying the moral which states the impact of dictatorial leaders and their self-serving policies.

All the above features of the novella make it relevant and contemporary in the context of the oppression, subjugation, discrimination and violence in contemporary Communist regimes indicating the failure of Communism as a whole.

## 2. Summary of Animal Farm

George Orwell starts the novella in a remote farm called Manor Farm which is controlled by the owner, Mr. Jones. He is the typical lord with complete control and very little care for his farm animals. He is given to drinking and indulging himself. One night, Old Major, a wizened pig assembles all the animals of the farm in the barn and gives them a rousing speech about the oppression of humans and also about his dream of a world free of human beings. The animals are inspired by this and take action against Mr. Jones one day when he fails to feed them. Mr. Jones is driven out making the farm a human free area. The farm is renamed *Animal Farm*. Old Major dies and his skull is kept on display to keep inspiring the animals. The pigs in the characters of Snowball and Napoleon take control of the farm, the animals and the various tasks of the farm.

Jones, gathers a few human beings and attacks the farm but is defeated in the Battle of the Cowshed. Hence, the animals under the leadership of the pigs launch upon their journey of self-governance. An education drive is implemented with various levels of success; the produce like eggs and milk are handled by the pigs; the farming of the land is done and a set of rules known as the Seven Commandments is formed and displayed for the benefit of the animals. Snowball, the follower of the principle of Animalism makes a plan for building a windmill which will bring about prosperity to the farm. Napoleon, however, only satisfies his own selfish motives by taking a number of newly born puppies under his care who are brought up as his private guards.

Napoleon continues to grow in power and one fine day succeeds to throw out his adversary Snowball. Hence the farm is completely in the clutches of this ruthless dictator who uses a fellow pig, Squealer, to publicize his activities and justify his wrong doings. The dream project of Snowball, the windmill is now constructed by Napoleon but is destroyed in a storm. Boxer, the hard working horse shows maximum sincerity in the re-building of the windmill. In the meantime, Napoleon starts doing business with neighboring farms, the pigs start using Mr. Jones's house by sleeping in his bed and over a period of time, becoming more and more like humans.

The brainwashing of the meek and the vulnerable is another arrow in Napoleon's quiver. He encourages and almost forces several of the animals to confess to imaginary crimes and then doles out suitable punishments which are delivered publicly. Contrary to this is also the other animals which claim that they have done things because of the inspiration got from Napoleon. As regular an event as laying eggs is credited to Napoleon's support. This shows the other extreme of brainwashing and its repercussions. Likewise happened in Soviet Russia under Stalin where lies were used to serve the purpose of the state.

One by one, the all-important Seven Commandments are altered irrevocably for the benefit of the pigs. Meanwhile, a second human attack destroys the windmill a second time. Boxer, now weakening with old age attempts to re-construct the windmill and becomes injured in the process. As a last blow to Animalism, the pigs send Boxer to the glue factory and have him killed.

The death of Boxer is like the last nail in the coffin of Animalism. The dream farm of the animals does not become a reality and after several years, the reader sees the animal's lot as being worse and the pigs becoming almost identical to humans in their deportment and demeanor and mostly in their overwhelming greed.

Orwell's satire and allegory reaches its pinnacle when the last of the Seven Commandments is turned on its head and reads 'all animals are equal but some are more equal than others' casting a telling blow to the very essence of the revolution. Further, in the last scene a poignant observation is made by the common animals that when they turned from man to pig and pig to man the dividing line between the two dwindled and they became one and the same. This amounts to be the death knell for Animalism.

The novel *Animal Farm* is Orwell's masterpiece because it fulfils multiple purposes. On the surface, it can be enjoyed as a simple story with animal characters who behave hilariously like humans and have the same desires, flaws, aspirations and weaknesses as their two-legged counterparts. However, deep within it is an exemplary satire too of the Communist regime of Josef Stalin and his insidious walking away from the principles of the Communist Manifesto which ensures equality to all. Orwell has lodged his complaint against this regime through his portrayal of the pigs as the offenders and the autocrats who use their wiliness to forego all concepts of equality and impose totalitarianism. Through this adept portrayal Orwell strikes the knell for the eventuality of all Communist regimes.

The rule of the pigs is much like the reign of Stalin where rights were denied, purges were regular and terror ruled. Napoleon's masterstroke is to bring up a bunch of puppies as his very own KGB and then the driving away of Snowball like the exile and then eventual assassination of Leon Trotsky. The use of Squealer as his own mouthpiece which constantly creates a narrative of Napoleon's good intentions when all he was doing was fulfilling his own desires and becoming more and more like human beings. The demise of Boxer, the most obedient and hardworking among all the animals is tragic and such a glaring example of the undermining of the honest like the fate of the proletariat in Stalin's regime.

### 3. Relevance of Orwell

Orwell is as relevant in the world even today as are the concepts of oppression, subjugation, violence etc. because he focused on these in his novels. Readers and writers read him avidly to this day.

John Rodden in his article *Orwell's Significance for Intellectuals Today: "A Presence in our Lives"* writes:

*Orwell himself does not directly influence events today [...]. Nonetheless, the fact that they read Orwell readily admit that their thinking is filtered through his work is significant and worthy of attention. For it occurs with virtually no other writer of the twentieth century [...]* (Rodden, 2009, p. 218).

Orwell is also as relevant today to contemporary totalitarian regimes as he was to Communist Russia.

The seeds of his desire to critique totalitarianism were sown early in his own life. He faced immense marginalization in his school on account of not coming from a wealthy background. He was born in India under British rule and saw imperialism at close quarters. However, initially, he did not pay attention to its negative aspects. John Fotheringham writes in his article *George Orwell and Ernst Toller: The Dilemma of the Politically Committed Writer*:

*He went out to Burma if not quite a glowing patriot, then at least as someone who did not really question the British Empire. [...] it is clear that his views began to change only through confrontation with reality as he saw at close quarters the dirty side of the empire, the degradation and exploitation which was British Colonial rule* (Fotheringham, 2000, p. 6).

It is needless to say that imperialism was another form of totalitarianism and Orwell's firsthand experience of it led him to write his political satire *Animal Farm*. He was convinced that art cannot be devoid of politics and that apolitical art is actually quite difficult and quite without purpose.

Peter Augustine Lawler in his article *Communism Today* writes:

*But surely, you might object, communism is dead; no one but North Koreans, Cubans, and a few out of touch professors buy that ideology any more. But in my view, the hard side of communism is dead, and the more soft side remains alive. Nobody really thinks anymore that communist revolution is coming, and so almost everyone knows that the totalitarian terror designed to provoke or complete such a revolution was at least a monstrous mistake* (Lawler, 2004, p. 25-26).

The view of the writer very clearly marks Communism as another form of totalitarianism and also relates it closely to terror. Moreover, he says that Communism is often discarded as having vanished from the face of the earth except in a few regimes. However, he feels, a soft and more sinister kind of Communism is relevant and also progressing in our times. Orwell's *Animal Farm* therefore, not only criticized and satirized Stalin's version of Communism but also foreshadowed its practice in future. We can see his foreshadowing taking shape in regimes like China and North Korea. Lawler further writes:

*But if Marx's communism really described all of human life, it would not be heaven on earth but a sort of inescapable hell. [...] We would really be stuck with something even more hellish than living the same day over and over again* (Lawler, 2004, p. 25).

A very clear association of Communism and hell is mentioned above. Orwell's *Animal Farm* describes the same hell for the animals in the novel. The terrible deprivations of the common animals and in contrast, the sumptuous existence of the pigs and the dogs is indicative of this hell. The treatment meted out to Boxer, the most servile and hardworking animal on the farm, is tantamount to burning in the fires of hell for the animals.

#### **4. Communism and Economy**

It may well be construed that Orwell's criticism of Communist Russia was an endorsement of capitalism. However, it is not so.

Michael Makovi in his article *George Orwell as a Public Choice Economist* writes:

*[...] Orwell was concerned not only with the potential for the individual abuse of power (per Crowthers), but additionally with the issue which political institutions were and were not able to cope constructively with this individual potential for abuse of power (Makovi, 2015, p 185).*

Orwell was against the abuse of power and having seen it first hand in his childhood during the British Raj, he was quick to gauge it. Makovi further writes:

*[...] he was opposed to a particular kind of socialism, viz. any form of socialism which turned totalitarianism because it neglected to provide suitable political institutions to mitigate the abuse of power. [...] therefore, Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty four were not intended as criticism of the abstract economics of collectivism in theory, but rather of the political dynamics of 'decayed communism' [...] (Makovi, 2015, p 186).*

In Animal Farm the initial promise of a system based on Communism/Socialism is decimated very early. Likewise it was destroyed in Stalin's Russia. Totalitarianism was the call of the day. Contemporary so called socialist countries are no different. In the context of North Korea, Johannes Gerschewski and Alexander Dukalskis in their article *How the Internet Can Reinforce Authoritarian Regimes: The Case of North Korea*, write:

*There is almost no Internet access in North Korea. International bodies like the World Bank or United Nations that track Internet penetration either do not report any data for North Korea or list its penetration rate as zero (Gerschewski and Dukalskis, 2018 p.12).*

In the modern context, the unavailability of one of the basic needs of any civilized society is the internet. The denial of this is to the citizens of any country is not only unfortunate but unthinkable. The examination of the motive behind this lapse can reveal the mala fide intent of the regime which does not allow freedom of expression as well as access to information.

Orwell's dream, no doubt from his witnessing of imperialism, is of egalitarian societies. However, it is easier said than done. No wonder he raised his voice against authoritarian regimes of the time.

According to Lane Crowthers in his article *George Orwell and the Failure of Democratic socialism: The Problem of Political Power* writes:

*Orwell [...] focused always on one basic principle: egalitarianism. Regardless of the specific subjects Orwell wrote about-most commonly class-equality, anti-imperialism, and economic fair play-egalitarianism was his ultimate value. Orwell's is thus a strongly political rather than economic definition of socialism, concerned more with social relations than with economic reorganization (Crowthers, 1994 p 389).*

Whatever may be there in Animal Farm, there surely is no egalitarian system. Very early in the novel, even before the decisive battle for power, the pigs and the dogs were claiming positions of power. The milk yielded by the cows is usurped by Napoleon. The pigs get better rations than all other animals and till the end, there is no equality as was promised and surely the decimation of the final and telling commandment that all animals are equal into some animals are more equal than others is the grand finale and the total encroachment of totalitarianism.

Johannes Gerschewski and Alexander Dukalskis further write in their article that the basics of authoritarianism are co-optation, repression, and legitimation (*Gerschewski and Dukalskis, p. 12*). Of the three, co-optation<sup>i</sup> and repression<sup>ii</sup> are very much evident in Animal Farm.

## 5. Social control

As mentioned above about the control exercised by the North Korean regime through the denial of access to the internet, The People's Republic of China too has insidious ways of exercising social control through seemingly innocuous but effective ways.

Wooyeal Paik in his article *The institution of Petition and Authoritarian Social Control in contemporary China* mentions the system of Xinfang<sup>iii</sup> Institution of petitions which is used as an instrument of social control on individuals with grievances. According to him, the Chinese Communist Party is instrumental in using this to suppress and subjugate especially those who are dissatisfied. On the surface, an instrument of redressal is actually used for exercising control. Paik writes:

*Analogous to an institution of civil society in authoritarian regimes,[...] the publicly accessible institution of Xinfang also functions as a mechanism for state social control. As for how it works, unlike omnipresent "police patrol" forms of social control, Xinfang functions as an efficient "fire alarm" as well as a selective police patrol, collecting information on people with grievances, monitoring them, quelling and even preempting their protests, even repatriating dangerous petitioners to higher levels of government like Beijing to prevent any disruption in politically important locations (Paik, 2018, p. 2).*

Social control is an important instrument of the pigs in Animal Farm. They have their own espionage system and the control in the form of the dogs who control with the exercise of fear. The phenomenal control can be viewed in the forced confession of hens, sheep and other animals who agree to be slaughtered for crimes not committed by them. Like all totalitarian regimes, the rule of Napoleon wants to establish an era of total conformity by all state subjects with maximum benefit to the controllers. Contemporary China has a similar stance exercised through insidious means like Xinfang as mentioned by Paik. He writes:

*States wish to control society. Therefore, they devise social mechanisms that regulate individual and collective behavior, which leads to conformity, compliance, and acquiescence to the state's rules. [...]. Authoritarian states rely more on coercive sanctions, such as censorship, surveillance, and imprisonment, than their democratic counterparts, in order to maintain control and regulate their subjects (Paik, 2018, p. 3).*

Paik also mentions that the same repressive systems have been followed by all totalitarian states throughout history.

Animal Farm has an all-powerful leader in Napoleon who becomes more and more powerful, ostentatious and distant from his subjects. He also indulges in the finery of monarchs by dressing like a king, by living in luxury, by marching with pomp etc. The modern day leader of North Korea, Kim Jong is no different in his demeanor. Just as Kim Jong ascended the throne after his father, it is likely that one of Napoleon's many off springs would likewise ascend the throne, not as a deserving candidate but as the son of Napoleon. This is very much opposed to the tenets of Communism and to Animalism in Animal farm.

Napoleon and Squealer are master manipulators and so are the North Korean leaders. Napoleon also enjoys sycophancy and flattery and many of the animals indulge in it in order to protect themselves or to find favor.

## **6. Violation of human/animal rights**

From the outset, animal rights violations occur in the Animal Farm. Soon after the so called battle for equality, the pigs syphon off the milk produced by the cows and thus deal a telling blow to the very idea of equality.

Following this are the many violations of extra work, low rations, no retirement, false confessions and purges.

In North Korea, it has been revealed, privileges are bestowed on those who are loyal to the ruling family. Press is the pet animal of the rulers and manipulation and censorship are rampant. So it is in Animal Farm where a well-oiled publicity machinery is in operation through the glib Squealer. The judiciary system in North Korea not being an independent body, trials are staged and manipulated and extremely inhuman punishments are meted out to the common man resulting in multiple deaths in judicial custody.

Animal Farm has similar episodes where animals confess to crimes not committed by them and are purged on the spot. The scenario in Communist China is no different. There is sporadic discontent because open discontent is not welcome and is liable to be suppressed. Chasing away government officials by citizens is not uncommon. This happens as a result of the government's oppressive policies. In Animal Farm the animals rise in rebellion during the tenure of Mr. Jones but they cannot muster their courage to do likewise when Napoleon wields his atrocities. Acute

hunger, extra work, discrimination, purges, the growing arrogance of the pigs, do not instigate rebellion, such is the fear of the pigs.

Chinese government, like all other totalitarian regimes, uses blanket censorship and manipulation of media to serve their own purpose.

According to Congressional Documents and Publications; Washington: Federal Information & News Dispatch, LLC. (Dec 19, 2019), United States Senators Ted Cruz and Josh Hawley sent a letter to the United Nations. In it they wrote:

*"China's actions in Hong Kong are consistent with its actions in other parts of the region and its treatment of those within its borders who may hold different beliefs from those of the Communist Party of. Its detention camps in Xinjiang holding nearly a million Uyghur Muslims reflects true ambitions" (Cruz & Hawley, 2019).*

There is a clear reference here to the policies of China and regarding the implementation of Communism. China's atrocities in Hong Kong and the detention camps where Uyghur Muslims are imprisoned bear testimony to the fact that the tenets of Communism have really gone wrong here.

The story is no different in North Korea. A reference to this regime is made in the Congressional Documents and Publications; Washington: Federal Information & News Dispatch, LLC. (Jun 8, 2018) according to which Congresswoman Vicky Hartzler raised the issue of human rights violations before US President Donald Trump. She said:

*"The Administration has a unique opportunity to advocate for those who cannot speak for themselves [...] The treatment of prisoners and detainees in North Korea's prison camps has been nothing short of heinous[...] For generations the people of North Korea have been victims of atrocious and inhumane acts committed by the Kim family," (Hartzler, 2018).*

Likewise in Animal Farm, the animals without a voice are made to suffer and the greatest example is Boxer. He suffers throughout and when his time to retire peacefully, he is killed mercilessly.

Moreover, the Seven Commandments are updated throughout the novel by the pigs so that the gullible farm animals are convinced that the right thing is being done. Their suffering is justified by the regime. Squealer is the perpetrator of this. He is finally caught in the act of altering the Commandments:

*There was a ladder broken into two parts at the foot of the end of the great barn where the Seven Commandments were written. Squealer was momentarily shocked, sprawled beside him and a lamp, a paint-brush, and an overturned pot of white paint lay nearby (AF, Orwell p. 87).*

## 7. Conclusion

The study of the novel animal Farm and the evaluation of the social and political systems followed in the People's Republic of China and North Korea reveal the blatant similarity with regard to oppression and discrimination of the common citizens for the benefit of a few. The promise made at the onset of the Russian Revolution and those made by the pigs in Animal Farm are so similar to the so called welfare of citizens promised by the Communist regimes of China and North Korea. In all the four examples, three real and one imaginary, Communism or Socialism has failed to live up to the expectations and aspirations of the common citizens. Moreover, Orwell's foreshadowing of more regimes like Soviet Russia has come true in the two regimes mentioned in this study. This lends strength to the reality of the eternal relevance of literary works. Animal Farm as a novel is alive and vibrant today.

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## 9. Notes

<sup>i</sup> See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/co-optation>

<sup>ii</sup> See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/repression>

<sup>iii</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petitioning\\_\(China\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petitioning_(China))