

Factory Farming or Organic Farming: An Issue of Animal Cruelty in *A Thousand Acres*

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Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* is one of her most famous and most studied works. Among several conflicts across the novel, one is often unnoticed. That is the conflict between factory farming and organic farming, represented respectively by Ginny's father and husband, and by Ginny's lover and the neighbor. Through a depiction of the expansion of factory farming and the failure of organic farming in the novel, Smiley exposes animal cruelty in factory farming, and attaches importance to animal welfare and human-animal relationship.

Keywords: factory farming, organic farming, animal cruelty, human-animal relationship

1 Introduction

In Pulitzer Prize winner Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, two groups' attitudes towards farming and animals form a striking contrast. Ginny's father Larry and her husband Ty are the supporters for factory farming while Ginny's lover Jess and the neighbor-the Ericsons uphold organic farming. The conflict between the two farming patterns is one of the conflicts throughout the novel. However, previous research on the novel seldom touched it in this way.

Factory farming is a modern form of intensive farming that keeps livestock at high stocking densities. After World War II, factory farming appeared on the scene, bringing a new generation of technology, calling "confinement" or "intensive" animal production. These systems used hardware and automation instead of labor for many routine tasks, and the animals were generally kept in specialized indoor environments (Fraser, 2006, p. 549). Plumwood dissects the regimes of factory farming as the product of self-maximising calculus, of the rationalist economy stripped of all ridiculous and corrupting human emotion and compassion, aiming to extract the most from the other who is the resource (Plumwood, 2005, pp. 159-160). In factory farming, animals are tortured in numerous inhumane ways, such as getting stuck in overcrowded or narrow and stuffy space, being fed with growth hormones and antibiotics, lacking in communication and activity, and growing deformed body and limbs, with both their physical and emotional needs ignored. Animal cruelty in factory farming receives serious criticism in *A Thousand Acres*.

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In contrast, organic farming that originated early in the 20th century tries to provide natural living conditions and feed to animals. In organic farming, animal welfare is valued, and their living condition is much better than that in factory farming. It's not difficult to find Smiley's appreciation of organic farming even though the characters favoring it finally fail in their career. In fact, the reasons for their failure in organic farming are the deep reasons for animal cruelty in factory farming.

By analyzing these two farming patterns, the paper digs out the deep reasons and implications for the expansion of factory farming and the failure of organic farming in the novel. Through the depiction of the two farming systems, Smiley questions the rationality of factory farming and reveals the difficulty of organic farming, with an aim of exposing animal cruelty in factory farming and calling our attention to animal welfare and human-animal relationship.

2 Animal Cruelty Reflected from the Expansion of Factory Farming

At the beginning of the novel, Larry decides to establish a corporation and divide the shares equally among his three daughters. Meanwhile, he plans to build a new Slurrystore and to enlarge the hog operation, but in reality to enlarge the hog operation is Ty's dream for years. With the loan from the banker Carson, Ty begins his expansion of hog business by remodeling the old dairy barn and constructing new buildings first. To a large extent, the expansion of hog operation is the epitome of factory farming expansion. It is through the description of the new buildings that the living condition of the factory farmed hogs and their sufferings are uncovered.

The building crew... pouring the specially designed concrete subfloor for the breeding and gestation building, over which a slatted steel floor would be laid. ...Eventually, every hog in every building would reside in an aluminum alloy pen with hot water heat in the floors, automatic feeders and nipple waterers for the shoats. (Smiley, 2008, pp. 253-254)

All the facilities are full of concrete, metals, and automatic technology. Since the size of hog operation is expected to increase from the former 500 finished hogs per year to 4000 ones per year, the systemized hog factory guarantees the accommodation and handling of such a large number of hogs while saving human labor as much as possible. With the increasing number of hogs, the cost will soar up accordingly. To improve efficiency and profits, there's a must in decreasing cost. By cramming hogs into metal pens with automatic watering, feeding, and flushing system, farmers or entrepreneurs achieve a great reduction in the cost of human labor. All these designs in the new hog factory are for humans' convenience and profits, not for hogs. The 24-hour indoor confinement deprives pigs of their favorite natural habit of wallowing in the mud. According to recent studies, "prevalent hypotheses for wallowing in pigs include thermoregulation, ectoparasite removal and protection from sunburn in domesticated pigs" (Bracke, 2011, p. 6). Rather than rolling around in soft, cool mud, pigs in such an intensive farming can only stand on hard slatted steel floor surrounded by concrete partitions. Their basic needs are neglected. It is just like what Cudworth discloses: "Most sows spend most of their time in metal crates, boars are kept in small pens, piglets fattened in pens and small runs with no bedding and nothing to do" (Cudworth, 2011, p. 125). In this way factory farmed pigs are both physically and mentally tortured.

Besides, poisonous chemicals are largely used in factory farming. In the novel, Ginny describes a variety of poisons on the farm: "Arsenic is around, in the form of old rat poison. There were plenty of insecticides we used in the hog houses. There was kerosene and diesel fuel and paint thinner and Raid. There were aerosol degreasers and used motor oil. There were atrazine and Treflan and Lasso and Dual" (Smiley, 2008, p. 311).

The hogs are trapped in the stuffy aluminum alloy pens full of insecticides and suffer from all kinds of poisons. The massive resort to chemicals not only does harm to the health of hogs, but humans. The advancement of science and technology seemingly brings farmers high working efficiency and productivity, but essentially adds countless dangers and harms to environment and creatures. As the epitome of factory farming, the enlargement of hog operation brings about an increase in profits at the sacrifice of animal welfare as well as human welfare. Obviously Smiley throws strong doubt on such a greedy expansion and shows concern to the living condition of factory farmed animals.

3 Animal Cruelty Reflected from the Failure of Organic Farming

In *A Thousand Acres*, both Jess and the Ericsons insist on organic farming, but finally fail in their farming career. The failure of organic farming in the novel proves the difficulty in preventing animal cruelty in factory farming. There're too many obstacles in the way of organic farming revolution. The reasons for the failure of organic farming are the deep reasons for animals' suffering in factory farming.

Jess, who has strong enthusiasm for organic farming, once runs a food corporation, selling organically grown produce, range-fed chickens, and undyed cheese. After his return to his hometown, Jess reiterates his organic dream to his family and neighbors. He appreciates the Nature Conservancy's environmental charity of buying land and conserving it so as to restore it to its natural wetlands condition. Jess suggests green manure and ridge till cultivation. His environmental advocacy of organic farming takes all the life into account. In fact, behind his insistence on organic farming are his abomination against industrialized farming, and his concern for animal suffering and environment as well.

Smiley points out some hard facts about cruelty to factory farmed animals through Jess' words: "You know that the new hybrid breeds of chickens fatten so fast that they can't support themselves on their own legs? I mean, since they're all in cages after all, they don't really have to, and I suppose if their legs are bad, they don't want to get out, either. But it disgusts me. I don't want to eat it. I don't want to do it" (Smiley, 2008, p. 127). The sympathy for chickens in battery cages facilitates Jess to repudiate factory farming and pursue an organic one.

It is via Jess' eyes that the dark sides about factory farming are unmasked. In intensive factory farming, it is common to see that all day long chickens are jammed in battery cages indoors. The chickens cannot stretch their wings, neither can they walk, roost or nest freely, which are all their natural behaviors. The deprivation of these physical and psychological needs does great harm to chickens' wellbeing. What's worse, through genetic engineering programs, chickens are deliberately made bigger and meatier. As for this, Kazez criticizes that "Today's industrial farmers are increasing their profits by squeezing animals into the smallest amount of space possible, denying them the most basic creature comforts, ignoring their instincts and their natural diets" (Kazez, 2010, p. 39).

In regard to the pains that battery-caged hens and other food animals suffer, Marc Bekoff writes:

Birds are kept in tiny, barren battery cages and cannot perform behaviors such as dustbathing, perching, and nesting. ...Food animals can suffer physical and emotional pain throughout their lives, ...Many animals die from stress and disease before being slaughtered. (Bekoff, 2002, p. 152)

Nowadays more and more countries realize its inhumanity and take actions to prevent. Battery cages have been banned in Switzerland since 1992 and in the European Union since 2012. In United States, several states ban

battery cages for hens. Nevertheless, battery cages are still used on a large scale across the world. For too many people, chickens are regarded as commodities without any emotions and subjectivity. Under the industrialization of poultry and livestock raising, animals are mechanized and instrumentalized to a maximum degree.

For all the efforts Jess makes to propagate organic farming to his father and neighbors, he doesn't succeed finally. What he harvests are doubts, incomprehension, and sneers. Even his father Harold mocks at Jess' organic dream and turns his back on him. Jess' failure implies the difficulty of changing the industrial farming into organic one, in which the torture of animals can be greatly avoided.

In addition to Jess' failure, another example is the Ericsons' failure in organic farming. Different from Larry and Ty, the Ericsons refuse to cater for farming industrialization. They stick to the organic way and cherish the human-animal bond. In their eyes, animals are not money-making tools or machines. For example, Mrs. Ericson milks their twenty-one cows by hand instead of using mechanical milkers. Due to the limited volume and a lack of creamery nearby, it is hard to have a truck to come to fetch and transport their milk to creamery far away so as to make profits. The practical way is to expand the scale by raising more cows and applying automation of practices. However, in such kind of large-scale milk industry, dairy cows are tortured due to over lactation for intense milk production, for they are "constantly kept pregnant through artificial insemination in order to keep milk yields high, and this leads to eventual fatigue. Cows use so many of their own nutrients in producing milk that their organs begin to deteriorate..." (Aaltola, 2012, p. 38). What's worse, "Large udders can cause considerable unease for cows, ... Lameness is the most typical problem for dairy cows" (Ibid., p. 38). The Ericsons know it well and choose not to make concession to the market at the sacrifice of animals' welfare.

They show respect and concern to animals by letting them live in a natural state. For instance, the chickens and geese move freely instead of being stuck in battery cages. Besides, they feed the animals with natural hay instead of silage from silos. Despite various animals they raise, the number of each species is limited. For them, animals are not commodities but friends, whose natural instincts and needs are respected. Moreover, humans and animals have direct contact with one another. The animals are no more market produces crammed in dark cages or aluminum alloy pen.

Although the Ericsons adhere to organic farming, they nearly end in bankruptcy later. Finally, they have to sell their farm to Larry and move back to Chicago. Mrs. Ericson's words to Ginny before their leaving sound sad but thought-provoking—"We just can't make it here. We don't know enough about farming" (Smiley, 2008, p. 135). It sounds ironic. The people having strong bond with animals lose their farm to those who exploit animals to their last blood. The truth is that the Ericsons know farming well, but they refuse to accept the highly mechanized factory farming.

Their failure reveals a cruel fact that it is arduous for organic farming to develop in a consumerism society which worships a maximization of profits. For farmers, organic farming means far more cost of time, energy and fund. What's more, the traditional farming usually is carried out on a small scale. When large funds flow into factory farming to satisfy global market, the small businesses are swallowed up by big ones, and the big ones are swallowed up by those bigger ones. In the end, the agriculture market will be monopolized by only a small number of agriculture tycoons, like Monsanto or Cargill. When capital keeps on accumulating in a few business tycoons' hands, are more often than not determined by them too, which can largely explain why battery cages are still in use today despite great cruelty to caged hens. Peter Singer once criticizes that large corporations and

assembly-line methods of production turn agriculture into agribusiness without any concern about the harmony among plants, animals, and nature. Under such a competitive farming system aiming at cutting costs and increasing production, animals are “treated like machines that convert low-priced fodder into high-priced flesh” (Singer, 2002, p. 97).

Conclusion

In brief, behind the two-farming-pattern conflict lies the conflict between two different perceptions of human-animal relationships. In factory farming, human-animal relationship is a kind of relationship between exploiters and the exploited. Animals are commodities used as instruments for humans to earn profits. To maximize the interests is what they pursue in capital markets. In such a profit-oriented farming system, animals are huddled together in limited space, fed with cheap feed, antibiotics, and hormones, and transported to slaughterhouses to be killed. In their short life, too many of them have no chance to stand in the sunlight, not even for a second. By contrast, in organic farming, human-animal relationship is a kind of relationship between the caring and the cared. Animals’ needs are satisfied, and their habits are respected. There’s much harmonious communication between animals themselves as well as between humans and animals.

Both the expansion of factory farming and the failure of organic farming in *A Thousand Acres* reveal that the market-oriented tenet of maximizing interests in factory farming doesn’t allow any human-animal emotion and compassion. Animals are objectified as pure products and instruments at humans’ disposal, while their tortures are continuously ignored. The criticism of inhumane treatment of animals in factory farming reflects Smiley’s anti-instrumentalist idea of human-animal relationship. She calls our attention to animals’ sufferings in factory farming and warns us of the difficulty in changing the intensive farming system. In a word, there’s still a long way ahead to prevent animal cruelty in factory farming.

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