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Deciphering Silences: Comprehending the discourses of victimisation in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

Abstract

Trauma Studies, since its inception as a distinct interdisciplinary realm of study with Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), has been anatomizing fictional as well as autobiographical narratives with its proclaimed aim of delineating the complexly lodged memories of victimization that are conducive to trauma. However the multitudes of expression that victimization has found in the various feministic and post colonial discourses ideologically overlooks certain crucial dimensions of it, which has been addressed by the Man Booker International prize winning South Korean novel by Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*. A deft descend into the vortex-like depths of human psyche, the novel commingles multiple comprehensions of victimization and trauma often diverging from the anthropocentric touchstones. This paper essays to dismember and interpret the novel with an intention of claiming voice to the *other* dimensions of victimization and justifying their significance, in the light of certain concepts and statements by theoreticians including Jean Francois Lyotard, Jacques Lacan and Cathy Caruth.

Keywords: Trauma Narratives, Victimisation, deferend, Anthropocentrism, Otherness.

The introduction of the discourses of trauma in its interdisciplinary incarnation into the academic parlance is a 'phenomenon' of recent history, the spores of which were sown by Cathy Caruth, who is Frank H. T. Rhodes Professor in Department of English and Comparative Literature at Cornell University after her successful career at Yale and Emory.

Notwithstanding Freud's canon that explores the unconscious mechanisms of the human psyche and the gargantuan repertoire of Holocaust literature that dealt with the trauma of war, Caruth's groundbreaking work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996) is generally considered as the first work to have addressed the furtive functionalities of trauma and the immediacy of the reparation that the situation demands. The term Trauma indicates an extremely harrowing incident or 'Phrase' in the Lyotardian terminology, that gets firmly embedded into the psyche of the victim and refusing an acknowledgement of its presence eventuates in a concatenation of negatively charged phrases including psychological complexities, tempestuous relations etc.

The significance of understanding the clandestine mechanisms and modus operandi of trauma is crucial considering its pervasive presence in this animated sphere that sustains us. The perfidious nature of traumatic expressions abets trauma's evasion of the victim's cognition and misguides the people around him/her in their understanding of the victim. This mendacious nature of trauma should be understood on account of the circumstances of the production of trauma. Traumatic experiences which are undesirable for the consciousness to retain are drained into the abyss of the victim's unconscious mind which in fact is a dynamic vortex from where they tend to surface intermittently, which in less intense conditions satisfy their need for expression through dreams or Freudian slips. Trauma, depending on the intensity of the *Traumatic Stressor* that causes it or the stimuli that triggers it from its *latency*, can take disastrous guises tearing down the good pages ahead in the individual history of the victim or even the collective history of the community or the nation that he/she forms a part of. The regenerative quality of trauma amplifies its magnitude as it implies that the birth of a victim initiates a chain reaction, the repercussions of which are capable of defying generational boundaries in its act of infection. Thus one can also proclaim with conviction that an expedition into the *fons et origo* of every occurrences of anti social behavior can unveil an instance of trauma. This is where a meld of literature and psychoanalysis becomes the savior incarnate. The eldest progenies of this holy propinquity, the one which possess a higher aesthetic appeal are the ones dubbed Trauma Narratives by the literary intelligentsia. Trauma Narratives are the fictional narratives that cater to the readers as well as their writers in their praiseworthy endeavors to disentangle trauma. Cathy Caruth, amidst her discussion of trauma in the light of Freud's psychoanalytic reading of Tasso's romantic epic *Gerusalemme Libberata* enlightens her readers on this respect in the Introduction to her *Unclaimed Experiences* (1996):

“If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing, and it is at this specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience and the language of literature meet.”(3)

Han Kan’s novel *The Vegetarian* (2016) fits neatly as an exemplar of trauma narratives, an adept descender into the human psyche that justifies every bit of the accolades showered on her on account of this novel, including the coveted Man Booker International Prize, 2016. The novel represents various grave disputes that qualify as crucial concerns in the present scenario of trauma studies, comprising among others the ideologically or otherwise concealed backyards of the act of victimization and the often surreptitious anthropocentric notions of trauma. The novel also provides glimpses of the potentially catastrophic nature of childhood trauma in the life of the protagonist, Yeong Hye, which unfolds through a non linear narrative framework glued with dreams and memories. The diegesis that unfolds in three sections titled *The Vegetarian*, *Mangolian Mark* and *Flaming*

Trees, which commences with the first person narrative of Yeong Hye’s husband Mr Cheong, takes the reader aboard on a vicarious exploration of the cryptic caverns of human psyche often blurring to the point of extinction the margins that divide the realms of sanity and insanity. This peregrination that intends to trace the anfractuous footprints of trauma is provided with an appropriate initiation in the narration of Mr. Cheong which introduces the ‘unremarkable’ woman, Yeong Hye. Supervening their ‘peaceful’ existence the episodes of trauma begin, when in the middle of a night Yeong Hye is discovered glaring blankly at the refrigerator complaining of a dream, the contents of which refuse to articulate even to Mr. Cheong until late in the novel when she manages to give it a voice, although superficially, before In Hye. In one of those deafening expressions of imposed silences, she finds herself trapped inside a rolled in straw matting in a red barn like building: “A long bamboo stick strung with great, blood-red gashes of meat, blood still dripping down. Try to push past but the meat, there is no end to the meat, and no exit. Blood in my mouth, blood-soaked clothes sucked onto my skin” (12) The frantic dreams testify to the intense tribulations that Yeong Hye is undergoing in her grapple with the asphyxiating sensations of guilt. The dramatic episodes of insomnia are followed by her unforeseen decision to abjure meat to become an absolute vegetarian.

A thorough perusal of the novel manifests the actual roots of her trauma which can be traced back to the violent conditioning that characterises Yeong Hye’s childhood. The

conformity that the society demands of her deprives her of her entitlement to her own embodied existence. When read silhouetted against the grey hues of her past, the root cause of her aversion can be traced back to the oppression that she is forced to contend with, from the male as well as female representatives of her family. Albeit not directly from the later, they too, though inadvertently, qualify as perpetrators of this *fait accompli*. Yeong Hye appears as a victim of childhood trauma, the dormant traits of which could be read as having “rejuvenated” with the eventless, vegetative and objectified existence with her husband who married her just on account of her passive personality. The stage is set with Mr.Cheong’s words:

“There is no need to affect intellectual leanings in order to win her over, or to worry that she might be comparing me to the preening men who pose in fashion catalogues, and she didn’t get worked up if I happened to be late for one of our meetings. The paunch that started appearing in my mid-twenties, my skinny legs and forearms that steadfastly refused to bulk up in spite of my best efforts, the inferiority complex that I used to have about the size of my penis- I could rest assured that I wouldn’t have to fret about such things on her account”(3).

Yeong Hye’s intense repugnance towards meat, while it limns her indignation at and an intense urge to cut her loose from any unholy nexus that binds her in obligation to be a partaker in the atrocities that humanity embodies, also symbolizes a compulsion to catapult oneself to the realm of the transcendental which the tranquility of plant life depicts. This rebellion manifests at its extreme when, at the family meeting, on not complying with their demands to consume meat, her father resorts to physical violence and attempts to force feed her. We find her shrieking in anguish like an ‘animal’, brandishing a fruit knife at the others and slitting her own wrist. The incident is bound to bring under surveillance, justifiably, the varying intensities of violence that permeates Yeong Hye’s past. However, a question that should educe is that WHAT counts as violence according to the trauma theoretician’s touchstone. Jonathan Hart defines violence as the one that can “occur in misunderstanding or trying to obliterate the other, be it willful or through ignorance or ideological blindness or hatred.”(13, Hart) In case of Yeong Hye along with every other character in this novel, the replicas of which walk by unnoticed amidst our quotidian affairs, ideological blindness could be held responsible for orchestrating the eerie symphonies of violence. The distressing apparitions of her traumatic past follow her into her adult life instilling in her a desire to break away from the confinements of her embodied self that exist solely as a medium of the dolours.

An exacerbation in the traumatic course occurs with the acute guilty conscience that sprouts from her musings over the contiguities of victimhood that binds her in close proximity with the animals she victimized, igniting a conflagration of concerns regarding the nature of victimization. The abrupt abjuring of meat could thus be described as proceeding from an *Identification with the Aggressor*. *Identification with the Aggressor*, although a term coined by Sandor Ferenczi, in the present connotation it found an endorser in Anna Freud's book *The Ego and The Mechanisms of Defence* (1936) in which she elucidates the concept, besides the other ideas like Denial in Fantasy, Denial in word and deed, Restriction of Ego etc as a defense against painful affects. Yeong Hye's juxtaposition of both cases of victimization brings in the anagnorisis positing her as an active perpetrator of the same autarchic ideals that she despises in her father. Yeong Hye's deeply etched memory as a passive perpetrator of violence, in which she describes the brutal punishment that her dog

Whitey suffers at the hands of her father as a 'punishment' for biting her. Its singed tail is wound around her wound. After having tied it to a tree he scorches it with a lamp and later is tied to a motorcycle as he drives in circle:

"The motorcycle engine starts, and Father begins to drive in circle. The dog runs along behind... Without moving a muscle I stand just inside the gate watching Whitey, eyes rolling and gasping for breath, gradually exhaust himself. Every time his gleaming eyes meet my own I glare even more fiercely. Bad dog, you'd bite me?.. At six laps, the dog vomits blackish-red blood, trickling from its mouth and open throat. As blood and froth mix together, I stand stiffly upright and stare at those two glittering eyes... That evening there was a feast ... The saying goes that for a wound caused by a dog bite to heal you have to eat that same dog... I remember the two eyes that had watched me, while the dog was made to run on,... and how later they had seemed to appear, flickering, on the surface of the soup. But I don't care. I really didn't care." (42)

Jean Francois Lyotard in his most influential *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (1983) explicates his concept of *victim*. He describes the victim as the wronged person in the case of a *differend*, which he describes as

'the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be put into phrases cannot yet be. This state includes silence, which is a negative

phrase, but it also calls on phrases which are in principle possible. This state is signalled by what one ordinarily calls a feeling' (22).

The silence and suffering that characterises the wrong, the Lyotardian term for “a damage accompanied by the loss of means to prove the damage”, can be seen as the probable binding factor that makes possible for Yeong Hye the identification with her victims- the animals, as well as her oppressors simultaneously. Yeong Hye's compunction, that even pushes her to the eddies of insanity, can be read as an offspring of this collation of two instances of victimisation, in both of which she could find the pain of silence. Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* consciously or unconsciously takes part in a revolution that seeks to splinter the shackles of anthropocentric ideology that has for long times refused to recognise the silence that humans inflict on animals. The trauma narrative, that *The Vegetarian* is, thus can be viewed as a *differend* that recognises this wrong and appeals for just reparation especially as it comes from a country which is considered a carnivore's paradise.

Yeong Hye's dilemma actually sheds light on the similarity in the production of others in a society, a process that mostly has been seen in a human context. While there have been aberrations in this theory in the form of the ecocritical, ecofeminist approaches towards literature, their superficial nature and inability to relate to the human condition has led to a visible plummet in the significance they enjoyed. Victimisations and inflictions of trauma have never been devoid of its justifications, irrespective of whether the context is human or non-human. The discourses of civilisation, practicality, morality and maturity had been, along with the rest of the siblings, busy making way for the oppressor. Edward Said acknowledges the same in his discussion of the Occident's 'noble' venture of civilising the East:

Every single empire in its official discourse has said that it is not like all the others, that its circumstances are special, that it has a mission to enlighten, civilize, bring order and democracy, and that it uses force only as a last resort. And, sadder still, there always is a chorus of willing intellectuals to say calming words about benign or altruistic empires, as if one shouldn't trust the evidence of one's eyes watching the destruction and the misery and death brought by the latest mission *civilizatrice*.”(Preface, xvi)

The genesis of subjectivity in a child can be traced back to its birth itself. The inception of the labyrinthine structures of one's conscience, from the very beginning is influenced by the social context, which includes the gestures, sounds, actions etc., into which one is placed.

Parent/child interaction and its reverberations in the child's adult life have been subjected to research by various psychoanalysts like Jacques Lacan and Daniel Stern. Jacques Lacan, in his essay *Marriage as a Psychological Relationship* explains that even choice of a marriage partner is influenced by certain unconscious motivations that emanates from the child's relation to the parents: "The relationship of a young man to his mother, and of the girl to her father, is the determining factor in this respect. It is the strength of the bond to the parents that unconsciously influences the choice of husband or wife, either positively or negatively"(48). A mother's contribution in the formation of inter-subjectivity in a child is considered crucial owing to her performance as a secure psychic vessel, thus facilitating the child in fantasising, memorising or in short delineating sense out of the world before letting it in. However, childhood under the shadow of a traumatised mother can impede this process at times even leading to repercussions beyond reparation. The life of the sisters Yeong Hye and In Hye is presented as have been a continuous torment, administered by the circumstances of which trauma takes different forms in their existences. While Yeong Hye develops an extreme hatred for humanity and eventually derails into insanity, In In Hye trauma transmutes into, what the distinguished Hungarian psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi christened, *Compulsive care-giving*. During his well known episodes of psychoanalysis with Elizabeth Severn, he discovered in himself as in with many others, 'a tendency to become the best possible mother to his patients, the reason for which , he assumes, was that he was never loved by his mother as much as he wanted.' Their mother's helplessness in adhering to the fulfilment of this biological necessity, and In Hye's position of being the elder among the two sisters seems to have ingrained in her a motherly responsibility towards Yeong Hye, a psychological process called *Parentification*. This involves the formation of a deep seated conviction in the psyche of a child, belonging to an emotionally dysfunctional family, that he/she is responsible for the family's emotional well being. However, these behavioural modifications can engender a condition wherein the child imbibes the quality of emotional regulation often with detrimental impacts on their adult interpersonal relationships.

The understanding of the consequences of *Parentification* in In Hye is necessary in understanding another instance of *differend* in the novel- that of In Hye's husband. In Hye's parentification, while it results in her acquiring better control over her emotions could be seen as assuming a different trajectory as it lets her find agency in a life characterised by a continuous silencing of selfhood. The urge for *Parentification* ensuing from her traumatic childhood, also entails an *Identification with the Aggressor*, in the sense Sandor Ferenczi used it. Ferenczi's

concept involves, in contrast to Anna Freud's concept of the same name, a fondness towards the oppressor, which has been interpreted as a propensity for the dominance that the oppressor embodies, albeit not necessarily the person him/herself. In Hye's quest for this sense of agency can be seen reflected in every choice of her life, including her job as well as a husband, in a way reminiscent of Lacan's words that has been quoted earlier in this paper.

A *deferend* encompasses an instance of conflict wherein an equitable adjudication is rendered impossible due to the absence of any legal language applicable to both. In Hye's husband's trauma issues from such a chaotic occurrence- an incongruous marriage. In Hye's *animus*, which could be said to have been directly influenced by her ambiguous relation with the patriarchal monarch, that her father was, proves decisive in her choice of husband, which has similarities with Mr. Cheong's choice of his wife. However, the stark distinction in individuality that her husband possess on account of being an artist for whom art exists as an act of sublimation of his innermost afflictions and desires, a wife who doesn't share the language of art proves an impasse in communication leading to infinite silences. Han Kang's dual representation of the male vantage point could be read as an analysis of what one might call the *Male Condition*. The initial representation of the male point of view could be found in the first person narrative of Mr. Cheong, which provides a picture of his perspective on Yeong hye as one devoid of an ability to understand the *other*. Though at the superstructure level it can be misleading since it steers the reader to a popular feminist reading of a patriarchal flat character, a comprehension of the later account of the inner life of In Hye's husband, his remaining unnamed throughout the novel and his traumatic encounters with art and sexuality provides an insight into the substructures that seeks to evade a judgement based on the male-female discernment, in favour of an understanding of every individual as separate entities with unique experiences that configure their psychic lives. As the Feministic discourses, that have been and are promulgating dawns of liberation for the oppressed womanhood, tend to stoop to the politics of the same patriarchy that they have opposed and metamorphose the *terra firma* on which the noble agendas of the movement were grounded into a biased ideological cognition by refusing to judge an individual and the behavioural traits he/she embodies as a product of the residues of their past experiences, flawed judgements ensue igniting another concatenation of traumatic lives.

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