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The Vegetarian: journey of a woman's psyche

Abstract:

This paper tries to delineate a woman's journey from being submissive to societal norms to her metamorphosis into a self which is not sane in conventional way but which gives her all the courage to subvert all the rules and regulations. A violent, brutal dream changes her altogether. She begins to repel all the meat products and becomes a vegetarian. Han Kang in her novel *The Vegetarian* deals with psychological, social taboos and the protagonist's journey to evade all those. Han Kang has created an appealing portrait of a woman who resembles many of the common women who are used to submit to their patriarchal guardians. But Kang's protagonist Yeong-hye transcends the social barrier. Her psychiatric imbalance gives her strength to raise her voice against those who have always oppressed her and to have courage to think and act as she has desired. Kang has contrasted this portrayal with another character – In-hye, the elder sister of the protagonist who has always conformed to social norms in spite of ideas to break free of them because of her rational attitude which comes from her so called sanity. This paper deals with this psychological journey.

Keywords: Psyche, society, norms, psychology, dream.

Han Kang the South Korean novelist offers an intriguing insight of woman's psyche in her novel *The Vegetarian* which becomes lucid in the translation of Deborah Smith. The paper tries to delineate the dormant protest lying within the mind of a completely reticent conventional housewife who finally makes herself free from bondage which is meaningless and derogatory. The novel depicts a unique transformation of a woman from her human self to a self of nature to her vegetable self.

From the very beginning of the novel the male psychology is clearly stated in the desire of Yeong-hye's husband –

The passive personality of this woman in whom I could detect neither freshness nor charm, or anything especially refined, suited me down to the ground. (Kang 3)

The male chauvinism always covets to be dominant irrespective of his inferiority –

... the inferiority complex I used to have about the size of my penis (Kang 3)

So when he gets a woman without any expectation in return he feels much comfortable as 'More than likely she would spend the time reading, which was practically her only hobby.' (Kang 4-5) though he himself detests reading, he feels it to be good for his wife as it keeps her busy and silent. But he becomes unaware of the fact that this reticence can turn into the cause of extreme irritation when he is not answered at all. It only suggests man's duplicity that he wants his wife to be submissive or full of voice according to his own will. This passiveness of a wife, so much desirous for a husband creates only distance between them resulting in the relation to be going on the verge of breaking down when Yeong -hye only answers – '... I had a dream' (Kang 8) in response to repeated questions regarding his strange behaviour of wearing only a thin night dress in -10 degree Celsius temperature and observing the freezer in a way as if she has lost all her sense.

The husband who finds it satisfactory that his wife does not speak any word except doing the household chores now feels 'the loneliness of the cruel season' (Kang 8). But he is solely responsible for it. Mr. Cheong completely failed to build up a relationship with his wife and when he gets rejection in the form of silent firmness he is lost with rage.

You are insane! You've completely lost it. (Kang 11)

The insanity here carries a significance because the man who is used to get his wife to manage everything for him now becomes attacking for his utter failure to perceive the psychological problem that his wife is suffering from. On the other hand Yeong -hye just maintained her 'calm tone of voice' (Kang 10). After five years marriage she has certainly developed some psychological issues which now she wants to address. As she never expected anything from her husband now she begins her fight not answering to him, and doing some bizarre things by throwing away all the meats from the freezer. While she always seems to be very submissive this act only shows her strength of mind with which she has taken the decision of dumping all

the meats or eggs without explaining it to her husband except a single statement 'I had a dream'

She does not feel it to be necessary to make her husband aware of her dream which is written in italics for the readers only-

But the fear. My clothes still wet with blood. Hide, hide behind the trees. Crouch down, don't let anybody see. My bloody hands. My bloody mouth. In that barn, what had I done? Pushed that red raw mass into my mouth, felt it squish against my gum, the roof of my mouth, slick with crimson blood. (Kang 12)

The dream is described so vividly that it can be visualised. The dream certainly is the image of her suppressed thoughts, her subdued frights, her concealed pain, her want of happiness which she never gets. This perhaps gets the visualisation in her dream as 'Families picnicking, little children running about...' (Kang 12).

Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* states-

All the material making up of the content of a dream is in some way derived from experience, that is to say has been reproduced or remembered in the dream so much at least we may regard as undisrupted fact. But it would be a mistake to suppose that a connection of this kind between the content of a dream and reality is bound to come to light easily ... the connection may long remain hidden. (44)

In her subconscious Yeong- hye has dreamt of a happy family with 'the sounds of singing and happy laughter' (Kang 12), but she is constantly thwarted away. Her sensitivity is never addressed by anyone. This can be traced to Freud's proposition in *The Interpretation of Dreams* – 'No one who occupies himself with dreams can . . . fail to discover that is a very common event for a dream to give evidence of knowledge and memories which the waking subject is unaware of possessing. (47)

The bloody image of herself which she has seen and the blood dripping down the flesh represents her inner self which is similarly torn and from which blood is flowing. The lurid sensational dream of blood certainly reminds of Lady Macbeth's sleep walking scene. Though Lady Macbeth is suffering from her own guilty conscience for committing heinous crime, Yeong- hye herself is the victim. She is completely devastated with the violence which she met perhaps everyday in the form of negligence. From Freudian point of view in his

book *The Interpretation of Dreams* – ‘Dreams . . . think predominantly in visual images . . . They make auditory images as well to a lesser extent, of impressions belonging to other senses.’(79)

The dream is grotesque and it affects the psyche with its gory images. The inner feelings of being hurt and bleed is visualised in the lines

My face, the look in my eyes . . . my face undoubtedly, but never seen before. Or no, not mine, but so familiar . . . nothing makes sense. Familiar and yet no . . . that vivid, strange, horribly uncanny feelings. (Kang 12)

In this respect the Freudian concept in *The Interpretation of Dreams* goes thus-

The transformation of ideas into hallucinations is not the only respect in which dreams differ from corresponding thoughts in waking life. Dreams construct a *situation* out of these images; they represent an event which is actually happening; . . . they ‘dramatize’ an idea. (79)

Han Kang in an interview to Sarah Shin for the magazine *The White Review* has said, “Yeong –hye only has a voice in very brief dream monologues, so the image of this singularly tough determined woman is gathered into an imperfect composite, through the gazes and voices around her. I am concerned with stories and certain moments of truth which cannot be told using traditional modes of narration.”

The crisis of identity is crucial. Finally she proclaims to be a vegetarian and thrushes her husband with her words –

Well, after all, you usually only eat breakfast at home. And I suppose you often have meat with your lunch and dinner, so. . . it’s not as if you’ll die if you go without meat just for one meal. (Kang 13)

The wife, who never asserts herself except for not wearing brassieres for it is uncomfortable to her, just takes her own decision of not eating or cooking meat. The importance of these lines has been analysed by the novelist herself in an interview for *Bookanista* –

Koreans don't usually declare they are vegetarian because they can just avoid meat from the meat table which is full of vegetables anyway even when meat is served. So to declare "I am a vegetarian" as my protagonist Yeong-hye does is to make a big statement. For her it is a way to protest against the violence humans live with and take for granted. The reason that I chose vegetarianism is that it could be seen as a perfectionist way of being pure, in that it's not committing any kind of violence.

Han Kang in the same interview has said –

I purposely did not give any voice to Yeong-hye. She is observed as an object sometimes of hatred, sometimes of fear and pity or compassion and sometimes the object of complete misunderstanding. I wanted readers to work out her true face.

The dinner party of Mr. Cheong completely disrupts with Yeong-hye's behaviour. First of all her not wearing any bra carries a great attention among them (wives of his bosses). Then she just calmly rejected all dish of meat and upon several issue of being a vegetarian and several attacks and pinches to her do not move her. She ate only fruits, salads, and kimchi. Her husband, utterly disappointed, frustrated and enraged realises somehow that arguing with his wife will be of no use. As eventually he informed his parents-in-law, in law, and sister in law, it becomes obvious that Yeong-hye is untouched with any of their concerns. When the dinner party was going on the wife of the boss pinched Yeong-hye –

A balanced diet goes hand in hand with a balanced mind, don't you think? (Kang 23-24)

Even if we ignore this pinching remark throughout the party, we cannot ignore the psychological setting of Yeong-hye. Her behaviour certainly calls to our mind that she is completely ignorant of the outside world. Yeong-hye's mental trauma which is certainly there for quite a long period of time can certainly be traced back to the negligence of her husband and her father's treatment of her as she was beaten by her father. Father and husband being two immensely important persons in any woman's life play a significant role in the building of one psychological status. According to her husband she is the most ordinary women in the world. He has never given her any credential which a wife deserves. He is accustomed to dominate his wife. Yeong-hye has never gathered courage to defy any of the two previously

as they have always dominated her, but in her present psychological state she can do this with ease. Her behavioural disorder is part of her self-protection. Ultimately she reaches a position when her father has to apologise to her husband for her ill-behaviour and her husband feels helpless as he fails to control her. Her father described as a 'patriarchal' (Kang 29) person feels himself guilty as his daughter is not submitting to her husband anymore. She has taken this stance perhaps as a defence mechanism. But her consecutive dream of murder and blood is a sign that she is a victim of violence and it is the result of a trauma which she has been undergoing for long.

As she apparently loses her mental balance her husband is getting restless for being physically dissatisfied. He just rapes her and she reacts as 'somehow sorted itself out during the time I'd spent washing myself'. (Kang 31) she has never got the love associated with physical relationship. It was all a mechanical process only to increase her mental trauma. This situation is worsened when all the family have gathered to make Yeong-hye eat some meat. She thwarted everything and finally just proclaimed – 'I won't eat it.' (Kang 37) The whole scene of forcing Yeong-hye to eat meat shows how the relationship is crumbling. Yeong-hye now stoically defies the violence both mental and physical. But the truth that she is psychologically shattered is evident from her attempt of suicide.

Daniel Hahn in his review of *The Vegetarian* in 'The Guardian' has written-

Across the three parts, we are pressed up against a society's most inflexible structure-expectations of behaviour, the workings of institutions- and we watch them fail one by one. The novel repeatedly shows the frictions between huge passion and chilling detachment, between desires that are fed and those that are denied. With such violence in these characters' internal words, and such a maddening external impassiveness, those inner passions and bound to break out somehow and it won't be pretty.

The novel creates an image of woman who is representative of every woman who wants to break free of this norms and regulations. Yeong-hye finds herself to ignore all these only by taking step that would stir the base of order in a family. Her decision creates a total disorder but she remains unaware of it. All of her behaviour cannot be interpreted as intentional. She certainly has some psychiatric problem to be addressed, but the causes of her psychiatric imbalance are the main concerns that should be dealt. It is noteworthy that only when she becomes psychologically shattered she finds a voice to deny and defy her family

members who are more interested to make her submit to them, rather than improving her health condition. But Yeong-hye wants to be free from all bondage. Body needs to be free at first to make the soul free. For this emancipation she has lost all her emotion, feelings, and sensitivity. She no longer bothers to be naked in front of everyone. She seems to be devoid of her identity determined by her body. Her breasts are burden to her- 'even though I've stopped wearing a bra, I can feel this lump all the time. No matter how deeply I inhale, it doesn't go away.' (Kang 49). She is obsessed with the idea that meat has created lumps in her body and it is solely responsible for her burden. She is traumatized with the idea of eating meat-

Yells and howls, threaded together layer upon layer, are enmeshed to form that lump. Because of meat. I ate too much meat. . . Blood and flesh, all those butchered bodies are scattered in every nook and cranny, though the physical remnants were excreted, their lives still stick stubbornly to my insides. . . . Nobody can help me. Nobody can save me. Nobody can make me breathe. (Kang 49)

Yeong-hye reaches such a state of depression that she clenches a white little bird and is completely indifferent to it-

A bird which had been crushed in her grip tumbled to the bench. (Kang 52)

Bearing violence constantly Yeong-hye has turned herself violent without even knowing.

The second part of the novel deals with the of Yeong-hye's response to physical and sexual issues. The title 'Mongolian Mark' is quite interesting. They are actually birthmarks of blue or grey-blue in colour which appears mainly in buttocks or lower part of the body. In-hye's husband, Yeong-hye's brother in law found Yeong-hye mysteriously interesting though she is much less beautiful than his wife In-hye; while Mr. Cheong has always regarded In-hye to be more attractive than his wife. To his brother in law Yeong-hye 'radiated energy like a tree that grows in the wilderness, denuded and solitary.' (Kang 64). He becomes obsessive of her Mongolian marks. Comparing Yeong-hye with a tree is quite interesting as we find that finally she thinks of herself a tree. She makes herself solitary and indifferent like a plant which is not bothered by the treatment of either cruelty or care done to it.

In-hye's husband as an artist makes a proposal to Yeong-hye of body painting. While he is totally embarrassed and tensed while making the proposal, Yeong-hye maintains composure. It seems she is little amused to be painted on her naked body by him. As she

loves to be naked when she is alone, she does not find any problem regarding acceptance of the proposal. In-hye's husband's constant sexual erection is contrasted to the calm indifferent acceptance of Yeong-hye to be the model. She desperately tries to break free of everything around her and through her activity she is finally able to make a complete detachment from everything.

The second part 'Mongolian Mark' is complex with its nuances of aestheticism, sensuality and sexuality. This part is a vivid psychological statement regarding the relationship status of In-hye, her husband and Yeong-hye. Yeong-hye has aroused sexual desire in her brother in law while he is shooting the painting on her body. But this sexuality finally evaporates as gradually he realises that Yeong-hye's body is plant like and the vitality of life is being squeezed out. Relationships and their utter failures reach the point of desperation and starkness. In -hye and her husband do not have any sexual interaction but to satisfy his urge to have sex with Yeong- hye he uses his wife. But Yeong-hye does not have any sexual desire for her brother in law. She has some sort of composure while the process has been going on. Perhaps in the depth of her psyche there is only repulsion. As she has previously been victim of a routine mechanical sex, when she found someone attracted to her she could not find the space for her desire to open up properly. She was quite indifferent when she was being shot naked. She loves her painting. She does not want her painting to get washed off. While being shot she was intimate with J and she became wet but she said she is aroused by the flowers painted on J's body and not the body itself. She has been thinking of herself as a plant. To In-hye's husband the Mongolian mark is 'against a background of silence, a soundless harmony recalling something primeval, something eternal.'(Kang 94)

On the other hand, the relationship between In-hye and her husband was crumbled even before he was attracted to Yeong-hye because of her Mongolian mark. In-hye's mental agony is worth noting and more pathetic in the last part of this section when she sees her husband naked with his body painted lying with her sister's painted naked body. Yeong -hye now completely lives in her own world and almost transforms herself into a tree-

She thrust her glittering golden breast over the veranda railing. Her legs were covered with scattered orange petals, and she spread them wide as though she wanted to make love to the sunlight, to the wind. (Kang 118)

Claire Armitstead explains Yeong -hye's obsession with being naked in her interview with Han Kang for *The Guardian*-

. . . in *The Vegetarian* in which a young woman, Yeong-hye, rejects her body, as if in an attempt to erase the violence done to it by a society personified in her father, her husband, and – in a florid body painting scene – by her sister’s artist husband.

In the third part of the novel ‘*Flaming Trees*’ the relationship between two sisters and the contrast between their mind is explored. In-hye is presented as agonised yet stoical figure who has tried to maintain everything in her life sanely unlike her sister. In-hye is a responsible mother. When Yeong –hye disappeared in the hospital In-hye could not think of her as her son is ill. But their connection is established by rain-

Only after she had hung up did it occur to her that the rain she had seen all day must have been pouring down on the mountain where Yeong-hye had been found too. An indiscriminate connection, their existences briefly aligned. (Kang 126-127)

Throughout the narrative dream plays a significant role. In-hye too has dreams in her trance while looking after her ill son. In hye in her dream sees her sister Yeong-hye who is doing a handstand in the dream. Yeong- hye in the dream is saying-

. . . leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands . . . they delve down into the earth. Endlessly, endlessly . . . yes, I spread my legs because i wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch; I spread them wide. . . (Kang 127)

This part of the novel deals with the psychological state of In-hye. Her world is completely devastated by her husband’s betrayal and at the same time she is constantly agonised with Yeong-hye’s predicament. While comforting her ill son, In-hye said, ‘It’s okay now’ (Kang 128) it ‘wasn’t clear who these words are intended to comfort; the boy or herself’ (Kang 128). In-hye with her motherly affection for her sister is struggling to find that her sister is losing herself as well as her-

What seemed to be happening was that Yeong-hye was retreating from herself, becoming as distant to herself as she was to her sister. A forlorn face behind a mask of composure. (Kang 130)

In-hye continues to be the caregiver of her sister who is psychologically obsessed with the thought that she is a tree. In her initial stage of this disorder she spoke with others but now she is confined to closed ward and ‘she’d taken to squatting down in a sunny spot

where she wouldn't be disturbed and muttering incessantly to herself On sunny days she would press herself up against the window; unbutton her hospital gown and bare her breasts to the sun.(Kang 138). Yeong-hye is certainly suffering from schizophrenia 'where the subject refuses to eat' (Kang141). When Yeong -hye is shifted to critical ward she gets satisfied to see big trees from her window. When Yeong-hye was suffering from such conditions she used to live in her own imaginary world but In-hye continued to suffer as she did not understand the concepts of her sister's bizarre imagination but sees her from the perspective of so called sanity. Yeong -hye stands on her head quite often and when In-hye asks her about this, she answers pointing to the window- 'All of them, they're all standing on their heads' (Kang 148). Yeong-hye believes completely that she is transforming into a tree. She saw the same dream that her elder sister had seen that she is becoming a tree. In- hye was completely taken aback hearing the similarity of dreams that both of them had seen. Yeong-hye proclaims –

I need to water my body. I don't need this kind of food, sister. I need water.
(Kang 148)

Yeong-hye finally thinks herself as a tree as all she 'need is sunlight' (Kang 154). Her schizophrenic state of mind is somehow incomprehensible to In-hye. She wants to make her sister sensible explaining that she cannot be a tree for trees do not have the capacity to speak or think. Yeong-hye's response to her elder sister is baffling to her-

You're right. Soon now words and thoughts will all disappear. Soon. (Kang 154)

Han Kang in an interview with Bookanista has said-

Before I wrote *The Vegetarian*, I wrote a short story called 'The Fruit of My Woman' which is a story about a woman who actually turns to a plant. Her husband puts her in a pot to look after her once she has become a plant, but until then they didn't have a good relationship. I wanted to take that further, I began to write this book with that intention, but it just took on a completely different form, very dark.

Throughout the third part In-hye's struggle is seen. While trying to maintain the sanity, the social norms, to live up to expectations demanded from her In-hye finds it despairing. The novel takes a darker shape with Yeong-hye's constant refusal of being treated and eating anything. Her treatment almost goes on the verge of brutality and In-hye is struggling in the same way as her sister. Perhaps In-hye's condition is more pathetic as she has the ability to see everything with so called sanity and reason, a bondage from which her sister has made herself free. In-hye finally confesses to her sister –

I have dreams too, you know. Dreams . . . and I could let myself dissolve into them, let them take me over . . . but surely the dream isn't all there is? We have to wake up at some point, don't we? Because . . . because then . . .
(Kang182)

In -hye represents those who always conform to the worldly law and regulations. The sisters stand in the opposite corner to each other. While In-hye here is an image of the common person who has perhaps got the hint that they should be free of all confinements and restrictions but they are restricted by so called reason of a sane mind which directs them that they cannot break free of every bondage and at some point they have to stop. In -hye sees a black bird which symbolises Yeong- hye –

She sees a black bird flying up toward the dark clouds. The summer sunlight dazzles her eyes, makes them sting, and her gaze cannot follow the bird's flight anymore. (Kang 182)

In-hye fails to fathom the bird's trajectory of flight as she fails to comprehend her sister. As the sunlight stings her eyes her sister's insane actions shatter her. The novels final lines seem to emphasize Yeong-hye's identification with the trees. To In-hye the trees look like 'blazing green fire undulating like the rippling flanks of a massive animal, wild and savage'. (Kang 183)

The novel comes to end with a symbolic note on the journey of a woman's psyche. Yeong-hye's extraordinary and unique protest against all odds and against all injustices done to her, leave a mark on every reader. It is certainly a baffling experience in which the brutality of dream completely takes over one's sensibility. The novel is a journey of a tortured psyche which never gathers courage to speak out in her psychologically balanced state, though when a dream smashes her psychic balance she is able to break free of the

norms. She no longer submits to the social conformity. She starts to exist in a primeval manner. In this so called imbalanced state she finally transcends the social, material, earthly bondage. The protagonist Yeong-hye chooses for her a plant like existence which depends solely on Mother Nature for survival, is complete within itself and most importantly can be completely indifferent to whatever may be done to it be it care or brutality and thus she frees herself from confined, restricted human existence.

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