

From 'Being' to 'Becoming': A Critical Analysis of Han Kang's Novella "The Vegetarian"

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Abstract:

Han Kang is one of the most promising contemporary writer of South Korea. Her novel 'The Vegetarian' (*Cheshik-juuija* in Korean) was awarded with the Man Booker International Prize for fiction in the year 2016. The story takes the readers into journey of exploring different facets of human relations not only with others in a society but also with one's own body and mind. An individual behaves in a certain way, in accordance to its association with external stimuli. The novella is written in three parts, the novella unravels human psyche that consciously /unconsciously engages in building up a wall to combat with traumas that one's body undergoes in relation with other humans and civilization which encompasses: various needs, expectations, instincts, social system, power structures and its functionalities, hierarchal structures which initiates the victor/victim roles and so on. The novella critically engages the readers to think and question about one's body and its experiences, mind and its psychological response or receptions towards certain experiences and mechanism that it employs to combat or deal with trauma.

This study would focus on the first part of the novella, titled- 'The Vegetarian'. The paper would precisely focus on the various underlying shades of trauma that a women's body and mind undergoes while trying to live up to the expectations of the contemporary society .

Keyword: *Women's Body, Trauma, Society, Novella, Gender Hierarchy*

From 'Being' to 'Becoming': From 'Being' to 'Becoming': A Critical Analysis of Han Kang's Novella "The Vegetarian"¹

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Introduction:

Han Kang's novella *The Vegetarian*, originally published in Korean language in 2007 and later translated by Deborah Smith, sets the readers into journey of exploring different facets of human relations not only with others in a society but also with one's own body. Han Kang is an eminent South Korean writer. She won the prestigious Man Booker prize for her novella "The Vegetarian". She began her career as a poet producing five poems including the famous "Winter Seoul". Apart from *Vegetarian*, she has many other popular fictional works to her credit, notable among them are – 'The Black Deer' (1998), 'Your Cold Hand' (2002), 'Breath Fighting' (2010), 'Greek Lessons' (2011), 'Human Acts' (2014) and 'The White Book' (2016). She is also a musician as she has composed and sang a number of songs.

The novel depicts how our body responds in a certain way when it is subjected to various traumatic experiences under different circumstances (the sets of external stimuli), which may or may not adhere to the behavioral norms of the society. Written in three parts, the novella unravels human psyche that consciously /unconsciously engages in building up a wall to combat traumatic experience that one's body undergoes. Our civilization as well as our society is driven by various power structures, norms and hierarchies which forcibly ascribe to the people the role of victim and perpetrator. The novella is critically stimulating as it pushes one to question one's own body and its experiences, its responses or receptions when faced with certain experiences and mechanism that it employs to combat or deal with trauma. In this paper, the focus is laid mainly on the first part which has the same title as that of the novella- 'The Vegetarian'.

The novella adopts the modernist mode of writing as it minutely captures the emotional and internal conflict of the characters. The sense of alienation, the tussle between the individual and social, the self and community has been well portrayed. Modernist writers like Virginia Woolf created a sense of collation through stream of consciousness. Similarly, 'the Vegetarian' has three parts with different narrative voices. The first part of the novel opens in first person narrative voice. What is more striking about the narrative technique is the way a female author takes up the voice of a male protagonist, who introduces us to his wife or rather to her journey from 'being' unnoticed to 'becoming' prominently noticeable. Both the title and content of the story is quiet lucid, however, while reading, one is ought to explore the complexities of the text. The text, on a superficial level, deals with the story of a woman who willingly becomes vegetarian, something which is unusual in a Korean society. Reading through the lines or the

meta- narrative of the story however, introduces the readers another set of complexities based on the issues of gender and how it is controlled through certain power structures. By consciously rejecting ‘meat’, she not only retaliates against violence/trauma that a (women’s) body undergoes while living up to the expectations of the society, but also claims her rights on her own body.

With the purpose of understanding the complexities that are hidden in the lucidity of the text, the reader becomes curious to know as to why does she decide to be a vegetarian in a country (Korea) where the common people are mostly non-vegetarian? Is it just a conscious rejection of ‘meat’ or retaliation against the patriarchal forces? Does her decision of ‘becoming’ a vegetarian pertain to condemning violence against animal or body in general? Is her dream sequence, a matter of melancholic psychological inebriation or a mind’s defense mechanism to protect her body? While drawing an analogy between ‘food’ and ‘flesh’, one also needs to think its relevance in the framework of cultural context. This further complicates the understanding of the text as while reading ‘The Vegetarian’, one needs to question the methodology of analyzing the text through an appropriate theory. The author, in one of her interviews, has mentioned that she has employed various narrative techniques which are generally present in modernist/western literary works. The study further instigates the reader to pose questions on narrative techniques employed by the writer to introduce the protagonist and his wife. For instance, one needs to question the representation of nudity towards the end of text. One also needs to critically analyze this character’s journey from ‘being’ what she is supposed to be in accordance to the codes of conduct of the patriarchal society to her sudden process of ‘becoming’ a ‘vegetarian’ which is perceived as an act of insurgence as against the norms of society.

The plot of the novella not only introduces us to the protagonists of the story, climax and anticlimax, but also knits a tale of transformation/metamorphosis of a woman’s character- who is unattractive, un-reactive, naive, docile and who embodies endurance. She later, however makes a conscious decision related to choice of her food habit and other practices through which she unconsciously attempts to voice out against patriarchal hierarchy. Her dreams help her to develop a defense mechanism against trauma that her body and mind have undergone in due process of being and becoming.

'The Vegetarian'

The protagonist in the very beginning of the story introduces us to his wife who is presented to the readers as an unattractive character who has “less expectation does not speak much and is easy to domesticate”. One of the reasons he mentions about marrying her includes her naïve nature that makes “her outlandish than other women who would have made the protagonist conscious and insecure about his physical and sexual imperfectness.” He liked her not because he found her attractive or appreciated her as a person or a suitable partner but because she proved herself to be an ideal wife who would herald the onus of his household. He rather found her as a woman who can be easily domesticated and she did live up to his expectations in their conjugal life.

In the exposition, she is introduced to the readers by the protagonist as a ‘jaundiced, sickly skin looking...timid’ woman with a ‘passive personality’. The protagonist describes her not in terms of her skills but physical attributes. Even in the climax, after the dream sequence, one can find a description of her body and not her psyche which undergoes a constant turmoil. Thus, her body is presented to us in a way that fails to create a spark of sensuality in one’s mind and rather depicts it as a ‘flesh of meat’ used to fulfill one’s mere hunger. The readers, therefore, are not introduced to the character but the ‘body’ of the character.

Subsequently, we are introduced to the protagonist’s wife and her psyche only after the dream sequence. She is seen to overcome her passivity only after she narrates her dream sequence. She seems to break the walls of domestication after her dream of ‘blood and murder’. While understanding her dream sequence, one encounters disturbing images of assertion of violence on a body precisely that of an animal. One might wonder if her dreams comprise of incongruent images of violence not on human body but on that of an animal, then how does it relate to violence on woman’s body? Or how her conscious rejection of not eating meat and turning vegetarian asserts her act of ‘choice’ which otherwise laid buried under ‘passive... timid’ character that she was forced to embody so far.

As the story unfolds further, we get to understand that the vision of blood and brutality in her dream conveys the internal violence that she feels from the very beginning till the end. Her body, like the blood-soaked body of the animal in her dream struggles to fight for life, for liberation. The dream of violence depicts the act of physical as well as symbolic violence for

the protagonist. Her self-defiant spirit invites more violence from people around her, for example- the incident of her husband forcibly trying to have physical relation with her.

The second part of the novella, 'Mongolian Mark' deals with Yeong hye's brother-in-law who is an artist by profession. However he is yet to produce any significant work of art as he is obsessed with her sister-in-law and her birth mark. He sets on a journey to recreate a form of art that further brings in more complexities in his personal and professional life until he discovers his fetish for his sister-in-law's body and desire for both the sisters. He tries to take advantage of her mental and physical instability, the doctors attempting to brutalize her by a horrid description of tubes down noses, blood and vomit all find a cathartic safeguard in her dream sequence.

The third section of Han Kang's novella, titled 'Flaming Trees' brings the sisters together. The narrative focuses on re-bonding of the sisters who realizes and recollects there trauma related to violent upbringing. Yeong-hye refuses to eat as she is diagnosed with anorexia nervosa. She is on the verge of dying in the lap of destitution and solitariness, when she finds solace in her sister and sisterhood. Although the narrative does not have an explicit mention of the re-union, one can trace the growing bond between the sisters through the interaction happening between the two.

The concept of vegetarianism was not familiar in the west until East India Company ruled India. Similarly, being a vegetarian or turning into a vegetarian is not accepted in many other societal set up, for instance, in South Korea as elaborately mentioned in the first part of the novella. The author introduces us to other characters who are precisely employed in the plot to criticize and discuss about/against being /becoming a vegetarian. There is a particular scene in the plot where the protagonist and his wife attend a party at his Boss's place. On knowing that the protagonist's wife is a vegetarian, the other characters present in the scene start conjecturing or commenting on the act of being/becoming a vegetarian. They did add a religious connotation besides mentioning about the trend of being on a diet where women prefer to eat vegetables. Despite coming up with different connotations, they commonly agreed on a point that vegetarianism makes people weak. We also see a similar view shared by the protagonist himself who describes her visible cheek bones after regular intervals in the narration. One can find a

similar view while reading William Smellie's *Philosophy of Natural History*², written in 1790; in which he described Indians as a "meager, sick and feeble race"³ due to their vegetarian food habits. The protagonist presents us with a petrifying description of sickness that overpowers his wife after she becomes vegetarian. Thus there exists an assumption that being vegetarian makes one feeble and sick. However in this story, the protagonist's wife evolves as a strong character after her dreams, which direct her to become a vegetarian. In the first half of the plot, she is a passive doer who embodies endurance and never raises her voice for anything; for she is unaware of her potentiality of making a choice.

She recognizes her ability of making a choice, of going against conventionality only after knowing her unconscious dreams. She starts questioning everything that once happened or keeps happening around her. She recollects an incident when she witnessed a dog being brutally killed by her father. Although she felt unpleasant after witnessing the way the dog was tortured and was put to death but, the realization of something wrong that was done to the dog came to her consciousness after the dreams. According to Freud, dreams are a part of our unconscious mind that comes in contact with our conscious mind when our psyche is at a state of sleep. The dreams conceived by her unconscious mind awakened her consciousness in a way that took her out from the sleep of passivity and endurance. In the 'Analysis of Dreams', Freud also opines that our repressed desires are pushed to our unconscious mind which reappears in our consciousness while sleeping. Resistance towards violence can be perceived as her repressed desire that has been trampled by the norms the patriarchal society. She has been treated as an object of domestication from the very beginning and never given a room for ventilating her personal desires. It becomes very clear that for a woman to speak out her mind as well as her choice in traditional Korean society remains an act of shame and stigma. The moment she dares to come out of her interiority, she loses the protection and respect of her family. So, the only way through which she can vent out her repressed desires is in her closeted space. That's why, the dream sequence of Yeong comes as a tool of empowerment because there she does not have to act or think according to the whims of her society. As a result of this, the disjunction between reality and dream seems all the more painful to her. Unlike, her dreams, where she has the sole authority

² William Smellie, "Philosophy of Natural History" published in Philadelphia : Printed for Robert Campbell, bookseller, northeast corner of Second and Chestnut Street, 1790.

³ Marguerite M. Regan, "Feminism, Vegetarianism, And Colonial Resistance In Eighteenth-Century British Novels" in *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 46, No. 3, 18th-Century British Novels (2014), pp. 275-292.

to have an opinion, in reality, she has to go through a series of violence enacted on her body to practice what she believes in. Whereas in her dreams, the animal appears a victim of brutal violence and she remains a spectator, in reality she gets substituted for the animal and the society becomes the onlooker.

Although in the initial part of the plot, she can be placed into the theoretical framework of domestication but later she breaks the barrier of domestication and claims her rights on her body and sexuality unlike animals. She not only rejects eating meat but consciously rejects her sexual life with her husband which can be suggestive of the fact that she was not comfortable in their conjugal relationship. On doing so, she becomes a victim of marital rape. Although she resists and tries to fight back, she fails to rescue herself. However, through her gestures, she makes her husband realize his mistake and also makes him feel guilty. At the end, when attempts are made to forcefully insert a piece of pork into her mouth, she grabs a knife and slits her nerves, thus, claiming her rights on her own body.

To her husband, this powerful and assertive version of Yeong-hye becomes a matter of disappointment and anger. He fails to recognize the existence of a woman's selfhood, a self that does not merely revolve around the desires of her husband, but has a power to make choices independently. By defying the normative values of the (patriarchal) society which includes her father, her husband and the society in which she lives in, she challenges the rigid binaries of subject-object position.

The novella also provides a critique of a society that has comparatively very little or almost no space for a woman's own pleasure and freedom of body in the contemporary society. Her radical spirit threatens the prominence of the stereotypical image of a woman that man of her society venerates where a woman is worthy of respect only when she remains docile, meek and submissive to her husband's demands. When she herself tries to practice the freedom of her body or tries to please herself, her husband says, "I really didn't have a clue when it came to this woman".

Conclusion:

In “The Vegetarian”, the conscious rejection of meat by the protagonist’s wife speaks up about a conscious attack on violence and assault that a woman’s body and rights undergo in a modern setup. The unconscious dreams invoke her consciousness and assist her to make a choice by becoming a vegetarian. It also helps her to question the societal ecosystem in contemporary context in which women are still treated as a mere object of domestication. This also aids her to assert her rights on her body and sexuality in a loud and clear voice.

The formal as well the linguistic setting of the novella well captures the condition of a woman in South Korean society. The very conscious decision of the writer to narrate the protagonist's story not in her voice, but in the voice of her husband, her brother-in-law and her sister depicts the controlling nature of her society. Everyone in the story portrays her in compliance with their own views, but no one cares to actually go beneath her skin to understand her internal desires and wishes. Despite all this, the protagonist emerges out as triumphant as she does not agree to bow before the dictates of male characters. The writer of this story, through the women’s issue at its center, has offered a pathway, which is thought provoking and further takes the issue of women’s cause to a higher level.

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