

A WOMAN'S PSYCHE AND METAMORPHOSIS OF THE SOUL IN *THE VEGETARIAN* BY HAN KANG

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ABSTRACT: Gender studies and its issues had always been a debatable topic in literature since ages. Many writers of the west have highlighted gender related subjects. Following the west, Eastern Literature had also begun to write about gender problems. One of the emerging women writers from the Korean Peninsula is Han Kang, a South Korean writer, poet and a short story writer who won the Man Booker International Prize of 2016 for her second novel- *The Vegetarian*.

The novel was originally titled "*Chaesikjuuija*" in Korean, and was translated into English by Deborah Smith in 2015. The novel surrounds Yeong-hye, a normal housewife who lives an extraordinary life on her terms. Yeong-hye's transformation from a regular meat-eating, dutiful Korean wife to an existent based on plants then to a weird transcendentalist who fantasizes her transformation into a plant. This paper aims to study the mental psyche of Yeong-hye, the transformation and psychic analysis of her dreams and how she is metamorphosed into a free soul who thinks herself to be a plant.

KEYWORDS: psychic interpretation of dreams, freedom of choice, transformation.

INTRODUCTION: Contemporary women's writing is enriched with its own merit, where the women writers attain equal position to that of men in writing literature. The possessor of such merit and of Eastern origin is Han Kang. She was born in Gwangju, South Korea wrote her first novel- *Human Acts* (2014) which is about a deeply suppressed student uprising with the backdrop of Yongsan tragedy of 2009, where the government crumpled the locals who were protesting.

Han Kang's writing is "simple, lyrical, visceral prose, and a vivid account of both the power of collective spirit...and brutal regimes crushing it to nothing" (Literary review). Her writing won the Yi Sang Literary Prize, the Korean Literature Novel Award. Seo Hee Im, a graduate from Yale University writing in *The Guardian*, describes Han Kang's role as a writer is to tend to those (housewives, victimized, oppressed people) who are enduring in silence and also when the marginal groups i.e women, youth and, immigrants remain invisible in politics and culture.

"My soul would sing of metamorphoses. But since, o gods, you were the source of these bodies becoming other bodies....." (Ovid 06)– these beginning lines from Ovid's *Metamorphosis* gives an introduction to the protagonist of the novella called *The Vegetarian*, consisting of three parts narrated by different narrators. The protagonist (Yeong-hye) is portrayed as a woman of few words, making a living with no demands. The three parts also portray her psychic development step by step. Everything changes when she turns "vegetarian". The first part is narrated by Mr. Cheong, her husband. His description of Yeong-hye as "completely unremarkable in every way having simple features and passive personality not demanding anything from life" (Kang 3). Though her interest in domestic routine was diligent, her uncommonly simple lifestyle, giving up comforts like expensive clothing made her oddly peculiar in behavior than other women which also troubled Mr. Cheong.

Trying hard to cope up with his wife's conventional life, Mr. Cheong finds her dumping away all the animal byproducts (meat, milk, eggs, and leather products) into the bin. To his surprise, she speaks of her decision of giving up on meat because she had a "dream". The journey of metamorphosis starts with a nightmare where she finds herself covered with blood and raw meat. This rancid feeling makes her abstain from the Korean lifestyle of eating meat.

Yeong-hye's decision to throw all the meat out of the house agitated Mr. Cheong. At first he left her undisturbed to her privacy –“ When a person undergoes such a drastic transformation, there's simply nothing anyone else can do but sit back and let them get on with it” (Kang 15). Days passed but she did not waver on the decision. Yeong-hye's change in lifestyle caused trouble around her; the decision of becoming a vegetarian came as a shock to her family members. Mr. Cheong viewed his wife's (Yeong-hye) change blatantly as he could not control her anymore decided to call her parents and let them know of this weird situation.

During a normal family meeting, Yeong-hye's parents persuaded her into meat-eating, picking up her favorite meat dish with chopsticks shoving it to her mouth, Yeong-hye refused with a calm but stern reply “ ‘I ‘am sorry, father, but I just can't eat it...I do not eat meat’ – clearly enunciated, and seemingly not the least bit apologetic”(Kang 38). Now the angered father (a war veteran) forced a piece of meat into her mouth, was a horrendous process with her father and brother pinning Yeong-hye down to force feed her even after her continuous rebuttals. Though Yeong-hye's appearance had turned pale, the members were astonished on seeing her strength to fight off her fathers' strong arms. “ ...my wife growled and spat out the meat. An animal cry of distress burst from her lips.”(Kang 40). She then, turned wild even to the extent of slitting her wrist.

Julia Pascal, in her review of the book in *The Independent Culture* said that Han Kang describes the social pressures that are mounted on Korean women. Here in the novel, Yeong-hye too faced allegations from society, when she chose not to wear brassiere for her husband's office dinner invite and the whole party looked at her in disgust. The whole novel is oriented on a strict Korean society where any individual is merely noticed out of a family system but Yeong-hye is seen fighting for her identity of being a vegetarian. Neither her family nor the society could change her spirit or make her comply with socially accepted behaviour.

Becoming a Vegetarian in a heavily meat eating Korean society was due to Yeong-hye's nightmares of blood and meat. She did not want to depend on other living things for her diet, so she slowly abstained herself from daily human activities. The transformation and psychic analysis of her dreams can be done using Freudian dream tools, where dreams that are seemingly strange and non-sensical are studied. Yeong-hye's dreams sequence can be analyzed under five processes, namely displacement, projection, symbolization, condensation, and rationalization. (Interpretation of Dreams, Freud).

The first two tools, displacement and projection show that the dreamer has a desire for something; they symbolize it through something else. When Yeong-hye decides to live a life of a vegan, she changed her lifestyle abstaining from meat. Projection happens when the dreamer propels their own desires onto others; here the protagonist, Yeong-hye makes the house 'meat-free', one morning, Mr. Cheong found her crouched near the fridge throwing the meat, flesh of dead animals into garbage. She refused to cook meat in the house anymore. Through Symbolization, the dreamer's repressed urges or desires come out metaphorically. The dreams became a solid reason for her to refrain from meat. Quoting from the novel, the instances like Yeong-hye's dreams, of her being lost in woods and someone pushing the red raw meat dripping blood into her mouth. While chewing it, she feels disgusted and eccentrically uncanny.

“...Roll it up and I'm inside, it's inside. A long bamboo stick strung with great blood- red gashes of meat, blood still dripping down. Try to push past but the meat, there's no end to the meat, and no exit. Blood in my mouth, blood- soaked clothes sucked onto my skin....pushed that red raw mass into my mouth, felt it squish against my gums, the roof of my mouth, slick with crimson blood...Chewing on something that felt so real, but couldn't have been...Familiar and yet not... that vivid, strange, horribly uncanny feeling.”(Kang 12).

This inner psychosis of hers starts spoiling the relations within her family and others in society. Yeong-hye contracts herself from all worldly affairs even from her family. She dreams of her childhood where she was bit by a random dog, and according to the ancient cure she had to eat the same dog. This past incident disturbed her conscience of killing those animals which ever she had eaten. To her all these lives have stuck up within her and have formed a lump which she could not free herself from.

“I can feel this lump all the time. No matter how deeply I inhale, it doesn't go away. Yells and howls, threaded together layer upon a layer, are enmeshed to form that lump. Because of meat...the lives of the animals I ate have all lodged there. Blood and flesh, all those butchered bodies are scattered in every nook and cranny... their lives still stick

stubbornly to my insides... I want to shout...maybe that would finally get this lump out of my body...Nobody can save me. Nobody can make me breathe.” (Kang 49)

The fourth and fifth dream tool – Condensation and Rationalization talks about the dreamer and the dreaming mind. The dreamer hides her feeling by contracting it or thinking about it, which means that the dreamer is not showing the effects of his/her dream to others. In the second part of the novel, titled “Mongolian Mark”, Yeong-hye after separating from Mr.Cheong, lived alone until she was offered a job by her brother-in-law to pose for his shoot. Even when she lived with her sister after Mr. Cheong divorced her, she was still refraining from normal human life.

Yeong – hye is now taken care by her elder sister In- hye. One day, In-hye’s husband accidentally found Yeong-hye roaming naked in her apartment, to which she replied of having a lump in her heart and she was not able to remove it how much ever hard she tried, because she felt guilty of killing those animals to treat herself eating delicious meals. Both the men involved with Yeong- hye treat her as a commodity and a physical body only for pleasure. During this involvement with him, she never revealed her inner trouble or dreams to him. She was just an object of wondering lust in the eyes of In-hye’s husband. Not understanding her mental psyche, he tries to seduce her. Finding them in an erroneous act, In-hye was shocked and immediately calls for help from the psychic hospital for her sister- Yeong- hye, who now wishes to transform into a plant.

The final stage of dreamwork is Rationalization, where the dreamer puts up incoherent dream into the existing one creating a secondary revision. Yeong-hye’s initial dream sequences were nightmares of meat and gory sites of her eating squishy red meat dripping of blood, which then turned into lumps of guilt that she could never get it out of her system. The last dream of hers is to turn herself into a plant which In-hye remembers from childhood as a fantasy of Yeong-hye. In the final part of the novel, titled “Flaming Trees”, In-hye took care of her sister after she is admitted to an asylum. The society had neglected Yeong-hye but being her sister and knowing that her behaviour is not strange as she repeated things from their childhood, In-hye supported her and finally confessed that she too had been dreaming of certain things that society would not allow them to show. Though Yeong-hye’s dreams were self-annihilating and of transforming into a plant, which would not be accepted by the society, In-hye too joins hands with her sister and reveals her dreams as well. “In-hye stares fiercely at the trees. As if waiting for an answer. As if protesting against something. The look in her eyes is dark and insistent” (Kang 183).

Yeong-hye’s independence from her body and her rejection of social rules was pitiable yet fascinating. Letting into the protagonist’s (Yeong-hye) psyche, the author lets the readers wonder about dreams of normal people and the connection of their past with present. In the novel, Mr. Cheong gave up the hope of ever changing her back to normal when he said: “When a person undergoes such a drastic transformation, there’s simply nothing anyone else can do but sit back and let them get on with it.”(Kang 15). People would go to any extent to hide their inner fantasies but people like Yeong-hye, who make their own rules and are stubborn over their choices create change for themselves and others to follow.

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