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Alienation, Assertion, Vegetarianism: Reading Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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Abstract

The Vegetarian, a Korean novella written by Han Kang and translated into English by Deborah Smith, revolves around Kim Yeong-hye, a young woman who is seen transgressing all boundaries in her defiance of patriarchy. This paper seeks to showcase her attempt at liberation from the shackles of male oppression eventually leading to self-assertion. It also explains how her tryst with vegetarianism acts as a turning point in her life and leads to her condition of social alienation and self-absorption. It examines the struggle of a non-conformist woman who is determined to carve a space for herself in a male-dominated world. Yeong-hye's vegetarian way of life is but a rejection of patriarchal values though it is considered as a consequence of her mental illness. Thus, through a close reading of the text, the paper will also try to deconstruct the Korean social system and its values to understand the psyche of the protagonist and interpret her life decisions.

Keywords: Alienation, Assertion, Liberation, Patriarchy, Vegetarianism

The Vegetarian (2007), a Korean novella penned by Han Kang and translated into English by Deborah Smith, epitomizes the colonial 'new woman' archetype, Yeong-hye, pitted against traditional values, which leads to destructive consequences. Journeying through the life of a non-conformist woman, this text opens up new vistas to the Korean patriarchal society and showcases the attempt of the protagonist at self-assertion and liberation from the shackles of male oppression. Kim Yeong-hye and her tryst with vegetarianism acts as a turning point in her life and lead to her condition of social alienation and self-absorption. Kang's attempt at reflecting this sense of

alienation is so scrupulous that she does not let her protagonist tell her own story.

The novel epitomizes an experimental sense of disjointedness: its opening segment is narrated in the first person by Yeong-hye's husband, and the second section is a second-person narration focalized through her brother-in-law (an artist who indulges in sexual fantasies about her), and the third segment is third-person narrated by her sister In-hye as she tries to convince the protagonist to eat. (Stobie 1)

As the story unfolds, we witness Yeong-hye as a young woman who ceases to conform to the societal norms and taking upon herself to decide her preferences and challenges. The novella herein not only records the journey of a young woman in particular, rather has been instrumental in revealing the misogynistic underpinnings of Korean society. Yeong-hye's tribulations are not the consequences of her decisions; rather they can be attributed to her nature of being anti-establishmentarian and unconventional. Life was ordinary, and uneventful before Yeong-hye decided to become a vegetarian. This sudden decision is "perceived as an act of insurgence as against the norms of society" (Ravikesh 505). Her husband, Mr. Cheong, describes her as "completely unremarkable in every way" (10). Her insignificant nature and passivity were, however, an advantage for the husband as he considered her disinterested and aloof nature a camouflage to his drawbacks. Her demanding emotional refrainment drew him to marry her despite his disapproval of her nature at the very first sight of her:

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 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. (10)

These lines confirm that the husband was, but a conformist as well as a carpetbagger. He married Yeong-hye because he was equally unremarkable and insignificant, a man who lived an ordinary middle-class life with no high hopes or soaring goals in life. He took the easiest road to live a life till death:

I settled for a job where I would be provided with a decent monthly salary in return for diligently carrying out my allotted tasks, at a company whose small size meant they would value my unremarkable skills. And so it was only natural that I would marry the most run-of-

the-mill woman in the world. As for women who were pretty, intelligent, strikingly sensual, the daughters of rich families—they would only have served to disrupt my carefully ordered existence. (10)

The husband observed that Yeong-hye “was a woman of few words” (11). She did her daily chores and took interest in anything but books, did not bother about the husband coming late nor wished him to take her out. They were two individuals who lived under the same roof out of customary need without any kind of emotional involvement, distanced and disinterested. These observations point towards her passivity and conventionality. However, she showed sparks of defiance in more subtle ways. For instance, her dislike for a bra and this often-brought shame to her husband. She would leave it unhooked and the husband had a problem with it since it was visible through her thin tops. He tried to persuade her but “she’d have it unhooked barely a minute after leaving the house” (12). She justified herself appropriately saying that “it squeezed her breasts” and instead charged her husband that he “couldn’t understand how constricting it felt” since he had never worn one (12). But he seemed to be more concerned with his wife conforming to the prevalent standards of beauty in Korean society: “It wasn’t as though she had shapely breasts which might suit the no-bra look. I would have preferred her to go around wearing one that was thickly padded, so that I could save face in front of my acquaintances” (11-12). This was her way of setting herself free from the chains of patriarchy that bound her and hence her body voiced her rebellious attitude. Besides this unusual habit, all else was okay with Yeong-hye till she had a dream which left her disturbed and compelled her to make a life-changing decision. Following the dream, she threw out all the non-vegetarian and dairy items stored in the fridge. She had decided to turn vegan. But the husband could not comply with her choices and addressed her as “insane” to which she did not bother to react: unperturbed and unmoved. Having dreamt of a red barn in the woods, her face reflected in a pool of blood, blood-soaked clothes and hands smeared with blood and all of these disturbed her to the consequence of being intolerant to the sight or smell of meat. She repeatedly dreamt of these scenes of dark violence:

They come to me now more times than I can count. Dreams overlaid with dreams, a palimpsest of horror. Violent acts perpetrated by night.

A hazy feeling I can't pin down...but remembered as blood-chillingly definite. Intolerable loathing, so long suppressed. Loathing I've always tried to mask with affection. But now the mask is coming off. That shuddering, sordid, gruesome, brutal feeling. Nothing else remains. Murderer or murdered, experience too vivid to not be real. (30)

Furthermore, Yeong-hye stopped using leather and other animal-based products as well, indicating her outright rejection of violence against animals. Korean society predominantly follows a non-vegetarian diet and thus Yeong-hye's defiance was mocked and her gastronomic shift from being "perfectly competent when it came to hacking a chicken into pieces with a butcher's cleaver" to surviving on kimchi and salad was such a shock for everyone. The dinner party hosted by the boss wherein the boss's wife asserts that "it isn't possible to live without eating meat" for they consider meat eating as "a fundamental human instinct", which implies "vegetarianism goes against human nature. . . It just isn't natural" (26). Such a lopsided and prejudiced view of vegetarianism is what Carol J. Adams terms, "The Sexual Politics of Meat". Adams, an American writer, feminist and animal rights activist, in her magnum opus, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (1990) introduced this term and defined it thus:

The Sexual Politics of Meat means that what, or more precisely who, we eat is determined by the patriarchal politics of our culture...What The Sexual Politics of Meat argues is that the way gender politics is structured into our world is related to how we view animals, especially animals who are consumed. Patriarchy is a gender system that is implicit in human/ animal relationships. Moreover, gender construction includes instruction about appropriate foods. (Preface 15-16)

After some serious discussion and contemplation regarding other reasons behind the vegetarian diet few of which were ideological differences, medical reasons, religious issues, following trends or making a lifestyle change, the final verdict is passed by the boss's wife: "The idea of a special diet always made me feel uncomfortable. It seems to me that one shouldn't be too narrow-minded when it comes to food" (26).

Yeong-hye's family, like almost all of the families in a Confucian society, expected absolute loyalty from their children. They speak of Yeong-hye as if she is a sulky and bad-tempered child, who must not

be taken seriously but needs to be corrected and this is emblematic of a Confucian society, where family has to take care of the child, no matter what the age of the child is. Therefore, the way the father patronizes her and forces Yeong-hye to consume meat reveals the patriarchal environment in which they operate. Being a patriarch, he not only teaches his daughter to conform to the social rules but also forcibly feeds her meat when she does not want to eat it thereby abusing her rights as a human being. Such physical torture is an extreme form of male chauvinism where a woman is forced to stay loyal to her family and later, her husband. Yeong-hye's discarding the stuffed meat out of her mouth reinforces her rejection of male dominance. She, even, attempted suicide by slitting her wrist which symbolizes her split from her misogynist family in particular and Confucian ideology or the larger society, in general. Patriarchy demands a prescription to the codes of conduct to ensure comfort although it implies being a prisoner's check of the tyranny. Yeong-hye's choice was unpalatable because it was not a part of the dominant group. As a matter of fact, choosing the non-dominant makes Yeong-hye the 'Other' by default; as Adams puts it, "Vegetarians face the problem of making their meanings understood within a dominant culture that accepts the legitimacy of meat eating" (107). The lack of interest to understand the marginalized discourses might lead to a kind of alienation of these minorities from the mainstream leading to a kind of silence. The 'Other' is always silenced and oppressed by the dominant but efforts are always made to force them to accept the tyranny of the dominant since a deviant poses a potential threat to the organic fabric of the oppressive forces and their self-proclaimed supremacy. Violence is thrust upon such peripheral discourses so that either they are wiped off their existence or more unfortunately, forced to accept the dominant order. Since Hang Kang aims to devalue the dark aspects of patriarchal oppression vis-à-vis a portrayal of violence inflicted upon her protagonist, she particularly draws upon episodes of mental torture as well as physiosexual violence arising from Yeong-hye's choice of turning vegetarian.

The sight of meat is not only what Yeong-Hye abhorred, but she also withdrew from the mundane world of fleshly pleasures as well. On being confronted by her husband for sexual avoidance, she

rationalizes that the smell of meat from his body is what puts her off. The savage instinct in him overpowered his mask of civilization and he raped her though he visualized her as “a comfort woman dragged in against her will”, while he “was the Japanese soldier demanding her services” (32). The husband justifies this heinous act by citing the excuse of a man’s inability to control his animalistic instincts:

But it was no easy thing for a man in the prime of his life...to have his physical needs go unsatisfied for such a long period of time. So yes, one night...I grabbed hold of my wife and pushed her to the floor. Pinning down her struggling arms and tugging off her trousers, I became unexpectedly aroused. She put up a surprisingly strong resistance and, spitting out vulgar curses all the while, it took me three attempts before I managed to insert myself successfully. (32)

Yeong-hye’s defiance of traditional gender-expected behaviour and her struggle for physical autonomy cast her as an embodiment of the new woman trope. Through her, Han Kang highlights the savage nature of human beings. Owing to the physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her husband and her family, Yeong-hye begins to question the anthropocentric ideologies of her family and society at large. She becomes a misanthrope and becomes protective of nature. In a way, she starts to connect her experiences with that of nature. She feels for the animals who are killed for human consumption the way she dies a metaphorical death every day. Therefore, she distances herself from the humans who have lost humanity and strikes a more vegetative connection with the innocent nature and identifies with her thereby staying away from destructive forces and their ways.

If the husband satisfied his libidinal urges by forceful sex, Yeong-Hye’s father asserted his male chauvinism by whipping her “over the calves until she was eighteen years old” (Kang 31). A product of military masculinity and strength, who was “never tired of boasting about having received the Order of Military Merit for serving in Vietnam” (31), the father leaves no stone unturned in forcing Yeong-Hye to have non-vegetarian food. From yelling at her to slapping her to asking his son and her husband to hold her as he forcibly pushes a chunk of meat into her mouth, he does it all but in vain. Such acts of violence and abuse highlight the depths of male chauvinism and misogyny ingrained in the family. The father could not withstand the fact that the daughter ‘chose’ for herself. The

husband could not tolerate the wife's entitlement to her freedom of denying him sexual pleasure. It is so because patriarchy *decides* for women since men believe women cannot and should not be privileged enough to make choices. They should always be the submissive and subservient *other*. A man with "strongly fixed ideas", he could not take the maverick nature of his daughter with ease (31). He yelled at her but she did not deter. It was expected of Yeong-Hye to say, "I'm sorry, Father, but I just can't eat it," but her assertive tone was not taken well by the men: "I do not eat meat" – clearly enunciated, and seemingly not the least bit apologetic" (38). The only man who, though silently, disapproved of the violent behaviour towards Yeong-hye was her brother-in-law. The brother-in-law's sexual attraction to Yeong-hye is what covers a major section of Part II of the novella. Being an artist, he might be drawn to her non-conformist attitude in addition to the Mongolian mark on her buttocks. However, it is revealed that he neither has any genuine feelings of appreciation for her rebellious nature nor does he respect her individuality. She is just a fetish for him. Her difference from other women in being insubordinate and defiant sexually attracts him towards her. He trivializes her journey of self-realisation into a fetish and considers her attitude as a deliberate attempt at sexual provocation.

In the scene when Yeong-hye attempts to commit suicide, the author tries to evoke a sense of parallelism between violence against women and those of animals. Animals are helpless beings dominated by humans and used according to their benefit. This anthropocentric view is underlined in the Biblical account of Genesis where "God gave man dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and all the earth, *Genesis 1.26*" (Abrams, 2013, p. 97). Therefore, a man presumes such authority over a woman's body as well. The image of thrusting pork into her mouth could signify the way a woman is silenced. She is not allowed to express her desires or speak for herself. Language of patriarchy which subjugates a woman to gratify the carnal desire of man is not acceptable to her. Yeong-hye's decision to abandon non-vegetarian food is congruous with her rejection of patriarchal values. It was her blatant refusal to abide by the stereotypical expectations of the male gaze which expected women to have fuller breasts and a wide waist

so that they look sexually attractive to the male sight. As she stopped eating meat, “She grew thinner by the day, so much so that her cheekbones had really become indecently prominent. Without makeup, her complexion resembled that of a hospital patient” (23). Yeong-hye had to pay a heavy price for refuting societal norms. It meant complete withdrawal from the world for her. She had to revert to a pre-human stage wherein she had to reject everything human as she could not identify with the species and their lifestyle any longer. However, it also meant that she had to lose herself completely and get rid of all her human attributes to liberate herself and accept her new identity. Her journey of self-discovery symbolizes the new woman’s struggle for self-assertion in the male-dominated world. This archetype of ‘the new woman’ also seeks to expose the abusive side of the torchbearers of male agency as well as shed light on the challenges and impediments witnessed by contemporary Korean women in their journey of emancipation. Deprivation of humanness in the case of women is synonymous with animals, who are treated not as independent beings with distinct identities but as beings at the disposal of man. This can be seen in the way how meat is referred to as mere flesh instead of a dead animal. In the words of Carol Adams, “Through butchering, animals become absent referents. Animals in name and body are made absent as animals for meat to exist” (79). The same can be applied to women. Men regard them as ‘possessions’ or ‘objects’ devoid of any identity of their own: “Through the structure of the absent referent, patriarchal values become institutionalized. Just as dead bodies are absent from our language about meat, in descriptions of cultural violence women are also often the absent referent.” (Adams, 2010, p. 68) The violence against Yeong-Hye has been quite chauvinistically justified in both cases. While the husband tries to play the victim by citing non-fulfilment of his physical needs, the father advocates for compliance with rules: “If she eats it once, she’ll eat it again. It’s preposterous, everyone eats meat!” (39)

Han Kang has emphasized the flesh trope through her preoccupation with one part of the body in each of the three parts. The first part portrays an obsession with breasts. It is so because Yeong-Hye hates wearing a bra as she finds it restricting and suffocating. Even when she goes out, she does not wear one

attracting the attention and contempt of people. Herein, another stereotype is broken since “many patriarchal cultures dictate that women, who are stereotypically cast as natural caregivers, must wear (often uncomfortable) undergarments to de/sexualize mammary glands which would nurture their children. Paradoxically, the supposedly caring woman is conditioned to enjoy eating meat, which (in most modern contexts) is the product of carnophallogocentric ideals” (Stobie 9). The second part of the novella fixates upon a birthmark on the protagonist’s buttocks referred to as “The Mongolian Mark”. She stayed with her sister In-Hye and her brother-in-law post her suicide attempt. The unnamed brother-in-law, an artist, is drawn towards this birthmark for which he paints her body with flowers and attempts to fulfil his sexual fantasies. Though Yeong-Hye resists at first when he paints his own body, she finally consents as she is drawn to the flowers on his body, but more importantly with the hope that those horrid, wild dreams would stop troubling her, but in vain. Instead of bringing her relief, they incite in her a desire for “*flowers to bloom from [her] crotch*”, causing her to “*spread [her legs] wide and mimic the form of a tree*” (Stobie 13).

The flesh vector is further reinforced when episodes of nudity surface throughout the novella. Yeong-Hye, post becoming vegetarian, ceased to be conscious of her nudity. She thought of herself as a plant in need of sunshine. Since a plant never clothes itself, she chose to do the same. Her complete identification with plants can be traced back to the sexist violence that was inflicted upon her and her body because she was like an animal to a man. Moreover, she did not want to identify herself with any kind of human-induced violence on nature as can be seen from her dismissal of leather products as well as lipsticks. So being a human would mean violence in every form - clothing, food and language. Perhaps, that is why she stopped eating plant-based food as well. Language is also known to hurt and violate, hence she stopped talking. Moreover, plants do not talk, and so does she considering herself as one. She further asserts how breasts are her only companions because they do not hurt: “Can only trust my breasts now. I like my breasts, nothing can be killed by them. Hand, foot, tongue, gaze, all weapons from which nothing is safe. But not my breasts. With my round breasts, I’m okay. Still okay. So why do they keep on shrinking? Not even round

anymore. Why? Why am I changing like this? Why are my edges all sharpening — what I am going to gouge?” (34-35) In fact, Yeong-hye’s fasting could be seen as a rupture of the patriarchal system of values. Self-imposed alienation puts her in a situation wherein she is shifted to a mental asylum being considered insane. Even in the asylum, the theme of violence is reflected in the way the doctors try to feed her forcibly. Even her sister comes to visit her and acts in the same way but that is out of her concern for her sister. The husband, and her parents all were ashamed of Yeong-hye and they had given up on her but it was only In-hye, her sister, who cared. She came to meet her at the hospital; she persuaded her to eat though in vain. Yeong-hye considered herself a tree and when her sister brought her rice cakes, she refused to eat them saying that she had ceased to be an animal: “I don’t need to eat, not now. I can live without it. All I need is sunlight and water” (129). She performed headstands since she dreamt that trees were standing on their heads, and being a tree, she should also do the same.

However, it is important to note that her so-called insanity might not be a medical issue, rather it is more of a social product. It springs up because she defies the dominant discourse. Joan Busfield, a renowned British sociologist and psychologist, points out that women’s mental illness can either be a “social product” or a “social construct” (536). It is a social product when it is “a direct product of their oppression” or in other cases, “mental illness is a label which is used to control and confine the actions of women and involves the exercise of patriarchal power” (536). The last paragraph of the novel speaks out for Yeong-hye through In-hye’s lenses: “Quietly, she breathes in. The trees by the side of the road are blazing, green fire undulating like the rippling flanks of a massive animal, wild and savage. 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”. (188) In-hye seems to be protesting against a male-dominated world which tortured her sister to such an extent that it destroyed her individuality completely just because she refused to conform to their rules and conventions. The Korean society is essentially a patriarchal one which places its beliefs in the Confucian mode of thought:

Exemplary behavior and uncomplaining obedience were expected of them....Women were expected to demonstrate obedience before all other virtues, and at every stage of life. As children, girls were required to obey their fathers; as wives, women were required to obey their husbands; and as widows, women were required to obey their grown-up sons. At no point in her life was a woman, according to the traditional Confucian view, expected to function as an autonomous being free of male control (Richey).

Numerous rules were laid down to ensure the good conduct of the women. Trivial things like how to sit and manage household chores and the time of waking up and going to bed were also pronounced. So, it was ensured through these rules that male supremacy was maintained and anyone who went against the set notions was certainly punished.

Thus, Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* is a novella revolving around multiple issues such as sexual and physical violence, animal abuse, patriarchy, alienation, eroticism and body politics. Thus, vegetarianism is not only a lifestyle change but, in this text, it becomes a symbol of protest and defiance. As Adams says, "An integral part of autonomous female identity may be vegetarianism; it is a rebellion against dominant culture whether or not it is stated to be a rebellion against male structures. It resists the structure of the absent referent, which renders both women and animals as objects" (220). By writing about vegetarianism, Kang not only draws parallels between women and animal violence and abuse, but she is also successful in challenging sexist oppression because "interrupting a meal, [means] interrupting a man's control, interrupting the male tradition with female voices. When women writers raise the issue of vegetarianism, they touch upon their dilemma of being silenced in a patriarchal world. Vegetarianism becomes a complex female meditation on being dominated and dominator." (Adams 186)

Besides violence and gendered oppression, the novelist also draws our attention to a woman-woman bond in the form of the two sisters. In-hye, though sane as per societal standards, has had a troublesome life packed with hardships and struggles. She worked for her only livelihood and after she severed her connections with her husband, she had to run the shop and take care of her son, Ji-woo. Towards the end of the novella, Kang tries to juxtapose the lives of

both sisters. Through the character of In-hye, she tries to question the significance and validity of societal expectations and responsibilities. Contemplating her own life decisions, she is trying to assess herself and the value of her existence. None of them was the one who has lived a life according to the accepted norms as any normal and sane human being would nor the one who revolted against society and built her world of fantasy wherein, she thrived away from the stark realities of life. This is what Han Kang calls the “im(possibility) of innocence” and the omnipresence of violence (qtd. in Patrick), omnipresent to the extent that the novella ends on the same violent note: “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” (152). In-hye expresses her amazement and frustration “at this world of mingled violence and beauty” (qtd. in Patrick). But what is indeed intriguing is that perhaps, in the process of taking care of her sister and trying to understand her problems; In-hye has been able to understand the inherent violence and struggle that the male-dominated world forces upon women. While through her rejection of anthropocentric values and norms, Yeong-hye has established a non-human identity for herself to escape the violence innate in this male-centric universe, In-hye has faced all the troubles single-handedly through rejection of a male-dominated household and has been able to assert herself and fight for her rights as an independent and bold woman as well as a single mother. Her protesting gaze at the end of the novella reflects her anger and frustration as well as her defiant and patient nature since she had been dealing with the male-centeredness in a unique way of decentering the male and taking his position as the breadwinner and caretaker of her own family.

Notes

1. Carnophallagocentrism is a neologism termed by Jacques Derrida in his essay “Plato’s Pharmacy”. It refers to the masculine point of view.

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