IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Trauma, Silence, And Psychological Fragmentation In Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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Abstract: Korean Novelist Han Kang has redefined the literary space with her visceral portrayal of trauma, silence, identity, and patriarchy in her award-winning novel *The Vegetarian.* This paper examines how Kang's heroine Yeong-hye reacts to emotional trauma by withdrawing from society and choosing to become 'vegetal' as a radical form of resistance to patriarchal oppression and control. The narrative follows the inevitable disintegration of Yeong-hye's personality as she continues to internalise her trauma until one day something in her changes irrevocably and she begins to use her body as an instrument of silent but irrepressible rebellion. This paper argues that her withdrawal from meat and later on even speech can be linked to trauma theory, isolation, as well as a lack of empathy from those closest to her. Yeong-hye thus emerges as a victim of societal violence and patriarchal hegemony.

Keywords: **Trauma, Oppression, Vegetal, Silence**

The Vegetarian[1] is a novel that impacts the reader at a visceral level, much like the portrayal of its heroine Yeong-hye, who has chosen to become a vegetarian in a society of hard-core meat-eaters, a society where vegetarianism is seen not as a choice but as an aberration, an abnormality on the mental plane. The story, published in 2007 by South Korean author Han Kang and based on Kang's 1997 short story *The Fruit of My Woman,*[2] is a novel in three parts about Yeong-hye, a young woman living in Seoul with her husband (Mr Cheong). The first part of the story, "The Vegetarian" portrays their perfectly ordinary lives until one morning Yeong-hye says to him 'I had a dream' (Kang) and decides to give up eating meat. She subsequently throws out all animal foods from the house, explaining to her husband that as he has only one meal at home he can surely do without meat as she is henceforth not going to cook it. This leads to marital discord as her husband is first outright baffled and then increasingly angry at her inexplicable and seemingly sudden decision. After failing to reason with her he finally ropes in Yeong-hye's family in a futile effort to make her 'come to her senses', which ultimately leads to Yeong-hye feeling like a cornered animal and attempting suicide as a means to put a stop to being controlled others.

The second part of the story "Mongolian Mark" continues Yeong-hye's story, as abandoned by her husband, she starts living with her sister In-hye and her brother-in-law (In-hye's husband), who is a video artist by profession. The brother-in-law develops a strange obsession with Yeong-hye when In-hye tells him about a Mongolian mark that Yeong-hye has on her body. He convinces Yeong-hye to let him paint on her body and film her, ultimately satisfying his strange obsession by having sex with her as they both are painted over with flowers and vines. In-hye discovers the video and has her husband arrested. Yeong-hye's mental state is painted as fragile throughout this section, with the final scene showing her standing naked to the sun, painted all over in flowers, staring fixedly towards the sun as if she is a plant seeking sunlight for sustenance.

The third and final section "Flaming Trees" continues the narrative after a time lapse of two years. Yeong-hye is now in a psychiatric hospital where she is refusing to eat and wants to live on water and sunlight, much like a plant. In-hye comes to visit her and reflects on their lives gone by, realising the inevitability of Yeong-hye's mental breakdown and her own silent complicity in it by not lending her sister a helping hand when she needed it. She reminisces '…only Yeong-hye, docile and naive, had been unable to deflect their father's temper or put up any form of resistance. Instead, she had merely absorbed all her suffering inside her, deep into the marrow of her bones (p. 157, Kang). At the same time she wishes she had Yeong-hye's ability to act the way she is acting - free from the constraints and demands of a patriarchal society. As she takes away Yeong-hye from the psychiatric hospital to a general hospital, she is lost in memories and has no answers to any of the questions that plague her.

The first part of the story is written in the first person, from the perspective of Mr Cheong (the husband), the second "Mongolian Mark" in the third person through the eyes of Yeong-hye's brother in law (who is not named in the novel), and the third "Flaming Trees" moves between third person and first person narration, from the point of view of Yeong-hye's sister In-hye. Yeong-hye's mental state is portrayed through italicised interspersed sentences and delivered with a rawness that bears testimony to her anguished inner life and the absolute isolation as well as the hopelessness that she is experiencing. The fragmented narrative mirrors the fragile state of her mind. We never hear her voice directly, which further reinforces her silence. The reader is forced to construct her identity throughout the narrative through the viewpoints of external perspectives, consolidating her identity as 'other'. Lori feathers writes "the failure to comprehend the very people with whom we should be closest is an underlying theme of the novel. Kang punctuates our erroneous faith in the ability to understand one another by silencing Yeong-hye and instead allowing her story to be told by her husband, her sister, and her brother-in-law. Their inability to "know" Yeong-hye creates frustration, disillusionment, and isolation."[3] The tragedy is of course that the people closest to Yeong-hye interpret her behaviour as insanity rather than what it actually is - the manifestation of buried trauma.

Kang is no stranger to portraying the violence inherent in human lives. Sarai Siiin states, "Han first got the idea of writing about vegetation or plants when, as a university student, she came across the work of the noted Korean writer Yi Sang. In particular, she was struck by the quote "I believe that humans should be plants,"[4] the reason being that plants don't harm anybody for the sake of their survival, unlike humans, who have resorted to endless ways to annihilate one another. It is noteworthy here that Kang lived through the times of the Gwangju massacre - her family had left Gwangju just months before the state-sponsored terrorism that left thousands of young people dead, and the horror and tyranny of mass murder - the helplessness of a people against a totalitarian regime - is woven into the very fabric of *The Vegetarian*.

What Yeong-hye feels deep in her soul is the mute oppression / terror of the cornered animal. She feels intense guilt at having been a meat eater - 'their lives will stick stubbornly to my insides - nobody can help me, nobody can save me' (p. 49, Kang). She wants to become sexless - like a plant, because plants are non-violent by nature and can hurt no one. She feels the violence that animals are subject to keenly, because she too knows what it is to feel helpless, unheard, and to have violence perpetrated upon her person in different ways by the men closest to her. She feels no different from the dog in her childhood, the poor creature that was forced to run in circles till it died from exhaustion, simply because it had dared to give in to its basic nature. She gets nightmares about being surrounded by meat and blood and the nauseating stink of butchered flesh, because she identifies so deeply with the oppression that animals face when they die in agony, to serve the needs of humans. Thus her desire to become a tree - because plants only give and give, and never take.

Her not wanting to feel constricted by a bra is no bid for women's liberation - it is an indication that she wishes to avoid the very object that reminds her that she is female - the physical constriction along her chest reminds her of the internal feeling of oppression when she is routinely raped by her husband, beaten by her father until she is eighteen, and later force-fed meat by him because he deems it is the right diet for her. In this context Pratikya Patra writes, "Meat becomes a symbol of the male gaze. Her choice is a rejection of this objectification, rejecting the idea of being passively consumed."[5] Her vegetarianism is in essence a rejection of that whole part of her that is subject to control by others.

Her husband Mr Cheong is a very average man. His own insecurities compel him to choose a woman who is unremarkable in every way - a compliant, mail-order prototype bride who he knows can be expected to act in certain ways and fulfil his requirements for a domestic robot who cooks, cleans and occasionally satisfies his carnal desires. She is to him 'my wife' - property that he owns. She can be considered to be a glorified live-in maid, who is not expected to have demands or desires of her own and fulfils domestic duties in return for board and lodging. The one quirk she exhibits (and is 'allowed' to indulge in) is her reading, which her husband finds incomprehensible but tolerates because it doesn't inconvenience him in any way.

Her other quirk is her insisting on not wearing a bra. Initially this insistence embarrasses, confuses, and angers him, but ultimately he lets it go as she is firm that she just cannot abide the constriction along her chest. In essence, Yeong-hye is different from the very beginning. But her husband is so self-absorbed that he fails to notice her distress. He just remarks apathetically 'she was the one standing there completely unresponsive, as though lost in her own world' (p.7, Kang), or when she sometimes failed to observe him returning home, when she was absorbed in a late night TV drama. Instead of trying to reassure her / find out what is wrong, he chooses to simply ignore her, hoping that whatever is causing her strange and incomprehensible (to him) behaviour will go away if he ignores it - 'I didn't even want to reach out to her with words'(p.9, Kang).

Kang's heroine Yeong-hye is thus the 'Other' - the one without a voice, generically because she is a woman in a patriarchal world and particularly because she has dared to challenge the status quo and shock everybody around her by embracing vegetarianism, simply because in a deeply misogynistic and patriarchal society, her body is the only thing she owns. In a patriarchal society like Korea, women have traditionally always had to endure subordinate roles - they are expected to be perfect wives / sisters / daughters / mothers. They are, to put it in Ibsenian terms, perfect little dolls, and dolls certainly don't possess minds or assertions of their own. They are prized, not valued, for their physical attributes and docile personalities, somewhat like cattle. Yeong-hye too is the perfect housewife initially - passively domesticated, handling and anticipating her husband's every need, handing him his clothes as he gets ready to leave for the office, cooking and planning meals. Until she isn't. One night she has a 'dream' and suddenly her entire world shifts on its axis. From the non-assertive wife / daughter who bends like a leaf to accommodate everyone, she is suddenly rock-solid in her rebellion, absolutely certain about her convictions regarding her abstinence from meat - 'My wife's unnaturally serene face, her incongruous firm voice' (p.1, Kang). She who has never opposed him in anything, bent herself entirely to his will, is suddenly an unyielding wall - 'Who would have thought she could be so unreasonable' (p.13, Kang).

Yeong-hye is very calm in dealing with the situation, explaining to her husband firmly that since he has only breakfast at home he can do without meat for one meal. But not once does he make any effort to her understand her life-changing dream, to address her concerns, seek psychiatric help for her, or even to provide any kind of emotional support to her - 'I had no way of knowing and moreover didn't want to know' (p.18, Kang) or 'She really had been the most ordinary woman in the world' (p.18, Kang). He refuses to take responsibility for her welfare as her husband - 'This strange situation had nothing to do with me' (p.19, Kang), and further accentuates his apathy by imagining himself as the wronged party - 'hadn't women traditionally been expected to be demure and restrained?'(p.21, Kang) He is not worried about her at all - just worried about how her behaviour is affecting him. When she is in the hospital, he heartlessly refuses to even carry her IV bag, and ultimately, when it becomes clear to him that she is beyond reason - 'Neither rage nor persuasion would succeed in moving her' (p. 26, Kang), he simply discards her like a pair of worn-out shoes and disappears from her life. Even her sister apologises to him for Yeong-hye's behaviour, along with the rest of her family, as if they have collectively breached the marital contract because of her strange and inexplicable behaviour. In this respect Anupama K and D G Chitra write that southeast Asian countries like Japan, China, and Korea "have their roots embedded and embodied in the principles of Confucianism, a 2,500-year-old doctrine that places women at the bottom of the social hierarchy… there are very strict ways in which a woman should behave and live under Confucianism…Hence, it turns into a deadly sin for women to be themselves. These ancient rules still affect the life and wellbeing of Korean women in terms of their freedom of expression and independence."[6] Even a simple meal with her husband's boss becomes a stage for her humiliation because she is no longer willing to conform to societal expectations and the event underscores her complete isolation where she feels unseen and unheard, as if she's screaming in a void and her screams are inaudible not only to anyone else but even to herself.

The singular 'dream' appears to be the expression of suppressed trauma. The overtly simple explanation - that a disturbing dream has led to a choice - is just the tip of a deep psychological iceberg that consists of unimaginable trauma as well as the fragmentation of self-identity. Trauma theorists like Cathay Caruth are of the view that trauma is not experienced fully at the moment it occurs - rather, it is felt in haunting repetitions and unconscious reenactments.[7] The collective memory of violence, the Gwangju massacre, the identification with the silence of lambs before slaughter - all these culminate in a dream that brings home to Yeong-hye the violence that is her world - and she reacts in the only way she can - by rejecting everything that she associates with that violence. Thus, from a psychological perspective Yeong-hye's behaviour is not insanity but a manifestation of this buried trauma - trauma that is inexpressible to anyone but which pervades her very bones. She cannot hope to possibly explain it to her cold-hearted husband or even to her own family members who are equal if unwitting participants to her agony and isolation. Thus she

grows more and more withdrawn into her inner world or rather into her inner reality. As she rejects outer reality, she becomes strangely assertive at the same time, ignoring her husband's sexual advances as well as her authoritative father's pressure to obey him - to the extent that she is willing to choose death rather than bear for one second longer the continuous oppression that she feels is being forced upon her. Her growing silence and her self-induced starvation - both are central to her psychological unravelling. In this context Elaine Scarry argues that pain destroys language. Trauma victims often have no words - because trauma returns the sufferer to a pre-linguistic state.[8] Most of us have experienced this to a greater or lesser extent - for instance when a loved one passes away there is an immediate period of utter numbness in which one feels surrounded by a wall of insurmountable grief - where reality cannot penetrate and words are impossible and there can be just raw, anguished cries of pain. Thus, Yeong-hye's silence is not only understandable but inevitable. Her silence is in effect a screaming protest against the oppressions that she and countless other women have faced in all corners of a largely patriarchal world.

The vegetal body that Yeong-hye strives for - a plant like existence - is her final desperate plea / challenge against patriarchal norms of femininity and subjugation. Her refusal to eat is an act of reclaiming her body against all external forces that throughout her existence, have sought to dominate and dictate her behaviour. Her final transformation is liberating not only for her but also for her sister In-hye, as she enviously wishes for the courage to demand the same freedom from the normative behaviour that patriarchal codes demand from her. Yeong-hye's ultimate descent into the fractured reality of her own making - where all worldly demands upon her person have ceased to matter to her - is a kind of rebirth that consolidates her self-identity for the first time - as a non-violent 'being' who is no longer a part of the horror of the human world. This identity, albeit tragic to the outside gaze, is essential for her very survival - In-hye finally realizes this as she contemplates her own choices as well as reflects upon the plight of all the helpless beings that have always been dominated / controlled by humanity while all around them nature is free. In this context Claire Fallon writes, "*The Vegetarian* paints a confounding portrait of not one woman, but two damaged sisters seeking desperately to deal with the violence of living in their world."[9]

The Vegetarian ends on this note of contemplation as well as confusion - and a whole lot of unanswered questions about freedom and control, about choices and compliance to societal demands, and ultimately about the impossibility of living life by codes that are different from the normative. It is about internalising trauma, compassion for other living beings, and the lack of empathy even from those closest to us. Ginerva Read writes, "the idea that people could find themselves surrounded by such brutal inhumanity and lack of connection that they reject their current existence and instead opt for transformation into a life form that does not involve thought or feeling is indescribably sad, but probably not beyond imagination for most psychiatrists."[10]

To conclude, Yeong-hye's psychological unravelling can be interpreted as a reaction to the unbearable violence that is part of her social and cultural milieu. Her sister In-hye is also subjected to the same violence, but it is Yeong-hye's tendency to internalise that trauma as well as no help or sympathy from any quarter that leads to the breaking of a mind under intense pressure. Through the portrayal of Yeong-hye, Han Kang has embodied trauma that demands recognition through a passive dissolution of the identity of what it means to be human. By becoming vegetal, Yeong-hye rejects not only the world but her very human-ness, in effect critiquing a societal structure that perpetuates and encourages violence and oppression. Through this gut-wrenching novel, Han Kang challenges the reader to examine the status quo of our world and reconsider what it means to be human.

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End Note

All text in single inverted commas quoted from *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang.