



A Post Humanist Reading of “The Fruit of My Woman” By Han Kang

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Abstract: This paper explores “The Fruit of My Woman” by Han Kang through the lens of Posthumanism, examining the destabilization of the human–nonhuman boundary in the narrative. The story depicts the gradual transformation of a woman into a plant-like entity, narrated through the perspective of her husband. Rather than presenting the metamorphosis as a pathological condition, the narrative invites readers to reconsider rigid definitions of the human body, agency and identity.

Drawing on posthumanist frameworks that challenge anthropocentric thinking, this paper argues that the protagonist’s transformation critiques human exceptionalism and patriarchal control over the female body. The woman’s becoming-plant can be interpreted as a form of resistance against social expectations and normative human identity. Through this vegetal metamorphosis, the story foregrounds alternative modes of existence that blur the boundaries between human, nature and object.

Furthermore, the narrative perspective—filtered through the husband’s confusion and discomfort—reveals the limitations of human-centered perception when confronted with nonhuman forms of life and agency. The paper ultimately argues that the story presents a compelling exploration of posthuman subjectivity, where the dissolution of the human form opens possibilities for reimagining embodiment and coexistence with the nonhuman world.

Index Terms – Posthumanism, Human–Nonhuman Boundary, Metamorphosis, Feminine Embodiment.

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, posthumanist theory has emerged as a significant critical framework that challenges the anthropocentric foundations of Western thought. Rejecting the notion of the human as a stable, autonomous and superior category, posthumanism instead emphasizes the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman forms of existence. As Rosi Braidotti argues, the posthuman condition calls for a shift away from human-centered subjectivity toward a broader, life-centered ontology that acknowledges the entanglement of human, animal and ecological systems (Braidotti). Similarly, Donna Haraway critiques rigid boundaries between humans and nonhumans, proposing instead a model of hybrid and relational identities that destabilize conventional binaries (Haraway). Within this theoretical framework, subjectivity is reconfigured as a distributed and dynamic process rather than a fixed human attribute.

Literary narratives that foreground transformation and embodiment provide a particularly productive site for exploring posthumanist concerns. By depicting bodies that exceed or transgress human limits, such texts challenge the presumed coherence and centrality of the human form. In this context, Han Kang's short story *The Fruit of My Woman* (1997) offers a compelling exploration of the dissolution of human boundaries. The narrative traces the gradual transformation of a woman into a plant-like entity, as observed through the perspective of her husband. Rather than framing this metamorphosis as a pathological deviation, the text presents it as an ambiguous and transformative process that resists conventional categorization.

A posthumanist reading of the story shifts critical attention from symbolic or psychological interpretations toward an understanding of the body as a site of material and ecological entanglement. The protagonist's becoming-plant destabilizes the hierarchy between human and nonhuman life forms, thereby challenging the notion of human exceptionalism. At the same time, the transformation invites a feminist reading, as it disrupts patriarchal attempts to regulate and define the female body within fixed humanist frameworks. The woman's withdrawal from normative modes of existence can thus be interpreted as a form of resistance that reconfigures embodiment beyond socially imposed identities.

Furthermore, the narrative perspective—filtered through the husband's confusion and inability to comprehend the transformation—highlights the limitations of human-centered modes of perception. His attempts to interpret and control the situation ultimately fail, revealing the inadequacy of anthropocentric frameworks when confronted with nonhuman forms of agency. In this sense, the story not only critiques human exceptionalism but also foregrounds alternative modes of being that challenge conventional understandings of subjectivity, embodiment, and relationality.

This paper, therefore, examines *The Fruit of My Woman* (1997) through a posthumanist lens to argue that the dissolution of the human form does not signify loss or absence, but rather opens up new possibilities for reimagining existence beyond the confines of the human. By foregrounding the entanglement of human and nonhuman forces, the narrative invites a reconsideration of what it means to inhabit a body and to exist within a shared ecological and material world.

3.3 Theoretical framework

Posthumanism emerges as a critical response to the limitations of humanist thought, which has historically privileged the human as a rational, autonomous, and superior subject. Rejecting this anthropocentric framework, posthumanist theory seeks to decenter the human and foreground the complex networks of relations that bind human and nonhuman forms of existence. As Rosi Braidotti argues, the posthuman condition calls for a reconceptualization of subjectivity beyond the individualistic and human-centered model, proposing instead a “zoe-centered egalitarianism” that recognizes life as a dynamic and interconnected force (Braidotti). In this formulation, the human is no longer the measure of all things but one element within a broader ecological and material continuum.

A key concern of posthumanism is the destabilization of rigid boundaries between human and nonhuman entities. Donna Haraway's influential concept of the cyborg challenges traditional binaries such as human/machine, nature/culture, and organism/technology, emphasizing instead hybridity and relationality (Haraway). For Haraway, identities are not fixed but are continuously produced through interactions across species and systems. This perspective is particularly useful in literary analysis, where representations of transformation and hybridity can be read as sites that disrupt the illusion of a stable and coherent human subject.

In addition to rethinking subjectivity, posthumanism also reconfigures the role of matter and materiality. Moving beyond the view of matter as passive or inert, Jane Bennett introduces the concept of “vibrant matter” to argue that nonhuman material entities possess a form of agency that influences human life and experience (Bennett). This shift enables a reading of literary texts in which objects, environments, and biological processes are not merely background elements but active participants in the production of meaning. Such an approach is particularly relevant to narratives that foreground the body as a site of transformation, where material processes challenge the primacy of consciousness and identity.

Furthermore, posthumanist theory intersects productively with feminist thought in its critique of the universalized “human” subject, which has historically been gendered, racialized, and exclusionary. By destabilizing the category of the human, posthumanism opens up possibilities for rethinking embodiment in ways that resist normative and patriarchal definitions. The body, in this context, is understood not as a fixed entity but as an assemblage shaped by biological, social, and ecological forces.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a framework for analyzing literary representations of transformation as processes that unsettle human exceptionalism and foreground alternative modes of existence. By emphasizing relationality, materiality, and hybridity, posthumanism offers a critical lens through which texts can be read as challenging the boundaries between human and nonhuman life. This framework is particularly relevant for examining narratives that depict the dissolution of the human form, as it enables an interpretation that moves beyond symbolic readings to consider the broader implications of such transformations for understanding subjectivity, agency, and coexistence.

Conceptual Framework: Reading Transformation, Embodiment, and the Nonhuman

While posthumanist theory provides the broader philosophical grounding for this study, the present analysis is guided by a set of interrelated concepts that enable a focused reading of *The Fruit of My Woman* (1997). The concept of metamorphosis is central to the text, functioning not merely as a narrative device but as a process that destabilizes fixed identity. Unlike traditional literary transformations that often resolve into symbolic meaning, the protagonist’s gradual shift into a vegetal form resists closure and challenges the stability of the human body. This metamorphosis is understood here as an ongoing process of becoming rather than a completed state, aligning with posthumanist notions of fluid and evolving subjectivity. The transformation thus disrupts the idea of the body as a bounded and coherent entity, instead presenting it as open to material and ecological reconfiguration.

Closely linked to this is the concept of embodiment, which is redefined beyond humanist assumptions of the body as a vessel for consciousness or identity. Drawing on the work of Rosi Braidotti, embodiment in this study is understood as a site of multiple forces—biological, environmental, and affective—that exceed individual control (Braidotti). The female body in the narrative is not merely transformed but reconstituted as part of a broader life process, thereby challenging anthropocentric definitions of what it means to inhabit a body.

The framework also emphasizes human–nonhuman entanglement, a key posthumanist concept that foregrounds the interconnectedness of all forms of life. Rather than viewing the human and the nonhuman as separate categories, this study approaches them as mutually constitutive. Donna Haraway’s emphasis on relationality and boundary breakdowns informs this approach, enabling a reading of the narrative in which the domestic space becomes a site of ecological interaction rather than human dominance (Haraway). The protagonist’s transformation into plant life thus exemplifies the permeability of boundaries between human and environment.

In addition, the concept of material agency plays a crucial role in this analysis. Moving beyond the notion of matter as passive, this study draws on Jane Bennett’s idea of “vibrant matter” to interpret the vegetal form as active and generative rather than inert (Bennett). The plant into which the woman transforms is not simply an object of observation but a dynamic presence that reshapes the spatial and relational dynamics of the narrative. This shift allows for a reading in which agency is distributed across human and nonhuman elements, rather than being confined to the human subject alone.

Finally, these concepts are situated within a broader concern with feminine embodiment and resistance. The protagonist’s transformation can be read as a withdrawal from patriarchal structures that seek to regulate and define the female body. By moving beyond the human form, the narrative challenges normative expectations of femininity and opens up alternative modes of existence that resist control and categorization.

Together, these conceptual tools provide a structured approach to analyzing the text, enabling a reading that foregrounds transformation not as loss, but as a reconfiguration of existence across human and nonhuman domains.

Textual Analysis

1. Destabilizing the Human Body: Metamorphosis and the Loss of Fixed Identity

At the center of *The Fruit of My Woman* (1997) lies the gradual and unsettling transformation of the female protagonist into a plant-like entity. This metamorphosis does not occur as a sudden rupture but unfolds slowly, eroding the stability of the human body and its associated identity. The story is told from the perspective of protagonist's husband and is through him the readers get to know about the position of the protagonist. In the beginning of the text, her husband notices- "I examined my wife's face with a cool, dispassionate gaze. The face I was confronted with felt unfamiliar. It felt unfamiliar, almost unreal" (Kang 3). There are many instances throughout the text which points towards the slow erosion of protagonist's personality and physical appearance. The woman's loss of speech, mobility and conventional subjectivity signals not merely a decline but a shift away from human-centered modes of existence. Rather than interpreting this transformation as pathological, it can be read as a process that destabilizes the idea of the body as a fixed and coherent entity. Further, the portrayal of the unnamed husband figure reveals his belated recognition of his wife's declining health. The narrative underscores that, despite her gradual physical deterioration over the years, this is the first time in many years that he consciously notices the severity of her condition, "If anything, she actually looked older than her age. Her cheeks, the colour of unripe apples into which the red has just begun to rise, were sunken, like knocked-in clay. The waist that had been as soft and pliant as a sweet potato seedling, the stomach that once had such an appealing set of curves, were now pitifully lean" (Kang 4).

From a posthumanist perspective, this dissolution aligns with Rosi Braidotti's conception of the posthuman subject as fluid, processual, and embedded within a broader network of life forces (Braidotti). "The bruises that had been the size of a newborn's fist the previous spring were now more like large taro leaves. On top of that, they'd darkened. They were the dull colour of a weeping willow's branches, whose pale green seems tinged with a hint of blue at the onset of summer" (Kang 6). The protagonist's becoming-plant challenges the primacy of human identity by foregrounding a form of existence that is no longer governed by rationality or individual agency. Instead, the body becomes a site of transformation that exceeds human control, thereby undermining the assumption that the human is a stable and superior category.

2. Human–Nonhuman Entanglement: Blurring Boundaries of Nature and Self

The narrative further complicates the distinction between human and nonhuman through its depiction of the protagonist's integration into plant life. As her body begins to resemble and ultimately merge with vegetal forms, the boundaries between organism and environment become increasingly porous. The protagonist's metamorphosis into a plant-like entity is progressively articulated through a series of textual cues. The description of her hair, "Her formerly glossy hair was as brittle as dried radish leaves" (Kang 6) employs vegetal imagery to blur the distinction between the human and the plant world. While the simile underscores her physical deterioration, it simultaneously functions as a textual marker of her ongoing metamorphosis into a plant-like being. The comparison to dried leaves further evokes notions of withering and withdrawal, reflecting her gradual detachment from normative social and gendered expectations. The domestic space, traditionally associated with human order and control, is gradually transformed into an ecological space in which human and nonhuman elements coexist and interact.

Significantly, the protagonist remains unable to rationalize her own transformation. As changes occur both within her consciousness and upon her physical body, the boundaries between the human and the vegetal become increasingly blurred. While the metamorphosis is presented as uncanny, the narrative does not frame it as a violation of nature. Instead, it appears as a strangely natural evolution, one that the protagonist experiences intuitively despite her inability to fully comprehend it. "Why is this happening to me? I keep wanting to go outside, and as soon as I do . . . as soon as I see the sunlight, in fact, I get the urge to take my clothes off. It's as though my body wants them off" (Kang 6). The

protagonist's transformation can also be interpreted as a means of shedding the burdens associated with human existence. As she gradually moves away from the social, cultural, and gendered expectations imposed upon her, the metamorphosis becomes a form of liberation. By embracing a plant-like mode of being, she rejects the constraints that have long governed her life and moves toward a state of autonomy in which she can exist on her own terms. "She crumpled to her knees like a puppet whose strings had been cut" (Kang 6).

This blurring of boundaries resonates with Donna Haraway's critique of rigid binaries such as human/nature and organism/environment (Haraway). The story resists any clear demarcation between these categories, instead presenting identity as something that emerges through relational processes. The protagonist's transformation thus exemplifies a form of entanglement in which the human is no longer separable from the nonhuman world but is constituted through it. Such a reading challenges anthropocentric assumptions and repositions the human as one component within a larger ecological network.

3. Material Agency: The Body as Vibrant Matter

A significant aspect of the protagonist's transformation is the way in which her body, in its vegetal state, acquires a form of agency that cannot be fully understood within humanist frameworks. The plant-like body grows, changes, and occupies space in ways that disrupt the husband's attempts to interpret or control it. "So what was my wife's problem? If she really was hankering after something, I couldn't image how it could be so severe as to constitute a psychogenic illness" (Kang 12).

Significantly, it is only after the protagonist's metamorphosis is nearly complete that the narrative grants her a direct voice. For much of the novel, her story is mediated through the perspectives of her husband—primarily who misunderstand, judge, or attempt to control her. However, in the final chapters, the reader is finally allowed access to her consciousness. This narrative shift can be interpreted as a symbolic reclamation of agency and autonomy. Having gradually shed the social roles and expectations imposed upon her, she is at last able to articulate her own desires and understanding of the world. Her declaration, "I've dreamed of this, of being able to live on nothing but wind, sunlight and water, for a long time now" (Kang 17), encapsulates the culmination of her transformation.

Rather than being passive, the transformed body exerts a quiet yet persistent presence that reshapes the dynamics of the narrative. This can be understood through Jane Bennett's concept of "vibrant matter," which attributes agency to nonhuman material forms (Bennett). The protagonist's vegetal existence challenges the notion that agency is exclusively human, suggesting instead that material processes themselves can generate meaning and effect change. In this context, the body is no longer a vessel for identity but an active participant in a network of material relations. The transformation thus foregrounds the vitality of matter and reconfigures the boundaries of agency.

4. Patriarchy, Perception, and the Limits of the Human

The narrative's perspective, filtered through the husband, plays a crucial role in revealing the limitations of human-centered perception. His inability to comprehend the transformation reflects a broader failure of anthropocentric thinking to account for nonhuman forms of existence. He observes, categorizes, and attempts to manage the situation, yet his understanding remains constrained by his attachment to normative definitions of the human. "In *The Fruit of My Woman*, the protagonist's decision to marry her lover coincides with her suppression of the urge to free herself from the physical and psychic confinement of her surroundings by undertaking an overseas journey" (Bose 3).

As the protagonist undergoes her transformation, the traits that once made her desirable in her husband's eyes gradually begin to disappear. Her fading voice, deteriorating physical appearance, and increasing withdrawal from domestic and social roles signal a rejection of the qualities through which she had previously been perceived and valued. In this sense, the metamorphosis not only alters her body but also dismantles the identity constructed around patriarchal expectations of femininity and

marital companionship. “Her voice was frighteningly flat. At that initial meeting, it had been her voice that most attracted me to her” (Kang 10).

The fact that doctors are unable to find anything medically wrong with the protagonist undermines attempts to pathologize her transformation. Although her husband interprets the changes as a sign of disorder, the narrative offers no definitive medical evidence to support this claim. This suggests that what appears unnatural to him may not be inherently unnatural at all; rather, his discomfort stems from witnessing her gradual departure from the norms of femininity and domesticity that he has come to expect. The transformation therefore exposes the limits of his understanding rather than the presence of an actual illness. “The doctor said there’s nothing wrong? I felt an intense wave of fatigue and loneliness. When I shrugged off my suit jacket, my wife didn’t take it from me. He said he couldn’t find anything wrong, she confirmed, her face still turned away” (Kang 12). The narrative also foregrounds male aggression and the discomfort experienced by men when confronted with a woman who no longer desires them or seeks validation through them. As the protagonist increasingly withdraws from her husband and begins to pursue a form of freedom beyond the confines of marriage and patriarchal expectations, her actions become incomprehensible to him. Unable to understand her desire for autonomy, he interprets her transformation as abnormal and threatening, revealing the extent to which female independence unsettles established structures of male authority and control. “Given that the doctor had said he couldn’t find anything wrong, perhaps, rather than there being some physical problem with my wife’s stomach or intestines, it was a simple case of yearning. But what on earth could she be yearning for?” (Kang 12). “Paradoxically and at this point unbeknownst to her husband, her withering is part of her process of rebirth, an escape from patriarchal violence into a more satisfying vegetal existence. It is a radical resistance against the demands of patriarchy. During this process her husband’s anthropocentric convictions become shaken. We can observe how he slowly begins to see plants no longer as mere objects but as alive and responsive” (Grewe-Volpp 12)

The protagonist's refusal—or inability—to engage with her husband's speech marks a symbolic rejection of patriarchal authority. As his words lose their power to influence or regulate her behavior, the husband experiences a growing sense of helplessness and agitation. The narrative thus reveals how male frustration emerges when traditional channels of control and communication cease to function, exposing the fragility of the power dynamics underpinning their relationship. “Most likely, my words had gone in one ear and out the other; I could hear them falling to the living room floor, crumbling like cheap biscuits” (Kang 13).

From a feminist posthumanist perspective, this dynamic also highlights the operation of patriarchal control over the female body. The woman's transformation can be read as a form of resistance—a withdrawal from the structures that seek to define and regulate her identity. By becoming plant-like, she escapes the expectations imposed upon her as a human subject, particularly as a woman within a patriarchal framework. The husband's discomfort and confusion thus reveal not only the limits of his perception but also the instability of the systems of control he represents.

5. Reimagining Subjectivity: Beyond the Human

Taken together, these elements suggest that the protagonist's transformation does not signify a loss of self but rather a reconfiguration of subjectivity. The narrative invites readers to consider the possibility of existence beyond the human, where identity is not defined by autonomy or rationality but by relationality and material interconnectedness. The vegetal form, far from being a diminished state, represents an alternative mode of being that challenges the hierarchies embedded within humanist thought. “The connection between the revival of her escape-impulse and her evolution into a vegetal being lies in her desire to escape, to live and die freely devoid of all societal conventions and the gloomy, noisy and crammed together ways of living of modern city life” (Bose 3)

“He’s been extremely kind. He bought a huge flowerpot and planted me in it” (Kang 16). The protagonist's transformation into a plant-like entity also precipitates a significant change in her husband. The narrative appears to trace a progression from her initial exhaustion with patriarchal expectations, marital obedience, and the constant demand for conformity, to a transitional phase marked by resistance and self-transformation. As she begins to subvert the roles imposed upon her, her

husband is left bewildered and increasingly unable to comprehend her actions. However, the culmination of her metamorphosis paradoxically alters their relationship. Once the struggle for control and compliance dissolves, a different form of connection emerges between them. In this sense, the transformation not only liberates the protagonist from patriarchal constraints but also compels her husband to confront and reassess his understanding of her, bringing them closer in a way that their conventional marital relationship never could. He spends his Sundays caring for the plants, patiently removing aphids and tending to their well-being. The man who was once perpetually exhausted now rises early each morning to climb the nearby mountain and collect mineral water, mindful of the protagonist's preference for it over tap water. His acts of care extend further as he replaces the old soil with fresh, nutrient-rich loam and ensures that the living space remains filled with clean air by opening the doors and windows after rainfall. Through these gestures, the narrative illustrates a shift in his relationship with the protagonist, suggesting a growing sensitivity to her needs and a newfound willingness to accommodate the life she has chosen.

“She is a hybrid between human and plant who still relies on words, but lets the reader share her new senses and feelings that are not dependent on human senses like seeing, hearing and smelling, but on the touch of leaves and roots, on the movement of air molecules, in short, on a newly developed intricate sensory apparatus. As an almost-plant she is not a dumb object, but a being very much alive to her immediate surroundings. She is not a victim, but an active subject who seems to manipulate her formerly unloving husband into a generous and care-giving man” (Grewe-Volpp 14)

In this sense, the story aligns with posthumanist efforts to rethink subjectivity as distributed across human and nonhuman domains. Significantly, the husband's final reflection indicates that he has moved from resistance to contemplation. Earlier in the narrative, he viewed his wife's transformation as a disruption of the social and marital order. By the end, however, he no longer seeks to control or reverse it. Instead, he wonders whether she will bloom again, acknowledging the possibility of a reality beyond his understanding. The metaphor of flowering thus symbolizes the protagonist's complete liberation from the constraints that once governed her existence and affirms her right to define her own mode of being. “When spring came, would my wife sprout again? Would her flowers bloom red? I just didn't know” (Kang21). The dissolution of the human form becomes a site of possibility, opening up new ways of understanding embodiment and coexistence. By foregrounding the entanglement of life forms, the narrative ultimately calls for a reimagining of what it means to be human in a world where the boundaries between self and other are increasingly unstable.

Conclusion

The Fruit of My Woman by Han Kang offers a profound reimagining of the human by dissolving the boundaries that traditionally separate the human from the nonhuman. Through the protagonist's gradual transformation into a plant-like entity, the narrative destabilizes fixed notions of identity, embodiment, and agency, challenging the anthropocentric assumptions that underpin humanist thought. Rather than presenting this metamorphosis as a loss or degeneration, the story invites a reconsideration of existence as fluid, relational, and deeply embedded within material and ecological processes. “The story, dependent on words, has no words for a truly alien existence. Human language takes us only so far. By reacting to a plant's signs and signals, the male narrator can change his vocabulary and start to be more considerate. But he cannot enter his wife's mind once she has become a plant. He cannot even say whether she is happy or not, happiness lying outside the register of a plant's existence. He can only follow her development on anthropomorphic terms as long as she has some human traits left” (Grewe-Volpp 16).

By engaging with posthumanist frameworks articulated by theorists such as Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway, this paper has demonstrated how the text foregrounds the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman life. The protagonist's becoming-plant disrupts the hierarchy that privileges the human and instead situates the body within a broader continuum of life, where agency is distributed across biological and material forces. Furthermore, the narrative's emphasis on material transformation resonates with Jane Bennett's notion of vibrant matter, highlighting the active role of nonhuman entities in shaping meaning and experience.

At the same time, the story's focus on the female body introduces a critical feminist dimension, revealing how the dissolution of the human form can function as a mode of resistance against patriarchal structures. The protagonist's withdrawal from normative human identity challenges the systems that seek to regulate and define feminine embodiment, offering instead an alternative mode of existence that escapes control and categorization. The husband's inability to comprehend this transformation further underscores the limitations of human-centered perception and the inadequacy of existing frameworks to account for nonhuman forms of agency.

Ultimately, *The Fruit of My Woman* presents a compelling vision of posthuman subjectivity, where the boundaries between human, nature and matter are not fixed but continuously negotiated. The narrative suggests that the end of the human, as traditionally conceived, is not an erasure but an opening—one that allows for new ways of understanding embodiment, relationality, and coexistence. In doing so, the text not only critiques human exceptionalism but also gestures toward a more inclusive and ecologically attuned conception of life, where the human is no longer at the center but part of a larger, interconnected world.

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