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***The Vegetarian: Nature, Culture and Identity***

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Haritha Vijayakumaran

MA English and Comparative Literature, Pondicherry University

***Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com*****Abstract:**

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* is a novel that shocks, appals and moves its readers in such a way that it is never possible to fully recover from it. The ripples that it create even now, twelve years after its initial publication bears testimony to its constant relevance. Food or its lack, the love for it and abhorrence towards it becomes not the crux of the novel, but a medium that allows us to understand the subject of the novel, Yeong-hye, an arborphiliac who is neither the protagonist nor the narrator of the story. "You are what you eat" is a phrase that we constantly hear and Yeong hye in order to move away from her "human" identity, the façade that she has created over years, gives up everything that bound her to it. But it is when she gives up non vegetarian food and later food all together that people around her stop and take notice, which validates the abovementioned phrase. The role of food in the creation of human identities, relationships, memories and culture is undeniable. How far Yeong-hye's abstinence releases her from her human/cultural identity and takes her from being a part of culture to being a part of nature is the focus of my paper. And in doing so, I aim to get closer towards resolving the dilemma of whether to locate man in culture or nature and probe what makes humans "human" and the relevance of such an identity.

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Food is one of the many things that bind us to our culture, sets humans apart from animals and create an identity for us. It is not that animals do not crave or enjoy food, but their eating habits arise from instinct unlike our food habits that are tied to emotions- that is why we feel great pride in being able to eat and serve our traditional cuisines and have terms like "comfort food" in our lexicon. Food, for us, isn't just about instinctive eating but is about preparing, creating, discovering, serving and savouring. Each step of the process provides a unique joy. Food thus being entwined with our history, culture, tradition and practices has a big role to play in the determining of an individual's identity. That is why a person who we think we have figured out seems like a stranger when we find out her eating habits are even slightly different from ours. In countries like India the hierarchy in the society is determined by the food we eat, but historically it is the economics of survival that decided the eating habit of each community. This historical truth has long been swept

under the carpet. The politics of food and how it affects our discourse and agency is something that needs deep probing, but what happens when you give up food all together? Does it release us from the discourse, the need for agency and, at a more elementary level, identity itself? This is the question

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Han Kang raises through her novel *The Vegetarian*.

The three part drama novella was published in South Korea in 2007 and was inspired by Kang's 1997 short story "The Fruit of My Woman". It tells the story of Yeong-hye, an otherwise ordinary home maker and part time graphic artist who decides to stop eating meat after having a traumatic and bloody nightmare. The changes this sudden and unexpected decision has in her personal and familial life is the plot of the story but not its essence. Yeong hye is not the heroine of the story but its subject.

The first part of the novel "The Vegetarian" is narrated by Mr Cheong, Yeong hye's husband who remarks he married his wife because she was not remarkable;

Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way. To be frank the first time I met her I wasn't even attracted to her...However, if there want any special attraction, nor did any particular drawbacks present themselves, and there was no reason for the two of us to not get married. (Kang,9)

This is until he sees her disposing all meat items in the fridge and learns that she has become an herbivore. This turns his life topsy turvy. The identity he had mentally imposed on her as being ordinary, unremarkable, an average wife and a good cook who enjoyed her own meals was suddenly lost, the equilibrium it had given his life was gone. The italicised portions in this section give us a glimpse into Yeong hye's mind. Though her behaviour is certainly new, the thoughts behind it are not: "Intolerable loathing, so long suppressed. Loathing I have always tried to mask with affection. But now the mask is coming off."(Kang,55). The mask is Yeong hye's way of adapting to the needs, desires and expectations of the people around her. By becoming a vegan she is defying such expectations, she is drifting away from the identity imposed by the external world. Her defiance becomes more concrete when she tries to kill herself after her father tries to force feed her meat and poignantly so when she sits by a fountain outside the hospital with her breasts exposed to the sun and her husband divorces her.

The next section "Mangolian Mark" is narrated by Yeong hye's unnamed brother in law, a video artist. He has absolutely no interest in her until he learns about the Mangolian mark on her buttocks which intrigues him so much that she becomes an almost painful object of desire and the subject of his ambitious video where he wants to feature a man and woman having intercourse, with flowers painted on their bodies. This is one of the few instances where we see Yeong hye happy. He does not understand Yeong hye, but understands what is happening to her, at least superficially: "This was the body of a beautiful woman, conventionally an object of desire, and yet it was a body from which all desire has been eliminated...what she had renounced was the very life that her body represented".(Kang, 156). Nevertheless he does not understand Yeong hye or the reason behind her choices because Yeong hye is not only defying desire but her humanness itself and this becomes clearer in the last section "The Flaming Trees".

The last section is explained through the eyes of Yeong hye's sister In-hye, as she cares for Yeong hye who is admitted in a psychiatric hospital wrongly diagnosed with anorexia and schizophrenia. By this point she had stopped eating all together, stopped moving or talking and doing anything that makes her human. She once escapes the asylum during a lashing storm and rain to go and stand among the trees and become one of them. Even when confined to the asylum she stand on her head most of the time to become a tree as she realizes that all trees stand upside down: "I was standing on my head...leaves were growing from my body, and roots were sprouting from my hands... so I dug down in to earth. On and on ...I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch, so I spread my legs, I spread them wide..."(Kang,257) and having become a tree she no longer needs food, at least not the kind of food humans eat; "I need to water my body, I don't need this kind of food, sister. I need water."(Kang, 275). She believes that she'll no longer have use for words either and soon enters a catatonic state and there are no vestiges left to remind anyone of her female or human identity. Her weight having dropped below thirty, she no longer menstruates and long hair start growing on her limbs which make her resemble

a plant and like a plant she remains rooted to where she is. By disassociating herself wholly from food she disassociates from all features that qualify life (human life) like memory, love, care, relationships etc;

Food and memory: Yeonghye and her sister shared a traumatic childhood because of their abusive father and the thought of running away from home cross their minds more than once. He unleashes his cruelty not only towards his family but also the other creatures around him and Yeong hye has been a part of it. She graphically describes how her father killed their dog after it had bitten her; by dragging it around tied to the back of his bike, she had watched the whole scene without even as much as a flinch. The dog looked at her yearning for some sympathy. Later on, they make a feast of the dead dog as that is the tradition and she relishes the meat. The way she had behaved and felt that day comes back to haunt her a lot earlier than she herself suspects it. Though on the outside she seems pretty adept at hacking and mincing meat and enjoys the meals she cooks, it makes her squeamish. She has nightmares where she kills people/animals and relishes the taste of blood, the sight of gore and the feel of torturing. And the fact she can identify that self of her in memories probably makes her want to disassociate from it.

At her sister's housewarming Yeong hye's family who thinks her idea of turning vegetarian is preposterous tries to force feed her her favourite meat dishes from childhood. Her father tries to force in a piece of pork, holding her captive. It is not the first time she is getting violated: the abuse she has faced from her father as a child, the multiple times her husband rapes her not understanding how she does not feel desire anymore and how torturous it is to have her body violated like that and in each of these incidents she recognizes an echo of her past actions and her terrible dreams and in her first loud act of defiance cuts herself. Later, at the asylum her sister tries to feed her her favourite fruits and vegetarian dishes from childhood, but at the stage her abstinence from because of her memories or nightmares, but because she had already succeeded in transcending everything that made her human like memories, love, relationships, responsibilities etc.

Food as love: love as an emotion, in its purest form, appears rarely in the novel. Yeong hye and her husband do not love each other. As mentioned earlier, Mr Cheong marries her because he is sure that she can never intimidate him or hurt his male ego, or disturb the course of his life in any way. And as for Yeong hye, her disassociation from human emotions has happened much earlier, in her childhood. None of the brief glimpses we get in to her psyche reveal any emotion that resembles love. She probably loved her sister, because she is the last person she shows any signs of warmth to before disconnecting fully. Food is definitely a form of love; we see Yeong hye's sister coaxing her in to eating fruits and other favourite vegetarian dishes from childhood. But in all the other instances, where she is forced to eat, whether by her parents or husband it is only a form of abuse, an act of controlling. They feel they have lost control on this hitherto obedient and dutiful woman and cannot tolerate her defiance and when they see that she is not going to bend cuts her off from their life fully. Even the delicious and wholesome food Yeonghye cooks for her husband is only a part of the façade that she had put up until then.

Food as relationship: Food has a deep connection with how we feel about people, there are foods that we associate with each person that we are close with, with whom we have spent a lot of our time. And all of us share a unique relationship with the food that we eat. Though for many of us food is one of the best aspect of being alive and some take great joy in cooking and feeding others for a few others food is just another thing like air and water that one requires for survival. Yeong hye's sister sees her in all the food she had loved as a child and though Mr Cheong has never truly loved Yeong hye he is comfortable with her and its comfort that he prizes over love. And a big part of this comfort and the peaceful life that they share before Yeong hye's nightmare is the food that she cooks. He is greatly impressed by her competency as a cook and her food is the only thing he actually relishes about her. For Yeong hye the deepest relationship she shares is with food, in her aversion towards it. For her, food is a constant reminder of the abuses she suffered in her childhood and the abuse she believed she meted out to the dog and all the animals that she had ever eaten, their memories haunt her in sleep and waking and cannot manage to push away their claustrophobic presence which hurts her physically:

The thing that hurts is my chest. Something is stuck in my solar plexus. I don't know what it might be. It's lodged there permanently these days. Even though I have stopped wearing a bra, I can feel the lump all the time. No matter how deeply I inhale, it doesn't go away.

Yells and howls, threaded together layer upon layer, are enmeshed to form that lump. Because of meat. I ate too much meat. The lives of animals I ate have all lodged there. Blood and flesh, all those butchered bodies are scattered in every nook and cranny, and though the physical remnants were excreted, their lives still stick stubbornly to my insides. (Kang, 93)

For Yeong hye food represents the tortured relationship she has with the animals that she had consumed. Though she is shocked and appalled that she had not felt any remorse in the murder of the dog or eating it afterwards unconsciously the guilt is so entrenched in her mind and soul that her life never returns to normal again. And it is by severing her relationship with food that she finally rids these memories and the constant reminders and attains the state of being a tree that she had aspired for, at which stage she no longer needs the foods that humans generally consume and is released from a torturous life of being haunted by nightmares.

Thus she finally moves away from the human world to which she was bound only by food in the last stages, she does not feel any emotional connection with anyone else and she is finally ready to forego her human identity. Though this is the most natural thing for her, the people around her find it very hard to accept her because they can no longer use any of the societal/cultural conventions to locate her identity. She is not wife, not lover, sister, daughter or mother and she ceases to be a woman even (physically too, to a large extent).

Yeonghye is at peace with this kind of an existence while her family is bewildered and they try and fail to understand her as she no longer possesses any human feature, except a few physical semblances. Yeong hye wanted to be a tree and she becomes one. And this makes the readers wonder if one can actually live outside the human world, the cultural, social framework of our existence that is created long before we are born and whose conventions we subconsciously perform. Yeong hye manages to do this by severing each connection a time, though it is only her 'disconnection' with food that is explicitly talked about in the novel, at the point where the novel starts she had mentally severed ties with everything else that binds her to it. This much we can understand from the rare few glimpses we get of her past and the working of her fragmented psyche.

Thus this surreal and shocking narrative by Han Kang points at the possibility of an existence outside culture, and as a part of nature. It does not deem it right or wrong, give concrete answers or discuss its lastingness. Kang leaves this job to the readers. But it certainly establishes it as a possibility and by doing so it deepens the rhetoric about man's relationship with nature and whether he should be located in nature or culture and also the possibility of alternate lifestyles outside culture, untouched by its limitations and shackles.

### References:

Kang, Han. *The Vegetarian*, translated by Deborah Smith. New York, Crown Publishing, 2015.