

Yeong-Hye Becomes a Tree: A Posthumanist Study of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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Han Kang's International Booker prize winning novel *The Vegetarian* speaks of aesthetics beyond the usual socio-normative performativity. It disturbs and dismantles a number of conditions that are apparently seamless of any trace of malevolence.

If looked from a distance of socio-ethical experiences, Han Kang's novels, be it *The Vegetarian* (2007) or *Human Acts* (2014), explore the narratives of trauma based on national identity. While *Human Acts* puts the Gwangju Massacre at its centre, *The Vegetarian* hauntingly brings back the collective trauma of the nation post WWII. However, this paper will be exploring a wider spectrum of human ethics from the posthumanist point of view of Kang's *The Vegetarian*. As far as the textual focuses are concerned, this paper will be dealing solely with the protagonist Yeong-Hye's dreams.

The novel graduates from the narratives of the socio-normativity of Yeong-Hye's husband Mr. Cheong to the covert masculinity of her brother-in-law to that of the introspection of her sister, In-Hye. The first part of the novel is spoken from the lens of Yeong-Hye's husband. In fact the novel begins with Cheong's absolute docile picture of Yeong-Hye where, for him "there was no reason... not to get married" (Kang 10). Her 'passivity' as Cheong notes, had drawn him to an alliance with her where he could be assured of a preconceived power hierarchy. The problem arises with Yeong-Hye's dreams—the dreams of blood. And these dreams, once set in motion, floods her frequently resulting in radical change of her behaviour. The description of her dreams start with her arrival at a slaughter house in dark deadly woods; blood dripping down blood-red meat. She tries to push past them but finds no end to the hanging meat. After somehow managing a way out she abruptly finds herself amidst a picture of 'happiness' where people are merrily picnicking while she is panicking in her blood-stained dress. She quickly hides herself in agony. This beginning part of her elaborate dream, speaks of the very first conscious understanding, or what might be stated as the cognition of the problematics of episteme. In fact Posthumanist argument primarily talks about how thinking shapes the thematics of decentering of the human in relation to a vaster rhetoric. Immanuel Kant in his essay 'What is Enlightenment?' (1784) hits at the very fundamental chord at the very beginning of the essay where he famously states "sapere aude" (Latin for 'dare to know'). He bases this

as the foundational stone right at the beginning while speaking about enlightenment. Even from the etymological perspective, the very 'light' in 'enlightenment' speaks about finding clarity in something that was hitherto laden in obscurity or darkness and to dispel the darkness the first step is, to know. As per Kant, "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance" (Kant). What Kant means and later states, is not to ignorantly accept or abide by any idea or belief just for the sake of their normative acceptance, but to argue each one of them if necessary. Yeong-Hye starts with a doubt or a proto-question in her dreams, which gradually builds up into more solidified enquiries. Her dream starts with a search in the lone 'dark woods' to a 'red barn-like building' (Kang 14) to a picnic scene. The initial horror of the dream is not alleviated at her arrival at the picnic but rather is intensified in terror. The delicious smell of the barbequed meat is 'painfully vivid', suggesting her enquiry into linguistic purview which is designed as a tool to use from an anthropological centre. The words meant to describe a picture of revelling biological human, lays bare the two-fold ethical problems. Firstly is the linguistic problem of the Derridian *différance*, which speaks of the meaning being differed and deferred, disrupting the assumption of meaning itself, thereby exposing the unreliability on the linguistic assumptions. Second is the invisibility of the cruelty imposed on non-human entities. Eija Vinnari and Marcus Vinnari while reflecting on including animals in sustainability, observes:

“...disregarding non-human animals in analyses of society constitutes a denial of human beings' animality. Although any remaining doubts of our common ancestry with other forms of life were dispelled by the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859, it appears many still find it difficult to relinquish the idea of human exceptionalism”.

(Vinnari and Vinnari 3)

Therefore the gay picnic picture of relaxing adults and jolly children casually relishing on either 'kimbap' or barbecued meat stands as a clear imagery of the normatively unseen violence over non-humans. Yeong-Hye hiding in the scene stands for her gap in cognitive understanding. On the one hand she finds a familiar linguistic phenomenon of the expressive 'happiness', while on the other, she becomes aware of the linguistic oppressiveness of that familiar scene.

By the next dream sequence Yeong-Hye had already commenced her 'eccentric' responses. Even though she manages to pull off a meal of 'bulgogi' for her husband, there remained a chipped bit of her metallic knife in it. Her enraged husband yells, "Just think what would have

happened if I'd swallowed it! I was this close to dying!" (Kang 18). At this Yeong-Hye decisively stares at him while feeling everything around her slide away leaving only herself. Technically she remains as the only entity actively engaging in the vaster ontological questions like, how and why the pain and suffering caused by human-inflicted harm to the non-human entities are automatically discounted in respect to human pain. The same husband enraged at the chance of a supposed harm is oblivious of, or so as to say, absolutely undisturbed of the systemic violence of which he is a part. Of course the narrative can find a natural interpretation from the postcolonial perspective of two differently violent masculinities (husband and brother-in-law) claiming Yeong-Hye's body, but the more fundamental interpretation lies at the shifted perspective of Yeong-Hye. Cary Wolfe while speaking of Posthumanism in terms of species, exemplifies the questions posed by Jeremy Bentham and Jacques Derrida, to speak of the idea of vulnerability of animals. Bentham poses a series of questions asking whether animals are 'able' to 'perform' similar actions to that of human. Since they cannot, the dynamics of power places them at a vulnerable position with their 'inability' (Wolfe 46) —the 'inability' of the cattle to save itself from being food and the 'ability' of Mr. Cheong to complain massively at the slightest inadequacy. The non-human 'inability' often regarded in terms of passivity is used as a means to obliterate the ethical co-dependency.

Ethics is the most fundamental tool to investigate the various dimensions of ontology. Cary Wolfe from the posthumanist perspective stresses on shared vulnerability of species reminding of the shared 'finitude' of life. By doing this he basically tries to dismantle the human superiority as species—a superiority that entitles human for enacting any degree on violence on any other non-human species. Bioethics uphold with the very same directness, the basic questions of ethics, but focuses on a more concentrated question relating biological ontology. As per Wolfe, "...bioethics— not only uninterrogated but indeed re-trenched, and nowhere more clearly (or more predictably) than in the confidence with which the boundary between human and nonhuman animals is taken for granted as an ethical (non)issue" (Wolfe 49). This relegation to non-issue can be supposedly explained through the Marxist ideology of obliteration of the subject to a no-one but a mere commodity in the capitalist narrative. This helps strengthen the structure of power hierarchy ensuring the preservation of the previous order. Yeong-Hye is haunted presumably with these ethical questions where right after Cheong's outrageous reaction she sees a face (presumably Mr. Cheong's) in the blood pool. In one of the next dreams that Yeong-Hye relates, the ones getting clearer and clearer, the author invokes a sense of murderous guilt for the readers. The dream narrates the process of

slaughter/murder thereby leaving space for the ethical background check for the readers. Yeong-Hye's dreams even though leave a 'hazy' image, brings in the definite feelings of murder and violence. For instance, the description of blood is stated in terms of temperature to make the readers go through the disturbing sensory understanding of murder and horror and pain associated with it. Therefore the reader participates in the murder while feeling the change of temperature of the victim's blood on his fingers. Kang takes special care to draw out the most tangible imagery of blood where violence feels to have achieved an unquestioned intimacy.

In the final part of the novel, Yeong-Hye, in the hospital, she speaks of knowing a tree. The ontological understanding of the tree has dawned on her in a unique way, where she identifies herself as a tree. This identification too has had come through a dream as well. In Yeong-Hye's words, "Well, I was in a dream, and I was standing on my head...leaves were growing from my body, and roots were sprouting from my hands...so I dug down into the earth. On and on...I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch, so I spread my legs; I spread them wide..." (Kang 85). This arboreal identity comes to her as an answer to the deeply ethical questions she is tormented with. It can be argued that she finds this arboreal identity as a means of minimizing the infliction of harm. Therefore her agonies find a potent answer in a vegetal rebirth. She volunteers into this identification where she 'dreams' to be independently self-nourishing her body. Interestingly enough, both her questions and answers do not follow structured identifiable patterns but more unfamiliar epistemological ideations. This unfamiliar realm stands at the core of Posthumanism, which denies an answer in the familiar patterns. And Cary Wolfe claims that, changing the nature of thought is a fundamental step for Posthumanism.

Though the focus of this paper has been solely the dreams of Yeong-Hye invoking a surrealist interpretation, this paper focuses on facts requiring a Posthuman interpretation. To speak of it, one needs a quick overview of humanism first. Humanism has been the steady focus of philosophical understating throughout history. The Renaissance Humanism had set the stage for curating various aspects of humanism thereafter. To speak of it very plainly, humanity urges the usage of human agency to fulfil a human endeavour. Since the Renaissance, the idea of humanity though has undergone certain apparent changes, it has withheld its primary ideation (as already stated). But this idea while placing the 'anthropos' at its centre, negated the rest as a non-human whole, therefore, non-identifiable and a convenient non-issue. Posthumanism opposes the inherited epistemological grounding of Humanism thereby establishing the need to understand not just theoretical narratives but actual living conditions. It raises the most

important human question, of what it is to be a human, simultaneously speaking of the planetary inter-species reliance if seen from the ecological perspective.

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