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Dr. Kanwar Pal Singh

The Vegetarian: A Post human Tale of Rebellion against Human Violence

Dr Swati Tyagi

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Hindu College, Moradabad, U.P.

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Abstract- Han Kang's novella *The Vegetarian* is one of the most acclaimed works of the Nobel laureate. It highlights the patriarchal societal constructs that oppress women and the individuals who go against social norms. Yeong-hye, the central character of the novella, rejects meat eating, and thus rebels against the patriarchal South Korean society. Her small acts of vegetarianism, clothing choice and affirmation of her bodily autonomy cause an upheaval in her personal, familial and societal life. Yeong-hye's abstention follows a series of horrible and violent dreams, exposing the predatory nature of the human being. She makes efforts to save her innocence through metamorphosis by transforming herself into a tree and ensuring her survival in sunlight through photosynthesis. Yeong-hye groans as an animal and envisions herself transforming into a tree, to claim freedom and break the shackles of societal norms. Yeong-hye, her unnamed brother-in-law, and her sister, In-hye, all find themselves entrapped in society, envisioning an escape from their perpetual miserable situation by affirming their bodily and ideological freedom.

Keywords- Vegetarian, Metamorphosis, Autonomy, Rebellion, Societal-Norms, Violence, Innocence, Dreams, Escape, Predatory Nature.

Introduction: She (Yeong-hye) wants to stop being human. Humanity is harmful, rageful, murderous, violent, grasping, jealous and greedy- all things that it doesn't want to be. So she defies us humans not only by becoming a vegetarian but by trying to become vegetation itself. She doesn't want to stop living; she wants to stop living like us (Ilana Masad The Guardian).

The Vegetarian is one of the most celebrated works of the South Korean Nobel laureate, Han Kang. The novel, originally published in the Korean language, later translated into English by Deborah Smith in 2015, won the International Booker Prize in 2016. *The Vegetarian* is a surreal tale of a rebellion against social conformity and patriarchal oppression. The book has been divided into three chapters, focussing on different characters – The first chapter is narrated by Mr Cheong,

Yeong-hye's husband, the second chapter focuses on her unnamed brother-in-law and the third chapter focuses on her sister In-hye.

Main Text: Yeong-hye, the protagonist, is rather an object of the novella. She is a young, unnoticeable woman living in Seoul, South Korea. She works as a part time graphic designer. Her husband considered her a suitable match for him only because she was a very ordinary woman who rarely spoke or demanded anything; moreover, he did not feel confronted or inferior in her presence. He used to boss around his junior students at school and chose a small company that valued his unremarkable work. She stayed at home while he spent time outside, she never asked for an explanation. The only unusual thing about his wife was that she did not wear a bra. He reproached her, but their life was going on smoothly until one day, she stood motionless before the open fridge as she had a dream. She threw away all the meat from the fridge and cooked and served only vegetarian food. After being asked, she replied that she had a dream. "Dark woods, no people. The sharp-pointed, blood-red trees, my torn feet, a long bamboo stick strung with great blood-red gashes of meat, blood still dripping down" (Kang 8).

Yeong-hye, haunted by a dream, refuses to cook meat, and her husband, Mr Cheong, views it as a selfish and disobedient act. Mr Cheong does not empathise with her and rebukes her for getting insane. Yeong-hye's childhood traumas and sufferings have caused an identity crisis. Her rejection of meat eating is a rebellion against human violence, meat represents violence and she stands against that violence which she has faced since her childhood, her father used to beat her to mend her manners, her husband is almost indifferent to her existence, he treats her mere an object, Yeong-hye defends herself from being consumed by her father, her husband and society. She has dreams, horrible dreams; her dreams are psychological traumas of what she has faced. She envisions herself chewing meat and getting it stuck in her throat. She recognises her face but she does not want to recognise that she is a meat-eater or a predator. The violence inflicted on her has caused permanent scars and she does not want to commit the same violence. The idea of committing such violent acts is horrible for Yeong-hye. Her husband attends a party with his seniors and colleagues, Yeong-hye does not wear a bra and draws unnecessary attention, she refuses to eat the meat dishes, other people in the gathering comment on Yeong-hye's vegetarianism disrespectfully, and her husband feels appalled in the presence of his boss and the colleagues. Yeong-hye's vegetarianism is not just about animal rights, but it's about bodily autonomy and a rebellion against social conformity, it's a rebellion against the society in which the women are "feminized, animalized,...naturalized and victimized by Patriarchal hegemony" (Gaard 24). Such small acts of vegetarianism and not wearing a bra are considered an act of defiance in South Korean society. Yeong-hye refuses to have sex with her husband as he smells of meat.

Yeong-hye's vegetarianism does not go well with her relatives. Her husband rapes her, and marital rape is not considered a rape in South Korean society. Her father feels appalled by her behaviour and her newly found autonomy and behaviour is a strange thing for the people around her, they are astonished and try to fix the problem. Yeong-hye's father rebukes her and apologises to her husband. He tries to thrust a piece of meat into her mouth forcefully. Yeong-hye's resistance infuriates him, and he slaps her. Yeong-hye's resistance against society is strange and unpredictable. Unable to bear the torture, Yeong-hye tries to kill herself by slitting her wrists. Yeong-hye's resistance is unexpected; she speaks rarely, her silence defies the social conformity, and challenges patriarchal society. In the first chapter, Yeong-hye's husband describes her as a body, and never as a living person, her emotions and ideas hardly matter in the patriarchal setup.

Violence inflicted on Yeong-hye is not a new phenomenon, she has had to bear it since childhood, and her traumatised experiences haunt her in her dreams. She has strange dreams – full of bloodshed and violence. In another dream, she sees her father’s dog, which bit her when she was just nine years old; therefore, the dog was punished, and it was killed and cooked for the local belief that the meat of a dog that bit should be consumed to cure the bite. She recalls:

The saying goes that for a dog... and I did scoop up a mouthful of myself. No in fact, I ate an entire bowlful with rice. The smell of burnt flesh which the perilla seeds couldn’t wholly mask pricked my nose. I remember the two eyes that had watched me, while the dog was made to run on, while he vomited blood mixed with froth and how later they had seemed to appear flickering on the surface of the soup but I don’t care I really didn’t care”(Kang 17).

Yeong-hye was forced to eat the pat dog’s meat, the dog’s pitiful watery eyes haunt her, and it reminds her of her predatory nature and predatory nature of entire human species which consumes the nature and the animals. Yeong-hye gets hospitalised after slitting her wrist, medical treatment tortures her even more and her blood runs into the IV bag. The medical treatment seems to be squeezing life from her further. She goes missing, found out in the courtyard, removing her gown and bandage, uncovering her upper body, showering in the sunlight and gripping a wounded white bird. The bird is wounded, its wings are missing, and some predator’s bite and blood stains are visible on its body. Yeong-hye faces the same situation as the bird. Both have faced violence, been wounded and had blood drops from their bodies; their innocence has been violated. Yeong-hye has stood against this violence; she has refused to be a part of this constant human violence, to be an object of consumption and to assert the societal constraints.

The second chapter ‘Mongolian Mark’ is narrated by the third person unnamed narrator. It focuses on Yeong-hye’s brother-in-law, an amateur artist who wants to paint something different, calm and sober. The brother-in-law is married to In-hye and has a son; he spends most of his time in his studio and avoids taking familial responsibilities. He respects his wife for being hardworking and responsible but feels frustrated. As Kang highlights- “He studied his wife, a picture of responsible compassion as she carefully approached their son with the medicine. She is a good woman, he thought. The kind of woman whose goodness is oppressive” (Kang 26).

Yeong-hye has been served divorce papers as her husband decided to get a divorce. In-hye feels worried for Yeong-hye, she states that Yeong-hye had a Mongolian mark and imagines if she still has it, it makes her husband feel aroused, his wife is far prettier than her sister in law but he loves her wild energy, Yeong-hye’s Mongolian mark and body capture his imagination, he goes to the toilet and masturbates. He remembers how she slit her wrist, and he took her to the hospital; all the family members behaved as if strangers, if not as her enemies. The brother in law, he does not feel connected to his family; he loathes the things around him and calls Yeong-hye, seeking her permission to visit her. He visits Yeong-hye’s apartment and finds her coming from the bathroom, naked while he stares at her, he apologises for staring, but Yeong-hye does not care; she likes to roam around naked in her room, which gives her a sense of being herself. “Seeing how utterly baffled he was, she laughed quietly a melancholic laugh. “Didn't I say you wouldn't understand?” He couldn't ask in that case why you used to bare your breasts to the sunlight like some kind of mutant animal that had to be able to photosynthesize. Was that because of a dream too?”(Kang 36).

She eats the fruits offered by the brother-in-law, and he thinks about her, her body and gets indulged in an act of mental pornography. Both of them visit a nearby ice-cream parlour, and he offers Yeong-hye a modelling proposal, where she has to undress herself, and he would paint her body with wildflowers. She does not accept the offer, but neither declines it; she gives her silent consent. The brother-in-law visits his friend's studio, sets his cam recorder. His wife informs her that she will be late at the store and requests her to pick up their son, Ji-woo, he expresses his inability, and In-hye has to request her neighbour to pick up his son. The brother-in-law hardly takes any familial responsibility; his attitude towards his family shows a father's indifference towards his child. His wife does not expect much; she just requests that he should spend some time with their son on Sundays. She feels grateful that he lets her work full-time and does not complain. A woman is raised in a way that she feels grateful for small favours and bears everything with a lot of patience considering it her duty. Childbearing and rearing are considered a woman's responsibility; husbands are indifferent towards their wives and their children as well. The brother-in-law feels resentment and discontent with his life. A few days prior, he pulls his wife into bed and pulls her clothes, when he was finished, she was crying, he did not understand why she was crying, and he did not care either. It shows women resemble nature, their patience is equalised with normality. Men can't understand nature and a woman, both are mere objects of fulfilling their desires.

The brother-in-law paints Yeong-hye's naked body with red and orange flowers; her Mongolian mark is more vegetal, it is not sexual. Yeong-hye's body is unique. He notices: "This was the body of a beautiful young woman, conveniently an object of desire, and yet it was a body from which all desires have been eliminated. But this was nothing so crass as carnal desire, not for her – rather, or it seemed what she had renounced was the very life that her body represented" (Kang 41).

The brother-in-law gets his friend, J's consent to get his body painted, he fantasises about shooting a male and female painted with flowers, having sex, Yeong-hye feels attracted towards flowers on J's body and pulls him towards herself, and she initiates it. The brother-in-law paints his body with flowers and takes advantage of Yeong-hye. Yeong-hye's elder sister, In-hye catches him and finds their naked video shoot. It astonishes In-hye; she calls the emergency service as she thinks that Yeong-hye and her brother-in-law require medical treatment.

The third chapter 'Flaming Trees' is narrated from the point of view of In-hye. In-hye is concerned about Yeong-hye due to deteriorating health as she has refused to take food and medicine, Yeong-hye feels that she is going through metamorphosis and turning into a tree, a tree which grows in sunlight through photosynthesis, under the rain showers and the sky. Yeong-hye has suffered from humanisation, society and societal constructs; she escapes from the cruel society and its inherent violence through the process of metamorphosis and assumes herself turning into a tree. Her vision of turning into a tree is her last efforts to save her innocence. She desires to be passive, calm and non-violent as a tree. In-hye finds Yeong-hye in a handstand posture as her hands are the roots and leaves will sprout from her hands. She says: "Look sister, I am doing a handstand; leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands...they delve down into the earth. Endlessly, endlessly...yes I spread my legs because I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch; I spread them wide" (Han 88).

Yeong-hye has stopped eating; she is force-fed by the hospital staff, and she does not want to live anymore. She vomits blood and begs to stop further human inherent violence on her through force-feeding, tranquillising and other medical procedures; she desires to get rid of this constant violence which she has suffered since her childhood.

In-hye realises that her own life was not a content life, the time which she spent with her husband was devoid of happiness, she has suffered the same violence just she could never stand against this violence, she suffered silently, compromised and tried to be the best daughter, wife and mother, in accordance with the societal norms and pretended to be an ideal woman, In this process, she lost herself and never lived, her breathing body cannot be assumed as her life, there was not life at all. She did not have to face her father's violence which he had inflicted on Yeong-hye due to the latter's rebellious attitude which infuriated her father again and again, and he tried to school the girl by beating her, torturing her and inflicting violence on her. In-hye's heart got broken when her husband had sex with Yeong-hye, took advantage of her situation and filmed her. She caught her and informed the emergency services, dared to get split finally, he never appeared after that incident, he just called once to talk to his son, and In-hye told her that she did not know him, he never called thereafter. After that videography incident, In-hye bled for a month from her vagina, she ignored it earlier as she was afraid of catching some serious disease, gathered some courage and found out that it was a minor issue. In-hye realises that she would have gone mad and collapsed one day if she had not her only solace Ji-woo. She is afraid of committing suicide; it seems that the trees and forests are calling her to take her miserable life. In-hye carried Yeong-hye to the hospital in an ambulance, looks at the flaming trees, and recalls Ji-woo's dream in which she turned into a white bird. In-hye had the same dream, wishes an escape and flight from perpetual misery but she cannot abandon Ji-woo and familial responsibilities. She cannot escape.

Conclusion: Yeong-hye, In-hye and her husband, all of them desire to escape from the societal norms. Yeong-hye and In-hye have faced the same societal violence and traumas. Yeong-hye bursts out and throws away all the meats after realising that she will be consumed as those pieces of the meat, she retaliates against the societal violence that she has faced in the hands of her father and her husband. She stands against human predatory nature and groans like an animal, desires to turn into a tree just to defend herself against this perpetual violence. Since her childhood, she has been treated as an object that his father handed over to her husband, if the object does not fulfil the expectations of the consumer, it should be corrected. Yeong-hye's parents feel ashamed of her insolent conduct; her father slaps her to teach her a lesson. Yeong-hye's brother-in-law is an unsuccessful artist who draws the scenes of flight; he draws flying butterflies. He has never loved his wife in spite of her beauty, elegance and dedication; he hates her perfection and idealistic demeanour. He is hardly aware of his familial duties. He gets obsessed with Yeong-hye's Mongolian mark and exploits her sexually. Yeong-hye's elder sister In-hye is a beautiful, docile, charming and responsible woman; she is the breadwinner in the family and runs a cosmetic store in Seoul successfully. In spite of being the bread-winner, she hardly gets a helping hand from her husband; therefore, she has to take the burden of all familial and societal responsibilities herself. She never complains, but it has broken her from the inside; she seems calm and happy outside, but suffers silently. In-hye realised about her miserable situation, internal struggle, agony and a desire for an escape and flight after she caught her husband filming Yeong-hye and having a conjugal relationship with her. In-hye is the only person who cares for Yeong-hye in the entire family; she does not distance herself from Yeong-hye, even though her family severs family ties from both of

them. In-hye cannot rebel against the societal violence because she cannot abandon her son Ji-woo and her familial responsibilities.

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