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Becoming Vegetarian: Reading Han Kang's the vegetarian and the fruit of my woman

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Abstract

Han Kang is a South Korean writer who won the Man Booker International prize for fiction for her novel, *The Vegetarian* in 2016. It is about a woman, Yeong-hye who decides to stop eating meat, which has a disastrous effect on her life and changes her from inside as a person. Written in three parts, *The Vegetarian*, *Mongolian Marks* and *Flaming Trees* the story is told through the voice of her husband, her brother-in-law and later her sister, the narrative is from the male point of view, which indicates the patriarchal structure of power that traps her. Kang's *The Fruit of my Woman*, is a short story about a woman who expresses a strong yearning to escape from the hopelessness of modern city life, failing which she gradually undergoes a metamorphosis and becomes a plant. Her husband then takes upon herself the responsibility of planting her in a flower pot and watering her regularly. At the end she bears a fruit, some seeds of which are consumed by her husband and the rest sown in flower pots and placed adjacently. This paper analyses the workings of the female protagonists' mind, living in a patriarchal society, wanting to liberate themselves from the oppressive societal conventions and finding their identity as they become one with vegetal life.

Keywords: Nature, female body, plant, domination

Introduction

"I believe that humans should be plants"

- Yi Sang

"Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society, whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this society."

- Rosemary Radford Ruether in her book, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation*.

Women and nature are in several ways linked to each other; the reproductive role of a female and the nurturing nature of the Earth connect them to one another. Similarly, both women and the environment are exploited and subjected to oppression by the capitalist and patriarchal society and this disrespect towards both must be addressed. Han Kang in *The Vegetarian* and *The Fruit of my Woman* explores the psyche of female characters who feel trapped in patriarchal conventions and find their desires erased from the society and seek to find their voices by becoming more plant like and entering into a transpersonal state of mind. Their denial to consume flesh or the fear of ending up like their mothers who have lived, grown old and died as the societal conventions expected them to is a sign that they aim to find their own selves in the world. Their subversion is manifested through their willingness to bond with the non-human environment which is full of life: "I feel buds sprouting and petals unfurling in places both near and distant, larvae emerging from chrysalises, dogs and cats giving birth to their young, the trembling stop-start of the pulse of the old man in the next building... Day or night, the stars describe a calm parabola, and every time the sun rises the bodies of the sycamores at the side of the highway incline their craving bodies eastwards. My own body responds in a similar way." (*The Fruit of my Woman*)

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Kang's *The Vegetarian* is rooted in the South Korean society, which is popular for its meat eating culture. The protagonist of the novel, Yeong-hye, is a young, docile and passive married woman, who becomes a vegetarian owing to a dream that involves meat that felt like chewing a living, red raw mass in the mouth and a pool of blood on which a face is reflected. This connection, although unconscious, between meat and violence, combined with a number of childhood memories revolving around cruelty towards animals, pushes her not only to reject eating meat and fish and eventually most types of food but also justify her decision as one rational and appropriate. She reasons her throwing away of meat and other animal products in the house and not serving her husband either with such food by saying: "Well, after all, you usually only eat breakfast at home. And I suppose you often have meat with your lunch and dinner, so... it's not as if you'll die if you go without meat just for one meal." (13) Her husband, however, sees it as a visceral rejection of his wishes which reflects the working of strong patriarchal societies which are severely repressive of women. He thinks: "As far as I was concerned, the only reasonable grounds for altering one's eating habits were the desire to lose weight... or having your sleep disturbed by indigestion. In any other case, it was nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband's wishes as mine had done." (14) Yeong-hye's mind and her actions can be seen as a reflection of the society's turbulent relationship with the environment. She is called "narrow-minded" by her husband's executive director at work's wife for having decided to quit eating meat; her psyche changes itself gradually once she realises the brutal acts done and passed off by her society in the name of non-vegetarian diet. She is mocked by her family for her change in attitude; they are so unsympathetic towards the revolutionary change in her behavior that they use violence in order to make her surrender to conventional choices. Her husband comes inebriated one night after a meal with his colleagues and pushes her down to the floor and after some attempts pushes himself inside her. "Once that had happened, she lay there in the dark staring up at the ceiling, her blank face, as though she were a 'comfort woman' dragged in against her will, and I was the Japanese soldier demanding her services." Suffering humiliation in the hands of her own family and understanding violence in language, she gradually retreats into herself which results in complete absence of her voice. Kang considers that "on the reverse side of the protagonist Yeong-hye's extreme attempt to turn her back on violence by casting off her own human body and transforming into a plant lies a deep despair and doubt about humanity". She sees a plant as the perfect symbol of non-violence. Kang further observes that Yeong-hye "refuses to eat meat to cast human brutality out of herself [...] I think that, in this violent world, hers is an extremely awakened state, a horribly true and sane state" (Filgate 2016). After the incident when her family attempts to force-feed her meat, Yeong Hye slits her wrist and is admitted to a hospital. Here too her mother tries to make her eat black goat by calling it a herbal medicine and after one sip of the soup she throws up. In the novel, Yeong-hye feels revolted by the thought of all the meat she has consumed: "The lives of the 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" (49). On the contrary

she almost always behaves as one who is becoming more like a plant, exposing her body to sun's rays and soaking in the sunlight to be able to photosynthesize and also taking in only water in order to survive.

In the second section of Kang's novel, *Mongolian Mark*, it is noticeable that Yeong-hye undergoes a lot of change as a person as her body transforms with a change in her eating habits. This process of change by spitting out all meat from inside, losing weight, trying to take her own life, surviving and now painting and covering the body with flowers are all sequences which lead to her gradually becoming a completely different creature, here, a plant. Her body which was undesired to her husband earlier becomes an object of desire for her brother-in-law who was fascinated by a Mongolian mark on her buttocks and wanted to paint flowers around it. The mark as he described it: "Its pale blue-green resembled that of a faint bruise, but it was clearly a Mongolian mark. It called to mind something ancient, something pre-evolutionary, or else perhaps a mark of photosynthesis, and he realised to his surprise that there was nothing sexual at all about it; it was more vegetal than sexual." (83) With the flowers painted on her body Yeong-hye is no less than Daphne, the daughter of Earth and the River Ladon in the Arcadian version of the myth, who preferred perpetual maidenhood. When Daphne transformed into a tree, her body was covered with bark and her hair had turned into leaves, the female protagonist, here, although does not literally metamorphose into a plant, she, essentially, had become a plant, devoid of Ego and surviving on itself: "It was a body from which all superfluity had gradually been whittled away. Never before had he set eyes on such a body, a body which said so much and yet was no more than itself." (87)

In the last section, *Flaming Trees*, Yeong-hye refuses to eat completely and is aggressive in her attempts to become a tree. Her single dream has changed everything around her: "The lives of all the people around her had tumbled down like a house of cards". She has been admitted to psychiatric institution from which she often flees to experience the natural world directly and be among the trees. On one of these occasions, she is discovered by a nurse deep in the woods, "standing there stock-still and soaked with rain as if she herself was one of the glistening trees" (125). Her sister dreams of Yeong-hye where she hears the latter's voice screaming, "Look, sister, I'm 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" (127). The relationship that the two sisters share in the novel is the only non-violent relationship in spite of each being a victim of extreme violence. In-hye showers a maternal affection on her sister. In-hye visits her sister at the hospital every Wednesday to see how she is getting on and it is these moments of bonding with her sister that would always lighten her heart. Three months later Yeong-hye has given up on food and only takes water. She says: "'They say my insides have all atrophied, you know.' In-hye was lost for words. Yeong-hye moved her emaciated face closer to her sister. 'I'm not an animal any more, sister,' she said, first scanning the empty ward as if about to disclose a momentous secret. "I don't need to eat, not now. I can live without it. All I need is sunlight."

"What are you talking about? Do you really think you've

turned into a tree? How could a plant talk? How can you think these things?" Yeong-hye's eyes shone. A mysterious smile played on her face. "You're right. Soon now, words and thoughts will all disappear. Soon." Yeong-hye burst into laughter, then sighed. "Very soon. Just a bit longer to wait, sister." (153-154) Yeong-hye's sincere urge to identify with plants and her instinct to become a tree is not a defeat but a strategic action to overcome a capitalist and patriarchal logic of domination and exploitation of women and nature. Her sister who also has undergone a divorce deals with its pain and the responsibility of looking after her child and her sister. In-hye, towards the end of the novel seems to have conviction in the end that becoming a tree is the only way to protest and express resistance against the hurtful attitude of men. At one time she tells Yeong Hye, "I have dreams too, you know. Dreams... and I could let myself dissolve into them, let them take me over... In Hye stares fiercely at the trees. As if waiting for an answer. As if protesting against something. The look in her eyes is dark and insistent." (182-183)

Yeong-hye, thus, sees vegetarianism as a way of not hurting anything and also as a way to escape from her oppressive dream. She believes that eating meat stands for human violence, the violence of the society and she chooses this path as a way of refraining herself from committing that violence. Gradually, she starts identifying herself as a plant instead of a human and stops eating entirely. She becomes like a vegetal being which, since its emotions can't be comprehended by the humans, has been denied an inner self by Western philosophy, by Aristotle, according to whom plants are the simplest form of life, being soulless creatures who are 'bereft of interiority.' In-hye's description in the end confirms this: "What is stirring behind those eyes? What is she harbouring inside her, beyond the reach of her sister's imagination? What terror, what anger, what agony, what hell?" (181)

The Fruit of My Woman, a short story written by Han Kang in 1997, is a surreal text where the heroine actually undergoes a physical transformation and she becomes a plant. In the story, a young woman transforms into a household plant, and her husband becomes a witness to her gradual changes, including her growing a 'chlorophyll-skin' initially mistaken as bruises, root-growing, the loss of language, and, eventually, the bearing of fruit. In this text the transformation of a human into a female vegetal being is a metaphor of an 'escape-impulse.' It is as described by Emmanuel Levinas in *On Escape* is "a quest for the way out" (54). It captures the essential human desire to overcome, move beyond, or step over one's physical or social limits.

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. Once she had sincerely wanted, "to see the very edge of the world. To get as far away as possible, bit by bit." She instead channels that curbed desire into having a domestic life and marriage, and her transformation into a household plant is stimulated by the return of that desire as her body failed to adjust to the centrally heated, tight sealed flat in comparison to the flat in the hillier districts of Seoul where they were more exposed to the natural environment. 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. As the story progresses, it is unfolded that through an embodiment of a rooted and immobile plant she attempts to find her ultimate freedom. The most interesting part of the story is the relationship between the protagonist and her deceased mother. The first part of the story, when the protagonist is still a human is narrated from the husband's point of view; in the second part, her transformation is explained twice, one by herself directly through an epistolary medium and another by her husband who shares his experience of nurturing his wife who has now metamorphosed into a different being. The existence of that letter is questionable since her mother is dead and its author, now a plant, is no longer able to write or speak. However, through this medium, the protagonist explains the true nature of her escape-impulse.

The protagonist writes: "I've only ever wanted to run away, an extremely basic impulse, the pain that provokes a cry, the pinch that produces a scream" (*The Fruit of My Woman*). The original escape-impulse comes from the desire to be unlike her mother who had led a sedentary life and fulfilled traditional social roles.

"That poor village by the sea was your whole world. You were born there and grew up there. You gave birth there, worked there, grew old there.

At some point, you will be laid there at the foot of our family burial ground, side by side with father.

It was fear of ending up like you, mother, that made me put such a distance between myself and my home." (*The Fruit of My Woman*)

The protagonist's vegetal transformation and her coming back to connect with her deceased mother is ambiguous, whom she now partially identifies with and partially repudiates. The maternal body, now decaying in soil after death, continues to be life-giving, and the protagonist's vegetal transformation is a necessary condition to access its nourishment. When looked deeper into this, metastasis of the vegetal being involves the rooting of the body in the soil, which is not an expression of the acceptance of a sedentary mode of being, but more the representation of desire for the connection with the maternal body. The roots are therefore not primarily metaphors of stabilization or localization, but, by their similarity to the umbilical cord, they are figures of connection to the maternal source of nourishment and seeking protection. Like a child, the protagonist, expresses her worries of dying in spite of trying hard to hold onto the soil, her mother: "I'm scared, Mother. My limbs have to fall out. This flowerpot is too cramped, its wall too hard. Shooting pains at the tips of my roots. Mother, I will die before winter comes.

And I doubt that I will bloom again in this world." (*The Fruit of my Woman*). In a way, by thus getting herself into a fetal relation with the mother, the protagonist in a way attempts to bring her mother back to life. In the final scene, the husband observes and tastes his wife's yellowish green, hard and with an acidic burning flavor, children/fruit. He plants the seeds in flowerpots and arranges them around the wife's withered stem and questions himself, "When spring came, would my wife sprout again? Would her flowers bloom red? I just didn't know." (*The Fruit of my Woman*)

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their book, *A Thousand Plateaus* describe 'rhizomatic thinking' as a type of interaction which is devoid of any hierarchical pattern or

any power relation as thoughts are heterogeneous and connect to each other at any point like a rhizome. Michael Marder observes that a plant's body, similarly, devoid of any organ exists in a non-hierarchical frame and both the female protagonist of Han Kang's writing find themselves drawn to this kind of an existence.

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