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ECHOES OF THE GRIM HORROR AND VIOLENCE IN “THE VEGETARIAN”; AN ECO – CRITICAL DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

Han Kang's "The Vegetarian" indicates a journey towards discovery of the self and in the process questions human violence. The novella centres around Young- hye, who after having a nightmarish dream, abandons eating meat and totally survives on plants in order to become the plant herself. Her decision to become a vegetarian violates the norms of patriarchal society and she had to endure the wrath which followed after it. Each of the parts of the novella have their own symbolic meaning related to violence. In the first part, the father forces Young- hye to eat meat and even beats her as she refuses. In the second part, the Mongolian Mark on Young- hye's body forces a kind of erotic exploitation by her artist brother-in-law. In the third part, the Flaming Trees incites in her sister In- hye, a violent protest against her isolation for not accepting her. Young- hye's decision influenced violence which operated on various levels- physical, emotional, psychological. Violence can also be interpreted as inflicted on the people in different forms as shown in the novel in forceful meat eating, sexual activities, and even nurturing. Violence on the body in various forms, forms a major theme in this novella and Young- hye, bared of everything, gradually retreats into a world of her own.

Key words- patriarchal, psyche, eco-criticism, symbolism

"Some say that after two World Wars, the word 'humane' has almost become an insult.i wrote of a human being who did not want to be human in this world."---
Han Kang¹

Han Kang one of the most celebrated writers of South Korea was internationally acclaimed for the novel *The Vegetarian*, it can be gauged from the very fact that she was laurelled with the prestigious Man Booker Award in 2016 along with the translator Deborah Smith. Violence can be defined in multiple ways as in cause and effect, we are aware of the fact that the *victim* on whom it is inflicted never remains the same. But could it be so of a heinous crime that one's choice of being a vegetarian could result in collapse of personal and familial life? Can dreams

change our lives to an extent where there is no way back? What roles do symbols play in our lives? The present article will try to answer these questions along with others which do run on a parallel stream through the novel of Han Kang.

'The Vegetarian', written way back in 2007, was waiting to be translated, and once it was done the book became internationally acclaimed for its content. The novel was greeted with both shock and surprise to the audience. It was one of the first of her Korean books to be translated into English, though the originality of the translation was doubted but Smith defended it by 'stating that one cannot translate text literally from one language to another, so liberties must be taken'.

The Vegetarian, based on Han Kang's 1997 short story *The Fruit of My Woman*, structurally the novel is divided into three parts- The Vegetarian, Mongolian Mark, Flaming Trees. It narrates the story of Young-hye, the protagonist whose sudden turning to vegetarianism, affected greatly her marital and familial life. The novella explores the multi-layered themes of violence, sexuality and poses questions pertaining to psyche of the individual. Young-hye is the thread that binds the three parts together. In the first part, the lack of profoundness of Young-hye's marriage is manifested from the fact that her husband married her without feeling any real attraction towards her. She will not pose any threat to his safe cocoon like existence. He married a simple complying woman who will fit into the performative codes as dictated by the patriarchal society. Things would have been normal if it progressed in the way but suddenly she declares one day that she has turned into a vegetarian, this upsets the patriarchal norms and brings about a cataclysmic change which her husband and her family could not fathom. Young-hye's inner self nauseates at the very dream of meat, making her incomprehensible to her close ones for whom vegetarianism is an option, not a choice. The novelist deliberately uses dream as an agent in the novel, dreams as we know through the Freudian psychology is the storehouse of our repressed desires. It often makes us act in ways and manner which others may find unusual or different but in the case of Young-hye the price which she had to pay is insurmountable. Dream is an agent through which the journey of the novella progresses in order to descend into degeneration at all levels- marital, sexual and psychic. Young-hye refused to eat meat because she had a dream and she associated her returning of these dreams to her meat eating habit. The act of throwing out meat from the fridge indicates a kind of throwing off (discarding) her present identity in multiple ways- on the surface her own carnivorous instinct of eating meat, underneath her conforming roles as dutiful wife who fits nicely into the 'middle course' lifestyle her husband seeks and that of a bullied daughter. Her refusal to eat meat creates a stir in the patriarchal hierarchy which causes her family's

intervention. Young-hye's father, who is suffering from 'Post – Traumatic Stress Disorder which emerged from the treatment of Vietnam veterans', used to whip her till she was eighteen years old. This left an indelible impression on her psyche. So when the same episode was repeated when she refused to eat meat and her father tried the forceful meat feeding, then she openly revolted by slitting her wrist.

'I had a dream'- this line defines Young-hye – nightmarish dreams of animal slaughter, bloodshed which resulted in her abandoning meat, severed her ties with husband and family, made her institutionalized and gradually marked her descent into madness. Her first dream:

A long bamboo stick strung with great blood-red gashes of meat, blood still dripping down. Try to push past but the meat; there is no end to the meat, and no exit. Blood in my mouth, blood-soaked clothes sucked onto my skin.(p-17)

Blood seems to be a recurrent imagery in her every dream. Her dream reflects her loneliness as her husband also restrained from indulging in her life too much. She, growing detached from her surroundings, gradually retreated into her own world, even her husband could not guess 'the shadowy recesses' of her mind. Her dreams are also suggestive of human violence:

"Dreams of murder. Murderer or murdered...Only the violence is vivid enough to stick. A sound, the elasticity of the instant when the metal struck the victim's head..."(p-30)

These dreams make her detest her own body and she feels a lump in her chest because of too much meat eating.

The second part of the novel centres around symbols and myths, Young-Hye's brother-in-law is an artist who is at war with himself for having constructed in his mind a mental picture which he dares not put in reality. But somehow the Mongolian mark on Young-hye's body instigated the neurotic obsession of her brother-in-law artist to get down to the brass tacks. The haunting picture of a sexual act with bodies intertwined like twigs, viewed from a vegetal perspective encapsulated his mind so

long. He finally succeeded in crystallizing it with the aesthetic effort of Young-hye but shattering his family in the process. In the third part, In-hye's emotional turmoil is expressed with relation to her family and her sister Young-hye and seems to castigate herself for the disastrous prevalent condition of her shattered family and sister. She is going through the same horrible nightmares that her sister went through. But she had her last ray of hope, her son, to cling to and not get disoriented by gruesome dreams. A random conversation between In-hye and her video artist husband about a Mongolian birthmark originated from the incident of bathing their son when she saw the mark on her son's body and she remembered the same mark on her sister Young-hye's body also. This excited in the husband a curious bizarre desire to perceive the mark on the sister-in-law's body. Like a flash of lightning, the mark emerged in his mind 'the image of a blue flower on a woman's buttock'. He views the Mongolian mark as an object of primordial and archaic value. The Mongolian marks are attributed with certain cultural beliefs and myths.

'Korean mythology explains the spot as a bruise formed when Samshui halmi, a shaman spirit to whom people pray around childbirth, slapped the baby's behind to hasten the bay to quickly get out from his or her mother's womb.

It forms a part of Korean culture and is related to their identity. The image of a blue flower on the woman's body was already repressed in his unconscious but it manifested itself on the surface in the symbol of a Mongolian mark and he wanted to give it an outlet through his art.

"In his mind, the fact that his sister-in-law still had a Mongolian mark on her buttocks became inexplicably bound up with the image of men and women having sex, their naked bodies completely covered with flowers."(p-55)

It created in him an irresistible desire, an obsession with Young-hye's body and it would not let him have a moment's rest-his unforbidden desire to paint flowers all over her body got rooted in him like a dangerous erotic fantasy. Japanese artist Yayoi Kusamo's work on orgies acted as a catalyst for his erogenous obsession with Young-hye's body.

. He had always given his arts wings so it never crossed his mind that he is taking unnecessary liberty putting his family and his reputation at stake, he crossed the border to give a touch of realism to his carnal fantasy in the form of art and which finally resulted in the objectification of the women's body.

The Mongolian mark 'a thumb-sized thing blue', reminds the brother-in-law of photosynthesis which also has blue green colour association. Just as the chlorophyll pigment in the leaves of plants absorbs the blue light, so the body also rejects all colours and absorbs the blue colour to be the sole proprietor of the Mongolian mark. It was '*more vegetal than sexual*' and the whole sexual act was also viewed from an eco-critical perspective.

'A green sap, like that which oozes from bruised leaves began to flow out from her vagina when he entered her'. (Pg 84)

Following the sexual act, Young-hye had been institutionalized. She had come to believe that she is a tree which echoes Han Kang's obsession with a line of poetry from Yi Sang 'I believe that humans should be plants'. Just like a plant inspite of staying in an artificial atmosphere seeks out the natural air, water, sunlight, similarly Young-hye managed to escape the psychiatric hospital to go deep in the mountains and stands rooted to the ground absorbing the rain 'as if she herself were one of the glistening trees'. Her taking clothes off and getting exposed to sunlight is indicative of the process of photosynthesis like plants for whom sunlight is vital to carry out the process of photosynthesis. The zelkova tree on the hospital's front garden, seems to be the alter-ego of Young-hye reflecting expressed and unexpressed thoughts. Her act of becoming a tree is portrayed from the handstand she does by standing on her head and her process of transition from a human to a tree is indicated when she dreams that

'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...' (p-124)

She refuses to eat food and this resulted in the atrophication of her internal parts. Like plants she

wishes to survive only on water and sunlight and her process of becoming a plant reaches its climax when she wants to get rid of her articulation when her sister asked 'How could a plant talk?' She responded by saying 'Soon now, words and thoughts will all disappear'.

She risked away everything, even her life in her deadly wish to get metamorphosed into a plant. This novella seems to be an eternal saga through which Han Kang seems to preach universal siblinghood from an eco-critical point of view '...All the trees of the world are like brothers and sisters'.

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