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The Physiological Challenges of Yeong-Hye In Han Kang's “The Vegetarian”

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ABSTRACT

“The Physiological Challenges of Yeong-Hye in Han Kang’s The Vegetarian” discusses on how a protagonist’s sudden decision to stop eating meat altered her own-self physically. It was the recurring dream that occurred to Yeong-hye continuously and strenuously, that made her avoid eating meat and food altogether. Throughout the novel, she spoke nothing but her act of defiance spoke louder than anything else. Yeong-Hye had to battle her wars physiologically in The Vegetarian against vegetarianism, eroticism, sexual harassment, familial conflicts, violence both internally and outwardly, misinterpretations, schizophrenia, social, cultural and the traditional norms in order to conquer in becoming a full-fledged plant. The protagonist fought the battles strenuously, with determination and consistency. She might have failed, but not her resolution. It was rather a searing, scary, bizarre, terrific and an upsetting novel, in which the loss of appetite of the protagonist to eat food increases the appetite of the readers to ponder upon the lives’ choices on a phenomenal level.

Keywords— *Physiological, Challenges, Vegetarian, protagonist, Schizophrenia, Insomnia, Mongolian Mark, Metamorphoses, Eroticism*

1. INTRODUCTION

The origin of Korean Literature is a combination of various cultures, tradition and unification of the society through the dissemination of knowledge. This paved way for the transition from tradition to the modern literature. Modern Korean literature attained its maturity in the 1930s through the efforts of the talent writers who enriched their worth through the writers’ works such as I.A. Richards, T.S. Eliot and T.E. Hulme. The English version of Ten Korean novels, part of the Library of Korean literature collection had spread the news about Korean literature in the United States and across the English - speaking world. The Literature Translation Institute of Korea translated the novels into English and published the collection in the United States.

Korean literature was the body of literature written by Koreans, at first in classical Chinese, later in various transcription systems using Chinese characters and finally in Hangeul (Korean in Yale Romanization), the national alphabet. Korean scholars were writing poetry in classical Chinese at least by the 4th century. A National Academy was established shortly after the founding of the Unified Silla Dynasty (668-935) and from the time of the Institution of Civil Service Examinations in the mid-10th century until their abolition in 1894, every educated Korean read the Confucian classics and Chinese histories and literature. The Korean upper classes were therefore bilingual in a special sense: they spoke Korean but wrote in Chinese.

Female authors in Korean Literature had become dominant in Korea and doubly so, outside Korea in translation. Korean women were barred from becoming authors. The Literary Translation Institute of Korea had been the forefront of publishing Korean literature and the translators were mostly women like Deborah Smith, Sora Kim-Russell and Chi-Young. The elements converged to bring women to the forefront of Korean literature translated into English are the creation of Hangeul, Modernization, Industrialization, Internalization, Economic and social changes occurred across Korea in the late 20th century and the changes in the publishing market. Hence better books were chosen and smoother language was used for translation. Surprisingly, female writers dominated the Korean domestic market. Irrespective of the patriarchy which is still reigning in Korea, female writers have found their identity through pen and paper such as Gong Ji-young, Shin Kyung-sook, Kim Sagwa and Cho Nam-joo.

Han Kang, a South Korean writer, was born in 1970 in Kwanju, a provincial city near the tip of the Korean Peninsula with a population of around six hundred thousand. Her father, Han Seung-Won was a noted novelist and the recipient of numerous literary awards. Both of Han's brothers were writers too. Her father was a teacher as well as a writer and the family moved frequently for his work. As a child, Han attended five different elementary schools and she sought constancy in books. She won the Man Booker International prize for *The Vegetarian*, a novel in 2016 which dealt with a woman's decision to stop eating meat and its devastating consequences. The novel was also one of the first of her books to be translated into English.

Han Kang studied Korean literature at Yonsei University. She began her writing career when one of her poems was published in the winter issue of the quarterly literature and society. She made her official literary debut in 1993 and in the following year when her short story published, "The Scarlet Anchor" (1994) was the winning entry in the daily Seoul Shimmers Spring Literary Contest. She also won the Yi Sang Literary Prize (2005), today's Young Artist Award, and the Korean Literature Novel Award.

The Vegetarian was Han Kang's first novel to have appeared in English. It is a bracing, visceral, system-shocking addition to the Anglophone Reader's diet. As Yeong-Hye changes, the book's language shifts too with Deborah Smith's translation moving between the baffled irritation of Mr. Cheong's first-person narration in part one, the measured prose of In Hye's world, the dense and bloody narrative of Yeong-Hye's dreams, and seductive descriptions of living bodies painted with flowers, in states of transformation or wasting away. In 2016, *The Vegetarian* became the first Korean language novel to win the Man Booker International Prize, which was awarded both to the author Han Kang and to the translator Deborah Smith.

The Vegetarian consisted of three novellas combined together. The first part of the novel was narrated by Mr. Cheong naming it "The Vegetarian". In the first part, the recurring dreams of the protagonist made her take a drastic decision of becoming a vegetarian, in spite of the oppositions from both her husband and her family. The second part of the novel titled, "Mongolian Mark", dealt with Yeong-Hye's transport to the hospital and Yeong-Hye's brother-in-law who was a video artist, narrated it. After off-handedly, learning that Yeong-Hye still had a Mongolian Mark (a hyper pigmented birthmark which are prominent at the age of one year, mostly disappearing in early childhood), he began to fantasize about a love-making scene between two people whose bodies were covered in painted flowers. Yeong-Hye's sister In-Hye, narrated the third and final part of the novel, "Flaming Trees", which took place one year after the events of "Mongolian Mark", which narrated the story of her husband's absence and their failed marriage. She explained that Yeong-Hye's vegetarianism had spiraled into mental illness. Despite receiving specialized treatment, she maintained her belief that the only way to avoid the brutality that humans inflict upon each other and animals was to become a plant. In-Hye became as her sole source of support. She periodically visited Yeong-Hye at Ch'ukseong Psychiatric Hospital with the hope that she would recover from intense mania. Towards the end of the novel, Yeong-Hye claimed that she was no longer an animal but rather, a plant. She became non-verbal and stopped eating all together. The novel closed with an ambiguous scene in which In-hye gazed through the window as the trees rush by.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE RESEARCH

The main objective of the research article titled "The Physiological Challenges of Yeong-hye in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*", is to analyze the physiological challenges in the life of Yeong-Hye when she became a vegetarian. Any transformation for that fact would bring in changes in everything that are associated with it. At this point, the character of a particular person or an animal undergoes the process of metamorphosis (a transformation into something different from the original form or structure), and that is the case with the protagonist of the novel when she becomes a plant.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Won-Chung Kim in the article titled, "Eating and Suffering in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*", analyzes how Han explores suffering through the topic of food and eating. Kim reveals that *The Vegetarian* is a work which probes into the psychological, physical, and spiritual effect of dietary resistance to male-dominated Korean society. After giving a working definition of sufferings, Kim rationalizes how the suffering caused by Yeong-Hye's denial to abide by the rules of the meat eating, patriarchal society breaks up the perfection of her personhood as a woman and a vegetarian. By metamorphosing her into a "given" face of a suffering victim that haunts us, Yeong-Hye instigative challenges us to reframe the current violent structure of our eating.

Ioana Alexandrescu, in her article "Korean Daphne: Becoming a plant in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*" aims to follow the process of a protagonist breaking off from main stream attitude and sliding towards madness. Transforming herself into a plant, the woman became a mythological figure of Daphne, the nymph who was loved by Apollo and metamorphosed into laurel tree. She made a study on how a protagonist transforming herself into a plant and the woman becoming a mythological figure of Daphne, the nymph. Sijabat revealed how a powerless and helpless became depressed and affected by Schizophrenia (A mental disorder affecting one's ability to think, feel and behave in an appropriate manner). Zolkos focused on female transformation into a tree and an escape into the vegetal world.

Young-Hyun Lee (2019) in her article, "The different representation of suffering in the two versions of *The Vegetarian*", studied the difference in the representation of suffering in the original and translated versions of *The Vegetarian* and analyzed the reasons for the difference. The author highlighted the translator's strategy being distorted in the central concepts of suffering. The translated version resulted in critical misrepresentation of suffering and violence in the original version.

4. CRITICAL STUDY

Physiological challenges are psychological conditions affecting the body leading to low energy, headaches, stomach upset, tense muscles, chest pain, rapid heartbeat, frequent cold and infectious nervousness and shaking, ringing in the ear, sweaty hands and feet, dry mouth, difficulty in swallowing, clenched jaw and grinding teeth.

The novel had begun with Mr. Cheong's narration about his experience with his wife, who had taken the decision to stop eating meat. That sudden decision of his wife altered her own-self physically. The woman whom Mr. Cheong saw was completely unremarkable in every way possible. A woman who was a silent person became a person whose actions spoke louder than words. Throughout the novel, she spoke nothing but her act of defiance spoke louder than anything else.

In his words, Mr. Cheong said, "It had to be that dream she had mentioned that was bound to be at the bottom of it all" (23). Yeong-Hye's recurring dreams were about blood-dripping meat which made her feel guilty with her hands soaked in blood. She was filled with fear but to her dismay, the dreams didn't stop in haunting her when she saw the reflection of her face in a pool of blood. The dreams of murder also put her in hopeless situation. Losing her personal identity, she became a different person. Her dreams pushed her into the state of being abnormal.

Ever since Yeong-Hye had the horrifying dream of animal slaughtering and bloodshed, it is for sure that it was the root cause for all that to happen. It was the recurring dream that occurred to Yeong-Hye continuously and strenuously, that made her avoid eating meat and food altogether ended up in losing her physical appearance of a person of a healthy diet. Things did not end when she threw away all the meat food from her house, but when she got completely affected physically. Her total refusal to eat food altogether became evident in her body as she grew thinner and thinner by the day so much as her cheekbones became indecently prominent, acquiring a dancer's physique. Mr. Cheong thought things would stop with that, "... but by now her body resembled as much nothing as the skeletal frame of an invalid" (25- 26). Her physical changes started right from her dried lips to her skeletal appearance of frame. This novel had portrayed how a strong decision could change a person physiologically. The dream affected Yeong-hye to the extent of disposing the most expensive meat products, including any things made of animal products like leather. She even changed the norms of the house policies and stopped cooking meat which made Mr. Cheong hard to digest and also what troubled him the most was the fact that Yeong-Hye avoided to have sexual intercourse with him. But during some late nights, he forced her to have sex in spite of her strong resistance. Probably that was one of the reasons why she had to stay strong in her decision.

Mr. Cheong said, "Her face was balanced, a result of protracted insomnia. A stranger coming across her in the street would have assumed she was a hospital patient" (42). There was no energy in her body because she refused to eat meat. He attempted to persuade and convince her to eat meat not because of his concern on her health issues but also to pave way to bring those times where his life was in an organized way, leading a married life for five years with a woman who was completely unremarkable in every way possible, a woman of few words, a dutiful wife who satisfied the needs and desires of her husband, who never made a fuss whenever he came late nights because of his meetings.

Mr. Cheong was first reluctant to find out what was wrong with Yeong-Hye. Neither did he take into much consideration when she said she had a dream nor did he have any sort of concern when her physical body lost its figure. In the words of Mr. Cheong, "There's nothing wrong with her, I told myself, this kind of thing isn't even a real illness," (26). That showed how self-centered he was for the past five years of marriage who chose to neglect the feelings and decisions of his own wife.

The second part of the novel solely deals with the narrator, Yeong-Hye's brother-in-law fulfilling his dream by using her as the main character in his sketches and later she became a main actress in his video-tape recording. Though she was a minor character in his life, she became a significant person because she had something in her which got easily vanished for others – the Mongolian Mark.

When Yeong-Hye's sister In-Hye informed her husband about the condition of Yeong-Hye regarding the issue of divorce papers by Mr. Cheong, it paved a perfect way for him to utilize the chance. "It was clear, only after hearing about her Mongolian Mark from his wife that he had started to see his sister-in-law in a new light" (79). Yeong-Hye found a new way to fall in love with the plants. Her wish to become a plant was brought to light through her brother-in-law, who had the similar dream of bringing the beauty of nude body with painted flowers and most importantly, with the presence of the Mongolian Mark.

The second part of the novel unfolded the inner feelings of both Yeong-Hye and her brother-in-law. Yeong-Hye's brother-in-law was all that Mr. Cheong was not. For instance, taking her on a date, like to eat meals other than meat, and even discussing about the dream which had put her into that state of situation. The narrator was clearly aware of the fact that Yeong-Hye's decision to become a vegan, solely depended on the dream that she mentioned.

"The Flaming Trees" formed the third part of the novel where Yeong-Hye has completely turned into a plant rather than being a human being. Or in other terms, she psychologically metamorphosed into a plant but to her dismay, she could not in fact transform her body, yet took a strong decision to completely stop eating food altogether which made the nurses and the doctors' work more tedious and hectic in the Ch'ukseong Psychiatric Hospital.

Yeong-hye was nothing but a typical plant who wanted to be treated and nurtured by a gardener, the only one who was aware of how to treat a plant every way. When asked whether she was hungry or not, all she wanted was some water to drink whenever she was thirsty. When all around her tried to persuade and force to feed her or tried to inject IV in her veins, she despised and resisted strongly that made the nurses and the doctors to wonder where the strength came from a body which was nothing less than a skeletal frame with bones and skin. In-Hye came to know about Yeong-Hye's health status from her doctor who said, "Fifteen to twenty percent of anorexia nervosa patients will starve to death. Even when they're down to nothing but skin and bone" (146). Yeong-Hye was one such person who refused to eat and suffered from schizophrenia.

5. CONCLUSION

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* is a sensual, provocative and violent novel, ripe with potent images, startling colors and disturbing questions. *The Vegetarian* portrayed how Yeong-Hye and her husband lived an ordinary and a controlled life, before the nightmares begun. The recurring dream tortured Yeong-Hye physiologically. Her sudden decision to stop eating meat changed everything and even her dear and near ones turned their tables against her. She was like a one-woman army facing the physiological challenges which she had before her, one who stood firm in her decision and never wavered or stumbled an inch. But nothing could change her from becoming more of a plant than of a human being. Her sudden transformation into a vegan forced her to fight against her physique. Despite losing her health, she did not just defeat the dominance of her husband Mr. Cheong, especially in fulfillment of his sexual desires but also the determining attitude of hers, made her to stop eating food altogether, left her in the most severe skeletal frame of her body.

The Vegetarian was not about the fall of the protagonist but about a novel where the woman succeeded in becoming who she really wanted to be, despite fighting against the odds, even to the extent of making a suicide attempt. That sudden decision of her, from the bad influences of the dream, found its way through the mountains and the valleys of life. Spending years in psychiatric hospital or being a schizophrenic patient was not a big deal to Yeong-Hye, to stop being whom she had already transformed in her soul. Through the character of Yeong-Hye, the author brought out the fact that the protagonist did not just turn into a vegetarian but rather became a plant herself. She had to face the problems physiologically dealing with the society, customs and traditions. Her small decision created a great havoc in her own family, where she had been treated and seen as a shameful and a disgraceful daughter. If her decision had been accepted by her husband earlier, things would not have gone out of hand. If only her father had not force-fed her, perhaps, she would not have gone to the verge of brandishing her wrist with a knife and ended up in a hospital. Yeong-hye could defeat the traumas when her body was painted with flowers. The Mongolian Mark on her body threw a light on the mind of her brother-in-law to use her as a model for his video-tape recording.

Yeong-Hye had to battle her wars physiologically in *The Vegetarian* against vegetarianism, eroticism, sexual harassment, familial conflicts, violence both internally and outwardly, misinterpretations, schizophrenia, social, cultural and the traditional norms, in order to conquer in becoming a full-fledged plant. The protagonist could be considered as a brave warrior, who fought the battles strenuously with determination and consistency. Though she fell many times, she was strong and persevered until the end and never gave up on her decision. She might have failed, but not her resolution. Thus, Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* is a perplexing novel in three parts, about the act of rebellion and taboo. It was rather a searing, scary, bizarre, terrific and an upsetting novel in which the loss of appetite of the protagonist to eat food increases the appetite of the readers to ponder upon the lives' choices on a phenomenal level.

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