

## VIOLENCE AS AN ACT OF TRADITIONAL LEGITIMIZATION: THE CRITICAL INVESTIGATION OF HAN KANG'S THE VEGETARIAN (2015)

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### ABSTRACT

Varying shades of violence in human life are circular as well as straight lines that produce their own bombastic legacy. The harmonic structures perpetuated through draconian tendencies to become the raisin, the tour of human existence and pander to the unique processes of decimation. The paper attempts to explore the predicament in the central female character, Yeong- his life, which is embroiled in the cultural mess in South Korean society, where the right to eat selective food has been severely castigated. The cultural and patriarchal constraints prepare that kind of milieu, where the very idea of freedom takes the backstage.

**KEYWORDS:** Abnormal psychology, Cultural constraints, Conformity, Normativity, Photosynthesisization

### INTRODUCTION

Different cultures and societies prepare its subjects to toe the line and the normative circles take different routes to make people accept the law of normativity. The very idea of resistance is taken to be against normative culture. The whole saga revolving around the life of the central female character ,Yeong- he makes the life-forces redundant in their own way. The situation in which she embroils herself goes against her individual self where her physical existence dilly-dallies with her psychological labyrinthine energy.

The protagonist in this text under critical scrutiny, Yeong- he reminds the readers of South Indian novelist S. L Bhyrappa's central female character Laxmi, where women like her are forced to eat meat under the garb of the ideological structures. Yeong- his new found vegetarianism is the driving force that throws open so many conflicting ideas and she is sticking to that particular food ideology throws tantrums amongst her own family members. For her husband, being normal is not being vegetarian "... her husband had decided that her vegetarianism was proof that she would never be 'normal' again" (70). Her individuality, gets the severe beating at this particular moment. She goes from crisis to crisis in this war of imposing ideology and throws herself in that kind of social-cultural tug-of-war where the player is not known for its physical prowess but the cultural constraint dilly-dallies with the whole gamut of processes. The whole drama of not eating meat turns out to be a family crisis where the so-called dietary imbalance shown by Yeong-he becomes depressed for her father, mother, etc. Every effort is made to bring back Yeong-he has lost the urge for non-vegetarian food resulting in her mental disequilibrium.

The real drama starts when the meat is chucked out of the dining table and the vegetarian delight like lettuce and soybean paste takes the Centre stage. As Yeong-his husband asserts "On the dining table, my wife had laid out lettuce and

soybean paste, plain seaweed soup without the usual beef or clamps and Kimchi” (13). The preying patriarchal mindset shows its repulsiveness “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). Her new found vegetarianism does not seem to fit well as her husband terms it as ‘disgraceful behavior’. It becomes incumbent on him to dissuade her from taking such a disturbing step. He opines “I didn’t know what I could do, exactly, but I knew that I had to do something” (26). Yeong- his dislikes for meat does not provide the necessary oxygen for the marital bliss and this unholy spousal link seems like a house of cards (perched precariously on the seismic zone of relationships). She even goes through undesired sexual act that is defined as ‘marital rape’ by present day feminists. The legalization of the sexual act in wedlock legalizes the tyranny of the husband over his wife. Yeong-his husband shows his intent “I became unexpectedly aroused. She put up a surprisingly strong resistance and, spitting out vulgar curses all the while, it took me three attempts before I managed to insert myself successfully” (30). Yeong-he faces the power of her community when it throws its weight against her choice of vegetarianism. The Foucauldian power relations seem to very aptly when examined in relation to the plight of Yeong-Hye: “Power is always experienced at the level of the individual subject’s body, the local level, the level of ‘microphysics’ (Jeff Lewis: 131).

In-Hye, Yeong-his sister, provokes her not to be religiously austere “Even priests who enter the temple don’t take their austerities too far” (36). Her father was more adamant than Yeong-hi and wanted a piece of meat to be inserted in her mouth at any cost. It was he who, unlike all the members of his family became more vituperative and violent over his daughter’s new condition and employed force to feed her the most undesired food item. He made her open the mouth forcibly “... when she opened her mouth to speak, the meat found its way in” (40).

The main action of the novel rides and fumes on the mental plane. The last part of this narrative shows the rising graph of abnormal psychology where Yeong- he chooses to adopt some other non-human life forms that will obey its own law of breathing and feeding herself. She begins to venture into the psychological integrity that becomes bizarre in its own way. The process of photosynthesis found in trees, comes into Yeong-Hye’s Phantasy and thinks of treelike existence after the scuffle. The act of subversion takes her to that psychiatric condition where the process of normalization takes a steep curve to spiral towards abnormal behavior. Thus she throws open the human condition that cannot be tested and cured medically in spite of the best of efforts of the paramedical staff. Her refusal to eat meat is the refusal to all those subversive tendencies that are forced upon her and take away her individual choices. Yeong-Hye’s acute mental condition produces the kind of medical condition where the subject shows the signs of ‘anorexia nervosa’ and starves to death. As one of the doctors explains “... Kim Yeong-Hayes is one of those particular cases where the subject refuses to eat while suffering from schizophrenia (141). The tug of war between life and death continues as she is transported to the main hospital at Seoul, where she will have to be administered a protein injection “... into one of her carotid arteries to stop the gastric bleeding” (176). Cultural constraints and normativity spread their own ideology that upsets the democratization of the materials of choice.

The emotional and psychological violence inflicted upon her psyche does not go without its consequences. Yeong-he retaliates by refusing to eat anything and insists on surviving on sunlight. The dream that motivated her to give up meat ends up by turning into a nightmare in real life. Yeong- Hye’s inexplicable dream pattern leads to inexplicable violence. The violence emanates from failing the ‘essential test’ that has never changed its presuppositions. Slavoj Zizek opines “Fundamentalism ‘naturalizes’ or ‘essentials historically conditioned contingent traits” (125). Yeong- Hye is a

living proof of the fact that mankind expects, endorses and enforces practices that have prevailed unquestioned over a long period of time. Her community consists of meat eaters, and when she tries to break away from the norm, society annihilates her. All those who are in authority over her make all out efforts to make her consume meat. The writer, Han Kang is here striking out at a society which will not tolerate individuality rather enforce conformity.

A new turn of events takes place when Yeong- Hye discusses with her sister In- Hye the strange position acquired by trees throughout their life span. The herbivorous approach adopted by Yeong- he rejects that kind of food chain from where oppression emanates. Her psychological self is so much disturbed that she is on cusp of leading an abnormal pattern of life. She gushes out her intense feelings “I need to water my body. I don’t need this kind of food, sister, I need water.” (148). All she needs is sunlight, a life force that sets her on an alarming life pattern. She insists on living on sunlight and becomes the source of nuisance for doctors and nurses who go through all their medical accoutrements to save her life. She has administered the life-saving drugs. She has become a skeleton for not taking even a small bite of any of the food items. Her hormonal balance got disturbed due to the long period of starvation “The doctor had explained that this was due to Yeong- Hye’s hormonal balance being disturbed, something that happens after a long period of starvation” (151). Her psychological condition is the byproduct of the ideology that causes total paralysis of her individual self and psyche where ideological and cultural blinkers are backed by belligerent patriarchy.

She defies the very basic instinct of survival and cancels the act of eating food “People are always telling me eat... I don’t like eating; they force me. Last time I threw it up... yesterday as soon as I’d eaten, they gave me an injection to put me to sleep” (156). The pyramid of emotions shows Yeong-hay to be cursed even her saviors (medical fraternity) who go on treating her medically instead of knowing her psychological self, “No one can understand me... the doctors, the nurses, they are all the same... they don’t even try to understand... they just force me to take medication and stab me with needles” (156).

Cultural constraints matter even in this age of information technology where the ‘new normal’ shop’s new activities of life forms. As Jeff Lewis opines:

Hair grows, but immediately it is subject to the actions of culture-shaved, colored, and combed according to cultural interests. The food we eat and how we eat it, the way we experience sex and sexuality, our shelters, our relationships, our definition and responses, to beauty, our desires and needs-all are subject to culture (Lewis: 248, 2008).

Obviously, culture is a determining factor even when it comes to personal choices. Breaking away from cultural conformity invites violence either psychological, emotional or physical. Yeong-he fails to crank back to normal life as the grammar of normal life shows its abnormal side where ‘being a woman’ is not ‘being a human’ without absolute authority even over domestic circuits of power.

## REFERENCES

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