

CONSTRUCTING LIFE:
CONSTRUCTING/DECONSTRUCTING VIOLENCE
IN HAN KANG'S *THE VEGETARIAN*

JASMINE ANAND*

ABSTRACT. In the wake of vegan rage throughout the world especially in Europe due to climate change and realisation of violent means towards animals, a vegan-feminist study of Han Kang's Korean novel *The Vegetarian* becomes very pertinent. Han Kang is definitely not directly endorsing veganism but tries to question "if it is possible for a human to completely reject any kind of violence and become a flawless, innocent being". The paper will delineate how animal vis a vis a woman's life is linked and shrinks under the influence of patriarchy, anthroparchy, and capitalism. It will also study how violence is subtly perpetrated and constructed as a moral or routine order under these institutions. Yeong-hye as the submissive protagonist calls her shots by abstaining herself from meat eating practice in a masculine world under the influence and awareness coming out of her blood curdling violent and haunting dreams. She deconstructs the idea of violence and refutes patriarchal and capitalist system around her by imagining herself as a plant gradually. Her nakedness is not erotic or sensual but a natural earthly innocent answer to the violent systems surrounding her. The paper also tries to caveat her extreme response and female desire to undo violence around and to take "the responsibility to work at each instant for [her] own evolution, transformation, transfiguration or transubstantiation". The work surely has an undercurrent of an appeal for world peace (especially the divide between North and South Korea) which is invisible amidst the visible violence.

KEY WORDS: vegetarian, vegan, violence, patriarchy, capitalist society

Introduction

Han Kang's Korean novel *The Vegetarian* is the winner of Man Booker International Prize 2016. The novel is an epitome of how in subtle patriarchal responses a female's life, choices, and desires are constricted which in turn disturbs the status quo leading to slow fossilization and vegetable state of a woman's body. The original Korean novel written by Han Kang was published in 2007. The author in this novel takes off the image of a woman turning into a plant from her short story "The Fruit of My Woman" written in 1997. The protagonist considers herself as a plant, not a human anymore and abstains from food (meat) symbolising human violence. The novel got

* JASMINE ANAND (PhD 2019, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India) is Assistant Professor in the Post Graduate Department of English at Mehr Chand Mahajan DAV College for Women, Chandigarh, India. E-mail: jasmine18anand@gmail.com.

adapted into a Korean film of the same name in 2009. In 2015 the novel was translated into English by Deborah Smith. The novel not only won felicitations but was translated during a period when the vegan trend had taken over the whole world. Veganism initially started in England in 1944 and reached US in 1948 and the novel *The Vegetarian* coming from South Korea surely has a statement to make in this context. The novel grapples with the question “if it is possible for a human to completely reject any kind of violence and become a flawless, innocent being” (June-Bong). This paper aims to initiate a study to assess explicit and implicit violence perpetrated under patriarchal nonvegan capitalist structure of any society.

The dual system theory in marxist-feminism is an analysis of how patriarchy and capitalism are twin systems of men’s domination of the women. Patriarchy and capitalism are not only similar in its material base but finds its basis in male control of female labour by excluding women from productive resources and restricting their sexuality (Hartmann 1981: 15). Hartmann in her thesis mentioned that neither marxism nor radical feminism has been able to do away with capitalist patriarchy. The paper puts forth the oppression coming in from these institutions objectively and is not seeking to explain the origin or dynamics of that force. It is important to note that even if capitalism gave rise to women empowerment or decrease in gender inequality in traditional societies; still there are undertones of subtle oppression and the “world is not yet flat” for everyone. In this context, Riordan mentions how female empowerment becomes an attractive commodity that “contributes to rearticulating dominant patriarchal and capitalist values, while not substantially disrupting power relations” (2001: 282). Historically speaking capitalism was founded on gender hierarchy and its sexual division of labour explains women oppression where traditional women tasks or unpaid domestic labour gets unnoticed/uncredited for. However, “Capitalism uses patriarchy as a lever to attain its objectives, while at the same time reinforcing it” (Comanne 2017). Thus, *The Vegetarian* seeks to make visible the subtle violence which is made invisible in our routine and accepted living. It further also takes the references from the text in order to deconstruct the same violence in subtle as well as extreme ways. Yeong-hye becomes an example of “anger and anxiety, and... responsibility to preserve the bases of life, and to end its destruction” (Mies and Shiva 2010: 3).

Review of Literature

The novel *The Vegetarian* consists of three separate novellas (The Vegetarian, Monogolian Mark, and Flaming Trees) which can be read individually as well as in connection with each other. Few research papers apart from reference in books in lieu of paraphrase is available. The novel largely has

been studied as a plain feminist text evoking male oppression. There is much more to this book as a text which has not been looked into.

N. B. M. Jamadar in the year 2016 analysed the text under the keywords of revolt, resilience and remarkable ardour in the novel *The Vegetarian*. The author mentions how any woman is either expected to surrender or if she revolts; she meets her punishment. It is mentioned that a comparison to Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* is pertinent but is not dealt with expansively in the paper. In another paper written in 2016 and titled "Korean Daphne: Becoming a Plant in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*", Alexandrescu compares as well as finds dissonances between the mythological Daphne (a nymph who was loved by Apollo and was metamorphosed into a laurel tree) and the protagonist Yeong-hye. C. E. Stobie in "The Good Wife? Sibling Species in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*" tries to work on the philosophical conundrum of good living and explores the contradictions in form and content through posthumanism, veganism, animal studies, postcoloniality and intersectionality. The research paper titled as "The Flowering of Human Consciousness: An Ecofeminist Reading of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and The Fruit of my Woman" by R. Chandran and R. P. Geetha published in 2017 is a comparative study of Han Kang's two texts in the light of ecofeminism. The paper discusses exploitation of woman and nature by considering both as objects and both showing resistance towards this dominance in their own ways. Further, a paper by P. M. Bica published in 2018 "*The Vegetarian* by Han Kang: A Postmodern Allegory for Women's Fight for Power and Freedom" is an exploration into the text as a postmodern fiction with hidden metaphors of marginality. In 2018 itself A. Savitri in her paper "Subjectivity of Women's Body as a Resistance to the Domination of Patriarchy in novel *Vegetarian* by Han Kang" discusses how the protagonist's madness is an attempt of the protagonist to liberate herself from any social constructions that bind it and voices the subjectivity/ownership of her own body. The ensuing discussion of the paper takes all these ideas ahead as well as thrust its basis on vegan-feminist study largely apart from the influence of capitalism which is implicit in the text. The study also initiates an analysis of Yeong-hye's stance and her relationship with her sister under the marker of psychoanalysis and cultural theory by french feminist Luce Irigaray. Further, the conclusion opens up the discussion under the ambit of peace studies by hinting at the divide between North and South Korea and contextualises the space of violence.

Discussion

Strangely, the novel begins with "unremarkable" epithet for a wife from her husband. Eventually one realises how in the patriarchal society being com-

monplace, unremarkable, ordinary for a woman is a standard of acceptance for matrimony. Mr. Cheong begins to tell about his wife Yeong-hye:

Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way. To be frank, the first time I met her I wasn't even attracted to her. Middling height; bobbed hair neither long nor short; jaundiced, sickly-looking skin; somewhat prominent cheekbones; her timid, sallow aspect told me all I needed to know. (Kang 2015: 10)

The knowledge that a woman is unremarkable actually boosts the timid ego and shelves the insecurity of any man:

The passive personality of this woman in whom I could detect neither freshness nor charm, or anything especially refined, suited me down to the ground... The paunch that started appearing in my mid-twenties, my skinny legs and forearms that steadfastly refused to bulk up in spite of my best efforts, the inferiority complex I used to have... I could rest assured that I wouldn't have to fret about such things on her account. (Kang 2015: 10)

After five years of marriage Mr. Cheong's peace and masculinity is challenged when his wife tries to exercise her freedom for the first time in her life in terms of her personal choice of food and body. He reaffirms his latent virility with a forcible act in order to construct his masculinity before his wife again. He grabs his wife and pushed her to the floor, "Pinning down her struggling arms and tugging off her trousers, 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. Once that had happened, she lay there in the dark staring up at the ceiling, her face blank, as though she were a "comfort woman" dragged in against her will, and I was the Japanese soldier demanding her services. As soon as I finished, she rolled over and buried her face in the quilt" (Kang 2015: 24). Critically analysing, the concern for consent and choice seems both erroneous in a marriage as well as prostitution. Yeong-hye response is that of a vegetable when she is forced upon by her husband. Initially, Mr. Cheong was internally peaceful to consider his wife as "a stranger, or no, as a sister, or even a maid, someone who puts food on the table and keeps the house in good order" not realising that his physical need will turn him into a beast thwarting her emotional need (Kang 2015: 23). Asexuality in a woman or freemartinism in an animal is not deemed valuable in a capitalist society to warrant any care as it is considered deviant and problematic to enrage any possessor.

The husband is unable to understand how his wife since her birth and marriage has been a "comfort woman" for both her father and husband. She has been a comfortable relief for the men of the house through her

showcase of obedience, muteness and subservience. Mr. Cheong also notes that his mother-in-law never showed any interest in her daughter except when she turns vegetarian. It is important to note that Yeong-hye is almost silent in the novel. The first part of the novel is in first person narrative of her husband, whereas second and third part of the novel is in third person as narrated by her brother-in-law and sister. Perhaps she was finding an exit point or escape or voice in her life which is lent to her via an uncanny dream which turns her into vegan. Han Kang in an interview mentions that Yeong-hye as the protagonist of the novel, “doesn’t speak for herself as a narrator. Instead, she only exists as the subject of hate, misunderstanding, desire, pity and peculiar sympathy by the three narrators of the trilogy, who view her from their own perspectives” (June-Bong). The only space/voice she gets is while getting deep down in her sub-conscious revealing her dream or some old memory in first person. After getting soaked up in blood in a dream she gets another dream of a murder, murderer or murdered which is so vivid to not be considered real. The analogy of her being a murderer as a meat eater, as well as, the feeling of murder of life physical or symbolical in context of an animal as a scapegoat or Yeong-hye as a scapegoat in the hands of her father and husband is very pertinent.

Mr. Cheong was aware of patriarchy and fixed ideas of his father-in-law. To the extent he knew from his wife that, “he had whipped her over the calves until she was eighteen years old” (Kang 2015: 23). When Yeong-hye retaliates against the whole family to eat meat, her father strikes her badly, “He’d hit her so hard that the blood showed through the skin of her cheek. Her breathing was ragged, and it seemed that her composure had finally been shattered... he parted her lips with his strong fingers,... and struck her in the face once more” (Kang 2015: 28). Mr. Cheong does nothing to stop his father-in-law from thrashing his wife. The violence perpetuates itself through the male order of the patriarchy. Yeong-hye spits out the meat and “an animal cry of distress burst from her lips” and in anguish she takes a knife and rips open her wrist in rebellion towards the violent men in her life (Kang 2015: 29) and later she is also described as a “cornered animal” (Kang 2015: 43) when her brother-in-law remembers the same incident. Her helplessness is similar to that of an animal when it is butchered. Carol J. Adams in *Sexual Politics of Meat* writes, “People with power have always eaten meat” (1990: 47). Meat is symbolic of consumables and exploitation prevalent in a capitalistic society both that of a butchered animal flesh as well as flesh of a fragmented woman. Animals consumed as meat are similar to frail and weak feminized bodies.

It is thought that in a capitalist system, patriarchy and anthroparchy have a similar and distinct function to perform, that of control and authority of a male figure “... both daughters and dairy cows were the property of

males who presumed the right to force females—whether they be called wives, slaves, or livestock (Jones 2014: 98). Mr. Cheong narrates how his father-in-law reprimands his wife over the phone and makes her realise the hierarchy of male power:

“Yeong-hye”, my father-in-law bellowed, “are you still not eating meat?” He’d never used a telephone in his life, and I could hear his excited shouts emerging from the receiver. “What d’you think you’re playing at, hey? Acting like this at your age, what on earth must Mr. Cheong think?” My wife stood there in perfect silence, holding the receiver to her ear. “Why don’t you answer? Can you hear me?” (Kang 2015: 23)

The violence against and commodification of female body is both a vegan and a feminist issue. “... what on earth must [the husband] Mr. Cheong think?” is a stark statement highlighting the mastery and control of a husband or husbandry over wife or animals. Yeong-hye since her birth had “merely absorbed all her suffering inside her, deep into the marrow of her bones” (Kang 2015: 89).

It is important to note that ancient Korea was influenced by Chinese culture and Confucianism. A house is divided into inside and outside spheres and women and men rule it respectively. “Women were to provide a harmonious household, while the man’s role was outside the home” (Rainey 2010: 57). The novel projects that both husband Mr. Cheong and wife Yeong-hye stay in separate rooms and involve themselves in separate activities. Rarely, a family time is seen between both of them except food. Under Confucianism there were “stronger set of rules dealing with the separation of men and women. Separation included separate living quarters in the home, separate spheres of activity, and detailed regulations concerning the interaction of men and women” (Rainey 2010: 101). A woman is supposed to be respectful and obedient towards the father and the husband. “To be obedient is proper to the Way of good wife” (Rainey 2010: 102). The principle of family life was practised ardently “... the father and husband are the leaders, the wife and daughter are explicitly secondary and inferior. Just as Heaven is superior to earth, and yang is superior to yin, women are subject to the three obediences: to their father when young, to their husband when married, and to their son on the death of their husband” (Rainey 2010: 169). Nevertheless, under Confucianism the biographies on women were mostly on women who respected their parents and their husbands while caring for the children and the family as a whole. Women’s status was thus inferior and that of a subordinate under the influence of Confucianism. It was opposed to freedom of thought and individuality and led to oppression of women. Education and self-cultivation was open to women like men, the reason we find Yeong-hye mostly reading. The critics of Confucianism have

argued it to be a purely male-dominated philosophy which supports rigid gender roles and make women secondary to men. It thus supports a patriarchal state and patriarchal family. Thus, “the basic message of Confucianism is that what men do and what men think is important, while what women do is not” (Rainey 2010: 201). Under New Confucianism too women are banished from being Western/independent or having a choice of their own. This background is vital to study the novel and throws light on the working of mind of male characters.

Yeong-hye, the protagonist is a sensitive soul who is disturbed by her subconscious thoughts of her childhood when she ate the same dog who had bitten her to heal her wound as per the traditional saying. When she was a child she did not care about “the smell of burnt flesh [of the dog that]... pricked [her] nose... [the thought of] two eyes that had watched [her], 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” (Kang 2015: 29). Now this very event haunted her. The thought is so strong that when her mother at the hospital tries to feed her black goat broth along with herbs to mask the smell, Yeong-hye vomits out everything in her stomach and turns anorexic. She believes that something is stuck in her solar plexus. She feels a lump inside because “of meat. I ate too much meat. 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” (Kang 2015: 33). Patriarchy, anthroparchy and capitalism overlap each other in ensuing violence to rule and consume the powerless.

Yeong-hye is an ardent wife who performed her duties without any “distasteful frivolousness” for the husband. She cleaned, cooked, ironed, earned, and did every bit for the household. Being a “woman of few words” she never demanded anything from the man of her life. She never fussed over anything. Reading was her only hobby. Mr. Cheong is a traditional patriarch who wants his wife to follow his rules without argument. He comments, “She hadn’t said a single word on the way here, but I convinced myself that this wouldn’t be a problem. There’s nothing wrong with keeping quiet; after all, hadn’t women traditionally been expected to be demure and restrained?” (Kang 2015: 19) Within the span of five years of their marriage after the wife’s dream, it was for the first time she seemed unfamiliar with her “unnaturally serene face, her incongruously firm voice” after disposing off “Beef and pork, pieces of chicken, at least 200,000 won worth of saltwater eel” in the dustbin, to him (Kang 2015: 13-14). It was for the first time that Mr. Cheong had to go to work without her handing him his things and seeing him off. Yeong-hye’s turning into a vegan and not

entertaining any meat or dairy at home was unreasonable and selfish in eyes of her husband. For him, his wife had turned obstinate and against his wishes as she had without no valid reason to leave meat because of religion, weight, medical, evil omen reason. Without any support for her food choice from her husband she is seen and rather becomes a patient of hysteria, weak nerves, and delusion. Eventually she turns into a “strange, frightening woman” that her husband neglects and leaves (Kang 2015: 31). The vow of any marriage “in sickness and in health” is thrown to winds by Mr. Cheong who proposes divorce looking at the health of Yeong-hye. Socialist feminism see family as the source of women’s oppression due to division of gender roles and consciousness. It studies the difference between the pressure on a man and a woman and the difference of consciousness from each other:

His work is future-oriented, geared to making a product or a profit; hers is present-oriented, getting dinner on the table... His work is abstract, dealing with money or ideas or an object; her work is hands-on, directly involved with living people who have bodily and emotional needs. He is supposed to be cool and impersonal and rational on the job; her job as wife... demands sensitivity to interpersonal cues and an outpouring of affection. (Lorber 2001: 49)

The oppression is automatically disseminated when a wife has to be obedient and emotionally available for her husband; and his only task is to get money home without any emotional attachment towards the wife even in her illness or otherwise.

Further, the rude remarks of Mr. Cheong to Yeong-hye makes her psychologically confused and her conscience gets pricked because of which she inadvertently commits mistakes while cooking. The fear of performance and obedience makes her cut her own finger that gives her the last taste of the drop of blood and further on the undetling fearful dreams:

The morning before I had the dream, I was mincing frozen meat—remember? You got angry. “Damn it, what the hell are you doing squirming like that? You’ve never been squeamish before.” If you knew how hard I’ve always worked to keep my nerves in check. Other people just get a bit flustered, but for me everything gets confused, speeds up. Quick, quicker. The hand holding the knife was working so quickly, I felt heat prickle the back of my neck. My hand, the chopping board, the meat, and then the knife, slicing cold into my finger. A drop of red blood already blossoming out of the cut. Rounder than round. Sticking the finger in my mouth calmed me. The scarlet color, and now the taste, sweetness masking something else, left me strangely pacified. Later that day, when you sat down to a meal of bulgogi, you spat out the second mouthful and picked out something glittering.

“What the hell is this?” you yelled. “A chip off the knife?” I gazed vacantly at your distorted face as you raged. “Just think what would have happened if I’d swallowed it! I was this close to dying!” (Kang 2015: 17-18)

Her confusion can also be seen metaphorically as the conflict between North Korea and South Korea as well as the dichotomy between the women under Confucianism and the modern independent women of Korea. She further mentions about her liminality in a statement: “It was the quiet tone of a person who didn’t belong anywhere, someone who had passed into a border area between states of being” (Kang 2015: 42).

Ironically, it is important to note the way Mr. Cheong admires his wife’s cooking than reading. A female and an animal’s life is bind to kitchen in a man’s perspective. A woman’s place is in the kitchen and an animal’s place is on the dinner plate (Cudworth 2011). Mr. Cheong praises the culinary worth of his wife and signature meat dishes which filled his appetite to the utmost:

... ever since we’d got married she had proved herself a more than competent cook, and I’d always been impressed by her way with food. Tongs in one hand and a large pair of scissors in the other, she’d flipped rib meat in a sizzling pan while snipping it into bite-sized pieces, her movements deft and practiced. Her fragrant, caramelized deep-fried belly pork was achieved by marinating the meat in minced ginger and glutinous starch syrup. Her signature dish had been wafer-thin slices of beef seasoned with black pepper and sesame oil, then coated with sticky rice powder as generously as you would with rice cakes or pancakes, and dipped in bubbling shabu-shabu broth. She’d made bibimbap with bean sprouts, minced beef, and pre-soaked rice stir-fried in sesame oil. There had also been a thick chicken and duck soup with large chunks of potato, and a spicy broth packed full of tender clams and mussels, of which I could happily polish off three helpings in a single sitting. (Kang 2015: 15)

Even after five years of marriage Yeong-hye is a woman who has not conceived yet. Her unmotherly status also somewhere makes her representative of juvenile rashness and madness implicitly. Motherhood is another act which is not considered biological or out of an equation of love resulting in procreation in our society. Motherhood is essential for reproduction of subordination in patriarchal and capitalist system away from the attention of public sphere. Women who are unable to conceive due to medical issue or even their own partner’s medical unfitness are considered as worthless, barren, as well as uncanny hysterical women. Yeong-hye’s period of marriage as well as cow’s age when it is slaughtered for consumption as beef is worth a notice. After the age of five cows are sent to slaughterhouse and Yeong-hye is sent to a mental asylum after her unworthiness and unnaturalness as a woman/human being who is not obedient as well as of no use:

Cows naturally live for as long as 25 years, but by the time they reach four or five on modern dairy farms, they are likely to be physically exhausted, lame and infertile. No longer able to produce the amount of milk demanded of them by the dairy industry, these worn-out animals are sent to a slaughterhouse. (“The suffering of farmed cattle”)

Informing his sister-in-law In-hye about his wife’s transformation into a vegetarian highlights the hidden thoughts of Mr. Cheong when he imagines her larger and prettier eyes which are more feminine than his wife and the way her voice arouses him sexually. On the surface level Yeong-hye’s character can be treated as morally bad because of her disobedience, independent choice, lack of chastity when she unthinkingly participates in a sexual act with her brother-in-law. A deep analysis will loosen off the sinful sparks from all the three male characters in the novel namely Yeong-hye’s father, husband and brother-in-law. In-hye’s husband also gets attracted to her sister-in-law more than his wife and speaks of her in the following strain:

Her face, figure and thoughtful nature all combined to form the spitting image of the woman he’d spent so long trying to find; and so, unable to put his finger on just what it was that he felt she was lacking, he’d made up his mind to marry her. In fact, it was only when he was introduced to her sister that he realized what it was his new wife was missing. Everything about her sister pleased him—her single-lidded eyes; the way she spoke, so blunt as to be almost uncouth, and without his wife’s faintly nasal inflection; her drab clothes; her androgynously protruding cheekbones. (Kang 2015: 42)

The extent of sabotaging of choice in Yeong-hye’s life goes to the extent of choice of not wearing a female upper inner garment. Bra becomes another metaphor for constriction and Mr. Cheong refers to his uneasiness over his wife not wearing the said garment four times in part one of the novel. Her choice in regard to her comfort could make her husband lose his face in front of the acquaintances. He “tried reproaching her, lecturing her to layer up with a vest instead of a bra in that sultry heat. She tried to justify herself by saying that she couldn’t stand wearing a bra because of the way it squeezed her breasts” (Kang 2015: 11). Further, not only the bra but the shape of the breasts also abhors Mr. Cheong: “She had now lost so much weight that her breasts were little more than a pair of small bumps beneath her sharply protruding collarbones” (Kang 2015: 24). The female sexual agency gets oppressed by “constructing it in highly specific ways” (Gill 2008a: 53). Bartky has also mentioned how power works through “discipline and regulation” and not through regimentation and domination (1990). Figuratively, women are linchpinned as collection of various parts rather than whole; represented by their eyes, lips, hair, calves, breasts and vaginas they become fragmented. The episode implies that bra as a garment

rather than as a covering accentuates female sexuality in the eyes of men. Yeong-hye's take on her private garment gives her an individual entity. Her non-conformist attitude towards bra wearing deconstructs the hidden violence of enslaving "power feminism" where Korean females undergo cosmetic surgeries and "are presented as active, desiring, sexual subjects who chose to portray themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interest to do so" (Gill 2007: 151). It is interesting to note that according to World Plastic surgery Stats chart "South Korea is the most cosmetically enhanced country in the world", as "Korea owns 24% of the total market share... in 2014" and "one in five Korean women have undergone some form of cosmetic surgery in Korea" ("Korean plastic surgery statistics").

During her transformation, Yeong-hye on the other hand imagines her body to be dangerous except her breasts. In her dream sequence in an intra-logue she says, "I like my breasts, nothing can be killed by them. Hand, foot, tongue, gaze, all weapons from which nothing is safe. But not my breasts" (Kang 2015: 25). Her vegetable attitude to bask in sunlight in full nakedness in hospital lawn deconstructs the voyeuristic gaze of men. She uses her body as a weapon to struggle against monolithic patriarchy exuding her sexual autonomy. Another resistance that she portrays through her body is her sexual response to her brother-in-law. The brother-in-law definitely takes the advantage of Yeong-hye's vulnerability and mental condition to appease his creative instinct as an artist and his sexual instinct as a man. To his creative eye, Yeong-hye "radiated energy, like a tree that grows in the wilderness, denuded and solitary" (Kang 2015: 42). The blue mongolian mark that she had on her buttock and "the fact that she didn't eat meat, only vegetables and cereal grains, seemed to fit with the image of that blue petal-like mark, so much so that the one could not be disentangled from the other" and this sparked the creative idea in the mind of her brother-in-law to paint her in flowers and shoot her naked. For him the attraction was in the gaze, "Rather than provoking lust, it was a body that made one want to rest one's gaze quietly upon it" (Kang 2015: 47). He again remarks:

It called to mind something ancient, something pre-evolutionary, or else perhaps a mark of photosynthesis, and he realized to his surprise that there was nothing at all sexual about it; it was more vegetal than sexual (Kang 2015: 51).

Yeong-hye participates not for her sexual gratification or machismo of the brother-in-law but out of her fondness for the flora that he was going to paint on her body, the feeling of being a vegetable, nurturing, innocent, and harmless. Her unresponsive nature during the act had made their sex "fairly one-sided" (Kang 2015: 67). This is the final act of her asexuality of changing into a vegetable akin to asexual reproduction in flowers. Her

brother-in-law had not only surpassed his anxiety of an artist block of past two years but his mental pain also gets elevated when he realised the reason behind Yeong-hye's naked basking in sun at the hospital lawn. He understands:

This was the body of a beautiful young woman, conventionally an object of desire, and yet it was a body from which all desire had been eliminated. But this was nothing so crass as carnal desire, not for her—rather, or so it seemed, what she had renounced was the very life that her body represented (Kang 2015: 52)

He analyses her naked in sunlight as “some kind of mutant animal that had evolved to be able to photosynthesize” (Kang 2015: 55). Yeong-hye also confesses that she did not want to wash away the flowers painted on her body as they stop her dreams from coming. For her brother-in-law this floral body painting filled in his fallow period of two years and also gave vent to his imaginative realism:

Half-open buds, red and orange, bloomed splendidly on her shoulders and back, and slender stems twined down her side. When he reached the hump of her right buttock he painted an orange flower in full bloom, with a thick, vivid yellow pistil protruding from its center. He left the left buttock, the one with the Mongolian mark, undecorated. Instead, he just used a large brush to cover the area around the bluish mark with a wash of light green, fainter than the mark itself, so that the latter stood out like the pale shadow of a flower. (Kang 2015: 52)

Yeong-hye's brother-in-law was well aware that the art he created in the capitalistic society was “to be screened as factual documentaries, the carnality, the pure sensuality of this image, was nothing short of monstrous” (Kang 2015: 39). Critically speaking, “This is a specifically female subject, produced through a complicated, ritualized and internalized disciplinary regime, performed on the body and the personality” (Gill 2008b: 152), involving “consumption and transformation tailored to the particular commercial image of the female body constructed in capitalist, consumer society” (Gill and Scharff 2011: 127). Even In-hye realises the monstrosity of images of a capitalist society which consumes and makes its consumers lose their plot in life. She introspects and questions herself, “What was it that had made him want to film such a thing? Had he staked everything of himself on those strange, desolate images—staked everything, and lost everything?” (Kang 2015: 101) After May massacre of Gwangju In-hye husband's paintings were ascetic and serious. When P, his art colleague listens to his idea and paints the flowers over his body she asks him if he was trying to transform his image from serious to romantic in an extreme manner. The art here can be seen reduced to the work of pornography where there is consumption without emotional attachment (Dines 2010). Maria Mies remarks very aptly:

Within the existing industrial and patriarchal-capitalist society... the search for sexuality and erotic relations is satisfied not by loving real live women but by pornographic magazines or sex tourism. Satisfaction of the needs for rootedness and 'belonging'... is sought not by working in co-operation with nature but rather by consumerism, by purchasing images. These needs are a very effective motor which drives on the economic growth of commodity production and consumption. The capitalist commodity production system can transform any desire into a commodity. This means that, although the search is for the 'real thing' the 'real life', the commodity-producing system can only provide this in a symbolic, sentimental and romanticized form of fulfilment. Thus people have only imagined relationships which they enjoy (if at all) as metaphors of real life... they enjoy them only as consumers not actors or creators. (Mies 2010: 143)

This shows how consumption is basis of any capitalist society and how an animal, women or a work of art can become vulnerable and saleable at the same time. Vandana Shiva also makes a comment that, "... capitalism transformed land and soil [women and animals] from being a source of life ... into private property to be bought and sold and conquered... It transformed man from the role of guest to predator (2010: 105). The rule of any capitalist society is dichotomy between hands and mouths, haves and have nots, man and nature, man and woman; some will consume/dominate and others will be consumed/dominated. Capitalism and patriarchy are both hierarchical institutions of domination that rely on violence, control and exploitation to construct their rule.

Reference to May massacre of Gwangju is biographical. The novel *Here Comes the Boy* that was written before *The Vegetarian* is about a boy who dies in the massacre of May 1980. Violence here is not typically treated but universally. She was really taken aback with violence at Gwangju massacre in May 1980 and the February 2009 incident in Youngsan and tried to represent rejection of human brutality in her works. Kang explores her question of 'being human' with the Darwinian instinct to survive without violence in these novels. In *The Vegetarian* she takes a step ahead in dealing with well accepted invisible violence through the question of food choice. Yeong-hye in order to redeem herself of all the violence chooses veganism and identifies herself with a plant.

Further, in the last part of the novel Yeong-hye while doing a handstand calls her sister and tells her that she is growing into a plant now "leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands... they delve down into the earth" (Kang 2015: 75). Finally she and nature become one when "Yeong-hye in an isolated spot deep in the woods covering the mountain slope, standing there stock-still and soaked with rain as if she herself were one of the glistening trees" (Kang 2015: 74). She stops eating anything just sustains on water and sunlight like a plant. She transforms into an asexual being as "She hasn't had her period for a long time now, and now

that her weight has dropped below thirty kilos, of course there's nothing left of her breasts. She lies there looking like a freakish overgrown child, devoid of any secondary sexual characteristics" (Kang 2015: 86).

The novel's aim is not to promote veganism but vegan feminism can surely be studied in the light of *The Vegetarian*. The protagonist Yeong-hye's life is constricted or meets death under the influence of meat eating capitalist society. Vegan feminism acknowledges both capitalism and patriarchal system of violence leading to speciesism. Meat eating symbolises strength and thus validates oppression in a manly capitalistic society. Plant based diet since times immemorial has been represented as feminine, frugal, inadequate and inferior both economically as well as nutritionally. Meat thus is seen as a "marker of nationhood, social status, and gender" (Cudworth 2011: 84).

The way the subtle violence against women goes unnoticed similarly the brutality against animals goes unnoticed that are solely used for consumption as a food item. Hence, oppression of animals closely mirrors that of women (Adams 2014; Hall 2010). Many flesh and non-flesh products such as meat, chicken, eggs, milk for human consumption come from female animals who are violently dominated and exploited in the production process. It can be deduced in a way that capitalist system is not only carnivorous but patriarchal. Yeong-hye not only stops eating meat first but also abstains from eggs and milk:

"Just make me some fried eggs. I'm really tired today. I didn't even get to have a proper lunch."

"I threw the eggs out as well."

"What?"

"And I've given up milk too" (Kang 2015: 15).

...

... Mayonnaise contained egg, so that was another thing off the menu for her (Kang 2015: 26).

Yeong-hye's brother-in-law's act of painting and filming her naked can be seen as a meat eating, and flesh gazing and capturing entity who savours the pleasure without any strings attached or ethical qualms. He as a non-vegan consumer and an artist masks the insensitive consumption of vulnerable body of Yeong-hye with his narrative of aesthetics.

Yeong-hye's believing and identifying herself with a plant can be studied as a change coming out of knowledge and desire of becoming innocent, harmless and non-violent in spiritual terms. Through her extreme stand of giving up on food and taking in just sunlight and water like plants Yeong-hye tries to maintain continuity between nature and nurture, and body and spirit. In this regard Luce Irigaray mentions that desire comes out of awareness and understanding with "the intention of accomplishing the per-

fection of its gender” (1996: 28) with “the responsibility to work at each instant for our own evolution, transformation, transfiguration or transubstantiation” (2007: 3).

Yeong-hye’s communication by the end becomes muffled to the extent of final oblivion of the world and the words. She tells her sister “Soon now, words and thoughts will all disappear. Soon” (Kang 2015: 88). The trauma of blood curdling dreams and violence in all the forms around her leads her to experimenting with “self-affection”. This self-affection “refers to an ability to remain within oneself ... alludes to a state of gathering with oneself and of meditative quietness” (Irigaray 2010: 6). This return to oneself or to her nurturing plant nature as a female “allows [her] to meet with the other as other without losing nor annihilating the otherness of the other” (Irigaray 2010: 6). Her idea to become a tree and not to remain a beast/human is to avoid any domination or being dominated. In her belief of self-affection or vegetal quietude she makes an effort to liberate herself of all the shackles that oppressed her.

Moreover, Yeong-hye’s going back to the spirit of the nature can be seen in the Irigaray’s sense of the realisation that she was born a woman [animal/predator] but must become the [natural/innocent] spirit or soul of this body that she is. The border between the spiritual non-harming innocence and psychological imaginary of being a plant and not a human gets blurred for the protagonist as the only answer to curtail any kind of violence. To maintain her subjective self and forge a new identity for herself she returns to a pre-linguistic and pre-gendered form of an existence in the asylum believing herself to be a plant. She liberates her womanly body-in-the-situation of specific sociocultural construct by opting for a plant “lived body” which is not equivalent to either sex or gender (Moi 1999: ix; Young 2005: 16).

The protagonist herself has become a non-violent entity for others by damaging herself. Critically speaking this evolutionary experiment of Yeong-hye does nothing to release her from violence but transforms its effect “by connecting with the inner life rather than outer conditions” (Douglas-Klotz 1999: 52). Consequently, the vegetable life isolates Yeong-hye from everything around but in the light of Irigaray, her self-affection, silence, asexuality can be seen as a mode to extricate a woman’s energy from masculine subordination and resultant violence. Rather than relying on others for support or power she now takes the lead by her own self-cultivation in form of a plant by being an example of how to shun violent means and become non-violent and innocent like plants and trees. The text is not only a statement on animal slaughter or violence on females, but has an undercurrent of world peace as violence destroys and makes everything ugly around.

Yeong-hye's remark that the trees are harmless as they just give out oxygen mirrors her ownself as her "flesh becomes soul and spirit" and she just a breathing spirit. Irigaray promotes yoga and breathing in her writings as a way to coexist in life. She mentions how cultivation of breath is important as it is natural to us and on the imaginative level can help us in peaceful spiritual connections:

Our task would be rather an assumption of our nature as it is and a progressive transformation, transubstantiation of this nature by a cultivation of breathing that, from being firstly a vital breath in the service of survival, becomes the vehicle for love, for speech, for listening, for thought. (Irigaray 2007: 358)

Rather than literal hysteria, the protagonist intentional practice of turning into a plant reinforces her coming to her senses and cultivating her bodily intelligence to place herself out of the binary trope where she was seen as deficient and unremarkable. She practices peace by maintaining her connections to the rhythms of the natural world. Her slow transformation should not be seen in the light of suicide, erasure of body or passivity but she makes her body speak through that which only her sister In-hye is able to understand at a later stage. Here her silence and interiority is not mediated by patriarchy but she cultivates it on her own and finds her own spirit/essence there. Luce Irigaray reminds us that in this kind of concentrated interior development she "manages to organize a kind of symbolic space" for herself where her task is not to master another but rather to give birth to herself (1993: 98-99). It is in giving birth to plant like self she refuses commodification in a capitalist society and calls for a change in existing social order. What Yeong-hye does and the application of Luce Irigaray theory both are radical and postmodern in thought.

Taking Luce Irigaray's thought ahead, only among women can women have either parity or true intimacy she says. In-hye out of all three narrators approaches Yeong-hye's suffering the closest in an intimate communal bond. She finally comes to an understanding how her own subservient behaviour was her mark of cowardice and was a survival tactic indeed. She also realises how a system that propels on subordination is "devoid of happiness and spontaneity" (Kang 2015: 91) and mentions:

Now, with the benefit of hindsight, In-hye could see that the role that she had adopted back then of the hard-working, self-sacrificing eldest daughter had been a signnot of maturity but of cowardice. It ha been a survival tactic (Kang 2015: 89-90).

The understanding goes beyond biological sisterhood that In-hye wants to identify with her suffering sister and at the same time envies her liberation and finds herself at far end of the world.

... would the blood that Yeong-hye had vomited today have burst from her, In-hye's, chest instead? (Kang 2015: 101)

She was no longer able to cope with all that her sister reminded her of. She'd been unable to forgive her for soaring alone over a boundary she herself could never bring herself to cross, unable to forgive that magnificent irresponsibility that had enabled Yeong-hye to shuck off social constraints and leave her behind, still a prisoner. And before Yeong-hye had broken those bars, she'd never even known they were there. (Kang 2015: 82)

In-hye too leaves her infidel husband and imagines herself as a bird who has turned her back towards the sun to attain her freedom from the dark clouds (Kang 2015: 102). She performs the function of an obedient daughter, a good wife, caring mother and loyal sister that she fails to notice how unhappy she is.

Conclusions

Thus, *The Vegetarian* is a “tensional interplay between active and passive modalities, purity and sin, Eros and Thanatos”... as “a space of becoming, with all things mutant” (Alexandrescu 2016: 126). It reflects how any non-violent peace process like that of Yeong-hye meets crisis or death because of lack of effort from surroundings to create a sustainable platform of interdependent relationships. An ecofeminist study hence aims to make readers recognise that life in biosphere can sustain on cooperation and mutuality which is based on both preservation as well as respect for diversity (life as well as ideas). Topically as well as geopolitically the novel highlights the conflicting problem of Korean peninsula. The current US President, Donald Trump consideration of bombing North Korean nuclear and missile facilities in order to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and a potential nuclear attack on the US mainland would have easily devastated South Korea and even triggered a regional war involving China. Generally speaking violence at any level devalues the other by the perpetrator that is significantly seen in connection with Yeong-hye's identity. Further, violence anywhere leads to dehumanisation of humans by alienating their consciousness which leads to the mental trauma and further identification of Yeong-hye with a plant than a human being. Another theme that can be perused in the study is how violence spreads due to cultural norms and values; here confucianism, patriarchy, capitalist structure and anthroparchy. The real or threatened violence in the novel further helps us to distinguish

between direct (episodic and direct from aggressor to the target) and structural violence (indirect and embedded in social, political, economic fabric of the society). It hints at how structural violence of any nation can directly lead to deadly direct violence anywhere on earth. The novel thus, contextualises the space of violence and salvation amidst the increasing socio-environmental/political disasters around the globe which provides a practical challenge in sustaining world peace and raises questions on human rights, peace with nature and animals, and our sustainable practices.

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