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**DECONSTRUCTING FRONTIER MENTALITY AND MEAT POLITICS:  
THE STANCE OF VEGANISM IN HAN KANG'S *THE VEGETARIAN***

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**Abstract:**

*Humankind always favors themselves above any other species on earth because of the pride of being able to think logically and speak which other living inhabitants of earth are not being able to do so. At the very outset, this attitude of humankind might seem to be a harmless phenomenon, but it is the focal point and stance for justifying humankind ruthlessness and indifference towards animals. The frontier attitude develops a breach in hierarchy and vindicates every roughshod action of humankind against animals like fur industry, poultry farming, cultural practice of animal beheading, circus shows, bullfighting etc. If we do scrutinize why humans are ascribing such depreciatory space to the animals, frontier mentality caressed by lifestyle, culture, religion and society is the foremost reason. Besides, the desire and craze to derive pleasure by eating meat at the expense of animal pain and agony is the second reason. The novella *The Vegetarian* by Kang rooted in Korean culture centres on Yeong-hye who decides to abstain meat after a horrendous dream which provokes dread and guilt conscious. Yeong-hye decision looks like a pretty simple choice but it takes great struggle to follow this rule practically in her life without any hindrance because the choice of food is intrinsically linked with culture and gender politics. Veganism deconstructs and distorts the attitude of frontier mentality and erases the preconceived notion of hierarchy as humankind being the center and other species exist only in relation to humankind. It advocates a sort of lifestyle where every species get access to its space and life, thereby nullifying the demarcated boundaries of existence. This paper is an endeavor to analyze and trace the history and construct of frontier mentality in beings under different spaces like personal, political, social, religion and culture. It also explores the nuances of meat politics and beings use of frontier mentality as a justification for their brutal hierarchical relationship with animals and advocates the significance of veganism ideology to promote integrity between humans and animals.*

**Keywords:** *Frontier Mentality, Slow Violence, Veganism, Meat, Patriarchy, Sexual Politics, etc.*

**Introduction:**

Frontier Mentality is not a radical concept rather it is as old as the existence of human beings. Its history can be traced back to the cave times where mankind viewed animals as a subsidiary entity in the hierarchical chain of food and power. Initially mankind killed animals for survival, but gradually culture started to associate it with gender attributes and identity. In the former case mankind is not



guilty of his actions and committed unconsciously, without realizing its pros and cons whereas the latter one is categorized as a deliberate heinous crime actuated by compliance. Before the intervention of culture frontier mentality operated in a subdued way that is it got encapsulated in vitality as Darwin points out, “One general law, leading to the advancement of all organic beings, namely, multiply, vary, let the strongest live and the weakest die” (Darwin, 221).

The evolution of beings into community disciplined by culture, religion and society is the root cause and the cornerstone for bestowing cataclysm by means of heightening the disharmony between animals and humankind. To elaborate further man has been nurtured to become audacious and venturesome to gain propriety, authenticity and acknowledgement in a society. Therefore man started to search for a way to prove his audacity and fixed his gaze on inculpable animal kingdom and flagged a new trend called hunting culture. The transition of mankind attitude from unconsciousness action to the intentional sporting of animals’ is the vantage point of frontier mentality.

#### **Animal Hunt and Meat as an Emblem of Man Power:**

Hunting is one of the politics enunciated by culture. Besides, it is intrinsically critical to comprehend its subtlety because it is inculcated via oral folklores and mythology which lacks reliability. If a child is born in a community it is lured to associate with community identity through stories. The stories don’t stop with creating community conscious rather transcends beyond to formulate a way of lifestyle which mirrors his or her ancestors lineage. There is no problem in learning and understanding one’s own culture or lineage, but the fault is that one refuses to fill the lacuna of customs and traditions within a context.

The stories play a significant role in the internalization of gender conscious which in turn implants the desire for a dogfight with animals. Gender identity of man complements his aggressiveness and high-handedness towards animals. The following excerpt from the *Sexual Politics of Meat* testifies the above mentioned conception “In the early times men and women lived apart, the former hunting animals exclusively, the latter pursuing a gathering existence” (Carols, 3). The notion of hunting culture doesn’t end within a short span of time rather prolonged and entrenched man thereby deterring him to develop an affective empathy for centuries. The kings’ prided hunting as an expression of his gallantry and marveled at the display of the animal’s head at his palace. Besides, the kings’ obsession legalized hunting and ascribed it an elite class lifestyle. The King doesn’t signify orient alone rather includes a wide range of occident as well. Even the eminent Roman Emperor Caesar had constructed an amphitheater not to stage plays but to display the carcass of wild animals which he hunted sportily (Cassius, XLIII.22).

Gradually hunting as a sport turned out to be a commercialization by kindling the desire for possessing animal parts like skin, horns, teeth, tusk, tail, claw, neb etc. As a result trophy hunting and poaching came into vogue and impelled wealthy merchants to hire hunters to kill animals illicitly in order to get access to its blue-chip body parts. As civilization reached its zenith prompted by education, cognizance and ethics the barbaric craze for hunting subsided and fueled the killing of domestic animals to satiate the appetite. Mankind cultivated a culture for domesticating animals, not to protect them, but to do mass murder to assuage the taste buds of humanity.

Domestication is not an expression of genuine concern and care for the marginalized animal community rather it is a new way of asserting frontier mentality because domestication of animals gets inevitably weighed in pecuniary values. Mankind adopted livestock as a profession to gain money and protein rich food at the expense of fauna life and justified their act by pointing out the natural aspect of death which every living inhabitant of earth is destined to encounter. The livestock culture is the mother of meat politics, which ascribed gender identity in getting access and royalty to meat cuisine. In the novel Kang mentions famous Korean cuisines like ‘Bulgogo’, ‘Stir-fried beef’, ‘sweet and sour



pork', 'steamed chicken', 'octopus noodles' etc. to highlight Korean people fascination, obsession and politics behind food. Though it is the woman who cooks it is always man who perquisites in relishing it completely. Besides, a woman is at the mercy of a male to get the leftover cooked meat as it is demarcated as patriarchy right and power as Simoons point out, "Flesh food is viewed as the property of the men. At feasts, the principal times when meat is available, it is distributed to households according to the men in them. The system of distribution thus reinforces the prestige of the men in society" (Simoons, 73). Food is not only meant to please the appetite or satiate the hunger rather it acts as a driving force in shaping behavioral attributes as it is connected with physical and mental health. Besides, the ideology and the belief associated with certain food acts as a trope for reframing gender identity. Generally, men prevent women from eating meat because of the percept that autocratic demeanor and physical strength are generated and boosted up by meat consumption as Ziegler point out, "A liberal meat supply has always been associated with a happy and virile people" (Ziegler, 5). And the fear of what would happen if women get this authority has made mankind to credit it with the title of taboo and amorality.

In the acme of globalization and modernization the divide between male and female in the context of meat access got dissuaded and threatened the vulnerability of the animal kingdom to a greater extent. In Korean culture meat is a part and parcel of everyday food routine starting with breakfast, lunch and dinner. When Yeong-hye confesses that she has turned vegetarian her whole family look at her with dashing hopes as if she has committed a murder and sin, especially her father gets hyper and persuades her to eat meat in vain. In Yeong father's perception her aversion for meat has resulted from religious connotation therefore he poorly tries to budge his daughter away from her ethical stance of vegetarian by making a correlation between meat consumption and priesthood as follows, "Everyone needs a certain amount of energy while they're alive. Even priests who enter the temple don't take their austerities too far – they might be celibate, but they're still able to live active lives" (Kang, 36). Besides, Yong-hye desistance from meat consumption is a serious issue for her father because it makes her distance and disintegrate from her culture which has an intertwining relationship with meat cuisine. This proves and illustrates how generation after generation, mankind has inherited the legacy of frontier mentality and is successful in asserting it not only towards animals but to fellow beings as well. Mankind is successful in channelizing this mentality in women as well in the name of constituting equality. Besides, this equality asserts a new way of exhibiting frontier mentality which hurls the innocent animal kingdom to a greater peril.

#### **'Guilt' Annulled Frontier Mentality in Yeong-hye:**

Guilt may seem to be an abstract concept, but it possesses the power to reify and comprehend morality and conscience as "no guilt is forgotten so long as the conscience still knows of it" (Zweig, 360). Yeong-hye belongs to an orthodox Korean family imbibed in meat culture. Like her family she too is inclined towards meat consumption as Mr. Cheong says "Tongs in one hand and a large pair of scissors in the other, she'd flipped rib meat in a sizzling pan whilst snipping it into bit-sized pieces, her movements deft and practiced" (Kang, 14) and exhibits no natural aversion until that dreadful dream which beckons her conscience and righteousness. Dream is the eye-opener in Yeong-hye case. Without this dream she couldn't have confronted the barbaric and brute savageness of her residual lineage of humanity. In her dream she sees a barn loaded with raw flesh and dripping blood from an animal carcass and starts feeling humiliated and guilty for unconsciously participating in the pitiless butchery as she describes the dream vividly as follows,

Dark woods. No people. The sharp-pointed leaves on the trees,  
my torn feet. This place, almost remembered, but I'm lost now.



Frightened. Cold. Across the frozen ravine, a red barn-like building. Straw matting flapping limp across the door. Roll it up and I'm inside, it's inside. Long bamboo sticks strung with great blood-red gashes of meat, blood still dripping down. Try to push past but the meat, there's no end to the meat, and no exit. Blood in my mouth, blood-soaked clothes sucked onto my skin (Kang, 12).

The phrase "I'm inside" signifies her confession of being part of meat consumption society. Though hardly she tries to justify her actions of meat consumption as "being healthy" and "routine of her food course" the guilt of being involved in the massacre of voiceless innocent animals fails to ascertain her validation. She screams and contends to find an exit resulting from the pangs of guiltiness but to no avail because she couldn't find a way to make compensation to absolve her sin. The notion of guilt operates in multifaceted ways that is in one aspect, it enables a person to go for a change and revolution, whereas, in the case of inability it shatters the person confident and forces to encounter a bout of insanity as Lorde points out, "Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge" (Lorde, 98). To place Yeong-hye in the above mentioned context, the guilt is the consequence of her own actions, therefore she decides to embrace the ethics of veganism to shrive off from her ruthless and peremptory nature of existence. But this change in her life is not "useful" as Lorde mentioned rather turns out to be a disaster and troublesome because her own family and husband start playing the role of oppressors. Though there is a logical argument about her conversion to veganism her husband and family trade mark it as "self-centered" and "unreasonable" endeavor. Because according to her husband a non-vegetarian person turns to vegetarian only in the case of health issues and to reduce weight. But Yeong-hye has no such complication therefore he terms it as nothing but a "sheer obstinacy". The dream of Yeong-hye is not trivial or like other silly dream which dissipates into mists of forgetfulness as one wakes up in the next morning rather enduring and entrapping. That is why as soon as she awakens from the dream in the midnight she instantly moves towards the refrigerator and hurls all stored meat of "Beef and Pork, pieces of chicken, at least 200,000-won worth of saltwater eel" (Hang, 10) into the rubbish bags without realizing the consequence that it would distort the relationship with her husband. The following morning when Mr. Cheong asks her to make some eggs for him Yeong-hye calmly responds that she has thrown the eggs as well and this reply accentuates her transformation as a complete vegan though in the viewpoint of her husband it is a ridiculous and inappropriate decision.

Although guilt is successful in effacing the notion of frontier mentality in Yeong-hye and opens a new door by encouraging her to get hold of the stance of animal friendly veganism the failure to completely do away with her guilt results in her emotional turmoil. She is determined that no more she would be involved in killing animals, but her inability to give justification for the life of already dead animals engulfs her conscience as she "feels unsafe inside" because "the past is alive in the form of gnawing interior discomfort" (Kolk, 97).

Besides, it brings chaotic transformation in her relationship with her husband when she steadfastly refuses to have sex. The moment Yeong-hye refuses to satiate his sexual hunger he blames her veganism as a cause as he says, "Well then, that means you need to eat some meat. That's why you don't have any energy any more, right?" (Kang, 17). I would argue that Yeong-hye's husband view explicitly testifies the prejudice against veganism as it is looked down upon by non-vegetarians as a mere 'vegetable' in the context of sexual intercourse as Adams points out, "vegetable becomes representative of someone who does not enjoy anything: a person who leads a monotonous, passive, or



merely physical existence.....you are what you eat, to eat a vegetable is to become a vegetable” (Adams, 15). The preconceived attitude towards veganism of Yeong-hye’s husband doesn’t stop with blaming of her for being inactive in sex rather transcends beyond the limitations and ascribes the status of insanity which is quite paradoxical.

Yeong-hye’s husband shares his part in pushing her to the terrain of insanity by refusing to listen to her emotional turmoil and to offer her a consolation and affective empathy. Whenever Yeong-hye’s husband question the reason for being transformed as vegan, she blurts out nothing other than one standard answer “I had a dream” and this paves an evasion for him. That is, he takes this emotional turmoil of Yeong-hye for granted and deepens her delirium by declining to listen and understand her, thereby deliberately denying psychologist counsel and consultation as he ironically states,

Even given the extreme unpredictability of her condition, I wasn’t prepared to consider taking her for an urgent medical consultation, much less a course of treatment. There’s nothing wrong with her, I told myself, this kind of thing isn’t even a real illness. I resisted the temptation to indulge in introspection. This strange situation had nothing to do with me (Kang, 19).

In addition to Yeong-hye’s husband, her father is also equally accountable for her insanity. In a get-together Yeong-hye family deliriously plans to retrieve her from veganism after her husband makes her family know about her abstention of meat. When her father insists to eat meat in an autocratic demeanor she stoically refuses without any apologetic tone and this infuriates him that he slaps her hard and decides to feed the pork forcefully to her as Mr. Cheong describes, “My father-in-law smashed the pork to a pulp on my wife’s lip as she struggled in agony” (Kang, 40). The torture of her father forcing to get back to her guilt personae triggers her self-righteous and will thereby making her to remind of the unconscious brutality towards animals as she says, “Only the violence is vivid enough to stick. A sound, the elasticity of the instant when the metal struck the victim’s head...the shadow that crumpled and fell gleams cold in the darkness” (Kang, 28). When this image of taking an animal life comes before her consciousness, she frets and instantly decides to take away her life and cut her wrist instead of retracting her life back to meat consumption. Guilt is indeed a blissful key to erase the frontier mentality and to generate an egalitarian attitude towards all living species on earth, but it should be wisely reflected and overcome through proper means of healing otherwise it would turn out to be disastrous and traumatic as in the case of Yeong-hye who decides to take away her life.

### **The Ethics and the Stance of Veganism:**

The term ethics is very complex to put in a structured framework because of its fluidity and contradiction. Though it adopts diversification taking into consideration the stance of justification rooted in context in terms of life, it is neutrally grounded irrespective of culture, language and religion. Formerly, ethics operated in a closed manner circumscribing human at the center and animals on the fringes because humans prided for having authority over all other creatures on earth as Bible points out, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping things that creeps upon the earth” (Gen, 1:26). The word ‘dominion’ is likely and deliberately misused to ascertain and nurture an anthropocentric attitude. There is no dubiety in the above mentioned fact, but mankind has failed to comprehend why God has created mankind in his own image and granted him dominion. Because God expected mankind to be as righteous and compassionate like him. That is dominion not only symbolizes authority and power



rather it is inherently linked with obligation and discipline. It is generally said that along with liberty always comes a complementary gift of responsibility similarly mankind dominion comes with an obligation to protect and conserve all life forms. The stance of ethical perception is obviously a social construct which determines power relations like “great chain of life also meant submitting to the great chain of death” (Wright, 4) and constitutes to the establishment of hierarchy by using a religious text as a substantiation.

Although it takes into account the well-being of the majority as Bentham highlights in Utilitarian philosophy, it leaves the other binary side of non-human lives in the dark without realizing the value of cooperative force which promises sustenance and universal vitality. This prejudice is foregrounded by humankind misinterpretation of religious text because God has never privileged human life over non-human species and granted permission to hunt and consume animal for food and it is testified through his conversation with Adam as he says, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food” (Gen, 9:3). It is not only Christianity, even Buddhism the second most prominent religion widely practiced in Korea accentuates the importance of cordiality and benevolence between mankind and non-human relationships. Besides, Buddhism is acclaimed as the mother of veganism and its tenets formulate the core ethics and foundations of veganism pedagogy as it is defined as a:

Philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude—as far as is possible and practicable—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of humans, and animals and the environment. In dietary terms it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals (Wright, 3).

Veganism is a one step process which possesses the ability to refine the distorted structure of imbalance in the hierarchy of humankind thereby promising a wholly new way of existence with integrity and innocence. Buddhism and Veganism share a common thread of an intersection because both emphasis on the common good of all species eudemonia irrespective of binary categorization, but the former is classified in a religious context whereas the latter is proposed as just a matter of choice and option. Beyond religion, Buddhism propounds a philosophy for a prolific existence by emphasizing on the need to live a kind of moralistic lifestyle not confined to any particular religion or culture. The same is the case with veganism because it is no more an ideology rather an unwritten rule which should be proudly imbibed in our day to day living to push the world forward in equal balance and proximity. Because humans are no more in a compulsion to eat meat being deprived of other plant based food unlike earlier times to give justification to meat consumption as Tudier highlights, “Due to the modernization of food production, unless one is geographically or economically unable to make her or his food choices freely, eating animals is no longer a necessity and is therefore a choice. When a behavior becomes a choice, it takes on a much more significant ethical dimension” (Tudier, vi). In the contemporary society food is no longer confined to the space of sustenance rather it has become a symbol of choice, privilege and status quo and its transformation is substantial and breathtaking. In earlier times a community which refrains from meat consumption has been hailed as noble and pious whereas, those who consume meat are rated as second-class citizens and received sub-human treatment. But it is not the case today where the tables got reversed and meat consumption is marked as an ennoblement as Spencer points out, “We do not adequately realize today how deep within our



psyche is the reverence for the consumption of meat or how ancient in our history is the ideological abstention from the slaughter of animals for food” (Spencer, 331). The commodification of meat as a symbol of power is a construct to manipulatively run the corporates and industry which rely on animals to mint money. Besides, the corporates who produce products out of animals and food industries which lure people with meat cuisine are successful in inculcating this addiction of ‘carnism’ by means of advertisements like “Chickens fly in on the table with knife and fork in their thighs (looking earnestly to be consumed)” (Billington, 235). Han Kang practiced Buddhism when she was a child and this would have inevitably kindled her to write the novella *The Vegetarian* but it is not confined to Buddhism principles as I already stated rather embraced the universality by taking into consideration the environment and health. Even the protagonist Yeong-hye is not a follower of Buddhism and this is attested by her liking and love for meat in the former part of the novella. It is after her confrontation of barbaric sensibility of humans’ injustice towards animals she turns down the regulatory custom of meat consumption and upholds veganism. The ethics and standards of Veganism is not a biased and preconceived phenomenon. Besides, it doesn’t stick to one particular religion or culture. Its prominence rests in the universality as:

Veganism combines compassionate non-exploitation of other animals with an emancipated vegan self and a more compassionate human society. Vegan ethics, from the beginning, was directed towards these interconnected goals of transforming human beings and transforming human society, with both flowing from the foundational reconfiguration of human-nonhuman animal relations (Cole, 178).

### **The Disparity between Meat Consumers and Vegans:**

Stereotypes and norm constructions are naturally inclined towards gender identity therefore food consumption is not an exception. Food is the hub of patriarchal politics in asserting male domination though it is obviously women who take effort to bring life to food. Patriarchy is successful in employing food as a bait in bringing obedience and passivity in women by means of economic laterality. To elaborate in a capitalist ideology, money determines the power and position in food consumption. It is men who have enslaved women, thereby circumscribing domestic space and later pinpointed their inability to earn money as a justification in offering menial position in food consumption as “Women’s devalued status in the capitalist system has also functionally important in regard to the role they play in consumption” (Corey, 209). Besides, meat consumption has secured vital importance because of the inherent belief of attributing male identity which constitutes physical power, well-built physique, coarseness and virility. But with the advent of globalization and economic independence food is no longer associated with a particular sect of gender identity and attained a status of universality. The erasure of gender binary difference in relation to food has given root to all-inclusive conflict between meat consumers and vegans.

Meat consumers have resistance towards vegans only in two aspects, namely religion and health complications. If an individual doesn’t fit in any of these two criteria then he or she is looked down upon for meat abstinence. Because the general perspective and opinion in the Korean culture is that meat consumption is “a fundamental instinct” (Kang, 23) and a socializing module which enhances the feeling of being part and parcel of the community. Besides, vegan ideology is viewed as a narrow-minded phenomenon and a sort of practice which is completely against nature. The above mentioned belief is testified by Cheong boss wife’s query towards Yeong-hye after she sedately refuses the waiter from serving beef and states to be vegetarian as she interrogates, “Was there some special



reason for you becoming a vegetarian? Health reasons, for example...or religious, perhaps?" (Kang, 24). In case of health and religion veganism loses its stance of becoming a debatable concept because health becomes an inevitable medical complication where none can comment or negate its obligations and in the case of religion it becomes a hot potato and induces communal riots which in turn distorts the peace by brewing animosity.

Yeong-hye feels no sense of ignominy unlike her husband in openly disclosing that because of a dream that she has turned vegetarian. But Cheong on the contrary feels awkward and in order to safeguard his job and to evade mocking comments and disgusting looks from his fellow colleagues he lies that because of gastroenteritis disorder Yeong-hye has become a vegetarian as he says, "For a long time my wife used to suffer from gastroenteritis, which was so cute that it disturbed her sleep...a dietician advised her to give up meat" (Kang, 24). Another radical transformation in contemporary society is that meat consumers are feeling a sense of uneasiness in eating a meal with vegetarians which was quite opposite in the ancient times. Because meat consumers do have this sense that vegans view them as barbaric and savage murderers. Though meat consumers are aware of this attitude they disregard it simply without giving serious introspection because of succumbing to taste. Cheong and his colleagues remark on her vegan diet as the cause of her cadaverous appearance which is nothing but a misconception. It is not that meat is always healthy and add nutritional benefits it too has its negative consequences like unbalanced vegetarian diet as Terry points out, "medical institutions have been acknowledging that the overconsumption of animal protein puts people at increased risk of...illness such as heart disease, type 2 diabetics, and hypertension" (Terry, 3). Yeong-hye conversion to vegan ideology is covered up quite easily by Cheong-hye because of her female identity otherwise it would turn out to be a serious issue if Cheong has been replaced in Yeong-hye position. Vegan is not a trivial transformation in the male case because it challenges the very nature of manliness as "Animal flesh is a consummate male food, and a man eating meat is an exemplar of maleness. Men sometimes fetishize meat, claiming that a meal is not a 'real' meal without meat" (Sobal, 138). That is meat consumers' start to associate effeminate attributes if a man refuses to eat meat which is not the case with females, but vegans contradict this belief by propounding gender-neutral or hybridity thereby emphasizing on moral grounds.

To conclude, though Veganism as an ideology raises many queries in terms of ethicality and practicality it distorts all misconceptions that meat consumers' have and is successful in decolonizing frontier mentality and meat politics. Veganism is not merely a dietary practice which promises health and well-being rather it transcends beyond the notion of food, thereby emphasizing on the need to inculcate a much more compassionate and holistic relationship between humans and other living species of earth. It interrogates the ethicality of humankind power to subjugate and kill other life forms for their own whims and fancy. Besides, it address the prominent environmental issue of precarity which is dragging the world towards its end because of humankind negligence in conserving animals. For universal well-being and to reclaim the world from environmental destruction it is significant to underscore "vegaphobia" (Cole and Morgan) and to develop an affective empathy and broad-minded attitude like Yeong-hye.

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