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THE METAMORPHOSIS OF VEGAN MADNESS IN HAN KANG'S *THE VEGETARIAN*

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on one of the most prominent subtopics of Ecofeminism, Vegetarian Ecofeminism. In Han Kang's psychological novel, The Vegetarian (2007), the character Yeong-Hye's journey from unremarkable woman to the self-assumption of being a plant will be explored through the perspective of vegetarian ecofeminism. 'Nature vs. Culture' has inevitably been a part of discourses of Ecofeminism and Male dominance has been intrinsically connected with the devastation of 'Women' and 'Nature'. The Novel unveils the power which the protagonist (Yeong – Hye) holds with the Madness residing in her and turns into the form of 'Vegan Madness' which is acknowledged by the heteronormative male-dominated Korean society. The paper argues that the close connection of Women with Nature is precisely described by Yeong–Hye, as she tries to protect non-human animals by being a Vegetarian which as a result makes her suffer from the violence from men around her.

Keywords: *Vegetarian Ecofeminism, The Vegetarian Novel, Vegan Madness, Ecofeminism, Korean Literature, etc.*

Veganity in Women: An Introduction:

“In the heteronormative society, Men have always slaughtered ‘Women’ by using innumerable methods of brutality and oppression over them. Every historical realm illustrates its artifacts of women being voiceless. Here the researcher will be desperately using the words “Slaughtered, Butchered, and Exploited again and again in the paper to showcase the main element of this paper which quite connects the topics of the paper. “Veganity or Veganism in Women can easily be understood which dates back to the theory from where the roots of Ecofeminism are widely spread. Ecofeminism was initially coined by the French feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne in 1974 where according to her, “The disenfranchisement and oppression of women, people of color, and the poor are intrinsically linked to the degradation of the natural world, as both arose as a result of patriarchal dominance”.

Ecofeminism: Its History:

“Ecofeminism is an ideological movement that sees climate change, gender equality, and social injustice more broadly as intrinsically related issues, all tied to masculine dominance in society”. Specifically, ecofeminism contends that the majority of environmental issues can be linked back to the global prioritizing of masculine values (particularly those some consider poisonous, such as violence and dominance) and people in power who exemplify those characteristics. Ecofeminism additionally highlights the reality that women are disproportionately affected by environmental



challenges. According to one report from the United Nations, because women worldwide typically hold less monetary wealth and rely on the natural environment more, they are more likely to be displaced by climate change and have to travel farther for resources, like water, as dry seasons extend. Some Research even shows that women are also more greatly affected by radiation than men. One study has even suggested few men may have internalized aversions toward environmentalism, as it could be perceived as feminine. There are several sub-branches of this movement, including vegetarian ecofeminism, spiritual ecofeminism, and materialist ecofeminism. But at their root, they all proclaim that masculine dominance has led to a disconnect between nature and culture, which has adversely affected marginalized groups as well as nature itself'. Third-wave Feminism started in the U.S. in the 1990s and carried on Until 2011. This wave embraced individualism & diversity and, in return, saw the emergence of many new ideologies like 'Vegetarian Ecofeminism'.

What is Vegetarian Ecofeminism? The Problem of "Othering":

As the word "Slaughtering, Butchering, Wrecking" is often used and signifies the killing of animals, here in the heteronormative society Woman is nothing just a replica of the non-Human species (Animals) where she is butchered in terms of physical, emotional, and psychological oppressions created by the Male centric society.

The idea of Vegetarian Ecofeminism extends beyond ecofeminism because it believes that how humans exploit & kill non-human animals should be distinctly recognized and that the oppression of humans is linked to the oppression of non-human animals. The Feminist Vegetarian connection is a concept indicating that the oppression of animals in the form of being slaughtered and consumed is parallel to the oppression of women in a patriarchal society which establishes a connection between Feminism and Vegetarianism.

The concept of "othering" has always been dedicated to other genders or the supposedly 'weaker sections of the society; which according to the male society is women. Herein, Women and Nature are considered to come under the category of "other" where the supposedly hierarchal power which Man holds in society is against Women and nature.

"Mad Woman": Sanity vs. Insanity:

The amalgamation of Women and Madness is a dangerous outcome yet a powerful element present among every woman that can disrupt the "Oppressive patriarchal society." Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* is a vicious example of how every woman is like Yeong-Hye. Every single woman is unremarkable until she invades and disrupts the balance created by the male-dominated society.

A heart-wrenching, deep psychological novel that revolves around Yeong -Hye who is a typical housewife, one day starts dreaming of weird things and begins to become a vegetarian who in the end destroys her mental health and she considers herself to be a plant.

Yeong Hye is a voiceless character who rarely speaks throughout the novel yet deeply engrosses the readers. Her identity, behavioral patterns, and ideologies are seen through the eyes of three other main characters: Mr. Cheong (Yeong Hye's husband), Yeong Hye's Brother-in-law (In Hye's husband), and In Hye (Yeong Hye's elder sister).

These characters prove the extremity of Madness present in them. The only difference between them and Yeong-hye was that her Vegan illness was visible, and the other characters opted not to show their disrupted minds in front of society.



In Chapter 1, Mr. Cheong's perception of his wife is narrated where it is observed that Yeong-Hye was unremarkable, not attractive, and was doing all sorts of things that a dutiful wife should do, till then his wife's abnormality and her being silent was normal for him. Nevertheless, when she defied and went against the desires of his wishes, for Mr. Cheong, she became Abnormal and, in the end, when her Madness (illness) reached a peak, he left his wife.

On the other hand, In – hye's husband's insanity was deep in his artistic life and the passion that he holds for nature. His insanity also led him to his destruction when he used his unstable sister-in-law for his sexual pleasures. His madness for his artwork was deeply rooted in the passion which he had for his sister-in-law.

Even In-Hye had her depressing state and fear in her life where she had her struggles which were kept hidden from the outer world. Those unnamed dreams which she often visualizes frequently collided with her reality and imaginary world, but all that kept her sane and responsible was her son, Jiwoo who showed him a transparent line between these two worlds.

Vegetarianism in Korean Society & The Butchering of Women:

"Meat eating has been the central norm for centuries in the Western world. It is the nature of dominant norms to be accepted without question. Thus, when people become vegetarians, they are typically asked to explain their dietary choices. Nonetheless, no one thinks to ask meat eaters why they became meat eaters" (*Eating Animals*, Jonathan Safran Foer, 2009).

Yeonge-Hye belonged to a typical Korean society where eating meat was normal, and not eating meat was unusual and related to the person opting for vegetarianism for dietary purposes. Korean culture has always been deeply rooted in the historicity of eating meat during war times. For Koreans consuming Beef represents good wealth. As in every culture, the usage of Meat and other sea species has its significance and beneficiaries. But this beholds a clash between nature and culture as it disrupts the whole ecological system. "In any other case, it was nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband's wishes as mine has done" (Kang, 14).

Here the words said by Mr. Cheong precisely state that he doesn't have a problem with Yeong-Hye being vegetarian but she choosing herself to be vegetarian and going against her husband's wishes and making him eat all sorts of vegetarian dishes and restricting him to eat meat which is not fulfilling his needs portrays that her being vegetarian is utterly stupid in his perception. "There's nothing wrong with keeping quiet, After all, hadn't women traditionally been expected to be demure and restrained?" (Kang, 21).

In the first chapter of *The Vegetarian*, where we see Yeong- hye is described through the eyes of her husband how unremarkable she has always been in their whole married life. Until she rebelled against him and his choices, she became a mad woman for him which showcases how the male hierarchy works. "My father-in-law mashed the pork.....more" (Kang, 40). When Yeong-Hye's father forces her to eat meat despite her denial and her husband and brother-in-law clench her arms by following her father's order defines the male audacity to go against the wishes of a woman. Making Yeong-Hye eat meat forcefully is also an act of suppressing her power which she holds as being vegetarian. This incident represents how a man uses meat violence to show his dominance against the other genders.

An analogy with the institution of heterosexuality helps to shed light on this phenomenon. In a well-known article the feminist author Adrienne Rich argues that in a patriarchal society, heterosexuality is not simply a choice or preference, but rather a compulsory institutional norm, which is "imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force." The purpose



of this enforcement is to maintain the “male right of physical, economic, and emotional access to women” (Rich, 11-48).

Yeong – Hye's Eco sexuality:

Artist beholds their deepest desires whereas art reveals the real entity and identity of the artist's psyche. The Chapter “Mongolian Mark” describes how the video artist who was a brother-in-law of Yeong –Hye had a sexual attraction toward his own sister – in law. He was an artist who was deeply obsessed with the Mongolian mark that his sister in – law had. “The physical intimacy between the protagonist and her brother-in-law can be connected with sexecology, a term that has been popularized by Elizabeth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle since 2002. Stephens underlines that it “may produce new forms of knowledge that hold the potential to alter the future by privileging our desire for the earth to function with as many diverse, intact, and flourishing ecological systems as possible” (Stephens, 51).

Here, sexecology can be perceived as a combination of art, environmental activism, theory, and practice. Through sexecology, ecosexuals seek to make the environment more erotic, pleasurable, and varied. This is where the “sexology and ecology intersect. And that’s a term of identity but also a political and artistic stance” (McSpadden, 32). Ecosexuals are found to be engaged in sexual intimacy either in or with nature. They might have an orgasm in the waterfall or even have sex with their partner in natural surroundings. Interestingly, the protagonist Yeong-hye too develops a similar kind of behaviour. Even though she does not explore this idea intentionally, inadvertently she becomes a part of sexecology. Embracing veganism and nurturing plants takes her further closer to nature”.

The very occurrence where the flowers painted on her brother-in-law’s body makes Yeong-hye aphrodisiac bear’s testimony to this fact. Hence, Yeong-hye is aroused due to the painting of flowers all over his body. Furthermore, when her own body is painted with flowers, Yeong-Hye not only wishes to keep the flower paintings on her body but also wants her brother-in-law to paint them again for her, once the colors of the painting start to fade. Yeong-hye’s behaviour resonates with the ecosexual statement that asserts, “These human bodies are part of the nonhuman material world” (Morris, 3).

The brother-in-law, when he dreams of making love to Yeong-hye imagines, that her skin is a pale green. Her body lay prone in front of him, as a leaf had just fallen from the branch, only barely begun to wither. “The Mongolian mark was gone; instead, her whole body was covered evenly with that pale wash of green” (Kang, 96).

Vegan Madness: The Ultimate Identity:

When defining Veganism, women usually make up the largest percentage of the category of gender who is vegans. Entomologically, women have always had a deep bond with nature, which we call “Mother Nature,” because the bond between humans and nature is somewhat considered to be feminine, which cannot be accepted by the inflexible mindset of Male society. Throughout the novel, Yeong–Hye’s madness is associated with her being a ‘Vegetarian’ and her madness is treated as a psychological illness called ‘Anorexia Nervosa’. “She was one of the particular cases suffering from – Schizophrenia and refused to eat” (Kang, 141). Yeong- hye was constantly questioned about her choices and the path she opted for. Every other character suppressed her voice because she opted for vegetarianism. If we look in the deeper context then Yeonge – hye’s identity was associated with Nature and opting for Vegan life. Even her transformation when she



self-absorbed herself as a plant portrays that she has finally attained her real identity which she has been searching for all her life.

Yeonge-Hye's deep attachment to nature has always resided inside her. She found a huge amount of tranquillity and serenity in the woods. Even when she was young and was lost in the mountains, those long branches of trees made her feel protected from the outside world. Even when she grew up and was in Chukseong Psychiatric Hospital, she loved being there because it had Zelkova trees which provided a sense of peace to her mind. "Look, sister, I'm doing a handstand; leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands...they delve down into the earth. Endlessly, endlessly...yes, I spread my legs because I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch; I spread them wide..." (Kang, 127).

Yeong-Hye was mumbling in her dreams when her sister visited her in the hospital. The whole description explains that her self-absorption as a plant is more on a psychological level where one considers oneself as a plant. "I can live without it. All I need is sunlight" (Kang, 154). "Well, I was in a dream.....them wide..." (Kang, 148). One of the climax incidents was when Hye visited Yeong-Hye in the psychiatry ward where she explained her dream to her sister where she became a tree and laughed frantically.

For the outside world, Yeong-Hye might sound like a mentally unstable patient speaking about weird dreams, but from the environmental perception, we can see that Yeong-Hye has now found her final destination, the destination of being a plant resembles that she finally understood which thing she was always associated with her whole life. This symbolism of considering plant is can be seen through a lens of a woman who finally attained her identity and reached her long-lost home.

To conclude, Yeong-Hye is not an exceptional woman, she is the reflection of all the other unremarkable women who live an unremarkable life. Yet, despite following all the Male depicted norms, she is forced to be clutched under the mishaps of violent men. Women and nature are closely related as both of them are the prominent parts on whom Males showcase their power. Yeong - Hye's Vegan madness is the symbolism of a ferocious rebellious woman who is dangerous for the heteronormative society as she can disbalance the whole hierarchy of men. Thus, Han Kang's Yeong-Hye briefly associates with the power women hold within them, the power of Insanity and Woman are a part of nature because nature exists within them.

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