

The Vegetarian: A Novel of Defiance

Dr.Nitin Jarandikar, Head and Associate Professor, Dept. of English, Radhanagari Mahavidyalaya, Radhanagari, (Affiliated to Shivaji University, Kolhapur)

Article Received: 08/05/2022, Article Accepted: 28/06/2022, Published online: 28/06/2022

DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2022.7.2.64

Abstract: *The Vegetarian* is a Korean novel written by Han Kang. The book received the prestigious Man Booker International Prize in 2016. The story *The Vegetarian* is about a young lady named Yeong-hye and her decision to become a vegetarian. In a Kafkaesque manner, one fine morning, Yeong-he suddenly tells her husband that she had a gruesome dream and had decided not to eat the non-vegetarian food. The whole novel unfolds Yeong-Hye's denial of non-vegetarian food and the attempts of her family members to convert her toward non-vegetarian food. But over time, Yeong-he has to pay a huge price for her decision. Yeong-Hye's whole journey hence onwards encompasses a sad and pathetic life story. The present paper is an attempt to explore the predicament of Yeong-hye and her decision to deny consuming non-vegetarian food.

Key words: Korean novel, violence, J. Krishnmurti, primitivism, feminism, Antigone

The Vegetarian is a Korean novel written by Han Kang. It is her debut novel. Originally published in the Korean language in 2007, the book was translated into English by Debora Smith and was

published in 2015. The story received the prestigious Man Booker International Prize in 2016. While appreciating the novel, Ilana Masad has rightly said, "*The Vegetarian* remains urgently relevant novel ... which is a mark of great literature".

The novel *The Vegetarian* is about a young lady named Yeong-hye and her decision to become a vegetarian. In a Kafkaesque manner, one fine morning, Yeong-he suddenly tells her husband that she had a gruesome dream and had decided not to eat the non-vegetarian food. Having a non-vegetarian diet is an integral part of Korean society. There are very few people in Korean culture, particularly the Buddhist monks, who prefer vegetarian food. Otherwise, unless and until there is a strong reason, the Korean people cannot think of consuming a strict vegetarian diet. In the case of Yeong-hye, except for her gruesome dreams, there appear to be no specific reasons to become a vegetarian; at least, this is the perception of her husband and the other family members. Then onwards, the whole novel unfolds Yeong-he's insistence on denial of non-vegetarian food and the attempts of her family members to convert her toward non-vegetarian food. But over time, Yeong-he has to pay a huge price for her decision. Yeong-Hye's whole journey

hence onwards encompasses a sad and pathetic life story.

Divided into three parts, in the novel, it is very seldom we see that Yeong-he is directly speaking to the readers. "Her voice is rarely heard, her speech is rarely present ... [but] her actions speak louder than words" (Masad). Yeong-Hye's husband is the narrator of the first part, 'The Vegetarian'; Yeong-he's brother-in-law is the narrator of the second part, 'Mongolian Mark,' and Yeong-he's sister is the narrator of the third part 'Flaming Trees'. The readers are confronted with Yeong-hye through the perceptions of these three different narrators. But the haunting question that torments the reader is what compels Yeong-hye to turn towards vegetarian food.

The novel has been interpreted as "the irreconcilable conflict between our two selves: one greedy, primitive; the other accountable to family and society" (Lori Feathers). As far as the idea of greediness is concerned, it can be said that the novel deals with the man's greed to grab the nutritional values by butchering the animals, which implies the jungle law. In the case of the issue of accountability towards family and society, in the novel, it is seen that Yeong-he decides not to wear the bras or not to follow the social conventions, to be precise. In that sense, Yeong-Hye's problem of choice between what to eat and what to wear is quite convincing.

But a reading of the novel from the point of view of primitivism is not convincing. Yeong-he has to pay the price for her decision. Her husband takes divorce and leaves her life. Yeong-he's eccentric behavior of not eating the non-vegetarian food, not wearing the bras, shedding off the clothes, or exposing their breasts to the sunlight is considered by the family and society as the symptoms of insanity. So she has been admitted to the psychiatric hospital, where no one now visits her except her sister. After denying the non-vegetarian food, the next step in her journey is her wish to become a tree. In the second part of the novel, it is seen that Yeong-he's brother-in-law, who is a video artist, invites her to be his model. He tells her about the body painting with floral patterns. The brother-in-law had heard from his wife about the Mongolian mark on Yeong-Hye's body. He had a strong desire to see that mark and wanted to convert it into art with his painting. Yeong-hye, excited by the idea of floral patterns on her body, gives consensus to the brother-in-law. The story doesn't stop here. She permits him to make love with her because the brother-in-law, too, has painted his own body with the floral patterns. Yeong-he is fascinated by those patterns. Yeong-he's love for the floral patterns on the body is one more step in her journey. It kindles a desire in her mind to become a part of Nature, to become a tree. In the last part of the novel, when she is admitted to the psychiatric hospital, she runs away into the woods; she starts walking upside down, balancing on her hands because she claims, "All of them [the trees], they're all standing on their heads"

(148). And finally, she tells her sister that she has turned into a tree and doesn't need any food; water and light are enough for her. Now, the reference to becoming one with Nature and elemental life may tempt us to connect it to the primitive world. But this argument doesn't seem convincing because the violent means for survival were the cornerstone of the primitive world. So Yeong-he's denial of the non-vegetarian food blooms from the primitive instincts is unacceptable. Further exploration is needed to see what exactly Han Kang is trying to communicate through Yeong-hye.

One thing is clear Han Kang is portraying a rebellious voice. But rebel against whom? As narrated by Yeong-he's husband, she was looking a very average kind of girl. "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" (3), says her husband. So Yeong-he may nurture her rebelliousness against established notions of beauty. Her rebellion can be seen through her act of rejecting to wear the bras. Yeong-Hye's husband finds himself quite embarrassing in social gatherings when he realizes that his wife hasn't put on the bras and still didn't bother about her appearance. The central core of the novel, where Yeong-he denies the non-vegetarian food, seems to be an extension of her rebellious spirit. Yeong-he's husband, in the first part of the novel, narrates: "According to my wife, he [Yeong-hye's father] had whipped her [Yeong-hye] over the calves until she was eighteen years old" (29). In the third part of the novel, Yeong-he's sister recalls how Yeong-he, as a child, was a

victim of patriarchal Violence. So it can be said that Yeong-Hye's decision about non-vegetarian food is a symbol of the denial of the patriarchal authority, as she equates Violence in the butchering of animals with her father's violent behavior.

Yeong-he's these two denials and challenges may persuade us to read the novel from the feministic perspective. At one level, Yeong-he challenges the established notions of feminine beauty by rejecting to wear the bras. It shows her desire to break the social conventions. On another level, she challenges the patriarchal authority by refusing to eat non-vegetarian food. But to label, *The Vegetarian* as a feministic novel is to delimit its scope because the story encompasses still broader issues. It does open a rich field for further inquiry.

Yeong-he is rebellious, no doubt, but her rebelliousness is not just restricted to social conventions in terms of the feminine world or patriarchal world. In one of her interviews, Han Kang has admitted, "I don't think that there's just one subject that I return to, but one important question I often return to is the question of human Violence. For example, *The Vegetarian* depicts a woman who rejects an omnipresent and precarious violence even at a cost to herself" (Krys). So Yeong-he's decision to reject the non-vegetarian food is her rejection of the violent human world in a broader sense. As J. Krishnamurthy has appropriately said:

"We have built a society which is violent, and we, as human beings, are violent; the environment, the culture in which we live, is the product of our endeavor, our struggle, our pain, and our appalling brutalities." (75)

Yeong-he's battle is related to the denial of this violent world, and she fights it in her style. Her decision not to eat non-vegetarian food can be considered a symbolic gesture against Violence. According to Han Kang, "Violence is part of being human, and how can I accept that I am one of those human beings? That kind of suffering always haunts me. Yes. I also think my preoccupation extends to the Violence that prevails in daily life. Eating meat, cooking meat, all these daily activities embody Violence that has been normalized" (Krys). Yeong-he's journey of the denial of Violence, though it begins haphazardly with a horrific dream, involves a systematic process. There is indeed a method in her madness.

Yeong-he's painful journey begins with her gruesome dreams. So it is clear that deep in her heart, she was yearning to resist Violence. Denial of Violence has become integral to her subconscious, reflected in her dreams. To say that Yeong-he decided not to eat non-vegetarian food solely by relying on her dreams would be too naïve. She seems to be battling the issue of Violence for a long time. It can be said that the gruesome plans provide her an opportunity to vocalize her anguish against Violence.

Yeong-he's journey unfolds a step-by-step process – denial of non-vegetarian food is followed by the refusal of clothes (she is seen displaying her nudity publicly); her attraction towards floral patterns through body painting and urge to become a tree; and ultimately, her denial of consuming any food and demand to have only sunlight and water just like trees. It appears that she has prepared her mind to throw away her own life in this battle through which she aspires for liberation; she is willing to throw away her outer appearance. In this connection, the remark of her brother-in-law is apt. While thinking about Yeong-he's body, he says, "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" (85).

Yeong-he knows it very well that violence is deeply rooted in the human mind, and there is no escape from Violence; life without Violence is a myth. When she talks about her gruesome dreams, actually she is talking about the violent world:

They come to me now more times than I count ... Violent acts perpetrated by night. A hazy feeling I can't pin down ... but remembered as blood-chillingly definite.

Intolerable loathing, so long suppressed. Loathing, I've always tried to mask with affection. *But now the mask*

is coming off. (Emphasis added)

That shuddering, sordid, gruesome, brutal feeling. Nothing else remains. Murderer or murdered, experience too vivid to not be accurate. Determined, disillusioned. Lukewarm, like slightly cooled blood. (28)

She also knows that no one will understand her intentions behind the decision. Had Yeong-Hye's decision been restricted to eating merely the non-vegetarian food, she would have easily switched to vegetarian food. But in the novel, Yeong-he denies any food at all over time. Her physical condition deteriorates day by day. Her sister notices Yeong-he's hollow eyes and sunken cheeks. Yeong-he loses her weight drastically. Her body is dehydrated. She starts vomiting blood. She stops eating, stops talking, and stops sleeping too. So it's clear that her decision not to eat non-vegetarian food is not merely a matter of choice.

Parallel to Yeong-he's decision about food, she develops a strong desire to become a tree. She is fascinated by a world of trees and plants. Her urge to become a tree blooms in the novel's second part when her brother-in-law paints floral patterns on her body. Her desire to become a tree goes to such an extent that in the psychiatric hospital, she starts to assume herself as a tree. She starts to walk upside down, balancing on her hands. She tells her sister,

"I need to water my body. I don't need this kind of food, sister. I need water" (148), "I don't need to eat, not now. I can live without it. All I need is sunlight" (154). Yeong-he soon realizes that she won't survive for a long time. She tells her sister, "Soon now, words and thoughts will all disappear. Soon." (154), and she asks her, "Why, is it such a bad thing to die?" (157)

So it is clear that Yeong-he knows well the consequences of her decision. She knows that no one will understand her intentions, and there is no solution to Violence. Despite that, she sacrifices her marital, familial, social, and personal life too. Looking at the pathetic situation of Yeong-hye, her gradual downfall on a physical and mental level, and the symbolic gesture behind her urge to become a tree, one may assume that Yeong-he is pessimistic. She is surrendering to society, and she is accepting her defeat willingly. One may feel that her urge to become a tree symbolizes her humility and submissiveness. But this is not true. Yeong-he dares to face the consequences. Right from the beginning, she understands that she is a lone warrior in her battle against the violent world in which she will never win. She also knows that society won't accept her decision that easily. Her father, family members, and her doctors try to feed her forcefully. But she remains firm in her decision. Despite knowing the consequences, she goes on fighting her battle. Though she becomes frail and speechless over time, she is not a submissive woman. Her whole struggle is to deny Violence. In that sense, she is

rebellious. Yeong-Hye's acts of resistance and postures of defiance are unparalleled and can be compared only with Sophocles' Antigone. What Cecilia Sjöhol says about Antigone is true in the case of Yeong-hye:

Women may seem only to conform to what is expected of them. But their freedom emerges beyond their overzealous willingness to comply, their self-absorbed and selfish search for pleasure, and their easy slippage into humiliation and abuse. (Walsh)

References

- Kang, Han. *The Vegetarian*. Portobello Books: London, 2015.
- Feathers, Lori. "Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*." *Words without Borders*. May 2015.
- Krishnamurti, J. *Beyond Violence*. KFI Publications: Chennai, 1973 (2015).
- Lee, Krys. "Violence and Being Human: A Conversation with Han Kang." *World Literature Today*. May/August 2016, Vol. 90, No. 3-4, Pp. 61 – 67.
- Masad, Ilan. "The Vegetarian by Han Kang". *The Guardian*, 23 December 2016. Walsh, Keri. "Antigone Now." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, September 2008, Vol. 41, No. 3, a special issue: ANTIGONE (September 2008), pp. 1-13.

How to cite this article?

Dr. Nitin Jarandikar "The Vegetarian: A Novel of Defiance", *Research Journal Of English (RJOE)* 7 (2), PP: 475-480, 2022, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.36993/RJOE.2022.7.2.64>