

Patriarchy Using Women As Wending Machines: A Feminist Approach to Analyze Han Kang's Novel "The Vegetarian"

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Abstract:

"The Vegetarian" is a chilling ordeal of a woman called Yeong-hye, who is going through inner turmoil and this inner turmoil, is shown piece by piece through the eyes of different characters. Yeong-hye undergoes psychological and mental breakdown as she starts having dreams of violence, considering humans to be inherently violent, she shuns away from being a human and starts to think that she is turning into trees to escape humanity. The novel is in three parts -The Vegetarian, Mongolian Mark and Flaming trees. The first part is narrated by protagonist's husband Mr.Cheong, second part by her brother-in-law and third part by her sister In-hye. The focus of this paper is to psychoanalyze the male characters and how men have become selfish "takers", operating women as "wending machines" in this system of patriarchy. Also examining how the society exerts ideological control and suppresses individualism. Further to understand the use of excessive violence in parenting, resulting in development of traumas in childhood, carried later on in adult life. This novel has won the Man Booker International prize for fiction in 2016 and the author has won Nobel Prize in literature in the year 2024.

Keywords: Woman, Patriarchy, Ideological control, society, violence.

I. Introduction:

"The Vegetarian" is a disturbingly visceral novel by South Korean author Han Kang. It was first published in 2007 in Korean and later translated into English by Deborah Smith in 2015. It's sourced from her earlier work, a short story she wrote in 1997 titled "The Fruits of My Woman" which was inspired by Korean modernist poet Yi Sang's idea of humans becoming plants. The story progresses throughout as stark clear pictures, one after the other filled with raw emotions that grips the reader to feel the ordeal of Yeong-hye. The narration style also is quite interesting and creative, the perspective of other characters towards the main character is seen, and also how men think about women. Yeong-hye hardly speaks in the novel and it symbolically and silently conveys the position of women in this patriarchal society.

The first male character is Mr.Cheong, husband of Yeong-hye, who narrates the first chapter "The Vegetarian". He is an average, ordinary man. From school days he understood his capacity which was mediocre, so he chooses to remain a big fish in a small pond. In school he bosses around juniors rather than guys his own age, he applies to colleges where he can get a scholarship and gets a job in a small company so people can appreciate his average skills. Anything beyond his position, he avoids. He also suffers from male inferiority, so he chooses the most ordinary, unattractive, passive woman to marry who wouldn't compare him to other men with better bodies. Yeong-hye who was docile, taciturn, demure, agreeable woman, a silent woman with no personality was the woman for him.

He got his deal of a superficial, non-simulating, purely transactional marriage. It's running its fifth year but no love or bond is apparent, it's a marriage for the sake of needs fulfillment and to appear agreeable in society. His needs of food, subservience and a body for physical needs are met; whenever any of these aren't delivered he lashes out in anger. He is portrayed as a cold man who minds his own business, as long as he gets what he needs, which is quite true for most men who lack empathy. They choose partners as objects, who fulfill their family equation, make them look good in society, matches their financial status rather than marrying for companionship or partnership.

On one such occasion of a company dinner at a wealthy restaurant, he wants to uphold his image in front of his boss, who has invited him for the first time. Yeong-hye, who had the habit of not wearing a bra, which she found constricting and squeezing of her breasts, went without it at the fancy dinner, her husband felt ashamed and embarrassed because of her lack of obedience, also she refused to eat meat, which is considered appalling in Korean culture, was looked down upon by the wives of his other bosses. So she failed to protect his image. Society has bound people in complying with rules, breaking those results in being out-casted and frowned upon. So the pressure to comply and save one's face to fit in a box called society, leads people to hide

their actual self. Suppression and further compliance which the society demands to uphold this fragile image causes inner conflicts among individuals. Louis Althusser, a French Marxist philosopher, defines society as one of ideological state apparatuses where individual subjects are produced by social forces through hegemony or by using force. It enforces the dominating ideology to establish control, like forcing someone to eat meat or condemning people for not dressing according to set rules.

Men have forgotten that woman is a “human” first and then anything else. Yeong-hye gets up at six a.m to prepare his breakfast and does his laundry, irons his clothes and hands him his things before he leaves for work. In all five years she doesn’t demand anything from him, she doesn’t complain in the slightest when he comes late from office or isn’t spending time with her on weekends. Despite her being a good wife when she starts experiencing these horrid dreams, he avoids talking to her about them as it doesn’t “concern” him. He doesn’t want to comfort her, not even with words, he complains rather because he isn’t getting his usual meat breakfast or she hasn’t done his laundry etc. so instead of understanding her, he gets angry because the transactions have stopped.

The gender roles are so indoctrinated inside women that they do not understand what is right and wrong, until they are completely degraded mentally and emotionally exhausted to the point of no return. One can argue that he is providing financially but that’s not the case here, Yeong-hye contributes to the income by working as a graphic designer. So why do women need to be in these draining arrangements, giving and giving to thankless takers when the marriage is not a true partnership? The society plays an important role here in disrespecting unmarried women who have passed the marriageable age, trying to put out individualistic freedom. The society applauds a woman who has all her life been a faithfully functioning wending machine which makes no noise, asks no repairs and wants nothing in return.

The horror in this relationship starts when Yeong-hye isn’t able to sleep or eat anything properly and her dreams are incessantly consuming her, her dreams of violence and blood. She avoids physical contact with her husband because he stinks of meat, but he gets angry and doesn’t understand her obsession with not eating meat. He gets what he wants using force; once he succeeds he rapes her frequently, leaving her mentally traumatized. The dark side of patriarchy will kick the wending machine and keep kicking it until it yields. So Mr. Cheong is the epitome of male violence in domestic scenario which is completely considered normal and justified in many societies. To conclude on Mr. Cheong, who serves Yeong-hye with a divorce and discards his obedient, giving wife as a non functional wending machine that he could get nothing out of.

The second male character is Yeong-hye’s brother-in-law; his inner mental state is seen in the second part – Mongolian Mark. From the starting, he is unapologetically pursuing his artistic dreams while being completely dependent on his wife In-hye. She works tirelessly in the house, takes care of their toddler son and also works in a successful cosmetic store which gives good returns. She is a completely devoted and extremely adjusting wife. He however has also chosen his wife as a good wending machine who completely understands his inability to contribute to the household or his family. He selfishly spends time in his studio working on his video arts on his camcorder, instead of spending time with his family or taking care of his son on weekends. He has had no artistic output in two years but once upon seeing a poster outside a theater of naked bodies painted with flowers, he has an artistic impulse and he is gripped by this image. He tirelessly draws sketches of his mental images, upon an instance his wife casually mentions about a Mongolian mark on her sister’s left buttock which hasn’t faded. This little information consumes his mind and he can no longer control his sexual attraction towards Yeong-hye. This frenzy ends only in his convincing a mentally ill woman to have intercourse with him and record this artistic venture on a camcorder. Despite having an obedient wife and a toddler, he doesn’t mind violating his marriage all because of a “Mongolian mark” shaped like a flower. Men have the capacity of this level of selfishness, placing their desires above all, even if it involves unjustified abusing. The poison of patriarchy has given men the divine right to abuse women and not feel apologetic. This inhumanity has downgraded society by devaluing women and normalizing this behavior.

The third and most important male character is Yeong-hye’s father, the main culprit behind the mental breakdown of both sisters. He is a war veteran, who served in the Vietnam War and proud owner of Order of Military Merit. It’s his do in the house. In-hye was the eldest and complied to his needs while Yeong-hye didn’t know how to dodge him. He is the shining example of the finest patriarchal agent. He beat Yeong-hye until she was eighteen, their brother Yeong-ho adopts his father’s characteristics of rage and violence carrying on the legacy of patriarchy. When Yeong-hye was 9 years old, a dog bit her; his father chained the dog to his motorcycle and ran circles until it bled to death. The dog was later eaten the same evening. The cruelty of this incident scars young Yeong-hye. He aimed at manufacturing them both as docile and domesticated objects, and was strict and controlling, so much so that both sisters lose themselves as individuals, as humans. One such incident of family gathering at In-hye’s house brought on by Mr. Cheong, who complained about his wife not eating meat, which ended up in a trip to medical emergency. Yeong-hye was slapped hard by her father for not complying and held by her brother and her husband to be forced fed meat by him. She loses her mental balance and slashes her wrists. This suffocation of actual personalities of children and manipulation through obsessive

control often is an example of failed parenting and results in either child rebelling or turning into Yeong-hye taking it all in and becoming silent, inexpressive like a machine. In-hye shares her ordeal in the last chapter – flaming trees. Their childhood was traumatic due to their father and both shun being human, they both subconsciously want to turn into plants. Trees and forest are depicted throughout the book. Initially in Yeong-hye's dreams and then in In-hye's memories of their childhood and later part of the novel where she constantly finds herself noticing trees. This departure from being human to trees and vegetative states is fuelled by their father who numbed them with his violence until nothing was left inside them, until they couldn't hold it together and all they could do was escape to their own world. The childhood traumas have broken both of them and led them into non functional humans unable to express anything. The question to ask here is, controlling or suffocating a child with violence to such an extent even worth it? To destroy one's own kids in such a way that they can't function normally as individuals is a lesson to take away from this novel.

II. Conclusion:

Humans are a mixture of light and darkness, in unequal proportions. Han Kang has this incredible talent in conveying this in stark vivid images, compelling a reader to feel the electric current and go through this journey of discovering the extent of humanity. It makes us see the wide spectrum of humanity and what it is capable of, both good and bad. The voicelessness of a woman is loudly stated by her. The world is dominated by men and men have represented women in stories, poems and paintings and given them identity. It's so interesting to note that all that is known about women is written mostly by men. From holy texts to anything up until modern times, men have represented women. The voice of a woman is nowhere to be found. This concept of the voice of "subaltern" by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak an Indian literary critic is fitting to this ordeal that a woman was never represented by a woman, majorly because she wasn't allowed to be educated, she was restricted in the kitchen with her "gender roles", giving birth to children and tending to men and their houses. It's a tragedy that the world which says "women are so difficult to understand" is half caused by representing women through men's eyes, their imagination of a docile, demure creature which can easily be domesticated and controlled has landed them in trouble and which they themselves can't fathom the actual reality of that they avoid the "real" woman altogether. The representation of women by women is the need of this society, which has always believed that by silencing a woman it can succeed, but it has only lead to its debasement. The categorizing of a woman as secondary to men, a concept beautifully given by Simone de Beauvoir despite being half the population, boggles the mind and implores one to question why such a narrative has been set. Women aren't mere objects; women are human beings just like men, individualistic personalities that don't need to sit in a box created for them. This novel has deep questions which hold a mirror to the society and that needs to be asked, probed, written and discussed. Women also need to unlearn this deeply ingrained psychology to keep giving without receiving and feeling guilty of asking just treatment from their male counterparts and refuse to be wending machines in marriages. The society needs to unlearn the definition of a woman defined by men, and learn a new definition established by women.

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