

Experiencing the ‘Other’: An Ethical and Ontological Inquiry into the Characterization of Yeong-hye in Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*

Ayush Chakraborty^{ID}, Jagadish Babu M^{ID}

Research Assistant, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India.
Post-Doctoral Research Assistant, Goldsmiths, University of London, United Kingdom.

Received: 14-03-2023 **Revised:** 28-06-2023 **Accepted:** 04-07-2023

Abstract

Any discussion on the concept of ‘difference’ entails within itself the understanding of the subject’s existence in the world through his experience of the ‘other’. What branches out as a result of this encounter is a myriad of possible experiences through which one tries to apprehend the world in which they live. Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*, published in Korea in 2007, is in her own words, an attempt to contemplate the ‘spectrum’ that is humanity. To do so, the author delves into a deeper inquiry into the ontology of human existence as validated by the perspective of the other. The three-part novel, narrating the perspectives of three different people in their attempts to understand its principal character, Yeong-hye, provides a broader methodological framework for the author’s exegesis. This paper seeks to engage closely with these narratives to probe a further inquiry into the ethics of subjective expression and its consequent effect on the ‘other’.

Keywords

Experience, Plurality, Confucianism, Difference, Dialogue, Self

Experiencing the ‘Other’: An Ethical and Ontological Inquiry into the Characterization of Yeong-hye in Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*

Ayush Chakraborty
Jagadish Babu M

Introduction

Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*, which was originally published in Korea in 2007 is, according to its author, a medium that has allowed her to probe into the aspects of “human violence and the impossibility of innocence; defining sanity and madness; the impossibility of understanding others[...].” (Patrick 2019). As she has said in most of the interviews, her instigation towards writing the novel stemmed from her experiences of the Gwangju Uprising in the early 1980s. On May 18, 1980, a massive protest was organized in Gwangju by the citizens, mainly the students with the agenda of the reinstatement of democracy after then President Park Chung-hee had been assassinated in 1979. The security forces responded to the protests using extraordinarily brutal means, with security forces arresting, injuring, and killing dozens of people. When more citizens joined the demonstration, martial law was imposed and the city came completely under the military troops resulting in the deaths of over 2,000 people. It was this incident which had forced her to contemplate humanity – “a spectrum that stretches from holiness to horror” (Parker 2016).

Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*

The Vegetarian centers around Yeong-hye, an unremarkable married woman in contemporary South Korea whose sudden decision to give up eating meat, after a dream that terrifies her, ensues a prolonged struggle for individualism and freedom from the much conservative Korean society, albeit resulting in a slow but inevitable breakdown of familial relationships, social structures, and ontological realities. The narrative of this book is divided into three segments, each of which deals with the protagonist herself, but is narrated from the perspectives of those around her – her husband, her brother-in-law, and her sister, the implications of which will be taken up in the later sections.

Mr. Cheong, Yeong-hye’s husband and the narrator of the first segment, establishes the character of his wife as utterly “unremarkable in every way” (Kang 3). The basis of their relationship is not some mutual attraction but rather a strict adherence to societal codes which Yeong-hye seems to maintain – waking her husband up in the morning, ironing his shirt, preparing his breakfast, and not seeking clarifications if he is late from work. This apparently ideal marriage for Mr. Cheong is turned upside down when Yeong-hye decides to become a vegetarian after waking up from a nightmare.

While Mr. Cheong does not bother about his wife’s dreams, the readers get to know about them through fragments inserted within Mr. Cheong’s narrative – the only instances when Yeong-hye is given a voice of her own where she describes her dreams in her voice. However, these are

isolated excerpts featured in the story: the other characters do not have access to these dreams of Yeong-hye but the readers are given the privilege to read them and understand their impact on her. These fragments are important because it is through these fragments that the gap between Yeong-hye's perspective and that of her husband, or the rest of her family, is understood. For Mr. Cheong, and the rest of the family and acquaintances, turning vegetarian is narrow-mindedness and "nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband" (Kang 14) that can only be justified if it is related to one's health.

However, Yeong-hye's decision to not eat meat is not simply a dietary choice, but a conscious renunciation of the human race which is riddled with the violence inflicted upon each other, upon nature. Yeong-hye's resistance towards the established structure is later highlighted when Mr Cheong takes her to a business dinner where he realizes that his wife has come without a bra. The realization turns into an embarrassment when she declares in front of the table that she doesn't eat meat. This further escalates when Yeong-hye refuses to engage in sex with him as he reeks of meat, crushing his hopes of having a child. Subsequently, Mr. Cheong forces himself upon her against her resistance – an act which becomes quite frequent – justifying his actions for being a man in his "prime" retaliating against a wife who has failed to "comply with his physical demands" (Kang 16) for such a long time. The physical violence takes an extreme turn when her own family forces her to eat meat. This culminates with Yeong-hye's father forcefully pushing the meat into her throat while her husband and brother pin her down.

The narrative of the second segment is focalized on Yeong-hye's unnamed brother-in-law, a largely unsuccessful video artist who is stuck with an image of a man and a woman, "their bodies made brilliant with painted flowers, having sex against a background of unutterable silence" (Kang 95), that he wants to shoot. His obsession rose from the moment he came to know from his wife, In-hye, that Yeong-hye still has her Mongolian mark – a birthmark that babies have on their buttocks that fades away when the child reaches puberty. But for her brother-in-law, the fact that his sister-in-law still had a Mongolian mark on her buttocks became inexplicably bound up with the image of men and women having sex, their naked bodies completely covered with painted flowers. The causality linking these two things was so clear, so obvious, as to be somehow beyond comprehension, and thus it became etched into his mind (Kang 59).

Han calls the book's second segment more or less having the "structure of a traditional tragedy," (Patrick 2019) for although the brother-in-law gets a semblance of Yeong-hye's gradual transformation – who had by then transcended the culinary notions of 'vegetarianism' into a more ontological reality of it – instead of helping her, he works towards the gratification of his impulse. There are instances when the brother-in-law looks at Yeong-hye as a "tree that grows in the wilderness, denuded and solitary" (Kang 64) and as someone "who had passed into a border area between states of being" (Kang 71). Nevertheless, he ends up painting flowers all over her body and brings in one of his friends to stand in for the male counterpart for a 'video art', but the latter refuses to be a part despite the lack of resistance from Yeong-hye. So, he gets himself painted with flowers and eventually films himself having sex with her. The second section ends with In-hye, Yeong-hye's sister, catching her husband red-handed the day after at her sister's apartment following which he is imprisoned. At the same time, Yeong-hye is admitted to a psychiatric hospital for her treatment.

The third segment is focused on In-hye relaying the events following her sister's intercourse with her husband. From the point of the narrative, it is an interesting choice since In-hye, through the course of her visit to the psychiatric hospital where her sister is admitted, slowly starts acknowledging her sister's decision to become a vegetarian despite her own inhibitions resulting in a conflict that seems far from a resolution. Belonging to the same family, In-hye is forced to reconsider her position in it, and this is further triggered by her husband's recent betrayal.

She realizes that her sister has destroyed the equilibrium of her family that stood on faulty and violent foundations, and this has subsequently resurfaced the feelings that she had repressed and chosen to live in denial. The complexity of this perspective lies in the fact that In-hye has always presented herself according to the norms of society.

“Even as a child, In-hye possessed the innate strength of character necessary to make one’s own way in life. As a daughter, as an older sister, as a wife and as a mother, as the owner of a shop, and even as an underground passenger on the briefest of journeys, she had always done her best. Through the sheer inertia of a life lived in this way, she would have been able to conquer everything, even time (Kang 139).”

As a result, she always remains in a dilemma where, on the one hand, she empathizes with Yeong-hye’s reaction while, on the other hand, she still blames her sister for the consequences she is suffering because of her drastic action. However, she does allow herself to see the burden that she and Yeong-hye have been putting up with – the hefty weight of violence inflicted upon them, and how she had kept quiet throughout. As a result, when the carers try to forcibly tranquilize Yeong-hye and put a tube for her to breathe which becomes hindrances to her spiritual transformation into a plant, In-hye finally starts shouting and screaming, requesting them not to continue with the procedure, ultimately biting the hand of the head nurse. The segment, and thus the novel, ends with Yeong-hye being transferred to another hospital while her sister accompanies her.

Two Ideologies at Conflict: A Study of Ethics

As mentioned earlier, when Han Kang talks about contemplating the spectrum of humanity that “stretches from holiness to horror”, the very use of the term ‘spectrum’ implies the absence of singularity for it points to the coexistence of a pluralistic world. The idea of plurality negates unidimensional thinking that kills the possibility of more than one perception and understanding, and, subsequently, the essence of being that is continuous and changing. Therefore, plurality upholds the possibility of more than one experience of a subject for a subject in the form of an ‘I’ that can perceive and relate to the existence of subjects that are not him – an ‘other’ – and come to an understanding of the world through his experience of this encounter with the other. This understanding of the being of the world is an outcome of a single encounter of the ‘I’ with the ‘other’ and such encounters will produce endless possible experiences by foregrounding ‘differences’ concerning each other. Merleau-Ponty says, “The experience that I make out of my hold on the world is what makes me capable of perceiving another myself...” (137), whereby ‘myself’ he refers to the presence of another being whose body is “a replica of myself, a wandering double which haunts my surroundings more than it appears in them” (Ponty 134). This notion of the ‘other’ brings up a fundamental aspect of the self’s relation with the other – that the self always manifests itself and its experiences about its world in the other and that the other is, therefore, always the object of the self’s perception. This point is perhaps most evident in the very narratological structure of Kang’s work where the narrative follows the perception of Yeong-hye’s husband, Mr Cheong, in the first section; her brother-in-law in the second; and In-hye in the third section, thereby making Yeong-hye the object of their own respective perception.

Perhaps an even better elucidation of the same rises out of careful consideration of the text’s setting vis-a-vis the philosophy of Confucianism that still permeates through a large cross-section of South Korean society. Kim Sungmoon, an eminent political theorist from Hong Kong, dubs South Korea a “Confucian democratic civil society” that still holds highly in its core the philosophy of Confucianism. For instance, the parallels between contemporary Korean society and the old Joseon period - also referred to as the golden age of Confucianism - in terms of their linguistic similarities in reference and deference, have developed from the tenets of the five

‘proper’ human relationships of Confucianism – that of the “affection between father and son, righteousness between ruler and minister, the proper divisions between husband and wife, the precedence of elder and younger, and the faithfulness of friends” (Eno 60). The philosophy, therefore, significantly influenced the experiences of and expectations of the people of South Korea, primarily the conservatives. This acquired and understood convention of looking at experiences based on the dominant ideology is what Raymond Williams has referred to as the ‘structure of feeling’. So, when we look at the characters of Mr. Cheong or Yeong-hye’s father, we have to understand their ideas and beliefs are shaped by the structures of feeling.

Gender roles in South Korea, though they have substantially improved in terms of healthcare and education, are still by and large the product of a deep-rooted patriarchal worldview mostly because Confucianism promotes the establishment of a hierarchical structure to create a balanced and harmonious society. As Martina Dulcher explains, under this philosophy, the “education of women was indoctrination. Its purpose was to instill in women, through the weight of China’s classic literature, the ideals of a male-oriented society and to motivate them for the tasks of married life” (258). Mr. Cheong, as it turns out, is quite a conventional man himself, never doing anything more than the bare minimum necessary to sustain in society; his life, as he puts it, has always followed a ‘middle course’ and for someone who has followed the most traditionally set path of life, the ordinariness of his wife makes this an ideal marriage for Mr. Cheong. Dulcher writes, “the pattern of behavior developed by the Confucians had the rigidity of a stereotype which did not allow for individual variations so that Confucian society acclaimed particular women not for their individuality, but for the degree of perfection with which they were able to mimic the stereotype” (258). Thus, what makes Yeong-hye “unusual” is her habit of not wearing a bra. To her husband, it was “laziness, or just a sheer lack of concern”. He goes on to say, “I would have preferred her to go around wearing one that was thickly padded so that I could save face in front of my acquaintances” (Kang 6). He would lecture her and reproach her and ignore her justification of how it made her feel uncomfortable, taking it for hypersensitivity.

Coming to the more immediate context of the text, it has been testified in some accounts that there is a very thin understanding of vegetarianism in South Korea. South Korean cuisine demands, rather necessitates, flavoring of vegetables with fish or shrimp, or even meat. Even those dishes which are still considered ‘vegetarian’ contain less meat than usual standards. Vegetarianism is only understood by Koreans in the context of some form of a religious vow, generally, a Buddhist one, where it is seen as some sort of spiritual act of sacrifice or self-denial from what is otherwise a “normal” diet. In Korean culture, ethical vegetarianism, which is founded on resistance to animal cruelty and the brutality of slaughtering animals, is nearly unintelligible. Thus, one can very well guess his reaction upon finding out that his wife has thrown away all the non-vegetarian items and has decided to become a vegetarian after she has had a nightmare. The passive and ‘unremarkable’ housewife is immediately labeled ‘crazy’, ‘unreasonable’, and ‘self-centered’. Yeong-hye’s subjectivity is never considered by her husband; her dream becomes the basis for the voiceless resistance that she puts up against her husband. Let us take up Yeong-hye’s dreams for consideration here – the only instance where the readers get a semblance of her perspective:

“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. A long bamboo stick 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 and blood-soaked clothes sucked onto my skin. Somehow a way out. Running, running

through the valley, then suddenly the woods open out. Trees thick with leaves, springtime's green light. Families picnicking, little children running about, and that smell, that delicious smell. Almost painfully vivid. The babbling stream, people spreading out rush mats to sit on, snacking on kimbap. Barbecuing meat, the sounds of singing and happy laughter. But the fear. My clothes still wet with blood. Hide, hide behind the trees. Crouch down, don't let anybody see. My bloody hands. My bloody mouth. In that barn, what had I done? Pushed that red raw mass into my mouth, and felt it squish against my gums, the roof of my mouth, slick with crimson blood. Chewing on something that felt so real, but couldn't have been, it couldn't. My face, the look in my eyes...my face, undoubtedly, but never seen before. Or no, not mine, but so familiar...nothing makes sense. Familiar and yet not...that vivid, strange, horribly uncanny feeling. (Kang 12)."

For Yeong-hye, it is not simply a dietary choice, but a renunciation of the violence which she has started to associate with non-vegetarianism. This is further exemplified when she remembers an incident where her father had tied a dog to a motorcycle and driven it in a circle until its mouth had started frothing and the rope had begun to choke its throat resulting in blood coming out of it. They had later eaten the same dog for dinner. The violence she associates with non-vegetarianism slowly transcends into all the violence she has witnessed around her, suppressing the "intolerable loathing" she felt towards the people responsible for this. But now, as she says, "the mask is coming off" (Kang 28).

Yeong-hye's experiences, which have shaped her perspective, have culminated in her decision to renounce meat altogether, but this fact is completely negated by her husband, and later on by her family as well, especially her father. Her father, a military man, whose stance is pretty clear considering his treatment of the dog, further slaps her and shoves meat into her mouth despite strong resistance from her. Thus, Yeong-hye is treated as the 'other' with no will of her own. Rather, the choice of the dominant structure of feeling that permeates through people like Mr. Cheong or Yeong-hye's father is imposed on her. The objectification of Yeong-hye, perhaps, takes an even more violent turn when Yeong-hye stops engaging in sex with her husband because of the smell of meat that his body exudes. For Mr Cheong, however, it means the breakdown of his dream of having kids which ultimately leads to him sexually assaulting her despite her initial resistance and then frequenting this act over the coming days. As rightly pointed out by Kim Min-seo, this entire ordeal reflects the "dark side of Korean culture which has been dominated by the Confucian idea of filial and marital authority."

The second segment, which is focalized on the perspective of the brother-in-law, takes this idea of subjectivity to an even more complex level mostly because we do not get to know much about the brother-in-law from the text apart from the fact that he is obsessed with his video art and struggles to produce a work following an image that has for long haunted him – that of two people, completely naked and engaging in intercourse, with their bodies painted with flowers. This is, for him, something "quieter, deeper, and more private" (Kang 56). He comes off as quite a sensitive individual, and his struggles and subsequent failures also make him a character who readers can sympathize with. He also appears to empathize with Yeong-hye and shows kindness and compassion towards her, which separates him from the likes of Mr. Cheong or Yeong-hye's father. Moreover, his self-awareness of his negligence towards his family, because he was obsessed with his work, anticipates the tragic dimensions of his character.

That being said, it does not make the way he deals with the situation an ethical one from the perspective of the societal structure that he belongs to, and this point can be further confirmed when he starts getting attracted to her sister-in-law in an intensely sexual manner. His perspective

towards Yeong-hye shifts drastically when he comes to know about her Mongolian mark and immediately perceives it to be “a blue flower on a woman’s buttocks, its petals opening outward. In his mind, the fact that his sister-in-law still had a Mongolian mark on her buttocks became inexplicably bound up with the image of men and women having sex, their naked bodies completely covered with painted flowers” (Kang 59). He immediately associates her with the woman in his video art, and he starts associating himself with the man in the same video while the two of them are engaged in sex with their naked bodies covered with paintings of flowers. Before knowing about the Mongolian mark, Yeong-hye was for him “nothing more than an object of pity” (Kang 69), but now she becomes an object of his sexual fantasy.

Considering this in another way, the brother-in-law himself is a conflicted individual mostly because he goes against the codified set of structures that defines the society he belongs to: he is not the breadwinner of the family. Instead, his wife works in a cosmetics shop and takes up that position; his sensitivity goes against the very patriarchal set-up which is substantiated by the difference in his response towards Yeong-hye’s plight from the other members of the family. Thus, in the brother-in-law, one finds, in some sense, a semblance of a rebellion of which Yeong-hye too is a part – both of them aspire to become something else from their beings that have been shaped by society. That explains the conflict: he knows that having sexual fantasies about his sister-in-law does not make him an ethical human being in the society he lives in – he questions, “Was he a normal human being? More than that, a moral human being?” (Kang 61) but is unable to conclude.

Yeong-hye doesn’t show any resistance towards modeling the erotic scene because, firstly, she was to be covered with flowers painted all over her naked body, and the person she had to shoot the scene with was also to be covered with painted flowers. Her perspective further becomes clearer when the brother-in-law gives into his fantasies and tries to have sex with her which she vehemently resists. However, he paints his body with flowers and eventually engages in sex with his sister-in-law with no resistance from her end whatsoever. One could probably, therefore, say that the idea of vegetarianism, for Yeong-hye, was transcending its immediate culinary connotations: her decision to become a vegetarian can be, as explored in the previous section, a conscious renunciation of violence that she associates with humanity. But in this section, it intensifies because, through this entire ordeal of shooting the video and the way she responds to the different situations, one can say that she is slowly on the verge of rejecting humanity altogether and turning into a plant herself. This act eases this process of transformation – a rather spiritual one – into a plant. The next morning, she goes to the veranda, “thrust her glittering golden breasts over the veranda railing. Her legs were covered with scattered orange petals, and she spread them wide as if though she wanted to make love to the sunlight, the wind” (Kang 118). On the other hand, her brother-in-law’s response to his impulses is ethically wrong from the societal point of view, exemplified by his wife’s reaction when she finds out what her husband had done. She calls both of them mentally sick and in need of medical treatment. However, from his perspective, it can also be the commonality with which he associates with his sister-in-law that he ultimately gives in to his desire.

If Yeong-hye, from her subjective position, has started perceiving herself as a part of nature, the ethics which usually determine the functioning of a society cannot be applied here as nature cannot be codified into laws since dialogue is not possible with nature. Ethics are a human creation to hold an understanding of what is ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ and language is an important instrument through which such ethics and other human conventions are defined and prescribed to follow. Based on our understanding of Yeong-hye’s transformation into a being closer to nature, we can say that her dreams have an inexplicable influence on her actions. Her dreams are a reminiscence of her past experiences and her actions are a response to how she wants to change her ways around the matters of nature. So, perhaps, there seems to be an unspoken communication

or relation between the dreams in which she sees the horrors committed against nature and her changing ways around food and people. And, there is no way a person inherently functioning under the ethics and conventions of society understands the ways of nature since there is no common ground for dialogue between nature and man-created ethics. It is impossible to have that dialogue because human subjects are not in a place to find a common ground for perceivable 'language' of sorts with a particular meaning mutually attached to the signs. An example that immediately comes to mind is this particular species of primates called the bonobos who are considered to be the 'most promiscuous animals after humans' because of their inclination towards a more polygamous sexual relationship, especially among the females of the species, other males, females, members of the family and even children. So, this way of looking at the relationship between the brother-in-law and Yeong Hye becomes even more complicated for it can neither be rendered ethical nor unethical.

Coming to the third section of the story which is focused on the perspective of In-hye, we come to know that after the events of the previous section, her sister has been admitted to a psychiatric hospital while her husband has absconded after serving a few months in prison. In this section, In-hye tries reliving her entire life up until that point and reconsiders a lot of ways in which she had perceived her relationship with people around her. As for her husband, she remembers the first time she had seen him, where "something in his defenseless state had drawn her to him" (Kang 131). She had wanted to look after him ever since, allowing him to rest, but in vain, since he perpetually remained in that state of exhaustion. It is at present that she reconsiders her entire perception as she realizes that maybe it was herself that wanted a respite from the exhaustion – that of carving out her own identity amidst the indestructible structures of her society. Maybe it was this exhaustion she had noticed in his face that drew her closer to him. This reconsideration brings to mind R.D. Laing's idea of 'you-as-I-experience-you' in *The Politics of Experience*, based on which we can substantiate that it is In-hye's own experiences that she manifests in her to-be husband then. This idea can also be used to look at the terms in which the brother-in-law himself had experienced Yeong-hye. However, what is absent in both these cases is a dialogue between the two subjects that would have created a space for what Sayed A. Sayeed calls 'inter-subjectivity'. It is possible only when the 'I' and the 'other' engage in a conversation as two subjects to understand each other solely through the words of the subjects themselves, and not by objectifying or drawing conclusions from one's interpretation of the experience of the 'other,' which might not represent the nature and the experience of the other as they truly are. Therefore, 'I' can only understand and relate to the experience of the other from the dialogue we had but can neither define the other nor understand the other fully. However, while it renders the dynamics between the brother-in-law and Yeong-hye too complicated to call it ethical or unethical from either of their subjective positions as mentioned in the previous section, in the case of In-hye, her husband ends up not being ethical to her, to her subjectivity, due to the failure of inter-subjectivity. As for her sister, In-hye begins to look at the life that both of them had been subjected to and how that shaped their respective states of being:

"Yeong-hye had been the only victim of their father's beatings. Such violence wouldn't have bothered their brother Yeong-ho so much, a boy who went around doling out his rough justice to the village children. As the eldest daughter, In-hye had been the one who took over from their exhausted mother and made a broth for her father to wash the liquor down, and so he'd always taken a certain care in his dealings with her. Only Yeong-hye, docile and naive, had been unable to deflect their father's temper or put up any form of resistance. Instead, she had merely absorbed all her suffering inside her, deep into the marrow of her bones. (Kang 157)"

This explains the 'intolerable loathing' of Yeong-hye as mentioned in an earlier section

and the significance, at least from her perspective, of rejecting humanity altogether. It also explains on In-hye's part the submission to the dominant patriarchal set-up which she had initially considered to be a sign of maturity but only now does she correct it as an act of cowardice, "a survival tactic" (Kang 158).

But once again, we have to understand that what In-hye does here is also along the lines of 'you-as-I-experience-you': she associates her experience with that of Yeong-hye to understand her sister, mostly because both of them were subjected to the same atrocities of their father. So, it is only on this basis that In-hye tries to understand her sister's actions. But the inter-subjectivity is still not developed, for Yeong-hye has never opened up about her feelings as far as her sister remembers – not when she was being subjected to her father's or her husband's atrocities, and of course not when she began to undergo the process of her transformation into a plant. This is why, when she visits her sister, who is now completely emaciated, with her weight reduced to less than 30 kgs and has completely rejected all kinds of food but only asks for water and sunlight for her sustenance, she calls her 'insane': "Perhaps, it's simpler than I thought [...] You're crazy, and so [...]" (Kang 167). This is once again a response shaped by the social construct. That being said, the fact that she tries to understand Yeong-hye's actions based on their experiences formed under a common structure of feeling shows that she does try to ethically engage with the otherness of her sister even though it falls short in certain aspects. This can be better substantiated by how she reacts to the carer by biting his hands when he forcefully tries to tranquilize Yeong-hye.

The section, and thus the novel, ends with Yeong-hye being transported to another facility in an ambulance, and it is where In-hye's conflict is brought out explicitly when she tells her sister, "Perhaps this is all a kind of a dream [...] I have dreams too, you know. Dreams...and I could not let myself dissolve into them, let them take me over [...] but surely the dream isn't all there is? We have to wake up at some point, don't we? Because [...] because then [...]" (Kang 131). The 'dreams' that In-hye talks about are her aspirations of what she could have become – an identity not determined by the male figures present in her life – which have been suppressed by the tenets of the social structure. This is why she is not able to complete her sentence because waking up from the dream would be waking up to the same old objectification that has suppressed her throughout her life.

Conclusion

Coming back to the narratological structure of *The Vegetarian*, we now see how it reflects the inability of Yeong-hye to engage in a dialogue with the people around her to confirm her subjectivity. Rather, we are left to interpret her character through the perspectives of three people around her, and how each of them engages with her otherness in their respective different ways. One is made aware of Yeong-hye's spiritual transformation into a plant, which is never explicitly stated, through whatever implicit instances are present in the story but there too lies the problem of engaging with her character: like the people around her, we do not get to engage with Yeong-hye for even us to understand her perspective, and naturally different assumptions are bound to rise. It is not necessary that as readers we have to stick to one perspective to attain a proper resolution. From our engagement with texts and the characters in them, it is only ethical to acknowledge the differences that arise out of the text, and contemplate them rather than assert them. In our attempt to ontologically understand the characterization of Yeong-hye, we could study the functions of human societies and the impact of their created cultures on the 'other' only by foregrounding the possibility of plurality and ethically establishing a relation with the help of limited information we have about the 'other.' Such a framework of comparative study will only unleash immense possibilities for studying texts and subjects where a much simpler yet complex depiction of the nature of 'beings' is understood.

Thus, for some, as in the case of the doctors of the psychiatric institution that she is admitted to, Yeong-hye might be schizophrenic, echoing the parameters listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.) which lists “delusions”, “hallucinations”, “disorganized speech” and “catatonic behaviour” as some of its marked symptoms, and anorexic, going by the DSM-V definition, “restriction of energy intake relative to requirements, leading to a significantly low body weight in the context of the age, sex, developmental trajectory, and physical health”. For others, like Dominic O’Key, a literary critic, the novel’s “strict narrative focalization and weighting of realism over and above the fantastic” (1265) itself does not allow the protagonist to attain the liberation that she seeks through her renouncement of human life.

Such viewpoints, while standing true to their respective viewpoints, can restrict the essence of this literary masterpiece by defining the boundaries of the literary imagination. As explored by Hans Robert Jauss discusses in his work ‘Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,’ these boundaries to literary imagination are a result of the ‘familiar experience’ of cultured readers, whose structure of feeling of literature is confined by the prevailing ideology. The acquired taste for literature conforms to accepted forms of literature produced within a particular space and time, known as the horizon of expectations. When such readers encounter a text or literary form that invalidates their familiar experience, it becomes difficult for them to embrace it due to the aesthetic distance - the distance between their familiar experience or the horizon of their expectations and the horizon of change in a new text offer. Therefore, readers can allow boundless literary imagination to flourish and embrace diverse viewpoints only when they acknowledge the eternal presence of aesthetic distance that is unique to every reader. And, it is crucial to recognize the value inherent in these perspectives because as Ponty says, “the highest point of truth is still only perspective” (Ponty 132).

At the same time, we cannot negate the protagonist’s perspective about her transformation towards the end as she acknowledges her atrophy: “I don’t need to eat, not now. I can live without it. All I need is sunlight [...] Soon now, words and thoughts will all disappear” (Kang 153). Even if she has both physical and psychological issues, it is also true that from her subjective point of view, she has more or less attained what she had aspired for. It, therefore, widens the possibility to experience and understand *The Vegetarian* and Yeong-hye in various ways even if it is by the same reader, for each reading of a text is a singular event that takes place in a particular space and time formulating a unique experience with every subsequent reading. Han Kang, through her tripartite narratological structure, contemplates the human condition and embraces the concept of plurality because it is indeed a work in progress towards a more ethical and responsible relationship with the differences of the world.

Works Cited

- American Psychiatric Association, A. P., & American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-IV* (Vol. 4). Washington, DC: American psychiatric association. 1994
- Maresh, Moriah. "Food Studies and the Reemergence of Lévi-Strauss's Structuralism in Literary Criticism." *VERBEIA. Revista de Estudios Filológicos. Journal of English and Spanish Studies*, vol. 8., no.7, 2022, pp.61-81.
- Bica, Paola. "The Vegetarian by Han Kang: A postmodern allegory for women's fight for power and freedom." *Rihumso: Revista de Investigación del Departamento de Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales*, vol. 23,no.12, 2023, pp. 47-57.
<https://doi.org/10.54789/rihumso.23.12.23.3>
- Deuchler, Martina. *The Confucian transformation of Korea: A study of society and ideology*. No. 36. Harvard Univ Asia Center, 1992.

- Eno, Robert. "Mencius: A Teaching Translation." (2016). <https://hdl.handle.net/2022/23421>
- Jauss, Hans Robert, and Elizabeth Benzinger. "Literary history as a challenge to literary theory." *New literary history*, vol. 2, no.1, 1970, pp.7-37. <https://doi.org/10.2307/468585>
- Han, Kang. "The Vegetarian, translated by Deborah Smith." , 2015.
- Khakpour, Porochista. "'the Vegetarian,' by Han Kang." *The New York Times*, 2 Feb. 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/02/07/books/review/the-vegetarian-by-han-kang.html.
- Laing, Ronald David. *The politics of experience and the bird of paradise*. Penguin UK, 1990.
- Lee, Young-Hyun. "The different representation of suffering in the two versions of the vegetarian." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol.21, no.5, 2019, pp.8. <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3260>
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The prose of the world*. Northwestern University Press, 1973.
- O'Key, Dominic. "Han Kang's The Vegetarian and the International Booker Prize: reading with and against world literary prestige." *Textual Practice*, vol.36, no.8, 2022, 1262-1288. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1900376>
- Patrick, Bethanne. "Han Kang on violence, beauty, and the (im) possibility of innocence." *Literary Hub* , vol.12, no., 2016.
- Sayeed, Syed. "Being Seen Through Literature." *Englishandforeignlanguagesuniversity*, 15 Apr. 2020, www.academia.edu/42750299/Being_Seen_Through_Literature.
- Sleziak, Tomasz. "The Role of Confucianism in Contemporary South Korean Society." *Rocznik Orientalistyczny/Yearbook of Oriental Studies*, no. 1, Jan. 2013, cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.pan-ro-yid-2013-iid-1-art-000000000002/c/2_TSleziak.pdf

The Author:

Ayush Chakraborty

Research Assistant at The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad.

Email: ayushchks99@gmail.com

Jagadish Babu M.

Post-doctoral Research Assistant at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Email: malajagadishmacomplit20@efluniversity.ac.in

Biography of the author:

Ayush Chakraborty is a Research Assistant at The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad. He is a part of the 'Integrative Humanities' research cluster which currently seeks to understand the ontology of religion and religious ideas in the world. His interests also include and are not limited to film and media studies, comparative literature, and post-colonial studies with a particular focus on its relation to Indian cinema.

Jagadish Babu M is a Postdoctoral Research Assistant at Goldsmiths, University of London. His work includes Archiving, Documentation, and Translation of fictional and non-fictional texts on Alcohol Narratives from the 20th century. Currently, he is working on a translation volume that is in the process of getting published. His research areas include comparative literary theory and practice, translation studies, religious studies, and cultures, folk art forms, and ritual theories of Telangana.