

EDIBLE RESISTANCE: A FEMININE REBELLION THROUGH CULINARY REPRESENTATION IN *THE VEGETARIAN* BY HAN KANG

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ABSTRACT

Food Patriarchy plays a significant role in Korean culinary culture, and in addition, it has social and historical importance. Tracing history, Korean agricultural society relied on meat as a source of protein, but the association of meat to social status and attributing the meat-eating business to men to gain strength and power and the role of women in the traditional Korean culture of being confined to their homes, where they were expected to perform domestic chores especially in cooking and serving meat questions the gendered division and authority in Korean culture. *The Vegetarian* is a novel written by Han Kang, a prominent South Korean Writer. The novel offers a nuanced exploration of gender and identity. It challenges the traditional gender roles, especially with the protagonist Yeong-hye's decision to opt for a vegetarian diet, and it is a means through which she expresses her resistance towards patriarchy and also through which she reclaims her identity by disrupting societal norms and criticisms. The study cross-examines the use of Vegetarianism as a literary technique to expose the rigid gender constructions through which the author rebels against patriarchal authority and challenges gender power dynamics in Korean Culture. It throws light on the gaining traction of the plant-based lifestyle in Korea. It also examines how the rejection of the traditional role by the protagonist is perceived by other characters in the novel. The study adheres to a qualitative mode of inquiry where Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Mary Douglas's theory of food as a system of communication serves as a theoretical framework. This analytical paradigm stresses the importance of studying the relationship between women and food, whereas, in the novel, the protagonist Yeong-hye uses Vegetarianism as a form of feminist resistance to establish her own agency. The responses of the other characters in the novel signify how the refusal to normative conformity would eventually create otherness. The author emphasizes asserting one's identity irrespective of the face of opposition through her novel.

Keywords: Oppression, Vegetarianism, Agency, Otherness, Non-Conformity.

INTRODUCTION

Korean Culture's rich and dynamic legacy is due to its unique blend of tradition and modernity. The Culture is renowned for its art, music, literature, and Cuisine. Korean Cuisine plays an integral role in Korean Society as it reflects their history, location, and values. Its Society relied on meat eating as they were traditionally involved in agriculture, where meat served as the source of protein in their diet. Various factors like religion, politics, and geography shape culture. Korean food is known for its bold flavours, and their custom of using fermented ingredients in their cuisine provides intricacy to their dish. Communal Dining is a social norm in Korean Society. The association of meat eating with social status was one evident belief in Korean Society. "In a highly collective Korean Society, it is regarded as a bad practice that disturbs harmony within the group, and vegetarians/vegans, especially those who are younger and occupy lower social positions, face enormous social pressures to yield to a conventional omnivorous diet" (Yoo, 2015). Korean Society's unequal treatment of men and women gave rise to the need to analyse its civilisation from a gendered lens. Attributing the meat-eating business to men as they require strength and power to work and confining women's role to carry out domestic chores, especially in cooking and serving meat, emphasizes the gender inequalities that prevail in Korean Society. Women in traditional Korean Society were expected to play the role of a subordinate to their male counterparts.

Han Kang, a South Korean writer, and a winner of the Man Booker International Prize 2016, constructs a narrative challenging patriarchy in her novel *The Vegetarian*. The novel revolves around a Korean woman named Yeong -hye who turns a vegetarian after experiencing a wild dream amidst her family's contention about her choice. Though the novel is often read from psychological and feminist lenses highlighting different facets of the human mind, the discrimination of gender, and its impact on Society, this study cross-examines the use of vegetarianism as a literary technique by the author to rebel against patriarchy and also questions how the other characters in the novel perceive the rejection of traditional role by the protagonist. The study adheres to a qualitative mode of inquiry where Judith Butler's gender performativity theory and Mary Douglas's theory on food as a means of communication serves as the theoretical framework.

BEYOND PATRIARCHY

The novel begins with Mr. Cheong describing his wife. The description states that he serves as the voice of the male chauvinists in society. He talks about how ordinary his wife is in every aspect beginning from her height to her skin to her looks. He further talks about how the passive

personality of the woman was one of the reasons for him to choose her. “In keeping with my expectations, she made for a completely ordinary wife who went about things without any distasteful frivolousness” (Kang 4). This highlights how men prefer having a submissive wife over an intellectual one. Yeong, the novel's protagonist, seems to meet all her husband's expectations, confining her duties to take care of him and his family. However, when she experiences a dream, things are no longer the same. “I thought I could get by perfectly well just thinking of her as a stranger, or no, as a sister, or even a maid, someone who puts food on the table and keeps the house in good order” (Kang 30). The author, in the voice of Mr. Cheong, tries to highlight how the traditional Korean culture treated women. The dream that disturbs Yeong is an indicative tool that makes her realize the importance of resisting social construction, especially the traditional gendered differences in Korean society. “I had a dream- she'd said that twice now” (Kang 11).

Judith Butler developed a theory called the Gender Performativity theory, where she argues about how gender is not an inherent trait but rather a social construct that people acquire. “That the gendered body is a performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. This also suggests that the reality is fabricated as an interior essence, the very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social...” (Butler 173). As a result of the acquisition, they perform and reinforce it through repeated actions and behaviours. Accordingly, Yeong-hye is seen as the manifestation of the Gender Performativity theory, where her decision to become a vegetarian is seen as resistance against societal norms and patriarchy. Mr. Cheong's insistence on opting omnivorous diet is not just his concerns about his wife. He was growing anxious about her avoiding physical intimacy with him. “But what troubled me more was that she now seemed to be actively avoiding sex” (Kang 16). This shows how men objectified women, and their sole need from their wives was to serve them food and satisfy their physical needs. Mr. Cheong tells his wife that he wishes for the evening to go well as his boss invited him for dinner. Yeong remains quiet and states, “There is nothing wrong with keeping quiet; after all, hadn't women traditionally been expected to be demure and restrained?” (Kang 21). This is not just Mr. Cheong's take on being quiet as typical of women; it shows how women are expected to be passive listeners in men's world. Food and sex were two essential ways Mr. Cheong tried to impose his power on his wife. Nevertheless, Yeong's choice of becoming a vegetarian and avoiding physical intimacy with him is a refusal to conform to the dominant cultural notions surrounding gender and its relationship with food. Her rejection of meat is a performance of her gender, a means through which she asserts her individuality and rebels against the gendered expectations.

DECIPHERING MEAT

Vegetarianism serves as a powerful literary technique in the novel as the protagonist uses vegetarianism as a tool to rebel against the normative conformity in society. It is a radical resistance against familial, gender, and societal expectations. It does not confine to society but is a symbolic representation of interrogating the hierarchal structural biases based on gender and class in the Korean Context. Korean society's positioning of men over women, associating meat eating with the upper class and vegetarians with the lower strata, and the necessity of men taking meat over women are all stereotypical ideas of Korean Society. In the theory of food as means of communication, Mary Douglas in her work *Deciphering a Meal* states "The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transaction across the boundaries. Like sex, the taking of food has a social component, as well as a biological one. Food categories therefore encode social events" (249). She also explains how people's food preparation, serving, and consumption reflect their social and cultural beliefs.

Han Kang uses food, especially the concept of vegetarianism, to communicate the various social and cultural practices prevalent in Korean society. The author does break the Korean tradition of mandatory consumption of meat in their diet. Meat consumption is deeply rooted in the Korean tradition, and Yeong's denial of meat-eating challenges societal notions. A conflict emerges between an individual's quest for autonomy and normative conformity. By preferring vegetarianism, the protagonist destabilizes the power dynamics, especially in their relationship where her husband controls her cooking and consumption of meat. The striking description of food images does not merely play a role in appealing the senses of the readers but instead it instigates the spirit of resistance against patriarchy. Throughout the novel there is a recurrent use of food images and phrases like deep fried belly pork, black pepper, kimchi, chicken stew mushrooms, beef tartar, mung bean jelly, salad, peppering the conversation, you smell like a meat indicates the quintessential relationship between food and language in one's routine life. The very title 'The Vegetarian' by itself highlights the necessity of the use of food images as a literary technique which serves as a means of protest against hegemony in the novel.

THE VEGETARIAN AS AN OUTCASTE

Yeong-hye is perceived differently by every other character in the novel, especially after knowing she would never get into the clutches of traditional gender roles. Yeong-hye's husband initially feels contented with his dutiful wife, but as soon as she opts for a vegetarian diet, he grows frustrated and finds it inconvenient. As Yeong grows mentally unstable, her husband starts becoming violent and abusive. Yeong's father and mother are highly disgusted with her decision, especially since they find her a betrayer of their tradition and feel that she embarrasses

the family by making such decisions. Yeong's father's authoritative voice implies that women's life in Korea revolves around their fathers and husbands. Yeong's father shows his authority over his daughter when there is a reminder that he is her father and she should go by whatever he says, "Don't you understand what your father's telling you? If he tells you to eat, you eat!" (Kang 38).

Yeong is a mirror image of Nora from *The Doll's House*, a play written by Henrik Ibsen "I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I was daddy's doll-child, and the children in turn have been my dolls. I thought it was fun when you came and played with me, just as they thought it was fun when I went and played with them, that's been our marriage, Torvald" (280). Both Yeong and Nora are the symbol of rebellions against the stereotypical gender roles. The family tries every possible way to force her to eat but fails to accomplish it even once. Yeong's sister is the only one who initially lends a helping hand by respecting her choice, but later, she considers her sister a burden as she starts acting like a lunatic. Yeong's brother-in-law is an artist obsessed with his sister-in-law's body and involves her in a project where she lets him film her naked body covered in flowers. He sees her as an object for his art, though he seems appreciative of her idea at first. When her mental state deteriorates, and she shows less interest in his project, he pressures her and becomes violent. Through the voice of the other characters in the novel, it is evident how people judge the one who does not go by the traditional norms. As Simone de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* states "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (330). Though Yeong is categorised as the 'other' in the novel for her choice, she still breaks taboos on how a woman should behave in Korean society.

CONCLUSION

The Vegetarian is a multi-layered novel that deals with various problems in Korean society, from highlighting gender differences to showing the association between food and the social status. Through the depiction of Yeong and her rebellious nature towards societal norms, Han Yang highlights the challenges of going against established stereotypes. The author throws light on the plant-based lifestyle developing in Korea by stating the urge for Yeong to opt for vegetarian food over meat. There is a vivid description of the vegetarian meals that Yeong prepares for herself, especially the salads in the novel. The description portrays the changing preferences in Korean food habits. Yeong's sister, who believes that meat would help improve one's health, later realises the benefits of a plant-based lifestyle. The novel explores gender differences and identities. The author uses vegetarianism as a literary technique to resist the patriarchy and establish agency. The author, irrespective of the other characters' responses to the refusal of social construction, emphasises asserting one's identity through her novel.

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