



Metamorphosis of a Lady into a Tree: An Introspection into Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

*¹Dr. Sarada PV

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sree Krishna College, Guruvayur, Kerala, India.

Abstract

A woman is equated with a tree is a topic of curiosity for the reading public with an anticipation of a kind of vegetative existence from the part of women community in an androcentric society. Likewise here in this novel Han Kang projects her central character Yeong-Hye as a submissive woman who lost her voice, identity, and above all her existence in a patriarchal world and later accepted the role of a tree in the narrative. Her convoluted journey from a human being to a tree began with the simple step of being a vegetarian in a traditional South Korean family where animal protein is quite frequent. Here the attempt is to analyse the role of Yeong-Hye under the theoretical frame work of ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism that focuses on the connections between women and nature. French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne had coined the term in 1974. Its focus is on equality between genders, on assessing non-patriarchal or nonlinear structures, and on respecting organic processes, finding holistic connections, and the advantages of intuition and collaboration. It also highlights a commitment to the environment and an awareness of the associations made between women and nature. Here the attempt is to analyse the novel *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang under the speculation of eco feminism. And it also tries to analyse the vegetative existence of the protagonist of the novel and finding similarities with women and nature in a subconscious level. In a way it tries to analyse how the protagonist finally succumbs to her tree like existence ignoring all social and familial role definitions.

Keywords: Eco-feminism, Metamorphosis, Vegetative.

Introduction

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Specifically, this philosophy emphasizes the ways both nature and women are treated by patriarchal (male-centred) society. Ecofeminists examine the effect of gender categories in order to demonstrate the ways in which social norms exert unjust dominance over women and nature. The philosophy also contends that those norms lead to an incomplete view of the world, and its practitioners advocate an alternative worldview that values the earth as sacred, recognizes humanity's dependency on the natural world, and embraces all life as valuable.

Ecofeminism is a philosophical as well as political movement that shares ecological concerns with feminist ones by pointing domination of women by men as connected to the annihilation

of the environment. In a way it suggests parallelism between the domination of women and the domination of nature by the patriarchal society. It also highlights the interconnectedness of social and environmental issues, suggesting that patriarchal systems are responsible for both the oppression of women and the degradation of nature.

In the present novel becoming a vegetarian is more like a tool for resistance in the face of patriarchal oppression. It is having deeper metaphorical connotations in her personal and social life. At a tangent way it's just a way of eating preferably vegetarian food but on a deeper level she denied her sexual role as a wife by indicating her husband's sweat smell as meat.

..it's the smell.'

"The smell?"

'The meat smell. Your body smells of meat.'

This was just too ridiculous for words.

'Didn't you see me just take a shower? So where's this smell coming from, huh?'

'From the same place your sweat comes from, she answered, completely in earnest. (17)

The above lines in the novel suggest that her hatred to her husband in sexual relationship is due to his smell. In fact, it underscores her present resistance against a male dominated, power maniac egoistic husband who didn't give a special concern or consideration towards his wife. Her husband always thought her as just an ordinary lady without anything to be proud of.

It must be observed that gender demarcations are existing in various measures around the world. Gender is a tool of oppression in the society whereas equality is a distant dream to achieve. Gender inequalities deny education, rights, and job opportunities, freedom of movement, and whatnot for the fair sex. A Woman was considered inferior whereas a man got unlimited freedom and social acceptance in the same society. Feminism is the only resort against these oddities. Many a time people believed women are meant to be always in domestic roles. Critics like Betty Friedan observed this condition as "the Feminine Mystique". Friedan added that such concepts lead domicile women in families to a sense of dissatisfaction and emptiness. Again, she talks about a particular problem which has no name- about the pervasive sense of discontent among educated, middle-class women trapped in traditional roles. When this novel is taken into consideration the protagonist also had to face all such situations and nobody could define her psychological stature and finally she was admitted to a mental asylum.

Here the attempt is to analyse the journey of the protagonist Yeong-hye from a human being to a tree. By becoming a tree she lost her voice, power of movement, liberty, sanity and whatnot. This was the same that happens to a married woman in a patriarchal society. Becoming a tree is more like a metaphor in the narrative since it suggests multiple layers of meanings to the plot. The narrative unfolds itself under three chapters with titles like *The Vegetarian*, *Mangolian Mask*, and *Flaming Trees*. It is clearly visible from the three chapters that her psychological trauma of being the victim of androcentric society is so strong a reason to leave her present life. Her life transformed later into a vegetative state whereas in truth she identified herself completely as a tree.

The metaphorical impact of the tree is decipherable when suddenly the protagonist stopped eating non-veg and becoming a complete vegetarian. Vegetarianism is tool of

resistance for her. In fact, this simple leap from her side creates a huge impact in her personal as well as social life. This was the first stage of metamorphosis that happens to a domicile ordinary housewife in a Korean family.

The term "Metamorphosis" means a rapid transformation from one object to another or a distinct or even degenerative change in appearance, personality, condition, or function. The concept of metamorphosis is commonly used in pieces of literature to describe an extreme change in character or form. The term "metamorphosis" is literally associated with the great writer Franz Kafka and his novella with the same title as *The Metamorphosis* which was published in 1915. In real the novella is an exploration of the transformation of the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, into an insect. Even though the concept of transformation has existed in literature for centuries, it was Kafka who brought a unique and lasting interpretation to the term within the literary context. It was the life of an insect which was mentioned in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* but here in this novel the life of a tree is pointed out.

Yeong-Hye, the protagonist in the narrative slowly accepted her metamorphosis into a tree by believing herself as a tree over the years. Just as the tree in her mad state she thought she too needed just sunlight and water to extend her sustenance. It was evident when in the novel In-hye, her sister laid the food she'd brought out on the table, Yeong-hye said, 'Sister. You don't have to bring that stuff now! She smiled. 'I don't need to eat any more. (147). By believing in the process of photosynthesis, she extended her body over sunlight just as naked as a tree. This was an uncanny prospect to be observed from the part of a human being in public.

He couldn't ask: in that case, why did you use to bare your breasts to the sunlight, like some kind of mutant animal that had evolved to be able to photosynthesize? Was that because of a dream too? (91)

Again, Yeong-Hye shows her stages of metamorphosis where she eagerly longing for flowers. Trees and their blooming are usually correlated with the "Tree of Life," and also, it's a symbol of interconnectedness and the continuity of life. In a way blooming, or flowering, is a crucial stage in a tree's life cycle, marking its reproductive phase and contributing to the beauty of nature. Just as in the case of a tree, here the protagonist also wanted to have flowers in her tree like existence. Her empathetic approach to encode a tree life is analysed here.

I really wanted to do it, she said carefully. 'I've never wanted it so much before. It was the flowers on his body... I couldn't help myself. That's all. He watched as she turned her back on him and walked decisively over to the door. As she scrunched her feet into her trainers he shouted over to her: 'If... He couldn't keep a shrill note from his voice. 'If I painted flowers on myself, would you do it then?' (107)

The novel projects diverse circumstances where she completely wanted to be identified as a tree. She thought entirely as a tree when she communicated with her sister about her mental and physical agony.

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. (127)

Her inclination to nakedness to experience pure air and her desire to be in contact with sunlight were treated as insane by others whereas for her it is just a normal thing as a tree. She found out her inner happiness in such experiences just as a wild tree which enjoys its existence in an open uninhabited area where there is nothing to intervene its growth.

She thrust her glittering golden breasts over the veranda railing. Her legs were covered with scattered orange petals, and she spread them wide as though she wanted to make love to the sunlight, to the wind. He heard the sounds of the approaching ambulance siren, of screams, sighs, the yells of children, and all the commotion of the alleyway down below. (118)

Trees and their giant existence are a perpetual fascination for the protagonist. This was ostentatious in the whole novel where there are ample instances to demonstrate how her inclination to be a tree is enhanced with juxtaposition of being a victim to malicious patriarchy. Her console lies within the premises of wild trees is apparent throughout the narrative.

Yeong-hye, who at the time was just beginning to speak again, cast her gaze towards the zelkova tree on the other side of the window and said, "Yes... there are big trees here? (143)

When the novel moves forward it is clear that not just Yeong-hye but her sister, In-hye too started to recognise the role of trees in her sister's existence. She understood how her sister found solace and reassurance in the lap of nature especially in forests where there are wild giant trees. In a way it is the same thing that is explicated when they were in their childhood. It is presented as "A long time ago, she and Yeong-hye had got lost on a mountain. Yeong-hye, who had been nine at the time, said, 'Let's just not go back?' (157). This reluctance to go back from mountain to her own home indicates how harshly she was treated by her father and how mercilessly she suffers in the hands of masculine dominance.

Later as she grows up, she develops a kind of a fellow feeling with nature where she can feel the resonance of her own existence with the vegetative life. She found happiness and self-satisfaction in the lap of nature rather than from her home. This was the real beginning of her metamorphosis at the age of just nine and that lead to her last capitulation of being a tree. She found out a sisterhood with trees and this was apparent when she proclaimed,

'Ah, you can see the trees from here too?

You will not be weak, In-hye told herself, her lips pressed tightly together. At any rate, she is a burden you cannot bear. No one blames you. You've done well to make it this far. She didn't look at Yeong-hye as she 'stood beside her. Instead, she looked down at the bright early winter sunlight as it splintered over the larches, which had not yet shed all their leaves.

"Sister' Yeong-hye said, her voice low and calm as if intending to comfort her. Yeong-hye's old black sweater gave off the faint scent of mothballs. When In-hye didn't answer. Yeong-hye whispered one more time.' Sister... all the trees of the world are like brothers and sisters.

(144)

Yeong-hye in a way develops a sense of arborescence which means she had developed a quality of being tree-like in its structure or growth. This can be described as something that resembles a tree in its form, its branching patterns, or its manner of growth. Here she develops the existence of being a tree throughout the novel which begins with social alienation and ends in a mental asylum. She accepted her "freedom-state of being a tree" by simply imitating trees by standing on her hands and raised her legs. She succumbs slowly and steadily to be in "freedom-state of being a tree" by withholding speech and movement. The state of being free like a tree suggest symbolically how she is reluctant to the patriarchal notions and how she enjoys independence, resilience, and connection to nature.

Later in the narrative she achieves tranquillity in her existence and accepted her life without any hues and cries. This level of complacent existence is achieved only through sacrifices of personal and social liberties and her final renunciation of everything which is valuable for a normal living being. Her insensitive smile on her face is a demonstration of the passive resistance she showed up to the societal role definitions assigned to her. This was the last stage of her metamorphosis whereas she identified completely as a tree with silence.

There'd been something faintly unsettling about the quiet smile playing around Yeong-hye's mouth. What seemed to be happening was that Yeong-hye was retreating from herself, becoming as distant to herself as she was to her sister. A forlorn face, behind a mask of composure. This was clearly nothing like the melancholy that sometimes afflicted her husband, and yet in certain respects they were both baffling to her in exactly the same way. They were both descending further into silence. (130)

Words and its articulation are treated as a sign of human life, and it obviously marks a difference between human and nonhuman life on earth. Here the protagonist deliberately quits her ability to speak and succumbs to eternal silence to accept her tree like existence.

What are you talking about? Do you really think you've turned into a tree? How could a plant talk? How can you think these things?

Yeong-hye's eyes shone. A mysterious smile played on her face.

'You're right. Soon now, words and thoughts will all disappear. Soon. Yeong-hye burst into laughter, then sighed.

"Very soon. Just a bit longer to wait, sister? (154)

Overall, it must be noted that Yeong-hye, the protagonist of the novel deliberately ended up her societal role definitions of a silly housewife to a giant wild tree whose happiness lies on her inactivity, reclusion and social rejection. Tree like existence gave her immense freedom, uncontrollable happiness and eternal solace in a patriarchal society where there is no role to play for a female. Her identity is entangled with the tree, and she could not decipher any differences between being a human and being a tree. And she simply stops being a human and started to accept herself as a tree. Thus, the life became a journey for her, it's a metamorphosis from human to a tree, a bizarre revelation to the world outside but a stoic reality for a psychologically deranged young

woman.

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