

## **An Advancement towards a Green, Equal Future: An Ecofeminist Study of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and "The Fruit of My Woman"**

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### **Abstract**

In the current times of climate crisis and worldwide female insubordination, there is an urgent call for analyzing and reformulating norms and acts, majorly pertaining to two arenas: those of environment and feminism. The acclaimed and popular South Korean poet, short story writer and the Man Booker Prize-winning novelist Han Kang is among the few literary figures whose writing tends to incline towards the endeavor of surmounting patriarchy and the destruction of nature. In the capitalist metropolitan setting of her everyday life and also those of her characters, Kang manages to weave narratives that beat (or at least strive to overcome) the hegemonic influence of male dominance over their female counterparts and nature in an intricate, Kafkaesque manner. This paper aims to identify, record, and analyze recurring themes of ecofeminism in Kang's writing, translated in English from the original, specifically in her novel *The Vegetarian* and the short story "The Fruit of My Woman". The paper will stress upon the need for a green future, free from the shackles of patriarchy and gender bias, through a critical probe into Kang's literary rendering of the same themes. With the aid of the texts mentioned above, the paper will thus employ an inductive approach in order to locate grounds and potential solutions for the same concern.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism; Ecofeminism; Han Kang; Patriarchy.

The term Ecofeminism (originally 'éco-féminisme') was coined by Françoise d' Eaubonne, the famous French feminist writer (Eaubonne). Ecofeminism, hence, a subcategory of the study of feminism, is an approach to view life and formulate connective links between worldwide women insubordination and exploitation of the environment; hu-

mans, the approach tends to believe, ill-treat nature the same way man dominates woman and hence tries to advocate for a balanced, non-binary, egalitarian future for both the planet and its species. Climate crisis, when coupled with the issue of patriarchal dominance, is a potent cause that needs to be fought for. And urgently so, keeping in mind the current widespread, unchecked damage to nature (in the form of deforestation, global warming, usage of plastic and CFCs and so on) and an unequal, almost always unfair treatment faced by females, trans persons, the queer community, etc.

In the conflicting times today, one is ridden with a number of burdens ranging from those in the realm of the psychological, spiritual, moral and ethical to those in the strained, tempestuous arena of physical bodily ailments, terrorism, unemployment, homelessness and so on. The two most important and undeniably urgent issues of the day deal with the exploitation of women kind (and of course, other various non-masculine genders) and the harsh, ravenous ill-treatment of nature by man for his own gain and comfort. Ecofeminism, as a popular and critical theory of the age, strives to raise awareness against the rampant unjust treatment both these elements are subject to. This movement, unlike other more critically valued theories of objectifying life and culture (such as, say, Reader's Response theory, Structuralism, Formalism, Postcolonialism and so on), is a hardcore political statement of protest and not just a tool to be used by students and teachers of English literature and language to analyze texts or prominent historical movements of the past. Ecofeminism is a mode to stress upon the need for a clean, livable, healthy future sustainable for all human and animal species on the planet and for females, to break free from the shackles of patriarchy and insubordination. This nature and need of the movement today, is what singlehandedly makes the theory, not just relevant and but also highly necessary.

Han Kang, born in the year 1970, grew up as a child with a familial lineage of writers. She went on to pursue a degree in Korean literature. She then began publishing poems for magazines such as the extraordinarily appreciated "Winter in Seoul" published in the winter issue of *Literature and Society* in 1993. The publication of her novel, *The Vegetarian* (Han), fetched her the Man Booker Prize in the year 2016 and she has since been, and very deservedly so, in the limelight.

*The Vegetarian*, translated from Korean into English by Deborah Smith, is a significantly canonical novel that, as has been mentioned before, fetched Smith and Kang the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2016. The novel is

inspired by the short story “The Fruit of My Woman” (Han), written ten years after its publication in the year 2007, delineated upon further on in the following paper, that Han Kang penned as a fresh, emerging writer. Written in three very intricately woven parts, the plot of the novel revolves around the story of a certain Korean woman named Yeong-hye, based in Kang’s native Korean city of Seoul, who decides, one fine day, to turn vegetarian and faces the harshly shocking consequences of the lifestyle choice she opted to embark upon.

The novel draws the attention of the reader and the literary critic to several significant factors using a myriad of symbols, themes and motifs. The very title of the novel tends to suggest that the identity of the protagonist, Yeong-hye is completely formed by her radical and independent choice of leading her own life. This prods one to ruminate over the idea that why is it that a simple decision, concerning just her own self and no one else, is viewed in such shocking life and is found so statement-making that it ends up finding a niche in Yeong-hye the title of the novel that, in fact, also has other equally vital plotlines. The text also focuses on the theme of marriage and courtship. The first part of the novel, narrated by Yeong-hye’s sympathetic husband, deals with the history of their courtship culminating into a wedding. The husband’s point of view is simple to the extent of being tediously mind-numbing. His reason for choosing Yeong-hye as first a girlfriend and eventually a wife tends to be quite shocking; he believed that the woman he chose (rather, was made to choose) to enter his life as his wife and lifelong companion must (only) be useful in terms of fulfilling his basic needs of food and conjugal happiness, silent and unopinionated at best. This ideology quite reminds the reader of the harsh truth of patriarchal marriage systems and the lack of importance a woman holds in the binary of the system. Yeong-hye’s distressingly moving state can be established from the following quote in the novel:

For the first time, she became vividly aware of how much of her life she had spent with her husband. It had been a period of time utterly devoid of happiness and spontaneity. A time that she’d so far managed to get through only by using up every last reserve of perseverance and consideration. All of it self-inflicted (Han, *The Vegetarian* 161).

Further, Yeong-hye’s husband thinks about her in very deprecating tones all throughout the novel. For instance, he observes to himself the following:

She's a good woman, he thought. The kind of woman whose goodness is oppressive (Han, *The Vegetarian* 65).

The very thought of a woman's crucial quality, be it any element of her demeanor, good or bad, never fails to pose a threat to a man, at least in the story, and to the man's power that he tries to overcome by force, violence and insubordination of the woman in order to regain the hold of his lost power in the binary of marriage. Moreover, the idea of desire and its seemingly shocking lack is depicted in the novel. A woman's body is essentially seen as 'an object of desire' as Kang states in the following quote:

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 (Han, *The Vegetarian* 85).

Interestingly though, the very object of desire, here, Yeong-hye's womanly body is itself bereft of desire. This perhaps reflects the idea of women not having autonomy over their own bodies or the highly flawed notion of womankind being repressive desireless entities meant to satisfy the other, powerful gender, mankind. Kang's views, promisingly optimistic, suggest otherwise in the following line:

It's your body, you can treat it however you please. The only area where you're free to do just as you like (Han, *The Vegetarian* 177).

Body Autonomy, for all genders, is a necessarily prime aspect of life and is advocated for in the novel. Moreover, the novel has immensely moving imagery of vegetation, animal and human cruelty, family dominance and so on. Flowers, painted over the bodies of the characters, and especially the flower-shaped mole on Yeong-hye's back, symbolize the strife to be closer to nature and give in to one's primal instincts of love and living as one might please. Finally, the theme of vegetarianism, a movement that both feminists and ecologists promote, is the very core of the novel. These themes, symbols, and motifs aid to promote the movement of ecofeminism clothed in the apparently harmless cover of popular fiction.

"The Fruit of My Woman", a critically acclaimed short story published in the year 1997 in Korean, is translated into the English language by the British translator Deborah Smith. Written in eight small parts, the story deals with a young Korean woman who suddenly finds herself beginning to transform into a plant. Gradually, over the course of several weeks, the young woman and her husband, living in a cramped apartment settlement

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of a busy metropolis in Korea, begin to notice hauntingly striking changes in herself. Upon visiting the doctor several times over, there was found to be no problem in her bodily functioning, but the deep bluish-green scars continued to darken until a point that she shot roots, leaves, branches and flowers. The story ends at the point wherein she is wholly transformed into a plant, transferred in a pot and shifted in the balcony by her shocked husband and reflecting on life, as she gradually begins to lose her human powers of movement, speech etc.

As is found to be typical with Kang's writing, all the devices used in the plot are ecofeminist arguments and delineations. In the riveting short story, the very Kafkaesque (Kafka)transformation of the protagonist into a plant is the most potent symbol. It can be read as a metaphor urging the readership to strive to reach back to their roots, embrace nature and adopt ethical, peacefully co-existent modes of life. The gradual transition from human(woman) to plant is seen as a journey from being ruthlessly inhuman to becoming one with nature. Similar motifs, as observed in *The Vegetarian*, are to be discovered in the work; the presence of a dominant, more or less apathetic husband, the busy suffocating metropolitan city setting, away from any substantial vegetation and so on. The woman-plant begins to shoot red flowers in spring and can be taken to mean, perhaps, a return to passion and desire which, up till now, the protagonist lacked in her dull life. Moreover, the protagonist's constant need to stray closer to the sunlight, hydrate herself (itself) with fresh river water, the need to be out in fresh air symbolizes, again, the urgently necessary call for being a subject of nature. The argument presented in the story, thus, seems to be the idea of embracing nature and human equality, especially in the binary of a marriage.

Most deeply rooted issues that trouble humankind are those pertaining to the neglect of the environment and the importance of a mature, egalitarian society. The planet, in the last decade especially, has become more susceptible to wildfires, droughts, floods, hurricanes and other natural calamities. Moreover, the present threat of impending war is a threat, not only against the environment but also against human peace and gender and economic equality. In addition, the unequal treatment of men and women, domestic violence, the misrecognition of the concept of body autonomy, pay disparity between men and women, transphobia and so on are problems gripping the globe today.

Han Kang's writing assists one to focus on issues of feminism and nature. Her lead characters, strong, independent, thinking, and, more of-

ten than not, young women tend to have a life that can be described as unconventional at best. This leads the readers to focus on and question their own mode of living and the treatments the females around them are subject to. Moreover, such as in "The Fruit of My Woman", the characters are young working professionals in busy metropolitan cities (of Korea, for the record) away from any form of daily greenery in their close vicinity. The distance and longing of these characters, often symbolized through the extreme metaphorical literary rendering of the issue, highlights the plight of those living in concrete jungles, unable to connect to Mother Nature. This extraordinarily intricate and observational rendering of the need to be close to one's natural, even ancestral roots makes Kang's writing subtly advocative of the need to have balance in terms of deforestation to build areas of cramped human settlement. Her work throws light upon the feminist issues of courtship, marriage, female insubordination, working women and their representation in professional spheres in the Korean landscape. These issues, if seen in isolation from the story, stand true for the Indian cultural setting and that of the world too; issues such as a considerable pay gap between the genders, busy metropolis cities lacking a proper exposure to nature and so on are global issues today, and as Kang's writing does, there is an urgent need to focus on ecofeminist concerns.

Perhaps the most important thing that one could do is to be aware; aware of the changes (both for the betterment and the degradation of the issue) and then change one's individual lifestyle. Little, seemingly unimportant things such as carrying cloth bags when out shopping, eliminating the use of plastic to whatever extent one can, shunning public waterworlds, circuses or zoos where animals are trained and exploited for momentary entertainment and so on. One must also always keep in mind the need to be just in terms of behavior and bestowing rights on an equal parameter to all genders, all the while questioning normative ideals and judging the situation objectively for oneself.

The thoughts and suggestions proposed in the paper shall aid a better understanding of the term 'Ecofeminism', shall promote the reading of Han Kang's exceptionally spectacular writing, will make one aware of the urgent need to address the issues of feminism and environmental preservation, and shall, if nothing else, shall at least prod and facilitate the reader to have a preliminary understanding of the vital issue.

The paper strived to delineate upon the movement of ecofeminism by defining it as a branch of feminism that helped advocate the movement of

the equality of all genders and the quest for ecological sustenance. Han Kang, award-winning Korean writer, in her two prominent works, *The Vegetarian* and the short story "The Fruit of My Woman", argues for an ecofeminist need for life on the planet through her writing. Her literary rendering of the themes of ecofeminism aid the political movement of the same and promote and awareness about the same among her widespread readership. And based on, and due to, her writing and its literary prowess, the movement of ecofeminism is at a huge benefit. Thus, these are the central ideas and claims expressed and established in the paper.

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