

BLURRING BOUNDARIES: POSTMODERNISM AND DEVIANCE IN THE VEGETARIAN BY HAN KANG

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Abstract

Postmodernism brings about a shift from metanarratives to micro narratives. This shift results in fragmentation and plurality, which marks a landmark change from earlier literature which emphasized on the organic unity of a work and a coherent narration. In its attempts to present the unrepresentable, postmodernism experiments with language and voices. The works show an increase in alternate subjective realities. Through the lens of postmodernism this paper aims to analyse *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang. Deviance theory would also be applied to it to examine the behaviour of the characters with respect to postmodernist thought and the constant blurring of lines between the accepted and the unaccepted.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Deviance, Fragmentation, Dreams, Reality, Human Body, Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*, South Korea

INTRODUCTION

In its temporal aspect, post-modernism comes after modernism. Rather than viewing post-modernism as an extension of modernism, it is more accurate to view it as a reaction to modernist thoughts and ideas. While modernism did herald a drastic move from earlier literature in terms of narrative technique, it still very much emphasized on an order. It focused on the universality of experience and inevitably succumbed to a fundamental social order.

Post-modernism on the other hand, marked milestones in terms of thought and expression. The narrative techniques became increasingly ambivalent and more open to experimentation. Universality of expression was no longer the mandate—the scope was brought down to individual expressions which were highlighted through micro narratives. Fragmentation and plurality accented the uncertainty surrounding human lives, and also the fluid nature of human thought and expression.

The Vegetarian by Han Kang is postmodern in many of its ways. Not only does it show a plurality of voices- all talking of a single person- but also shows with it, fragmentations of narration. The narrative voices speak of the individual experience. The narrators and their psyche mould the protagonist's experience which is an uneasy mixture of uncertainty and obstinacy.

The novel also shows strong strains of deviance. These instances of deviances are as psychological as social. The blend of both increases conflict and ambiguity, as there is a continual movement between the psychological and physical spaces of the narrators, as they stand witness to the actions of the protagonist. The protagonist lacks agency, yet her actions seen through the eyes of others generate a greater feeling of unease as her mental state always remains unexplored.

ANALYSIS

"Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way." (Han, 2015, p. 3). These are the opening lines of *The Vegetarian* which set the stage for the entire tale that is to follow.

In South Korea's heavily meat consumptive society, the protagonist Yeonghye, decides to become a vegetarian, thereby beginning a solitary journey, towards first discovering, and then rediscovering herself; enabling those around her to do the same. She deviates from the norms. What leads to her deterioration is her choice to listen to her inner voice.

The novel is divided into three parts. In the first part titled 'The Vegetarian', Yeonghye's husband is the narrator. In the second and third parts titled 'Mongolian Mark' and 'Flaming Trees', the narration is in third person, where Yeonghye's brother-in-law and sister are the narrators respectively. Throughout the novel, a polyphony of voices describes Yeonghye. She has no voice- just dreams and memories in the first part- which provide her with a limited, if any, agency. All observations about Yeonghye are made by those around her. Yeonghye's world exists in her mind while she exists in a world created around her by others. Her madness makes her an unreliable narrator, forcing the reader to understand her through others' voices which direct the reader towards who Yeonghye actually is. Yet, one can never be sure about the accuracy of those individual voices

which fail to penetrate into the mind of the protagonist. Yeonghye is the focus of attention, but is never the narrator of her own tale.

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard talks about “the incredulity of metanarratives” (p. xxiv). He instead focuses on micro narratives, which take into account an individual and her/his tale. These micro narratives are in fact, a way to move away from metanarratives that are totalizing and omniscient, and seek to hide the internal contradictions and anomalies of a structured society. Micro narratives believe in fragmentation and disfiguration, thereby perceiving the society for what it is and what it is not.

Yeonghye’s tale is then a micro narrative. Not only is the reader directed towards something very personal— perspectives that concern themselves with Yeonghye’s mind and body— but is also thrust into a world solely occupied by Yeonghye and her thoughts, where others are mere intruders: be it the reader, or even the narrators. Yeonghye breaks out of the system of totalising thoughts and behaviours. She no longer lets the society and its norms dictate her thoughts, behaviour, responses, choices, and self. She exercises free will. From being a component closely connected to the society, she goes on to distance herself to the extent that she falls out of society like a fragment.

Yeonghye’s madness is both a cause and an effect of her deviance. Whether it can actually be called madness is another question for the primary change is observed in her perceptions and beliefs. With her acts, however, one thing is confirmed by those around her- including the reader- that she is deviating. Deviation starts from one person, one thing, and then slowly seeps into the behaviour and realization of others.

Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, talks about the human subject as being a product of power and knowledge. Postmodernism views metanarratives as propagating through power and knowledge. It is at the intersection of these two that there is either conformity, or deviance. Deviant behaviour, in its essence, is going against the set norms. Deviant is again a label given to those who step outside the constructs. Deviance is thus, very individualistic, for it is caused by the act of individual engaging in a certain behaviour, while also being collective, as the labelling occurs as a result of societal forces.

Yeonghye’s behaviour in the novel can be seen as deviant on numerous accounts. She oversteps the boundaries she has been forced to live in. Exiting the human way of the world, she forays into the area of nature, notwithstanding everyone’s efforts to bring an assumed ‘normalcy’ and ‘sanity’ to her.

Yeonghye’s husband’s only claim of his wife being unusual is that “she didn’t like wearing a bra” (p 5). It can be seen as an act of deviance on Yeonghye’s part, but also as an assumed social normalcy of women having to wear a bra. It is mandated, and hence the absence of it, especially in public spaces, becomes a matter of concern.

Yeonghye’s husband observes that “... she thought that this ridiculous decision of hers [of turning into a vegetarian] was something completely rational and appropriate.” (p. 13). He is unable to absorb the change in Yeonghye’s behaviour. When suited to his temperament, and inflating his ego, Yeonghye was a good wife to him. His perception of her is in accordance with his structured beliefs of a good wife. This pushes him to find a reason behind her deviance. A deviant behaviour is seldom accepted as it is; there are always attempts to rationalize it, to find a concrete reason behind something happening in a particular way. Yeonghye neither meets his gastronomic demands, nor his physical ones. As her deviance keeps increasing, so does his feeling of unease.

Yeonghye keeps claiming that a dream caused her to turn a vegetarian. She blurs the line between her dreams and realities. Her dreams slowly metamorphose into her hyper reality. Her behaviour is determined by her dreams, and her dreams become the simulation she creates for herself. Yeonghye’s decision seems unreasonable to everyone around her, but it is still “*transreasonable*” (Nealon, 1988, p. 524). Since she exists on the boundary of two different states, she occupies a trans-space, thereby disrupting a coherent narrative. Since the husband is shut out of Yeonghye’s dream, he is relieved. He fears the impact the dream would have on him if he were to know about it. He does not want to venture into the simulation Yeonghye has created. Prioritizing his own sanity, he chooses to stay out of it.

“Meat-eating is a fundamental human instinct, which means vegetarianism goes against fundamental human values.” (p. 23). This is said during a dinner party which Yeonghye attends with her husband. Meat-eating is a social construct like many others, and is adhered to rather staunchly in the South Korean society. It is also a metanarrative that totalizes a certain action as accepted and hence, worth promulgating. Labelling something man-made as natural and then imposing those ideals on someone deprives that individual of their right to choose. It showcases society’s reluctance to accept people who are different from it and its continuous attempts to rectify such behaviours.

Yeonghye has a voice only in her dreams and recollections. She recollects a childhood memory where a dog bit her. The dog can serve to be a metaphor for Yeonghye- both are considered ‘normal’ until they do something to shake people up. Yeonghye’s dreams and memories are always enriched and oozing with blood and violence. As disturbing as they are, she can do nothing to avoid them. The real world is not real, it is hyper real; and her dreams further this sense of hyper reality. The original does not exist in her dreams either—it is just one image after another being replicated from somewhere. She associates the blood in her dreams with the blood she gets on her hands while preparing meat. She also associates it with her own being, for she constantly feels the meat she has been consuming settling down somewhere in her body. The descriptions of people cutting meat are gory too, which add to the brutality of humans towards other creatures. This normalization becomes troublesome for Yeonghye; she internalizes it.

There is a freeplay of meanings while understanding Yeonghye's dreams, erratic as they are. They are her return to a primal existence, her repulsion to human brutality, an attempt at a metaphysical existence which comes as a consequence of her believing that she is losing control over her body and it becoming a weapon, a decision to withdraw from the human ways, and an exercise of her freewill over her own body, even if it leads to her destruction.

The description of Yeonghye cutting her wrist occurs as a palimpsest of polyphony. Her husband gives the first account whereby he acts as a passive observer expecting Yeonghye's family to 'fix' her vegetarianism, even if it is at the cost of violence being unleashed on her. The second account comes from her brother in law, who rushes to save her. Time being inadequate, he is himself surprised at his agility dealing with the situation. The last account comes from Yeonghye's sister, Inhye, who considers various possibilities in retrospect. She somehow blames herself for Yeonghye's anorexic condition at the psychiatric hospital.

Yeonghye's deviance from all structures brings them to Inhye's notice. Inhye's own mental condition is not in the best state. She fears digressing into what Yeonghye did and acknowledges her drift towards it. Her son slows down the process for her. She took responsibility and delayed the process; Yeonghye took none. In Inhye's case, there is an acceptance of deviance. That it could have been her instead of her sister is another possibility that Inhye considers. She no longer looks at Yeonghye's condition as something abnormal. She sees Yeonghye's end and accepts it before it occurs. Disorder, chaos, deviance- they are no longer abnormalities to Inhye. Instead of fearing a decentring, she perceives it as vital, as an escape that Yeonghye availed herself. Yeonghye did what people fear doing the most— letting go.

Inhye's observations of the people in the psychiatric hospital are another marker of a changing world view. She finds the hospital a prison which reinforces the idea of othering. It is also another simulation which is designed in a very specific manner. The patients shrivel within themselves, accepting their fate as madmen, which further intensifies their illness. They are free from the bondages of the social order, yet trapped in the recesses of their own mind.

"Confinement hid away unreason, and betrayed the shame it aroused; but it explicitly drew attention to madness, pointed to it. If, in the case of unreason, the chief intention was to avoid scandal, in the case of madness that intention was to organize it." (Foucault, 1961, p. 70)

Yeonghye's identification with a tree marks her turning point from human to non-human. She becomes a simulacrum to the tree. She no longer wishes to associate herself to the race that sees brutality as normal, nor does she want to become a part of those traumatizing experiences all over again. She wants to exist as a plant, a tree that causes no harm to anyone and is steadfast. The identification of a human with a tree would be considered as a hallucination, a delusion in the modernist perspective. However, this goes according to the postmodern doctrine of everything being a disorder. There is the absence of a binary opposition between human and nature. They are not perceived as two alternate realities. There is no battle for supremacy of one factor over the other. They exist on a spectrum and Yeonghye glides on it.

Yeonghye's attraction towards everything that is a part of nature is what convinces her to be the muse for her brother-in-law's art film. His film can be considered another simulation where he wants Yeonghye to act in a way that suits his own narrative voice. He just has to tell her that he will be painting flowers on her body. It enchants her for she can finally be a tree from which flowers blossom. She does not mind appearing naked in front of her brother-in-law or even another man he brings in for the project. Natural beings do not garb themselves and Yeonghye identifying with them rids her of the shame generally associated with nudity.

Yeonghye ends up in a forest by the psychiatric hospital, getting drenched in rain, because she hears a voice calling to her from there. Yeonghye does headstands too, thinking of her hands as roots, and her legs as branches. She also believes that flowers would bloom from her crotch. This would sound bizarre to most people, but it is normal for Yeonghye. She has stopped thinking as per the human ways of the world. Her disorientation, her fragmentation- of mind, body, and soul, her essence itself no longer adheres to what is human. She has renounced the reality of humans and transcended it; she now lives in a hyper reality of her mind. That is the main reason she never feels that she is deviating and goes about without any feeling of guilt. Her distant past as a human form is the only thing that causes her guilt. She does not need to keep a check on her behaviour as it is already established as the norm in her mind.

Yeonghye's brother-in-law deviates too. He possesses the knowledge of his deviance yet never stops. He has numerous chances to stop, his inner voice even suggests him to die, but he carries on. "It's true, she really is ordinary. It's me who's the crazy one." (Han, 2015, p. 91). The brother-in-law comes to this realization upon looking at himself and Yeonghye through the lens of the conscious. To him, Yeonghye is functioning on her unconscious, which makes her unaware of her actions. Her actions are then absolutely ordinary and normal to her in her world. He, who still is a part of the conscious world, 'the reality', and is choosing to be so, letting reason go, is the crazy one.

The brother-in-law chooses to find another acquaintance to film sex scenes with Yeonghye on grounds of his own failing body image, and not morality. Yeonghye becomes an object of gaze for him. He continuously oversteps boundaries, going down the immoral path fully aware of its consequences. His deviant behaviour affects his conscience. He feels all the more attracted towards Yeonghye due to her body which no longer has any

“superfluity” (p. 87) in it. Yeonghye’s rebellion in which her body becomes her weapon is what arouses him, and he comes to detest his wife’s passive understanding of things around her.

When he finally gets the flowers painted on his body and has sex with Yeonghye- who reciprocates because of the flowers on his body- he puts the final nail in the coffin. Once he has had intercourse with her, he has reached the climax, a point of no return. No matter what he does now, the number of rationalizations he provides, all of it would be inadequate. In his own micro narrative, he is both the hero and villain.

The Vegetarian constantly blurs lines between dreams and reality, mind and body, beliefs and actions, conscience and transgression, nature and human, and life and death. While dealing with themes that are binary in nature, it raises questions on the unreal, real, and hyperreal.

CONCLUSION

The Vegetarian is a tale that deals with themes of the human body, psychology, nature, identification, choices, deviance, othering, and finally, death. It explores numerous ideas related to the human body and sexuality in a myriad of ways- a possibility and agency that postmodern ideas provide and sustain. Censorship on the discussion of the human body and sexuality is deemed necessary due to the discomfort it tends to generate in society, which in reality, is nothing but a result of the lack of dialogue surrounding it.

Non-compliance, the mere possession of a different thought is considered to be a point of deviance. The acceptability of views that differ from conventions is low.

There is an attempt to present the unrepresentable through language and a constantly shifting narration. The ideas are as abstract as they can be and their expression serves to unsettle.

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