



Ethics of Becoming: Plant and Animal Subjectivity in the Vegetarian

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Abstract: This study examines Han Kang's novel, *the vegetarian*, through the synergistic approaches of critical plant studies and animal studies, suggesting that, this novel challenges traditional western anthropocentric narratives by accentuating subjectivity and ethical significance to both animal and plants. Tracing Yeong-Hye's rejection of meat and identification with plant, this work examines how she challenges the hierarchical separation of human, plants, and animals that has shaped historical western narratives. Since the publication of *the vegetarian*, many scholarly studies have been made on, focusing mainly on feminism, patriarchy oppression, veganism, psycho analysis, trauma studies, and bodily autonomy. While these scholarly research works have given insights into the layers of this novel, very less studies have been made, simultaneously on critical plant studies and animal Ethics. Grounded in the theoretical insights of Michael Marder, Luce Irigaray and Carol J. Adams, this article will examine *the vegetarian* through the complementary perspectives of critical plant studies and animal studies.

Key words: plant subjectivity, animal subjectivity, vegetal agency, ecological ethics.

Introduction

Modern literature hopefully and radically challenges anthropocentric literary narratives and advocates for ethical significance for neglected non-human participants. Narratives with strong theoretical concepts more often, studies the space and significance of non-human agencies. Capitalist modernity, geopolitics, post colonialism, environmental degradation, climate change, loss of biodiversity and massive extinction of Anthropocene epoch urge scholars to question and study nonhuman agency and interconnectedness. In traditional narratives human beings own primary position where the position and ethical agency of animals, plants, environment, and other non-human entities are overlooked. Advancing areas such as, animal studies, ecocriticism, post humanism, postcolonial eco criticism and critical plant studies challenge this human dominated hierarchy in narratives and intentional separation from the environment its living organism.



Western philosophy, traditionally represents plants as immobile, and inferior. These narratives hinder agency of plants by placing them as beings with no consciousness; thus, they became voiceless. This notion posits human at the top of this hierarchy followed by animals, and plants at the bottom of this level. However, philosopher like Michael Marder, proposes idea like “plant thinking” which recognizes plants as another beings with importance. Strong research oriented Ground work like this offers a new way of thinking for identities beyond human boundaries.

As far as this context is concerned, Hang Kang’s *The vegetarian* explores turbulence of human identity and ethical orientation of non-human entities. The story follows the central character Yeong-Hye, an ordinary woman, whose refusal of eating meat, gradually develops a sense of aversion and disgust toward people, speech, food and societal norms. Her radical change and new identity questions the moral and ethical ground of human identity.

Although critics have vividly studied Yeong-Hye’s transformation through the lenses of trauma studies, rejection of patriarchy, psychological agonies, feminism, they often overlooked the ethical side of vegetal becoming and plant consciousness. Her radical transformation as a vegetal body is a severe reaction against the system of hierarchy that privileges men and oppress animals and plants.

Through the theoretical insights like plant- thinking by Michael Marder, and other complementary insights from plant studies and animal studies, this paper will examine the way the novel, *The Vegetarian*, reframes vegetable consciousness and animal ethics.

Ethics of Becoming: Plant and Animal Subjectivity in *the Vegetarian*

For centuries, western philosophy places human in the centre of everything, supported by his cognitive power, rational self, autonomous nature and communication skill. This attitude made human superior over everything and developed a sense that everything on earth is for human to use and dominate. This misunderstood notion shaped religion, art, literature, science, philosophy in different way over different times. Non-human beings, especially plants and animal thus, regarded the least valued symbols, without agency, significance, and consciousness in literature. Contemporary environmental philosophy such as, eco criticism, critical plant studies, nature philosophy and critical animal study ardently challenges this assumption and asserts that plant also have their own forms of communication, consciousness, memory, and intelligence.

Michael mardner, one of the pioneers of critical plant studies, in his seminal work, *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, argues that:

Vegetal activity encrypts itself in its modes of appearance by presenting itself in the guise of passivity, which is to say, by never presenting itself as such. The life of plants, therefore, poses a special challenge before hermeneutical phenomenology, incapable of elucidating that which does not appear in the open, that which emphatically does not give itself. It is an obscure non-object: obscure, because it ineluctably withdraws, flees from sight and from rigorous interpretation; non-object, because it works outside, before, and beyond all subjective considerations and representations. (29)

This very idea exposes the certainty that plants are not passive beings they are active participants, but this function is concealed. Western philosophy understands only what is visible and reasonable, therefore, they deny the verity that, plants possess their own way of agency and ontological stage.

To realise this, one requires a radical change. Yeong-Hye in *the vegetarian*, repeatedly imagining herself being a tree. This new identity is a political voice, that rejects, the very poor system of domination. She rejects the emotional domination of her husband, violence from her father, societal expectation, patriarchy and violence



against plants and animal. These dynamics altogether reveals human identification of its surrounding or environment. She goes beyond it. Thus, her vegetal identity becomes an ethical reaction to violence and misconceptions. Yeong-Hye in the novel says:

Everything starts to feel unfamiliar. As if I've come up to the back of something. Shut up behind a door without a handle. Perhaps I'm only now coming face-to-face with the thing that has always been here. It's dark. Everything is being snuffed out in the pitch-black darkness. (30)

She feels her existing identity unfamiliar and strange because it opposes the subjectivity of other living beings. She doesn't want to be a part of the ongoing system which rejects the significance of and consciousness of other entities. But deep within, she contemplates and accepts the hidden truth of multispecies subjectivity, especially, vegetal subjectivity. These truths are patronised by societal interpretation and human centered thoughts.

Her identification of the violence also shifts to animals. Animals are generally treated as mere metaphor and symbols that allow to grow an inferior status for them. But in this story, she stops eating meat after recognising animal violence, led by men. She considers them as sentient beings. Rejecting meat is a reaction against domination and power politics also the violence associated with it. Because meat is just not a food but our domination. Carol J. Adams in his foundational work, *the sexual politics of meat*, says:

Because the structure of overlapping absent referents is so deeply rooted in Western culture, it inevitably implicates individuals. Our participation evolves as part of our general socialization to cultural patterns and viewpoints; thus, we fail to see anything disturbing in the violence and domination that are an inextricable part of this structure. Consequently, women eat meat, work in slaughterhouses, at times treat other women as "meat" and men at times are victims of sexual violence. (101)

From time immemorial, we have been taught to normalise violence and domination. We are living in a world where the pain and violence behind the meat, we eat, are hidden. An animal with sentiments and ethics becomes a product of meat and we consume it without being aware of the killing involved in it. Women also face this objectification and denial of subjectivity. Often men also face this. The practise of eating meat without being aware of the suffering reduces the subjectivity of animals to a mere object to be used and consumed for human needs and greed. This recognition is reflected in the transformation of the character Yeong-Hye. She says:

"I'm sorry, Father, but I just can't eat it," but all she said was "I do not eat meat" (38)

This rejection is a reaction against the system that treats animals and other living beings' inferiors by hiding their pain for the motives of humans as well as the physical mental torture that she herself faces from the patriarchy. Her husband loves her body for his usefulness and her father forces meat in her mouth, denying her bodily autonomy. Being a victim of the oppressive system, she refuses to engage in its continuation. Her refusal is an ethical recognition of animal sufferings and rights.

Yeong-hye's transformation is not just a choice but a challenge to anthropocentric views that dismisses animals and plants, denying subjectivity. Her refusal of meat by being empathetic to animal violence and identification as a plant questions the Western stratification and power hierarchy. After refusing meat consumption, she does not continue her ordinary identity which is part of this hierarchical order. She builds her new identity as a plant by affirming interrelation connection subjectivity of plants.

Mainstream narratives devalue plants by saying that, they don't have brains like humans to think and respond. But plants think, communicate, and respond in their own ways. Richard Karban in his scientific study, *The Language of Plant Communication (and How it Compares to Animal Communication)* proposes plant subjectivity after scientifically examining plants' consciousness, perception, chemical perception, perception of touch, perception of temperature, plants' language, the lexicon of plants and plants' Communication with Animals and Microbes. In the conclusion, he says:



Plants respond to cues from distant tissues from the same individual, from other individuals, and even from different species. While plants have much less ability to communicate than animals, the more developed disciplines of animal behaviour and linguistics have much to offer the nascent field of plant communication. Although we know little about the “language” of plants it appears to be extremely complex, using many different modalities (visual, electrical, chemical cues) and capable of conveying sophisticated information about both past and future events. (17)

He says that plants can send signals from one part of it to another. Also, it can receive signals from nearby plants. It communicates with other beings such as, fungi, insects and bacteria etc. He concludes plants communication is rather different from that of animal but they are having their mode of communication for necessary matters and survival. This Idea is an exposure to western narratives that diminish plant subjectivity and instruct values. There are not mere passive participants but active subjects in ecological relationship. Their ecological ethics, therefore, should be validated. Yeong-hye’ identification with plants demonstrates this idea. She admits plants have their own subjectivity which we deny for centuries. Instead of treating them as resources or background image she recognises them as a fellow being and leave her human identity of violence behind.

The fact that we were born from a man and a woman, that is, that our chromosomes and genes are already hybridized, we are also conceived in a cultural context, which acted upon those who have generated us and the first environment in which we began to live. Contrary to the vegetal world, our “essence” is never simple, and this renders our human roots more complex and uncertain. Hence, the fact that we need the vegetal as a shelter and a help for our life. (Luce Irigaray 76)

Irigaray here says that human identity is shaped by different factors. Biologically we are influenced by our parents and hereditary. From there we build aspects from culture, society, making our identity complex. We consume everything by the assumption that we are the centre of everything, forgetting the interdependence. Unlike human, plants are deeply rooted to earth and become a part of interdependence and their identity is, thus, simple and natural. In fact we are dependent on plants. Yeong-hye realises this co-dependence. That is why she being a plant-identity, she recognises plants as her brothers and sisters, she says:

“Sister...all the trees of the world are like brothers and sisters” (116)

Here she expands the idea of family. She includes non-human beings, especially, plants to the dynamics of family concept. This highlights interdependence and correlational cobweb. This is a rejection of any sense of human superiority.

Conclusion

Han Kang’s, *The Vegetarian* is a critical work against anthropometric views that posits human at the centre and undervalues non-human subjectivity. Through Yeong-hye’s rejection of meat and gradual identification with plant, this novel shows how interconnected intelligence cares for animal and plant subjectivity. Her transformation challenges human supremacy and promotes relational existence and compassionate coexistence. By bringing critical plant studies and animal studies, this article proposes concern over animal and plant directives, ecological ethics, animal-plant rights and significance in literary narratives.

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