

***Journey of Denial, Acceptance and Transformation:
Discovering Meaning in Han Kang's 'The Vegetarian'***

Oshin John, Manipal University Jaipur, India
Richa Arora, Manipal University Jaipur, India

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Abstract

The term "trauma" pertains to events or circumstances that elicit significant emotional distress. It surpasses an individual's capacity to handle the situation and causes them to feel powerless. Trauma thus affects an individual's identity and is highly personal, being shaped by various elements. The Protagonist Yeong-hye in Han-Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* (2007) defies societal norms by adopting vegetarianism, ultimately resulting in a transition in her Identity. The three parts of the novel deal with, firstly, her choice to abstain from consuming meat creates a consequential impact on her family. Secondly, her desire to become like a plant, thirdly Yeong-hye being admitted to a psychiatric hospital. The narration of various characters in the three parts of the novel provides a deeper understanding of the protagonist Yeong-hye. This paper adopts the methodology of Cathy Caruth's phenomenal work *Unclaimed Experiences* (1996) to study trauma through narration in literature, with the interconnection of Affect theory to study Yeong-hye's demeanor. The methodology will help in understanding the impact trauma has on a character's behavior. Throwing light on denial, acceptance, and transformation. The paper aims to analyze Yeong-hye's resistance and redefinition of her Identity from fragments into whole through traumatic encounters and create a new meaning of being human.

Keywords: Trauma, Han Kang, Transformation, Cathy Caruth, Lauren Berlant, Identity

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Introduction

The study of trauma and its far-reaching effects on one's personal experiences and sense of self has been extensively researched across multiple academic fields. Traumatic experiences are defined by events that exceed an individual's ability to manage, often resulting in feelings of helplessness and emotional turmoil. Extensive research has been conducted across various academic disciplines on the topic of trauma and how its profound impact shapes individual experiences and identity. Trauma is considered to be events that overwhelm an individual's coping mechanisms, resulting in a sense of powerlessness and emotional distress.

According to Berlant (2011), Moments of uncertainty can make us feel as though situations that evoke dreadful anxiety can be quelled by embracing optimism. The theory presented here offers a comprehensive insight into the interdependencies among attachment, aspiration, and the challenging realities of contemporary society. As academics grapple with the complexities of navigating an increasingly unstable world fraught with persistent inequalities, Berlant's theory of cruel optimism presents a captivating lens through which to analyse the inherent contradictions between the longing for a brighter tomorrow and the harsh obstacles that impede its attainment.

Han Kang's "The Vegetarian" (2007) is a poignant exploration of trauma as the protagonist, Yeong-hye, challenges societal norms by adopting vegetarianism, leading to a transformative journey in her identity.

In the late 19th century and the 20th century, the form of aesthetics in Korean literature received much influence from Europe literature (Lee Tae-dong, 1996). The influence of European literature had been making innovations in Korean literature which was known, had tendency to be realist. One of the Korean novels, which successfully step outside from the realist tendency and become an anomaly in Korean literature, is a novel '*Ch'aesikjuuija*,' by Han Kang which had been translated in English as '*Vegetarian*.' (Savitri, 2018, p.1)

Han Kang's "The Vegetarian" is a captivating work that probe into the intricacies of societal expectations and individual rebellion. Told through three perspectives from protagonist Yeong-hye, the novel provides a poignant commentary on the complexities of human behavior and the impact of cultural norms on an individual's psyche.

The First section of the narrative elucidates Yeong-hye's choice to relinquish meat consumption, which caused a seismic shift in her family dynamics and disrupted the conventional societal order. Her husband, Mr. Cheong, struggled to fathom her decision, and familial tensions escalated as her rebellion challenged the established norms. The second section of the book offers a unique perspective through the eyes of Yeong-hye's brother-in-law, an artist fixated on capturing her evolution into a plant-like existence through hauntingly vivid dreams. As the plot thickens, the line between reality and fantasy becomes increasingly blurred, exploring the concepts of control, desire, and artistic interpretation in a surreal and thought provoking manner. The third section of the book centres around In-hye, Yeong-hye's sister. Here, In-hye confronts the aftermath of Yeong-hye's choices and her own internal battles. With Yeong-hye's hospitalization, the narrative explores the complex topics of mental well-being, cultural expectations, and the enduring repercussions of nonconformity for both individuals and their loved ones.

This paper seeks to delve into the intricate layers of trauma and its impact on identity through the lens of Cathy Caruth's seminal work, "Unclaimed Experiences" (1996), while also incorporating Affect theory "Cruel Optimism" by Lauren Berlant to decipher Yeong-hye's complex emotional landscape with a cruel end.

Tracing Denial

The novel commences with Yeong-hye's abrupt resolution to renounce meat, a decision that goes against the deeply ingrained meat-eating practice of society. Her choice is met with bewilderment and mistrust, marking the outset of the story's exploration into the familial and societal repercussions of rejecting a staple element in her diet.

Yeong-hye regularly experiences powerful dreams filled with vivid and surreal images of blood and violence. The detailed and symbolic depictions of these dream sequences are both discomfiting and intriguing, leaving a lasting impression on the viewer. Kang (2015) describes Yeong-Hye's dream:

But the fear. My clothes still wet with blood. Hide, hide behind the trees. Crouch down, don't let anybody see. My bloody hands. My bloody mouth. In that barn, what had I done? Pushed that red raw mass into my mouth, felt it squish against my gums, the roof of my mouth, slick with crimson blood. (p.10)

The novel's opening section portrays a crucial juncture in Yeong-hye's life, wherein a recurring dream catalyzes events that affect her personality and attitude towards food, specifically meat. The dream's continuous recurrence highlights its significance in shaping Yeong-hye's character and behaviour, leading her to reject meat and embrace vegetarianism. The dream sequences in the novel are intricately woven into the narrative, emphasizing their importance in the story's overall theme. The author's use of symbolism and dream imagery effectively conveys the protagonist's psychological and emotional struggles, providing a deeper insight into Yeong-hye's complex and multi-faceted character.

As Caruth (1996), writes:

the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that, like Tancred's first infliction of a mortal wound on the disguised Clorinda in the duel, is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (p.8)

Through the first part of the book we see Yeong-hye Struggling in her personal choice of denying meat. Through the narrative of her husband we can trace the trauma erupting in the actions of the protagonist. Her behavioural shift as a woman, wife and as a human being gives us a glimpse of the impact of trauma.

Emerging Acceptance

Yeong-hye experiences a surreal metamorphosis, accepting a life akin to a plant's. Her brother-in-law, fascinated by her desire to transform into a tree, embarks on an artistic

endeavour to chronicle this evolution. The tale blurs the boundary between reality and symbolism as Yeong-hye embraces her novel persona, rebuffing conventional expectations.

The denial which turned into desire to become like a tree presents a new identity of Yeong-hye. “She smiled in response. Her smile was quiet and thoughtful, not dissimilar to that of his wife. For all the world as though she were a perfectly ordinary woman.” (Kang, 2015,p.51). we can trace the changes in her expression and the identity she is building through every phase by the other character’s narratives.

Yeong-hye's transformation throughout the novel is a poignant reflection of the profound impact of trauma. Her old self is gradually replaced by the unbothered lifestyle. The novel provides a powerful commentary on the long-lasting effects of trauma and how it can shape you for better or for worse. At the end of section two of the novel we see acceptance in Yeong-hye behaviour.

Up until then, Yeong-hye had seemed oblivious to her sister’s presence in the apartment; only now did she look over at the two of them, her face a perfect blank. Her gaze was utterly devoid of any form of expression. She slowly turned her back on them and walked out onto the veranda. The chill air rushed into the apartment when she opened the sliding door. He fixed his eyes on the pale blue of her Mongolian mark, seeing the traces of his saliva and semen that had dried there like sap. Suddenly it felt to him that he had grown old, had experienced everything there was to experience, and that not even death held any fear for him anymore. (Kang, 2015, p.65)

Her acceptance and the desire to be plant like act as a shield towards the trauma. Theory by Lauren Berlant proposes “‘Cruel optimism’ names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic.” (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010). Such an optimism by Yeong-hye unveils her as a strong woman, but the unconventional approach will gradually bring her demise.

Radical Transformation

In the book's third section, Yeong-hye is admitted to a mental health institution, where her sister In-hye visits her frequently. Through In-hye's observations, the reader becomes aware of the toll Yeong-hye's nonconformity to societal standards has taken on her mental wellbeing. The institution serves as a backdrop for an exploration of the complexities of mental health and the challenges that arise when individuals do not align with societal norms.

Yeong-hye’s increasingly odd behavior had become noticeable around three years ago, when she’d suddenly decided to turn vegetarian. She lost so much weight it was quite shocking to look at her, and she practically stopped sleeping altogether. Yes, she’d always been quiet, but at that time she would say so little that any kind of meaningful communication was impossible. (Kang, 2015, p.73)

Yeong-hye's transformation can be interpreted as a strategy for coping with trauma and the pitfalls of optimistic expectations. Nevertheless, the metamorphosis engenders a profound sense of loss and isolation. The plant-like semblance assumed by Yeong-hye creates a perceptible chasm between her and human connections, thereby amplifying her detachment.

The symbolic connotations of her transformation expose the intricate challenges that individuals encounter when striving to negotiate the fine line between personal authenticity and societal expectations.

Lauren Berlant's theoretical construct of cruel optimism serves as a valuable lens through which to examine the complexities of Yeong-hye's choices. Cruel optimism refers to the phenomenon in which individuals develop a strong attachment to conditions that are intrinsically damaging, where the very objects of their desires ultimately become sources of harm. By employing Berlant's framework, one can gain deeper insight into the intricate interplay between desire, attachment, and the forces that shape human agency. Yeong-hye's inclination towards a more natural and uncontaminated way of life, signified by her transformation into a plant-like being, can be interpreted as a manifestation of optimistic attachment.

She's stopped talking. She's also been trying to pull the IV needle out, so we had to get her into the secure room and give her a tranquilizer before we could put it back in. How she has the strength to shake us off... (Kang, 2015, p.78)

The attachment is cruel in the sense that it isolates Yeong-hye from societal norms and deepens her mental health struggles. The optimism implanted in her desire for transformation becomes a source of cruelty, leading to further alienation and tribulation.

Yeong-hye twisted away from her sister. "You're just the same," she whispered, her voice barely audible. "What are you talking about? I..." "No one can understand me...the doctors, the nurses, they're all the same...they don't even try to understand...they just force me to take medication, and stab me with needles." (Kang, 2015, p.84)

Yeong-hye is willful until the end. Though physically she is fading away but her optimism is still intact until the end. Her constant gaze towards the trees is a constant reminder of her cruel optimistic approach.

But if the cruelty of an attachment is experienced by someone or some group, even in disavowed fashion, the fear is that the loss of the object or scene of promising itself will defeat the capacity to have any hope about anything. (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010, p.94)

This might point to something as banal as a scouring love, but it also opens out to obsessive appetites, working for a living, patriotism, all kinds of things. One makes affective bargains about the costliness of one's attachments, usually unconscious ones, most of which keep one in proximity to the scene of desire or attrition. (Gregg and Seigworth, 2015, p.94)

Trauma, which emanates from Yeong-hye's dream, exerts a powerful influence that shapes her life. Her refusal to consume meat and subsequent transformation into a plant-like state are her ways of coping. They are her efforts to establish authority over her life and escape from the traumatic realities she has faced. The optimistic attachment to an idealized reality proves cruel, intensifying psychological unravelling and aggravating trauma.

Conclusion

The life of Yeong-hye, depicted in the novel "The Vegetarian," provides a poignant example of the dangers of cruel optimism. At first, the optimism surrounding the pursuit of alternative ideals may seem promising, but it can eventually turn into a source of cruelty, making the pain worse and leading to psychological distress. The book examines the fine balance between being true to oneself and the potential risks of optimistic attachments that deviate from societal norms. Yeong-hye's journey is a valuable lesson on the consequences of such attachments.

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Contact email: oshinjohnoshin@gmail.com