
Food, Violence, and Cannibalism- Exploring the Affective Aesthetics of Disgust in Monika Kim's *The Eyes Are the Best Part*

Disha Banerjee

Research Scholar, Department of English and M.E.L., University of Lucknow, Chandralok, Sector B, Aliganj, Lucknow, U.P.

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Abstract:

An enticingly graphic and unsettling narrative that leaves readers squirming and gagging from its visceral intensity, Monika Kim's novel *The Eyes Are the Best Part* charts the turbulent life and inner turmoil of its young Korean American protagonist, Ji-Won Lim. Tracing the psychological and moral unravelling of the protagonist, this paper aims to analyse her experiences of dealing with familial disintegration, social alienation, pervasive racial fetishization, exoticisation, and misogynistic oppression and how they contribute to the breakdown of Ji-won's psyche through a series of disturbing hallucinations, gory nightmares, violent murderous urges, and a growing hunger for eyeballs. Employing the general lens of Affect Studies combined with Carolyn Korsmeyer's Aesthetic Theory and Philosophy of Taste, this paper explores the novel's affective aesthetics of disgust generated by sensory and bodily horror and acts of serial violence and cannibalism. Additionally, it examines how Ji-won's cultural and familial roots and the politics of representation shape her deteriorating mind and transgressive interactions with food, flesh, and hunger. This paper argues that the novel creates a claustrophobic atmosphere of lingering revulsion, anxiety, and perverse fascination, which become the narrative forces that amplify Ji-won's suppressed female rage, culminating in a subversive act in which the oppressed subject of the male gaze literally and metaphorically consumes the blue eyes of white men to reclaim her agency, highlighting the monstrous and transgressive potential of the self within the affective dimensions of the novel.

Keywords- Affect Theory, Aesthetic Disgust, Cannibalism, Serial Violence, Asian Fetishization**Introduction:**

In the past years since its publication in 2024, *The Eyes Are the Best Part* has drawn acclaim for its unflinching, graphic, and visceral portrayal of the mental, social, and cultural

issues that precipitate a protagonist's descent into heinous acts of serial violence and eyeball-consuming cannibalism. Ji-won's psychological and ethical unravelling begins with her father's abandonment of their family, followed by the subsequent introduction of George, her mother's white Caucasian boyfriend, whose perverse, predatory gaze towards Asian women intensifies her rage. Adding more layers to the tension, Ji-won's history of conflict with her longtime friends, her irritation towards the pseudo feminist and imposing Geoffrey who tries to force through her boundaries, and her self-perception of being alienated, lonely, and unseen, escalate her anger and rage towards men and society, sowing the seeds that lead to the breakdown of her sanity. As Kim herself states in an interview- "With her family falling apart...her friends gone, she is painfully aware of the cards that life has dealt her and of being alone out in the world..., and when certain white men come into her life and try to control her, she turns to her deceitful side." (Sutherland) Thus, through Ji-won, the novel displays a dramatic portrayal of the radical and transgressive extremities of female rage based on the daily humiliations and oppression that women face, which are usually suppressed in the face of society.

This paper offers an affective reading of *The Eyes Are the Best Part* by borrowing ideas from Affect Studies, supported by Carolyn Korsmeyer's philosophy of taste and aesthetic ideas on the complicated relationship between Food, Violence and Disgust to examine what shapes the protagonist's motivation towards conducting acts of violence and how the narrative generates an affective atmosphere of lingering visceral horror and disgust, which pass from the body of the text and penetrate the senses of the readers, allowing them to become implicit in the protagonist's actions and affective experience. It argues that the author uses a language of Affect and employs the Aesthetics of Disgust and violence as a medium of critique, as well as the primary regulator of the storyline that pulls the readers into following Ji-won in her ethical and mental deterioration, savouring through their senses, episode by episode, feeling the transmitted affects even before understanding why it happens. Gregory J. Seigworth & Melissa Gregg have popularly defined Affect as "visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension." Thus, traditionally, Affects have been understood as pre-cognitive, pre-emotive, and pre-linguistic registers of "force-encounters traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between bodies." (Seigworth and Gregg 2) Other critics in the field, such as Sara Ahmed, have defined affects as "sticky" and "what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects," emphasizing how Affects while being bodily urges, are also a result of cultural practices, social phenomena, and mechanisms of power, rather than simply individual feelings. (Ahmed 29) Adopting a more holistic view, this paper will consider Affects as visceral and biological responses which can be empowered by mental processes, language, cultural context, and social learning.

Through the symbolic and affective narrative of Kim's *The Eyes Are the Best Part*, this paper will investigate how Affects can be deeply intertwined with beliefs, judgments, cultural and social contexts, and evaluations of objects and events that matter to us, rather than being merely a blind biological urge. From the very beginning of the novel, the author's engagement with tactile details evoking the affect of disgust to amplify horror is apparent, perhaps using it as a deliberate aesthetic strategy to compel the reader into a deeper and uncomfortable understanding of Ji-won's psychological state and the societal forces that shape it, rather than simply repelling them. Poignantly, the story starts by establishing a complicated relationship between food, aesthetics of disgust and violence with its description of the consumption of fish eyes by Ji-won's mother as "the eyes are the best part," and are considered a symbol of good luck and fortune in the Korean culture. (Kim 11) This is immediately followed by Ji-won and her sister's affective response of disgust towards the image of their mother chewing and savouring the slimy fish eyes, reflecting on how their mother's action of plucking "the eyeball out of its head" seemed "too extreme," calling it a "cruel" act as the fish too "was once a living, breathing creature. It could see and feel and think. It probably had a family, maybe even friends." (Kim 12) Ji-won's physical revulsion at her mother's fish-eye-eating coping mechanism after their father abandoned the family becomes an important affective inheritance of parental trauma that is passed down. Thus, the author foreshadows the radical re-manifestation of this initial act by her mother, in Ji-won's own future descent into violence and cannibalistic hunger. The disgust she feels towards her mother's desperate consumption transforms into her own active, violent, and transgressive consumption in later parts of the novel.

With her mother's slow descent into depression, while waiting endlessly for her husband, who had abandoned the family, Ji-won's frustration keeps growing until she feels suffocated and wants to escape. In the desperation of pleasing her mother, Ji-won decides to be brave by eating the fish eye once and for all. Her first interaction with the slimy fish eye as it pops into her mouth elicits the affective response of gagging, and yet immediately it is described by her as a unique sensory experience- "The initial wave of nausea recedes, and I roll it against the inside of my cheeks. It is a strange feeling...I bite down, grinning at my mother, and swallow." (Kim 32) This first taste of the fish eye evokes an unnatural appetite in her, already evident in how she reaches out for the other eyeball immediately after eating one- "I reach for it, suddenly starving." (Kim 33) In her study of affective experiences, Megan Watkins posits that, "Affect also operates independently, accumulating as bodily memory that, while both aiding cognition and inducing behaviour, may evade consciousness altogether," highlighting how the usually fleeting Affects "may also leave a residue, a lasting impression that produces particular kinds of bodily capacities."(Watkins 279, 269) This phenomenon can be studied through Ji-won's hunger of fish eyes that once consumed becomes a pleasurable affective experience and translates into a bodily urge in her gradually, leaving a lasting enjoyable and exciting impression associated to the affective object- the eyes. This feeling of sensory pleasure or happiness derived from eating the eyes becomes a

part of her bodily memory, overriding her earlier conscious response of revulsion and progressively induces a set of violently transgressive behaviours to satisfy her urge. As Ahmed posits, “We judge something to be good or bad according to how it affects us, whether it gives us pleasure or pain,” and “Objects that give us pleasure take up residence within our bodily horizon.” The Fish eye is the sticky object that induces a pleasurable affect in Ji-won that sticks to her body and mind. (Ahmed 31-32)

Ji-won’s longing for eyes, and her hunger for it and her enjoyment while crunching on the slimy gelatinous orbs evokes an atmosphere of visceral horror and the narrative’s affective aesthetics of disgust. This notion can be understood by referring to Carolyn Korsmeyer’s ideas espoused in her work *Savouring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*, examining how in relation to food, Disgust becomes complicated as it cannot be limited to just an affect or an innate bodily response to something nasty, as traditional affective stances usually state. Korsmeyer says that – “Surprisingly, there are numerous examples of foods that begin as objects of disgust and migrate over into the category of the edible. Some of them even rise to the level of gourmet delight—at which point their disgusting origins are mere shadows.” Ji-won’s initial disgust is rooted in familial trauma and a culturally specific act of her mother voraciously devouring fish eyes, but once she eats the fish eyes and eventually starts dreaming of eating human eyes, she feels a perverse pleasure rising within her, taking her from “the disgusting to the delicious.” (Korsmeyer 61) These eyes are not just food, but also an affective and symbolic object that needs to be consumed before it consumes her, a power play.

With the addition of George into their family, her mother’s white Caucasian, blue-eyed racist boyfriend who becomes “a disruption to everything in Ji-won’s life,” the plot adds a new layer of tension and an external, culturally charged target for Ji-won’s escalating resentment. (Sutherland) Ji-won is repulsed by this, calling him “disgusting” very often in the novel. He serves as a direct catalyst, transforming Ji-won’s internalized familial trauma and feminist rage into an externalized, violent, and ultimately cannibalistic response- eating of blue eyes, an act that is both disgusting, criminal and yet pleasurable. These parts of the novel comment on how Asian stereotypes and othering is common and even being appropriated into the American space, the identity of immigrant communities remains reductive and regressive, they are still seen as the other. In an interview, Monika Kim presents her thoughts on the role of cultural motivation for writing this novel saying that –

Almost every Asian woman I know has had to deal with some aspect of our hyper sexualization and fetishization in popular culture.... Much of this, I think, comes from stereotypes of us as submissive, as weak, and unable to defend ourselves, and worst of all as willing to put up with anything a man does to hurt or degrade us. A key motivation for me to write this book was to tell a story that challenges these insidious stereotypes...empowering women to be whatever we want to be....” (Spratford)

In the light of this statement by the author, one understands why Ji-won decides to turn towards her “deceitful” side, by taking up her feminist rage and directing it at the male gaze and consuming it literally and symbolically.

The narrative explicitly points out the moment Ji-won first notices George’s icy blue eyes, marking beginning of her transformation as from then onwards she cannot stop “thinking about George’s eyes.” (Kim 63) While loathing everything George embodies, her obsessive thoughts about his eyes turn into nightmares infused with gruesome and murderous scenes with her primary affective object at their centre- “Eyes.” In a telling dream sequence description, Ji-won finds herself in a room full of glossy eyes of all kinds, raining and falling all over her until she remembers the moment she first ate this fish eye-

The excitement that jolted through my body from swallowing it. I lower my hands and reach out, trembling, to touch the eyes on the wall...I swallow one whole, barely tasting...I pluck one eye after the other, shoving them greedily into my mouth. I mash them into a pulp, teeth gnashing, feeling each clump slide down my throat. (Kim 64)

Ji-won finds in her dreams, a new way to “escape” what makes her uneasy and suffocated- it is by eating eyes. Following her dream Ji-won comes across a “mesmerising” blue human eye, and her monstrous appetite is instantly provoked- “It’s hunger that propels me. Desire. My hand darts out and snatches the eye from the plate, and before I can think, I shove the entire thing into my mouth...It’s so good.” (Kim 64) Ji-won associates the taste of juicy and fresh cherry tomatoes to the taste of human eyes in her dreams, linking the natural world to an unnatural consumption. Yet, while fuelling her obsession with eyes by gathering information about it and musing over the taste of blue eyes, the thought of this cannibalistic act is chuckled off by Ji-won – “I would never actually want to eat George’s eyes. I tell myself that it’s more of a morbid curiosity.” (Kim 99) Even at this point in the story, Ji-won hasn’t accepted her unnatural obsession, as her internal moral compass and the ethical as well as social implication of violent acts makes her hesitant.

Feeling small and insignificant in her own home owing to George’s suffocating presence and her unravelling life, she registers her rising inclination towards murder that escalates on a violent note moving from- “Thoughts of George’s death starts to preoccupy me” to “I want to cut his head open, peel back his skin, eat his eyes.” (Kim 111, 166) With her nightmares getting more vivid and realistic leading her to start sleepwalking, the narrative attacks the reader’s gustatory senses by increasing the pacing descriptions of food and eyes- wet, gurgling, bulging, and protruding blue eyes. Plans of marriage of her mother and George drop like the final bombshell on Ji-won and she is nauseated and physically disgusted by this. Meanwhile, unable to destroy George immediately, Ji-won starts to practice for her final revenge on him by choosing random blue eyed male victims that seem like an easy prey and imagining them as stand ins for George. Her first act of murder and eye eating is affectively narrated using a tactile vocabulary of cutting into the flesh of the dead man, pulling out his

eyes, optic nerves and blood spurting and her inner voice mocking her- “Don’t you want to taste it, Ji-won?... He was already dead when you found him. You did nothing wrong.” Symbolically, Ji-won isolates herself in a bathroom reeling from the ethical repercussions of her first act of murder and stares at her reflection in the mirror “expecting to see a monster, a demon, a killer, but it’s me. Just me.” Giving way to her affective response to the eye, she quickly pops it in her mouth as the “jellylike matter explodes” and she savours the taste and pleasure it gives her describing its likeness with animal meat- “It’s delicious. The flavour is rich and full. It’s not like the fish eyes I’ve tried. Not at all. If anything, it’s more like organ meat, with a slightly metallic, beefy taste.” (Kim 161)

Ji-won goes from being repulsed by the sight of fish eyes to ultimately enjoying the taste of human eyes highlighting how “the shift from disgust to savour transforms the aversion to an enjoyable affective state,” presenting a narrative paradox where the clear distinctions between positive and negative affects become blurred and distorted. (Korsmeyer 94) This positive affective response associated to the consumption of human eyes increases Ji-won’s unnatural hunger and encourages her to engage with further acts of serial violence, even when the recollection of the murders elicits a bodily revulsion in her. She begins to get strange and disturbing hallucinations, just after her first murder, exposing her fractured psyche and self. Her hunger becomes a motivation to pursue her cannibalistic fantasies, an act that is a social taboo and a source of violent horror. Slowly, Ji-won starts to trip up George, controlling and sabotaging his life and finally making him lose his fancy job to break him down physically, socially, and mentally, projecting all her anger and suppressed rage onto him and attempting to emasculate him and destroy him completely. In the meantime, she pursues two more victims to satisfy her hunger for eyes and for seeking revenge against men, fuelled by “a blind desire to eat. To devour.” (Kim 185) After killing her second victim, whimpering, moaning at the taste of freshly extracted eyes and blood shooting in her mouth, Ji-won describes how this act of cannibalism fulfils her- “the taste—oh god, the taste—sends waves of pleasure radiating through my body. I am in ecstasy.... I suck the blood and fluids and juices out of it.” (187) For her third victim, Ji-won chances upon a campus student who she had observed being racist and sexualizing Asian women, which makes his eyes a ‘special meal’ for her and she compares his eyes tasting like the crispy fish skin her mother eats.

Soon after, Ji-won prepares for her final act- “There’s an energy thrumming in my veins. An anger. Fury. The desire to punish, to exact justice. Tonight, George will finally get what he deserves.” (Kim 241) Further incidents occur, and a failed attempt to ambush and kill George lands Ji-won in the hospital with a suspected brain tumour and its operation. With the removal of the tumour Ji-won feels somewhat different, lighter, her headaches and hallucinations are gone and when she imagines George’s eyes and thinks of eating them “there’s no pleasure or desire attached to the memory. I concentrate hard, but I feel nothing.” (250) Yet, this hope of becoming normal is half-lived, as once she falls asleep, her nightmares

come back with a twist, George is now eating her eyeballs, he has taken her sight and is consuming her. This rattles Ji-won and she hatches her master plan to kill George by sedating him, gouging out his eyes and putting all the blame on Geoffrey, killing two birds with one stone. She successfully carries it out and now elevating the eye by putting it in her plate of food, she devours George's blue eyes slowly and meticulously, "bringing each delectable morsel to my mouth" until she is full, claiming she has "never felt more satisfied" in her life. (260) Ji-won finally revels in her power and reflects silently simmering in glory- "My mother may be too weak to protect herself, and my sister too young. But I'm neither of those things.... They have no idea how powerful I already am." Ending the story with a terrorizing threat, Ji-won states that her next victim will be "the person responsible for all this, the one who is ultimately to blame: Appa," threatening fratricide as her next punishment, hinting that perhaps her story is not over just yet. (266)

The aesthetic experience of *The Eyes Are the Best Part* lies in the flesh- the bleeding, leaking, sexualized, exoticized, and fascinating body, which is the site of patriarchal, oriental, and social control and is also dealt with horror-inducing violence and cannibalistic consumption as an act of transgression. This paper explored how Monika Kim positions the affective aesthetics of food, violence, and disgust not merely as a shock or barrier to engaging with the novel, but as a critical, subversive force. Through these visceral elements, the narrative compels readers to direct their reflection toward the actual disgusting issues- the underlying social injustices against women, and their constant oppression and sexualization by the actions of men and their gaze. The novel's graphic descriptions become arguably empowering in response to the anxieties of being a marginalized subject in a society marked by racial and gendered power imbalances. Ultimately, Ji-won's final act of consuming George's eyes and threatening to punish her father, echoes the language of male oppression, throwing it back onto the aggressor- "And when you take everything from him, you can say what these men say about us: He was asking for it. He was begging for it. He must have wanted it, since he didn't fight back." (Kim 140) Driven by a pleasure-seeking hunger and a desire for power, Kim's potent use of cannibalistic eye consumption and serial violence becomes a perverse form of reclaiming agency and identity for her protagonist, Ji-won Lim, within a social, moral, and ethical structure designed to define and diminish her.

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