
Autonomy as Madness: Posthuman Feminism in *The Vegetarian*

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Abstract

This article examines the repercussions of seeking non-conventional bodily autonomy within the framework of posthuman feminist theory in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. It dissects Yeong-hye as a subversive figure who resists patriarchal and anthropocentric norms by choosing to not consume meat. While, to begin with, the choice seems simple. However, as the plot unfolds, it depicts gendered violence and species hierarchy in more ways than one. The logic of consumption and femininity stand questioned. By situating this novel as a critique of patriarchy and human exceptionalism, this article dismantles the normative definitions of sanity, agency, intimacy and art. It explores posthuman resistance as a space for exposing the fault lines of the phallogocentric society. In Yeong-hye's identification with the vegetal world, there is a movement away from the conventions that drive the patriarchal society, which this study, borrowing from Foucauldian theory, positions as a threat. The madness associated with Yeong-hye is nothing but a cultural disruption that cannot be accepted and is, therefore, pathologised. Through this paper, *The Vegetarian* emerges as a critique of institutional frameworks that regulate bodies and as a proponent of fluid articulative spaces where the lines between the human and the non-human get blurred to exhibit and reclaim the fragments of lost agencies.

Keywords: The Vegetarian, Posthuman Feminism, Bodily Autonomy, Madness and Pathologisation, Anthropocentrism, Vegetal Ontology, Contemporary Korean Literature.

Introduction

The Vegetarian has been widely acclaimed for its representation of the female body since its publication. In the novel, Han Kang paints Yeong-hye as an initially tolerable wife who becomes a deviant by choosing to turn vegetarian in a predominantly meat-eating society. Quite interestingly, the title of the book is marked by this apparently simple choice because the choice does not remain simple after all. It converts into familial disappointment,

rage, coercion, violence and finally, ostracization. When she ends up living alone, her interaction with her brother-in-law is for art and her inclination towards art is based on her vegetal inclination that she is constantly reiterating. But for her sister, it is the violation of an order. Having seemingly violated several social orders, Yeong-hye ends up being institutionalised. However, in all of this, it must be noted that we do not get to know Yeong-hye's perspective first-hand because she is not one amongst the three to get a space in the narratorial realm of the book. Han Kang seems to have made a conscious decision with respect to this because in doing so, she is extracting possibilities of sensory empathy from the image of her protagonist and laying her bare to be interpreted as the reader wills. This is exactly why the debate between Yeong-hye as autonomous and Yeong-hye as mad remains open-ended.

Therefore, this article seeks to explore the fine line between autonomy and insanity for a woman in the civilised society. It poses significant questions about the extent to which a woman must remain within the dictates of the society, and dissects how the humanness of a woman is governed by cultural factors. It critiques how the simplest of non-alignment materialises into societal concerns which intend to steer the supposedly strayed sheep back to the flock. Extending feminist theory into the posthuman realm, it argues that the renunciation of human subjectivity is an act rooted in subversion because Han Kang's female protagonist, who is deprived of the privilege to make her own choices as a human being, chooses to stop being a human being altogether. In all, this article views posthuman imagination as a crucial site within the contemporary feminist discourse in its analysis of body, psyche, desire and sexuality.

Posthuman Feminism: Theoretical Framework

In the twenty-first century, posthumanism has emerged as a response to human exceptionalism. It has questioned the supremacy of the human body and argued that "the human of Humanism is neither an ideal nor an objective statistical average or middle ground" ((Braidotti 26). This argument finds itself in the heart of the feminist theory that has long "decentred the ideal of Enlightenment Man" (Åsberg and Neimanis 4). Posthuman feminism, therefore, becomes an important critical lens which exposes patriarchy on two levels: in terms of hierarchy and in terms of embodiment. It rejects the preeminence given to man and male-centric notions of body. This, therefore, becomes an important lens to dissect Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. While a significant body of scholarship has worked with posthuman re-imaginings of the protagonist who turns vegetal, the prominent lens applied here is that of vulnerability as a response to a hostile world. Even when not explicitly pathologized, her refusal of human subjectivity is frequently accompanied by a residual sense of pity. This paper, however, argues that such an affective lens reproduces the very logic it seeks to

critique. Instead, it contends that Yeong-hye's vegetal transformation is a form of posthuman autonomy that is misrecognized as madness within an anthropocentric epistemology.

Autonomy as Pathology: Social Construction of Madness

All discourses of madness in the society are mechanisms that regulate forms of subjectivity which deviate from socially sanctioned norms. This means that the concept of madness, within the cultural fabrication, is "a manifestation of the non-being" which positions subjects that reject normative frameworks, outside the institutional boundaries of reason (Foucault 114).

Feminist scholarship has constantly noted how this regulation works within patriarchal contexts where dissent is equated to hysteria (Bowman 1). This means that for a woman, especially in terms of her body, the definition of autonomy is tainted with susceptibility to pathologisation because when a woman reclaims her bodily autonomy, it is construed as an act of crossing socially legible boundaries of womanhood. She, therefore, becomes a deviant. Madness, then, is a label to demonstrate how she has undermined the order of the civilised world. The society institutionalises her to correct her fallacy or at the very least, prevent social mingling in any form.

In *The Vegetarian*, autonomy occurs as a process. Yeong-hye assorts to small acts of autonomy that are driven by her psyche. To begin with, she does not wear bras. Then, she has a dream that leads her to eschew meat. Her dreams are childhood recollections about violence, masculinity inflicting violence and dietary enforcements as a product of that violence. The reason why she acts so strongly on her decision to not have meat is the trauma that she has held within for so long which cannot be contained any longer. Therefore, her dreams, driving her actions, function as "excretions of thoughts that have been stifled at birth" (Freud 105). In reclaiming her autonomy, she reclaims those thoughts. This is probably driven by the fact that she 'can' reclaim her autonomy because she is financially independent. But even then, the power of reclamation lies beyond the ability to fend for self. It is her mind that refuses to align itself to the familial dictates anymore, and she would rather kill herself than have meat. Later, sensuality does not lead her to permit her brother-in-law to paint on her naked body. Her love for a vegetal spatiality where there is no violence allows her to look at art as a standalone process. This, therefore, is also an act in autonomy. Eventually, she refuses to speak, dress herself or eat. Her transformation into a plant is rendered legible only as a psychological breakdown. While she ends up being in an asylum, her withdrawal from mainstream life is purely subversive. Yeong-hye becomes what she wants to be. She breaks free from being a subject of the anthropocentric, patriarchal order.

Madness, in the novel, is the lens applied to a woman, who dares to be herself, by the society that refuses to see outside the normative, oppressive ideas of womanhood. Her attempt to reconstitute subjectivity by undermining the epistemological boundaries of human existence is seen as pathology, but she is only traversing beyond consumption, violence and control. Hence, labelling her as mad is an epistemic failure of dominant frameworks to accommodate expressions of agency.

Embodied Refusal and the Breakdown of the Human

“Massive trauma precludes its registration; the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, malfunction” (Laub 57). In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye does not have the means to articulate her trauma. Therefore, her resistance manifests in her refusal to eat meat, her withdrawal from social interaction and her disidentification with the human form. It is, hence, her body that lies at the epicentre of rejection of the structures that sustain human ontology. Her embodied refusal poses questions at the foundational assumption of human beings as rational subjects. It demonstrates how rationality, autonomy and sanity are bounded by socio-cultural normatives. If a society is rooted in sexism, violence or egoist tendencies, its ethics are also tainted by such ideas. As a result, it will view every body that does not follow these orders of compliance as foreign and it will strive to ostracise or eradicate such bodies. In Yeong-hye’s case, her body becomes a site of resistance that refuses to participate in the normative human life.

When she starts identifying with a vegetal life, she is not hopeless or devastated. Her transformation is not a regression into passivity or death. It is an act of subversion where she shifts away from the binary of human and non-human to a fluid mode of being (Braidotti 129). She is inhabiting an existence that lies outside of the entrapments of instrumentalisation. However, her transformation is viewed as a breakdown. Her emaciated body, her refusal to eat, her silence and her disidentification with clothes are seen as signs of pathology because even the basic acts of survival are understood within normative frameworks of existence. Even Yeong-hye’s sister, In-Hye, who becomes her caretaker, cannot understand her refusal to eat, even when her narratorial voice acknowledges: “It’s your body, you can treat it however you please. The only area where you’re free to do just as you like. And even that doesn’t turn out how you wanted” (Kang 133). In-Hye cannot help but see her sister’s disidentification with human subjectivity as a pathway to death. At one point, she notes that her sister is turning more and more into a child:

Is Yeong-hye trying to turn herself back into a preadolescent? She hasn’t had her period for a long time now, and now that her weight has dropped below thirty kilos, of course there’s nothing left of her breasts. She lies there looking like a freakish overgrown child, devoid of any secondary sexual characteristics. (Kang 113)

This establishes how Yeong-hye's articulation of autonomy not only embodies an anthropocentric rupture but also embodies the rupture of frameworks of patriarchy that are expected to be presented through the body. Her apparent breakdown is, in fact, the breakdown of a system that cannot imagine being non-humanocentric and non-patriarchal.

Becoming-Plant: Radical Posthuman Transformation

By the end of *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye becomes a plant. She has moved to a fluid form of subjectivity by refusing the defining characteristics of human life such as consumption, speech and hierarchical separation from other forms of life. In doing so, she is resisting incorporation into a fixed template of humanism. Posthuman feminist frameworks allow this transformation to be read as an affirmative reconfiguration of self (Braidotti).

However, it must be noted that Yeong-hye's vegetal transition is never fully articulated within language. This exposes the limits of representation. For the lack of better categories, Yeong-hye's transition is framed as deviance, pathology and death. Since, her non-identification cannot be understood within an anthropocentric order, it is rendered as pathological.

But the way it precipitates in society only reinforces the radical potential of her vegetal transformation. Instead of resisting hierarchies, she exits the system that produces them. She is able to rearticulate herself beyond a system that oppresses her. In her articulation, she chooses to unapologetically become what she wants to be. Therefore, her posthuman transformation is extremely radical. It overturns all elements that bracket human existence.

Re-reading Madness: Resistance or Erasure?

It is important to understand that Yeong-hye's transformation in *The Vegetarian* is not construed as a form of self-erasure without merit. In her act of disengaging from the world, Yeong-hye does resort to an emaciated body that she refuses to nourish. The refusal to align herself with the dictates of the world is also the refusal of life itself. Therefore, when she is institutionalised, it is an acknowledgement of self-annihilation that a seemingly altruistic albeit stereotypical society cannot overlook. Her actions, hence, garner pity. The interpretation is that the trauma of hypermasculinity inflicted by her father was imprinted so strongly into the psyche of a young Yeong-hye that she resorted to self-erasure to find a way out of that trauma. In such a case, she is a prey to the world; her transformation is a dissolution and her posthuman conversion is a dystopian turn. Madness, then, is a psychic disruption that could not be contained any longer.

However, it must be noted that throughout the book Yeong-hye gives herself the freedom of choice. She does what she does because she refuses to be a part of the system.

She does not want to have sexual relationships with her brother-in-law but allows him to paint flowers on her. She does not have food but asks for glasses of water. In her transition into a plant, she reclaims spaces naturally wherever she wants to. All of this redefines autonomy. This posthuman subjectivity is a reconfiguration of individualism (Braidotti 147). Yeong-hye does not assert herself into a system that she knows will not accommodate her. Instead, she refuses it altogether. Madness, then, is a label given to her because she displaces the normative tenets of human subjectivity.

Therefore, there are two alternative interpretations to it, and it seems that both the interpretations are necessary. The authorial intent behind an open-ended novel is perhaps that this ambiguity should not be fully resolved. Neither should a reading of resistance overlook Yeong-hye's suffering, nor should a reading of erasure push her reclamation as dystopian. It is in the collision of both these interpretations that the real problem of agency surfaces.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that in *The Vegetarian*, madness is a mode of misrecognition applied to forms of subjectivity that traverse humanist norms. What cannot be explained is construed as mad. Posthuman feminist theory allows for a re-reading of Yeong-hye's transformation as a radical reclamation of autonomy.

Rethinking agency is what this paper has primarily aimed at. If autonomy is tagged with rationality, relationality and socio-lingual presence, Yeong-hye's refusal to eat, speak and identify as a human erases subjectivity altogether. However, the reading, then, remains confined within the epistemological structures that Yeong-hye disrupts.

Therefore, it is important to view Yeong-hye's trajectory as an exposure of the fallacies of the anthropocentric society that considers humans as the epitome of intelligibility. Her pathologisation holds up a mirror to the society that cannot downplay its dominant discourses to recognise agency beyond its set template.

The Vegetarian, therefore, compels a reconsideration of the human itself. What it does is crucial for every marginalised voice.

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