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FAMILY IDENTITY IN HAN KANG'S *THE VEGETARIAN*

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ABSTRACT

The novel *The Vegetarian* was penned by Han Kang. It was published in the year 2007 in Korea and it was translated by Deborah Smith in the year 2016. The novella primarily deals with the story of Yeong-hye, a home-maker, who decides to stop eating meat after a nightmarish dream about human cruelty leads to devastating consequences in her personal and familial life. Through this the reader comes to know that the decisions taken by women will not be valid and the society or the dominant powers will make them to stop the decision and also, this novella deals with how men and society abuses the female body. This paper deals with the ideas of family and identity.

KEY WORDS:

Familial life, women's decision

INTRODUCTION

Han Kang is a South Korean writer. She won the Man Booker International Prize for fiction in the year 2016 for the novel *The Vegetarian*. The novel deals with a women's decision to stop eating meat and it further speaks about its consequences. This novel was her first book to be translated into English. Han's career in fiction began when she published the novel *Red Anchor* which won the Seoul Shinmun Spring Literary Contest. *Fruits of my Woman* (2000), *The Black Deer* (1998), *Your Cold Hand* (2002), *The Vegetarian* (2007), *Breath Fighting* (2010), and *Greek Lessons* (2011). She has won the awards such as Hankook Ilbo Excellent Writer's Award (1995), Korea Fiction Award (1999), Yi Sang Literary Award Grand Prize (2005), and Man Booker International Prize (2016).

The Vegetarian is a South Korean three part novella written by Han Kang and it was first published in the year 2007. Based on the short story *The Fruit of My Woman*, *The Vegetarian* is set in modern-day Seoul and it tells the story of Yeong-hye, a home-maker, whose to stop eating meat after a bloody, nightmarish dream about human cruelty leads to devastating consequences. This novella was

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published in the year 2007 in South Korea. *The Vegetarian* is Han's second book to be translated into English and it was translated by the British translator Deborah Smith. This novella is also considered as Korean translated literature's biggest. The novella primarily dealt with desire, shame, and empathy reflected by the characters' attempt to understand the people around them. Han Kang's achievement is to suggest that this defiant act of vegetarianism can kill several lives and threaten the order of a society. This writing challenges a tradition that demands a devotion to the family and the struggle for freedom. This novella completely focuses on the survival in the world.

The novella is divided into three parts and each part is narrated by each person and together it says about the alienation of an individual. The first part is narrated by Yeong-hye's husband, in the beginning of the novel itself he describes the nature of his wife that she is very silent and a kind of selfish person and also always she wanted to be alone. But the real conflict began when she declared herself that she is a vegetarian by breaking all the traditions and cultural norms followed in their society. And he was startled by hearing her decision for a nightmare and also he cannot abide his wife's small desire. The chapter ends with a painful scene and also it ends with the haunting family scene which is the act of abuse. The next chapter is narrated by her brother-in-law. He is a video-artist and he was attracted by the Mongolian mark or birth mark of Yeong-hye and obsessed with that. And he wanted to incorporate Yeong-hye's birth mark into his art. Due to his obsession he creates a work which spoils the life of both the sisters. Next chapter deals with the sisters violent upbringings. After all these incidents Yeong-hye refuses to eat food and is hospitalized and the doctor started to diagnose Yeong-hye with anorexia nervosa, and her sister started to bring her childhood favorites still she refused to eat. In-hye also now separated from her husband and lives rest of her life for her sister, Yeong-hye.

"Her life was no more than a ghostly pageant of exhausted endurance, no more real than a television drama. Death, who now stood by her side, was as familiar to her as a family member, missing for a long time but now returned."

In *The Vegetarian* Han Kang explores the conflict between two selves: one is greedy, primitive and the other is accountable to the family and society. "Existence precedes essence" is a central tenet of Jean-paul Sartre's philosophy – first a human exists and then she creates her essence. Likewise Yeong-hye is slowly sheds her essence by emotionally isolating herself into another world. She isolates herself into a world without meaning, like a plant or animal and while doing these entire things she ignores the social and cultural norms. And also the reader come to know that Yeong-hye, her sister and her brother-in-law all experience dreams in which they see their own reflections, only Yeong-hye surrenders herself into it and both her sister and brother-in-law surrenders them temporarily.

CONCLUSION

The Vegetarian is in second person narrative. The story of the protagonist is told through her family members such as her husband, her sister's husband and by her sister. Due to this, Yeong-hye is always framed through someone else, so that the reader cannot understand the emotions and feelings of Yeong-hye. And also she is described by her roles as wife, sister-in-law and sister. As a result, her disturbing behavior is always a little bit of a mystery. Korea's claustrophobic family oriented culture is evident in Han Kang's language. Now Yeong-hye is doing when she stops eating meat and playing her social role, is claiming back her identity. She is doing something that is outside her requirement and disrupts other people's lives, and she suffers the consequences.

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