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The Vegetarian Animosities in Literature

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ABSTRACT

Being a vegetarian, means a lot in the present era of political camouflages in India. What one eats determines a major part of one's culture, class and identity. While some people are brutally tortured and tormented on behalf of the flesh of an animal they sell or eat in the country, some others are purposefully eating the so-called banned food to emphasize the rights they are assured by the constitution. Ironically, it is at the same era veganism is gradually moving up with its popularity and accredits its glamour among the world.

In this, paper “The Vegetarian animosities in Literature.” I like to discuss the idea of vegetarianism and its ecological and cultural extremities with the help of the novel 'The Vegetarian' by Han Kang. Which gives the idea that eating living things does not lead to enlightenment. The paper explores the links between food and ones identity. Keywords: vegetarian, feminism, trauma, culture, ecology, environment.

“One cannot think well, love well, and sleep well, if one has not dined well”

Virginia Woolf

The food one eats decides his class, caste, identity and nature. Cultural studies often give prominence to the food habits of a society to place it in the social strata. It always has been a bone of contention to prioritize vegetarian and non-vegetarian food. The wild acceptance of Brahminical ideologies in India propagates the aura of vegetarianism, especially during the present political camouflages. There are powerful crooked attempts to vegetarianise the country in the name of traditions and conventions.

Vegetarianism as a practice began in many parts of the world centuries ago. Pythagoras, the Greek mathematician and his followers practiced one of the first recorded diets known as vegetarianism. He advocated a diet devoid of the flesh of slaughtered animals. It was because he concerned mainly about health, and wanted to make people compassionate to other animals. Until the late nineteenth century non-meat eaters were generally known as 'Pythagoreans'. In addition, he

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avoided beans from the diet, because of the belief that beans contains or transmitted souls. The cultural and religious intimations in his era prompted him to adopt the life style and diet.

Vegetarianism began as a religious practice in the many parts of the world and continued to be relevant in the religious conventions. People who belong to either middle class or high class have a tendency to choose vegetarian diet easily, as they are more concerned about the health and other cultural values of a society. The lower class people, proper food is a luxury and they are denied of any choices over food. Meat is a desirable food for them, as they cannot afford it regularly. In India the lower class and lower caste people are considered subhuman as they eat the flesh of the dead animals. These people are culturally and socially ill treated because of the food they eat. The authoritarian politics is always subjected to the views of brahminical ideologies so they banned meat, and meat eaters are degraded and alienated as a part of the political agenda.

While it comes to gender, a major part of the vegetarians comprises of woman. Feminism is somewhat connected to vegetarianism. Masculine qualities are always associated with strength and valor. Hunting, and slaughtering animals add up to their pride and heroism. Eating meat, in order to build their body and to maintain their strength is recommended in most cultures in the world. Meanwhile woman tends to be attracted towards the vegetarian diet easily as the vegetarian diet is symbolically attributed to the feminine qualities. Light, low fat and fresh food always suit them for their health and character. In many religions, women are advised to skip non-vegetarian items from their diet as part of fasting in some religious events. Women are said to keep the un written rules of less eating and have to keep themselves mannered in food habits. Another connection with woman and vegetarianism is that woman are said to be more compassionate towards fellow animals and nature. Slaughtering and eating the blood stained flesh of animals are considered less human and they prefer to be vegetarians. Some of them prefer to be vegans keeping away themselves from eating and using all the animal products. There are many references in literature that shows the link between woman and vegetarianism.

'The Vegetarian', a South Korean three-part novel written by Han Kang, depicts the issue in a phantasmagoric way. The plot is both traumatic and harrowing one, which chronicles the life of an ordinary woman. Her decision to stop eating meat, twisted and turned her smooth life to a much happening one. The novel, published in 2007 accomplished reception and recognition from many parts of the world. It is a noted fact that veganism attained popularity in the world with the year 2010. Many celebrities and leaders of the world opted vegan diet, and that made the diet more credited and accepted among the youth. It is also an ecofriendly environmental diet. When people are becoming more considerate about the environmental values veganism attributes all the qualities and requirements they needed. Now there are many vegan stores opened, and vegan food is available in many restaurants. Eating raw and fresh food, without harming anything in the nature is believed to influence ones character in a regenerating way.

On the contrary Yeong-hye, a Korean family woman when she was overwhelmed by a series of blood stained dreams, turned to be a vegetarian suddenly as it was the only choice left for her. With that decision she changed herself into another person, the abstention from meat and flesh makes her estranged from her family, from her lifestyle and ultimately from herself. Mr Cheong, her husband considers her 'completely unremarkable' in all the ways. Cheong finds her as a dutiful wife without any more wishes or requirements in life. The uneventful and so the peaceful life of the couple got troubled suddenly when he finds Yeong-hye disposing all the meat in the house. While asking for the reason she explained it in a line that she had a dream. she stopped eating meat, cooking or keeping the meat in house. She rejects meat first, and then she dispersed herself from other individual activities. Finally, she refuses humanity itself.

Here the writer makes it clear that food is very much connected and interlinked with ones nature and identity. It is somewhat similar to the popular saying 'you are what you eat'. but as the culture and conventions implicates becoming a vegetarian here never helped her either to be patient or to have a peaceful life. She became a violent person and all the love,

kindness and attachment in her found to be missing.

When Cheong finds his obedient wife behaving like someone else with her own choices and decisions in life he got puzzled and he informed her parents and asked them to make a solution. The family finds fault with her vegetarian diet, they want her to eat meat again to bring her back to the 'normal' state of mind. Her father, a Vietnam war hero forcefully opens her mouth and compelled her to eat a lump of meat during the dinner. She spits the meat out and in an unpredictable way, she freed herself from the forceful clutches of her father and took the knife from the table and cut herself in the wrist. The incident made her aloof and alienated from the family and relationships. Here a piece of meat, which she once ate with pleasure and desire, happens to be the reason for her withdrawal from her ordinary life.

She often complains about having a weight or lump in her chest. She prefers herself to be less dressed always to escape the feeling. In the novel it is clear that all the scary, blood-spattered dreams she had in many nights, which prompts her to be abstained from her usual diet are connected with a childhood mental trauma. Once when she was a child of nine years her pet dog bites her and her father, a war hero believed that driving the dog to keep running until the point of death is a milder punishment for biting his daughter. He chained the dog to the back side of his motor cycle and moved the motor cycle in a circle. The dog ran breathlessly behind. With in some time the dog vomited blackish red blood and it was tortured to death in this way. She remembers the panting helpless look in the eyes of the dying dog. Her father and his friends believed that to heal the wound caused by a dog bite one has to eat the same dog. On that evening Yeong-hye had an entire bowlful of dog meat with rice. She can find the two eyes of her dear dog, on the surface of the soup. She was a child at that time with no choice left than to obey her father, so she was compelled to watch her dog murdered in a callous way and more shockingly she became the reason for the murder. The last breathless panting look in the eyes of the dog meant a lot to her and that became the seed of a mental trauma, which have grown up with her. The shocking incident was preserved there in the memory of the woman. That remains as a lump in her chest that caused discomfort in all these years.

As Cathy Caruth says, trauma is an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradictions of experience and language. Traumatic events exist as memories and they are not easily recognizable truths. Caruth sees trauma as it often occurs in a delayed manner. Repetitive hallucinations too add the intensity or destiny of it:

“Trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (*Unclaimed Experience* 11).

Here Yeong's childhood trauma develops with her with all the ages. It was there in her conscious and unconscious memories, all the other oppressing incidents added its intensity. Finally the web of dilemmas tortured her as horrifying dreams which directs her to the abstention of meat and finally to the abstention of humanity. Trauma works in different ways across cultures. The untreated and unresolved trauma often leads to many other problems. Her unconscious mind finds a way out of it by avoiding meat from her diet and from her home; she finally possesses the freedom from the haunting memory and bloody dreams, or she let the dreams outlive her emotional oppressions.

She was then hospitalized and there also she is reluctant towards eating non vegetarian food. In addition to that she kept herself away from considering others and minimized speaking. Because from the bottom of her heart she was finding herself as never before in her life, for others she became strange and different but it was at this period of mental trauma and struggle she finds herself true to her heart. Relieved from the hospital, and relieved from her family life she stayed alone in an apartment, there appears a drastic change in her behavior. She thought herself as a plant, and realized that there is no need of food at all. She sits in sunlight often naked herself as a plant which photosynthesize its food with the sunlight.

All the changes in her began with the abstention of some food items. She became a vegan and contradictorily she became a violent, different person with the change in diet. She began to behave like an animal in many ways with the change of vegan diet. Finally, she stopped eating and drinking at all, and feeling herself like a plant in the end of the novel.

The novel is actually not about vegetarianism, but it prioritizes the selection and abstention of food and it is interlinked with the identity of a person. The novel turmoil the prejudices about the calm and patient nature of vegetarians. Here Yeong-hye becomes violent and stubborn while she prefers the vegetarian food. It is a noted fact that with the abstention of meat from her diet, Yeong-hye made her free from the patriarchal control of her husband and father.

Feminism and vegetarianism are interconnected in such a way that both the movements are against oppression. Men hunt animals, bring them under their control and treat them as their slaves to prove themselves strong and fit to the customs and patriarchal notions of the society. They slaughter the animals for flesh. Eating meat is necessary to build their body. Most of the oppressions of these kind are also happening to the woman in the society from the part of men. A reference can be found in the Greek myth of Zeus, the powerful god once got attracted by the beautiful goddess Metis. He followed her subdues her and finally rapes her after the sexual violence Zeus opens his mouth and swallows Metis. The myth is intimation on the exploitation of woman by men, it also illustrate the links between sexual violence and the consumption of meat.

In 'Surfacing' Margaret Atwood writes about her idea of eating meat. According to her the animals die to meet the benefits of man. We ate them out of cans, so we are eaters of death. and she says the dead Christ flesh resurrects us from inside, which is actually granting us life.

Carol J Adam in her book 'The Sexual Politics of Meat' describes her ideas about meat eating and she explores the inter connections between feminism and vegetarianism. Woman and animal are similarly positioned in a patriarchal world. both of them are objectified in the perception of the patriarchal society. The world believed that meat of animals and the flesh of woman are for the satisfaction of men. Vegetarianism finds a way to reject that notion of ownership. Rejection of meat and animal products is a way to express and explore their own subjectivity. They are trying to relieve animals from the object of category in which patriarchal culture had placed them.

Feminist vegetarian activity declares the acceptance and celebration of nature; it is against consuming animals, dead or slaughtered. There are a majority who prefers vegetarian diet because of the empathy and love they had for the animals on earth. There are several reasons for one to choose vegetarian diet, health benefits, environmental thoughts and animal caring and love are some of the main reasons. Now, when there is a hike in environmental concerns, being a vegetarian or vegan constitutes a lot more cultural implications. Treating the earth as a mother and animals as fellow beings makes the man devoid of eating meat; some may go to the extent of avoiding all animal products in their day today life.

The environmental considerations make one shifts from vegetarian to vegan. The term vegetarian is used from around 1839 to refer to vegetarian diet. Before that in 1813 P B Shelley wrote an article 'A Vindication of Natural Diet' advocating abstinence from animal food and spirituous liquors. vegetarianism established as a movement in nineteenth century in England and United states. Donald Watson coined the term vegan in 1944, he co founded the vegan society in England. Veganism is a part of punk culture which stood against the mainstream accepted cultural values in the society. Punks usually portray meat eating as a form of patriarchy. They subvert male authority through accepting vegetarian ways of living.

Punk sub culture celebrates veganism as a cultural movement. They neglect all the privileges while challenging the social hierarchies in the society. they are also dead against the corporate domination. They opt anarchism as their life style and they are Influenced by environmentalism. The subculture is actually against racist, sexist divisions. They

celebrate Veganism, as it is differentiated from the mainstream food routine. Punks associate the civilizing process of producing and cooking food with the human domination of nature and associate veganism with feminism. Dylan Clark in his essay 'The Raw and the Rotten :Punk cuisine' explain it as :

“Indeed vegetarianism for many punks is partly a feminist practice, but it also reveals ideological fissures with in punk culture. Meat , with its prestige, caloric content and proximity to physical violence, has been widely associated with masculinity (Adams 1990; Rifkin 1992). Yet even within punk culture, which is critical of both sexism and meat-eating (O' Hara 1999), some punks continue to produce an overtly sexist , masculine presence (Nguyen 1999) and one associated with eating meat. Meat for some punks is a way to challenge feminism in punk and to reassert masculine power. Other punk meat eating falls into the categories of those who flaunt meat-eating as a way of challenging punk orthodoxy.” (235)

Punk subculture treats veganism as a cultural challenge, which meets the need of environmental ideologies.

The food one eats expresses the political cultural, environmental ideologies of a person. Indeed the same food decides our character, identity and moral values regarding the environment. The novel 'The vegetarian', even though it does not have much to do with the idea of vegetarian diet, the plot reflects the inter connection between the food and identity in detail. Food here becomes an epitome of our ideologies, values and personality. When the food one consumes decides what we are, always beware and be conscious about the selection of food.

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