

Transcending the Human: Manifestations and Repercussions of Trauma in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

Vishnu S P

Kizhakathil (416-B)
SVMP School Road
Aralummoodu P O
Trivandrum, Kerala

Abstract:

Trauma studies has been of interest to psychologists and social scientists ever since Freud's theories of the unconscious regarding the repercussions of childhood trauma in a victim's life gained currency. However, Trauma theory as a distinct theory of its own can be traced back to the publication of the *Unclaimed Experience*(1996) by Cathy Caruth followed by the works of Shoshana Felman , both Professors of Comparative literature at Emory University. Trauma narratives, which exemplifies the convolutions of trauma grants the readers access to the psychological undercurrents below the behavioural superstructures. The South Korean author Han Kang's novels,almost all of which count under this rubric, explores the imperfections, complexities and existential concerns of human nature .Her Man Booker International Prize winning novel, *The Vegetarian* which captivated the literary cognoscenti around the globe is primarily built around the protagonist Yeong Hye's conversion to vegetarianism, which later turns out to be a manifestation of her unconscious desire to extricate herself from the constraints and violence of the embodied human existence, and recast herself into a plant. Weaved into a polyphonic narrative, the novel takes a non-linear course in illuminating the roots of Yeong Hye's abhorrence for meat in her memories of oppression and helplessness. The novel traverses Yeong Hye's childhood through her dreams and memory narratives and a first person narration by one of her oppressors, her husband Mr. Cheong. This paper essays to analyse an underlying theme in the novel which seeks to explicate with the lives of the characters that the human instincts to transcend the limitations of the embodied existence in a conformist society is a major source of trauma. It also attempts to plot the author's portrayal of the cyclic nature of trauma as it transmutes from one victim to another.

Keywords: Trauma theory, Childhood Trauma, Polyphonic narration, Memory narratives, Transcendence

The term Trauma is defined as a deeply distressing experience that gets lodged in one's unconscious and have long lasting repercussions in one's life, and at its apogee often prove conducive to many psychological complexities, disruptive relationships etc which in turn leads to more trauma, thus forming a never-ending cycle of distress. The minacious nature of the phenomenon owes to the disguises it takes in the victims' lives which makes decoding their behavioural 'anomalies' onerous. Cathy Caruth's phrase "Unclaimed Experiences" defines best, the furtive functioning of trauma that refuses to reveal its workings even to the victim. Disentangling these knots of aching memories to reason with

them is crucial in at least partially averting or curing its consequences. Trauma narratives are the fictional narratives that aids readers as well as writers of trauma to access traumatic experience and comprehend its reaches. This function that these narratives fulfil have granted them an important place among diverse artistic, scholarly and testimonial representations in illuminating the personal and social aspects of trauma which in its therapeutic incarnation Suzette A. Henke called Scriptotherapy.

The American sociologist Kai Theodor Erikson explains that trauma can result from “a constellation of life’s experiences as well as from a discreet event, from a prolonged exposure to danger as well as from a sudden flash of terror, from a continuing pattern of abuse as well as from a single assault, from a period of attenuation and wearing away as well as from a moment of shock.”(Erikson,457) Symptoms of trauma has been identified as including “periods of nervous restless activity- scanning the surrounding world for signs of danger,...explosive rages,...depression, feelings of helplessness, a loss of various motor skills and a general closing off of the spirit as the mind tries to insulate itself from further harm.”(Erikson,457) While the regenerative nature of trauma makes it a dire necessity to curtail its cruise, trauma narratives that essays to decode trauma and deal with it has served even therapeutic purposes. Trauma narratives, even when purely fictional, demands a need to be analysed and discussed as many of them seeks to educate how trauma blows the death knell to peaceful lives, how it ends up creating anti socials, how it percolates down generation barriers etc., and also raises pertinent questions associated with the writing and reading of trauma as they orient “their readers in ethical dilemmas analogous to those of trauma survivors”(Vickroy,1)

Some Prominent names of this mode of writing has been Toni Morrison, Jamaica Kinkaid, Marguerite Duras, Pat Barker, Dorothy Allison, Monica Ali et al. The latest sensation in this realm are the novels of the South Korean writer Han Kang, whose *The Vegetarian* (2016) won numerous accolades including the first Man Booker International Prize ever to be bestowed on an individual work . The book has three sections titled *The Vegetarian*, *Mangolian Mark* and *Flaming Trees* and was originally published as three novellas in South Korea. Though initially received as “very extreme and bizarre” in Korea it has since received commendations from some of the most distinguished connoisseurs of literature around the globe and has become a best seller, with translation rights sold in over twenty countries. In *The Vegetarian* Han Kang illustrates in haunting hues the trauma infested lives of its protagonist Yeong Hye and her family. The novel depicts humanity’s vain pursuit of transcending the restraints and violence of the embodied existence in a society that demands conformity as the root cause of trauma. This compulsion to shatter the limitations and attain agency is most conspicuous in the portrayals of Yeong Hye and her sister In Hye’s husband, who remains unnamed throughout the novel. While everyone judges them by the facades, the only person who seem to come closer to understanding them is In Hye. While the apparent veneer of madness limits other’s understanding of them, only In Hye sees through it albeit it necessitates undergoing some traumatic experiences herself. Born of trauma Yeong Hye’s, quest for the transcendental tends towards shedding all that is human, and becoming a plant. Yeong Hye wishes to achieve the mysterious tranquillity of the majestic trees in her memories. Traces of the lines that plots this transgressive pilgrimage in search of the realm above the blood-stained human existence in her mind can be traced back to her childhood, which unfolds in bits and pieces throughout the fragmentary narrative. Born into a severely patriarchal family, her childhood had been a continuous losing of selfhood. Her memories about her father are mostly those of beatings, cruelty and oppression. Although her

conditioned mind echoes to the demands of a cruel patriarchy that has been draining her of her individuality, it makes one interpret that an undercurrent must have been cleansing her of her illusions. This reaches its ultimatum as she starts identifying herself with the oppressed. She starts finding herself, In Hye and their mother in the thousands of animals that she slaughtered to satisfy the demands of her palette. She perceives in them the same helplessness and hopelessness that she herself felt under her father's despotism.

The narrative of oppression follows in her married life too in the form of a husband for whom she embodies an instrument to satisfy his ego. The early account of her traumatic life appears to the reader through the narrative of Mr. Cheong, her husband, from whose vantage point the first novella is related. The reader learns from Mr. Cheong that even his marriage with this 'unremarkable' woman was due to his affinity with mediocrity. He married Yeong Hye because of her 'passive personality' which would spare him the trouble of fretting about any sort of competition. He chose Yeong Hye because:

"There is no need to affect intellectual leanings in order to win her over, or to worry that she might be comparing me to the preening men who pose in fashion catalogues, and she didn't get worked up if I happened to be late for one of our meetings. The paunch that started appearing in my mid-twenties, my skinny legs and forearms that steadfastly refused to bulk up in spite of my best efforts, the inferiority complex that I used to have about the size of my penis- I could rest assured that I wouldn't have to fret about such things on her account"(3)

Troubles begins to surface as in the middle of a night Cheong wakes up to find Yeong Hye standing alone in the kitchen, staring blankly owing to a violent claustrophobic dream. The guilt in her traumatised mind starts percolating down to her conscience through these dreams which soon becomes a frequent affair. In one of those dreams she finds herself trapped inside a rolled in straw matting in a red barn like building:

"A long bamboo stick strung with great, blood-red gashes of meat, blood still dripping down. Try to push past but the meat, there is no end to the meat, and no exit. Blood in my mouth, blood-soaked clothes sucked onto my skin"(12)

The dream testifies to her inner malady as she struggles in the asphyxiating sense of guilt. The third part of the dream is highly reminiscent of one of the greatest portrayals of guilt in the Shakespearean canon- Lady Macbeth. This reminds one of the sleepwalking scene in which Lady Macbeth is lamenting the permanence of her crime as she says – "Here is the smell of blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand."(Act 5, Sc 1). It is a similar sense of deep seated guilt that we find in the disturbed thoughts of Yeong Hye in her dream:

"...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"(12)

Yeong Hye's extreme aversion to eating meat, while it represents her displeasure at and escape from being a partaker of the cruelties that humanity embodies, can also be interpreted as a revolt against the traumatic memories that the family gave her. This revolt appears at its extreme at the family meeting when, on not complying with their demands to eat meat, her father slaps her and tries to force feed her. We find her screaming in distress like an animal, brandishing a fruit knife at others and slitting her own wrist. The incident is highly expressive of her agony at being deprived of agency, of having denied voice to her

individuality. Her embodied self has never been her own. From the various perspectives that unveils through the course of this polyphonic narrative including her own, the reader learns that her is an identity which has been subjected to violent conditioning. Although her primary oppressors were all men, the female members of her family including herself had been silent perpetrators of violence in their act of passively conforming to the norms of patriarchy. Their helpless state of being obliged to promote male violence makes her hate womanhood also. The situation is aggravated as she tends to compare her self-the victim- with that of the helpless animals she victimised. She seems to find in herself shades of both the victimised as well as the victimizer, igniting in her an intense feeling of guilt and empathy towards them. However, the needs of her conditioned human body, along with the memories of the lives she took and the acts of violence in which she was a silent promoter keeps exacerbating the situation for her. In a memory narrative Yeong Hye relates such an act, the brutal punishment that her pet dog Whitey suffers at the hands of her father for biting her. Its singed tail is wound around her wound. After having tied it to a tree he scorches it with a lamp and later is tied to his motorcycle and drives in circle:

“The motorcycle engine starts, and Father begins to drive in circle. The dog runs along behind...Without moving a muscle I stand just inside the gate watching Whitey, eyes rolling and gasping for breath, gradually exhaust himself. Every time his gleaming eyes meet my own I glare even more fiercely. Bad dog, you’d bite me?... At six laps, the dog vomits blackish-red blood, trickling from its mouth and open throat. As blood and froth mix together, I stand stiffly upright and stare at those two glittering eyes...That evening there was a feast ...The saying goes that for a wound caused by a dog bite to heal you have to eat that same dog...I remember the two eyes that had watched me, while the dog was made to run on,... and how later they had seemed to appear, flickering, on the surface of the soup. But I don’t care. I really didn’t care. ”(42)

In juxtaposing human and animal suffering, Han Kang also scrutinizes the anthropocentric notions of oppression that excludes anything that doesn’t come under the rubric of humanity as the other. By drawing parallels with the oppressed animals, the author highlights the similarity in the creation of the other by the dominant subject through a sequestered promotion of selective violence. This enlightenment on the comparability of the others in terms of the *modus operandi* behind their deprivation can be interpreted as the reason behind Yeong Hye’s anguish. The terrible memories of those lives that abruptly ended with her consent keep reminding her of her inescapability from her past guilts, as her body still holds all the screams in it. The reader gets a glimpse of Yeong Hye’s guilt conscience while recuperating in the hospital after her suicide attempt:

“My wrist is okay... The thing that hurts me is my chest. Something is stuck in my solar plexus. Yells and howls, threaded together, layer upon layer, are enmeshed to form that lump. Because of meat. I ate too much meat. The lives of the animals I ate have all lodged there. Blood and flesh, all those butchered bodies are scattered in every nook and cranny, and though the physical remnants were excreted, their lives still stubbornly to my insides. One time, just one more time, I want to shout. I want to throw myself through the pitch-black window. Maybe that would finally get this lump out of my body... Nobody can help me. Nobody can save me. Nobody can make me breathe.”(49)

Construction of subjectivity in a child is a process that begins with birth itself. From the very beginning itself the development of consciousness of a child is influenced by the social context, which includes other's actions, gestures etc , into which it has been positioned. This immediacy of social influence has been acknowledged by eminent psychoanalysts like Jacques Lacan and T. Berry Brazelton. Various studies conducted by the prominent psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Daniel Stern, points towards the importance of parent/child interaction in the development of intersubjectivity in a child. Mothers' role in this is considered extremely significant as they act as secure psychic vessels, aiding the child in fantasising, imagining, memorising or in short making sense out of the experiences of the world before taking it in. However, traumatisation of mother can render this intersubjective nurturance almost impossible, which is the case with both the sisters. However, trauma takes different pathways in both the characters. While Yeong Hye develops an extreme hate for humanity, in In Hye, we find what Sandor Ferenczi referred to as Compulsive care-giving. While engaged in his famed psychoanalytic sessions with Elisabeth Severn, he found in himself as in with many others, a tendency to become the best possible mother to his patients, the reason for which, he assumes, was that he was never loved by his mother as much as he wanted. In Hye's childhood with Yeong Hye, who is four years younger to her, under the nurturance of a mother who herself is a victim, creates in In hye a motherly affection towards her sister. However, dissecting it further reveals that although an act of empathy at the beginning, the experience of mothering her sister also develops in her a sense of agency which she has always been deprived of. While explaining it as an act of empathy, it also helps find her in a state superior to that of her then present state of victimhood. This also helps her keep the aftereffects of childhood trauma at bay for quite a long time. However, the repressed pangs of trauma is augmented owing to the tug of war between her conscious and unconscious intentions and supposed failures. The possibility that she could have stopped her father from beating and oppressing Yeong Hye makes her feel guilty for the state of madness Yeong Hye is in. Several players seem to be contributing towards building this situation. While having wanted to protect her sister from difficulties since an early stage in life, the present state in which Yeong Hye is trapped in marks a kind of failure for In Hye. Since the act of mothering had given her agency to creativity in place of the undesirable conformity and servitude, the anagnorisis that she herself had been a reason for Yeong Hye's misery subverts the positive creativity that she intended. Her inability to defend Yeong Hye in front of her father, while makes it possible to interpret it as the result of a conditioned conviction regarding the right of a father to oppress his children, it can also be read as an act of sympathising with her father, as probably she herself has been longing for power, something her conscious mind wouldn't prefer to acknowledge as that would make her identify with her oppressor, her father. From her tendency to be a mother to Yeong Hye , her choice of career as an entrepreneur, and her protective attitude towards her husband one can find this longing to hold power. This incongruity between her conscious and unconscious wishes manifest as extreme guilt at the agony of her sister proves conducive to her trauma that appears to her as dreams and hallucinations.

In Hye's husband's incestuous act towards Yeong Hye also adds to her guilt, as a retrospection makes her feel that partly she was a reason for that too. Being a person who loves his art more than anything, his loveless marriage with In Hye whose failure in appreciating or understanding his art, itself acts as a trauma in his life, culminating in a long stagnancy of imagination. Rather than love, it was the same motherly feelings that she had towards him. It was his defenceless state that drew her towards him, probably because he was

nothing like her father. This could also be read as an unconscious desire to dominate the sex that oppressed her once. He, already a victim of an extreme sense of inferiority which could probably be a product of his childhood, suffers more trauma with the incidents that follow. His sense of inferiority is evident in the rough sketches of the video art which he shoots with Yeong Hye. The headless human figures engaging in sexual act speaks volumes about the conflicts vexing his conscience which he himself acknowledges.

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* abounds in images that explores the traumatic roots of the existential crisis that mars the lives of its characters. In this endeavour, the overwhelmingly painful narrative dives into the dimension of dreams and memories to make sense out of the surreptitious currents of those 'unclaimed experiences', that clandestinely narrates lives. In this novel, Han kang contemplates the inability of transcending the ultimate lack of agency and otherness as the major source of trauma in many miserable human existences. By picturing in poignant hues the transmutation of trauma from one character to another, the novel addresses the cyclic nature of trauma. *The Vegetarian* while being an exploration of the author's own seemingly insurmountable hesitation in embracing the human, harbouring questions of the enormity of human violence, unfolds a pessimistic world view of the impossibility of innocence. According to Geoffrey Hartman trauma narratives prove ethical precisely because they address "the other as a responsive, vulnerable, even unpredictable being"(1995: 549)Hence, notwithstanding the pessimistic views the novel upholds, the novel qualifies in terms of its ethical and functional aspect as it addresses the exigency of understanding trauma.

Works Cited

- Kang, Han. *The Vegetarian*. Trans. Deborah Smith. London: Portbello Books,2015.
- Abubakar, Sadia. "Art as Narrative: Recounting Trauma through Literature" *International Journal of Management and Social Sciences*.01(2017):118-123.research-advances.org.17 September.2017.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- Henke,Suzette A. *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life Writing*. New York: St.Martin's,1998.
- Erikson, Kai. "Notes on Trauma and Community." *American Imago* 48.4(1991):455-71.
- Vickroy, Laurie. *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*.US: The University of Virginia Press,2002.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOwJKbJxVUM>