

# Green Thinking: An Eco-critical Reading of Han Kang's The Vegetarian

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## **Abstract**

*Green Thinking calls for a conceptual shift from the human-centric to the bio-centric. Eco-literature is critical of the existence of humanity that harms the environment. Han Kang's The Vegetarian is an eco-literary novel that brings out aspects of eco-consciousness such as love for nature and nature's fraternity. The theories of Anthropocentrism and Biocentrism are analyzed by way of Yeong-hye who is the protagonist of the novel The Vegetarian. Through Yeong-hye, the anthropocentric aspect of human violence towards nature, and the biocentric aspects such as a sense of guilt over past violence, the need for innocence, a feeling of repentance, reconciliation with nature and becoming nature are elucidated. Shifting from non-vegetarianism to rigorous vegetarianism, the tale of Yeong-hye throws light on the ecophile's conception of nature, its fraternity, and the remarkable truth about nature. Kang calls for an eco-conscious and biocentric way of living. The paper titled "Green Thinking: An Eco-critical Reading of Han Kang's The Vegetarian" explores biocentrism and its feasibility.*

**Keywords:** *green-thinking, ecophile, anthropocentrism, biocentrism, vegetarianism, zelkova*

## **1. Introduction**

Green Thinking calls for a conceptual change—moving from the human-centric to the bio-centric. Eco-consciousness is the state of showing concern for the environment. The concept of Green Thinking is associated with eco-consciousness and eco-criticism. Glotfelty<sup>[5]</sup> (1996) writes, "Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (p. xviii). Also, Glotfelty<sup>[5]</sup> writes that "Ecocriticism expands the notion of 'the world' to include the entire ecosphere" (p. xix). The purpose of the research paper is to explore

anthropocentrism in terms of vegetarianism, and the feasibility of its opposite, biocentrism with respect to the protagonist of Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian*.

Han Kang is a well-known South Korean poet, short-story writer and novelist. Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* was published in 2007. It was translated to English by Deborah Smith, a renowned British translator of Korean fiction. Through her novel, Kang asks whether it is possible for a human to be completely innocent, and the ways of suppressing this violent nature ("Han Kang <sup>[6]</sup>", 2016, p.60). *The Vegetarian* also throws light on patriarchy, feminism, and can be explored in terms of eco-feminism and psychoanalysis.

The novel begins with an account of the non-vegetarian life lived by the protagonist Yeong-hye. Her husband, Cheong, describes her as "the most ordinary woman in the world" (Kang<sup>[10]</sup>, 2007/2015, p. 18). He is hardly able to think of her family without bringing to mind the smell of meat and the various meat dishes his wife excels in. He doesn't accept his wife's new vegetarian life-style not only because she forces him to follow her ways, but also because of her emaciated body and a pale look which results from sleeplessness caused by fear of a recurring dream. Yeong-hye is tormented by the dream in which she sees herself as a bloody predator, which makes her feel guilty of her love for meat. She feels that giving up meat and products made out of animal skin would give her a sense of peace. This results in Yeong-hye getting into a conflict with her strict non-vegetarian family who forces her to eat meat. As a result of this unbearable intrusion in her quiet life, she attempts suicide and falls sick thereafter. She is admitted to a psychiatric hospital because of her innocent willingness to sit half-naked in public and at home. Yeong-hye's brother-in-law uses this opportunity to film her with flowers painted on her body which projects her nature-loving ideals. Her sister's attempts to revive her are futile as Yeong-hye's steadfast relationship with trees and nature seems irreversible. As an eco-literary novel, *The Vegetarian* addresses the subject of ecology and eco-consciousness by presenting human violence towards nature and their general attitude towards nature, a sense of guilt, innocence, repentance and reconciliation with nature, and becoming nature. Kang brings out these aspects of eco-consciousness and the understanding of nature through the protagonist Yeong-hye.

## 1. 1. Literature review

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* has been analysed from various points of view by several researchers. Starting with the title 'Vegetarian' and delving deep into conflicts and theories, the novel has been anatomized in the light of meat-consumption and vegetarianism, patriarchy, post-war trauma, feminism, post-feminism, eco-feminism, eco-criticism and psychoanalysis. The protagonist of the novel has been studied as a strong woman whose psyche is affected by male domination, and who fights back refusing to be suppressed and chooses her own identity as a non-representative of the human species, which is opposed to the patriarchal system and normal human behaviour. This research paper titled "Green Thinking: An Eco-critical Reading of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*" differs from the above mentioned concepts and theories by its attempt to study the novel by probing into the novel's eco-critical message and examining the concepts of Anthropocentrism and biocentrism. The paper deals with the human relationship with nature illustrated by Han Kang.

## 2. The notion of anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism<sup>[1]</sup> is the view in which humans are the central and the most significant entities in the world (Boslaugh, 2016) and hence dominate over nature. Boslaugh also delves into the origin of anthropocentrism, which is, the Garden of Eden. God instructs man to subdue and have dominion over all other living beings, and the natural world has value only as it benefits humankind. This view is emphasized by White<sup>[15]</sup> (1996) when he alleges the contemptuous behaviour of humans towards nature and their urge to exploit nature by doing as they please. Through the novel, Kang brings out a noticeable aspect of anthropocentrism, that is, meat consumption. Kang shows that eating meat is a symbol of human violence by means of projecting the vegetarian protagonist Yeong-hye.

### 2.1. Meat consumption and human violence

The Korean society at large is a non-vegetarian society and it is a challenge to be a vegetarian. However, Gibson<sup>[4]</sup> (2020) writes that veganism is on the rise in South Korea. Lee Won-bok<sup>[7]</sup>, the head of Korea Vegetarian Union tells *The Korean Herald* that “the number of vegans in South Korea has tripled from 10 years ago” (He-rim, 2020). Won-bok’s statistics is accurate for the reason that non-vegetarianism was at its peak around the time of the novel’s publication, in 2007.

Kang, in her novel, *The Vegetarian* presents Yeong-hye as a typical South-Korean wife who is like any other non-vegetarian. Her dexterity in cooking meat is described by her husband who says, “There had also been a thick chicken and duck soup with large chunks of potato, and a spicy broth packed full of tender clams and mussels, of which I could happily polish off three helpings in a single sitting” (Kang<sup>[10]</sup>, 2007/2015, p.15). However, when the protagonist Yeong-hye understands the violence she has inflicted on the innocent animals and birds she has killed and eaten, she throws away all the meat from the refrigerator which has been stored for months. She also gives up milk and eggs and anything of animal yield. Yeong-hye dreams of her own violent butchery:

Dreams of my hands around someone’s throat, throttling them, grabbing the swinging ends of their long hair and hacking it all off, sticking my finger into their slippery eyeball . . . The butcher’s shop, and I have to clamp my hand over my mouth. Along the length of my tongue to my lips, slick with saliva. Leaking out between my lips, trickling down. (Kang<sup>[10]</sup>, 2007/2015, pp. 32-33)

Yeong-hye has the same dream for quite a long time. She struggles in order to annihilate her guilty past. A few days into her new vegetarian life-style, Yeong-hye’s husband Mr. Cheong takes her to a restaurant for a dinner party hosted by his employer. The few people consisting of the employer and his wife, colleagues and their spouses gathered around the table represent the whole of meat-loving Koreans. Almost every person around the table stab Yeong-hye for her vegetarian lifestyle. Mr. Cheong’s employer comments on Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism: “My word, so you’re one of those ‘vegetarians’, are you?” (Kang<sup>[10]</sup>, 2007/2015, p. 23). The employer’s wife strikes at Yeong-hye branding her vegetarianism as against human nature because the former believes that meat-eating is a basic human instinct.

She goes on to indirectly call Yeong-hye a narrow-minded person who lacks balance. When Yeong-hye's family comes to know about her new lifestyle, they are surprised. Her parents apologize to her husband through phone. Mr. Cheong takes this opportunity to exaggerate his situation. He tells his mother-in-law that he has not had a piece of meat in his own house, although he knows that he has the means and opportunity to eat meat outside his house, at restaurants and at his workplace. Her mother feels ashamed of the defiant Yeong-hye. Her sister, In-hye too makes an apology over the phone. The whole family decides to change the situation during the upcoming get-together. However, they make Yeong-hye's situation even worse. They fail to understand and refuse to do so. According to Yeong-hye's family, there is not a thing in the world that is inedible. Yeong-hye's family is thus a representation of the meat-loving Korean society as portrayed by Kang.

### 3. The principle of biocentrism

Biocentrism<sup>[3]</sup> is a moral perception that all life deserves to be treated equally (DesJardins, 2015). It is challenging and extremely demanding. "It is difficult to understand how any living being, and especially humans, could survive without doing harm to other living beings" (DesJardins, 2015, Challenges section). A biocentrist has an ethical dilemma over the choice of food, moreover, a dilemma over eating. Jainism<sup>[8]</sup>, which originated in India, is a religion that believes that enlightenment can be attained through the practice of non-violence and not harming living beings ("Jainism," n.d.). Jainism makes biocentrism feasible to a certain extent—to reduce harm to living beings. Buddhism, a religion of Indian origin, also promotes non-violence. However, Kang materializes the concept of biocentrism through the fictional Yeong-hye. Kang thus projects Yeong-hye as a person who feels guilty of killing and eating animals, and yearning to be innocent. Aided by her vegetarianism, she stops wearing clothes and make-over made out of animal skin such as leather, and gives up food altogether which is the challenge presented by biocentrism.

#### 3.1. Guilt and innocence

During the initial stages of her vegetarianism, Yeong-hye is tormented by guilt. The feeling of guilt intensifies when her father forces a piece of sweet and sour pork into her mouth. Yeong-hye's understanding of her own self is pushed aside by her dominating father. Her father pays no attention to her inner turmoil. It is a pity to perceive that the family does not understand Yeong-hye, and it is comprehensible that doing such a thing is certainly not possible for the family. According to Yeong-hye's family non-consumption of meat is a shame whereas to Yeong-hye it is her purgatory. Therefore, when her family succeeds in making her eat (they believe that Yeong-hye has swallowed the piece of pork), they do not expect the manner in which their vegetarian daughter would react. To their shock, Yeong-hye spits out the meat and slits her wrist. This act seems to be an act of revenge or as a sign of self-punishment. She is troubled about the terrible feeling of guilt which is the aftermath of having eaten so many animals. She says that the lives of the animals that she has eaten still lodge in her insides (Kang<sup>[10]</sup>, 2007/2015). Kang<sup>[6]</sup> says, "I wanted to explore if human

innocence was possible, what someone would have to overcome to lead a completely blameless life” (“Han Kang,” 2016, p. 59). Yeong-hye wants to be innocent and therefore she does more than follow a strict vegetarian diet.

### 3.2. The ecophile

An Ecophile is a person who loves nature or is in love with nature. Nature proves to be of a higher state than everything else in the world for an ecophile. Yeong-hye’s ecophilia seems to be more powerful than other emotions. During the initial stages of her vegetarianism, love-making is a disgusting prospect for Yeong-hye. She tells her husband that his body smells of meat. Later she agrees to make love to a person named J whose body is painted with flowers, a novel idea brought out by her brother-in-law for his video art. She obliges to have her naked body painted with flowers and leaves. When J refuses to comply, her brother-in-law uses this chance to seduce her, but she shoves him off her, but later accepts when he offers to paint his body with flowers and leaves. Yeong-hye’s intention is wholly vegetal, as she only desires to make love to the flowers and leaves, and not to the person concerned. Yeong-hye’s extreme love for nature masks every other emotion. This perspective of Yeong-hye portrays the meaning of guilt. Yeong-hye’s guilt lies only in her meat-eating past. The lives of the animals in her body are the only elements that mount her guilt. She does not mind the moral boundaries she has crossed. Her brother-in-law, as a contrast, feels guilty of having taken advantage of her innocence. When he is found guilty, he resolves to end his life by jumping off the building. Broken relationships are not an issue for Yeong-hye as she, “thrust her glittering golden breasts over the veranda railing. Her legs were covered with scattered orange petals, and she spread them wide as though she wanted to make love to the sunlight, to the wind” (Kang<sup>[10]</sup>, 2007/2015, p. 118).

Yeong-hye is finally admitted to a psychiatry hospital. Her love for nature can be perceived from her first day at the hospital. She is relieved when she sees a zelkova tree (*Zelkova serrata*) in the hospital campus and is pleased to see many trees around. Kang’s choice of placing a zelkova tree in her tale is unique as it aides in a better understanding of Yeong-hye. Chang-young<sup>[2]</sup> (2022) mentions the Koreans’ association with zelkova trees dating back to the ancients. A zelkova tree at the entrance to a village symbolizes a deity that protects the community, similar to other Asian cultures. Owing to people’s practice of socializing in its shade, the zelkova tree is nicknamed ‘pavilion tree’. It is also an ornamental tree used in bonsai<sup>[11]</sup> (Mabberley, 2008, p. 922). It is a belief of the people of Korea that the god of the zelkova<sup>[12]</sup> tree would punish anyone who broke its branches, which explains its long-time conservation by the Koreans (Mackie, 2016). Although Kang makes only a common reference to the zelkova tree as a tree among many other big trees, its cultural significance is remarkable. Yeong-hye’s spirit is renewed at the sight of the zelkova tree in the hospital campus which brings out her spiritual connection with trees, and her own desire to be one. Yeong-hye’s ecophilia projects her desire to be as old as the zelkova tree rooted to the soil since old times. Her ecophilia fails to conjure up the past and has an uncaring attitude towards the future and its uncertainty. On the subject of loving trees<sup>[13]</sup>, Roy (2017) writes that one who loves a tree is a patient who is in need of counseling. The misalliance of being

in love with a tree, gives others the impression that one is mentally ill. Yeong-hye is thus admitted to a psychiatry hospital even though she is not definitely a mentally ill person.

### 3.3. The ecophile's notion of nature and its fraternity

A person who is in love with nature, or who does prefer nature over others is undoubtedly inclined to perceive things with an 'ecofied' eye. Yeong-hye as an ecophile has a remarkable notion of nature which is different from the way humans see nature. William Blake<sup>[14]</sup> writes to the Rev. Dr. Trusler, "The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a Green thing that stands in the way" (Russell, 1906). While Yeong-hye visualizes nature as her fellow beings and marvels over communicating with them and finding out truths about them, her sister asks her how she could possibly think of turning into a tree and how a plant could talk. Yeong-hye shares with her sister her notion of the trees and plants around her: "I thought trees stood up straight . . . I only found out just now. They actually stand with both arms in the earth, all of them"<sup>[10]</sup> (Kang, 2007/2015, p.148). She tells her sister that she needs water, like the trees, and not the food consumed by humans. Brotherhood and harmony within nature are astounding truths that cannot be denied. Humans in their hasty life have abandoned nature and this truth is discussed by Jinhee<sup>[9]</sup> (2015) where he says, "nature, once regarded as an organic life form, has lost its value as 'life' because humans, even as they share the phenomenon of life, have split off from nature, in which they once circulated, and have become alienated from life's value" (pp.50-51). Exploiting Earth and nature is the same as damaging one's life and body. The realization that humans and nature are the same is perceived by Yeong-hye.

Yeong-hye begins to communicate with nature. She disappears into the woods surrounding the psychiatry hospital. A voice calls her and she responds but hears it no more. She answers In-hye's repeated inquiry over her disappearance. She says that she went out because she had heard something call her and that she was just about to go down into the earth. Yeong-hye's response towards nature calling out to her is extraordinary. Her indulgence towards her world of nature becomes inflexible. The most striking of ecological revelations made by Yeong-hye are the description of the trees and the relationship the trees share with each other. She tells In-hye, "Sister . . . all the trees of the world are like brothers and sisters"<sup>[10]</sup> (Kang, 2007/2015, p.144). This truth realized by Yeong-hye throws light on human relationships. Yeong-hye's own family abandons her and this beautiful revelation about the existence of trees is shared by Yeong-hye to her sister. The love and concern showered by In-hye on her helpless sister can be compared to Yeong-hye's perception of nature's selflessness. In-hye begins to think like Yeong-hye. In-hye later recalls the video captured in her husband's camcorder. She now realizes that the act was not sexual at all but vegetal. Her recollection of the video created by her husband is described:

She recalls the sight of those two naked bodies, twined together like jungle creepers. Of course, it had shocked her at the time, and yet oddly enough, the more time went by the less she thought of it as something sexual. Covered with flowers and leaves and twisting green stems, those bodies were so altered it was as though they no longer belonged to human

beings. The writhing movements of those bodies made it seem as though they were trying to shuck off the human<sup>[10]</sup>. (Kang, 2007/2015, p. 179)

## 4. Green thinking

While anthropocentrism is practical and easier, both voluntarily and involuntarily, becoming biocentric is easier said than done. Shifting from the anthropocentric way of living to the biocentric principle, Yeong-hye's earnest longing to become a tree hardly seems to be a reality. Yeong-hye sees herself as a tree when she does handstands. From the human point of view, it is fitting to call Yeong-hye, in the words of Roy<sup>[13]</sup> (2017), a lover who is permanently exiled. Yeong-hye is not able to feel her body as a tree. Her body is still the same because a physical transformation is logically impossible; she succeeds only in her thinking and in her imagination. When she refuses food altogether, the medical personnel in the Ch'ukseong Psychiatric hospital try feeding her through tubes. As a consequence, Yeong-hye suffers excruciating pain as she bleeds from her stomach and blood splatters all over the doctor's white gown. In-hye forcefully stops them from harming her sister again. When this phase is over, "All of a sudden the sunlight is pouring through the window, brightening the gloomy space. It's been a long time since In-hye has seen such light"<sup>[10]</sup> (Kang, 2007/2015, p. 177). This effect seems to bring out nature's affinity with Yeong-hye which her unbelieving sister In-hye accepts.

### 4.1. Becoming nature

Roy (2017) makes a reference to Vansh Pradip Singh<sup>[13]</sup>, when she writes about the kind of human-nature affinity. Vansh Pradip Singh, a ruler of the kingdom of Sawar in northern India told his subjects that cutting the smallest branch of a tree was equivalent to cutting his finger. Roy writes:

Thus a person's hairs are the tree's leaves and his skin the outer bark; and when blood flows from skin, it is as sap flowing from a tree's bark, for "when a man is wounded blood flows as sap from a tree that is struck". A person's flesh is the tree's inner bark, his nerves tough like the tree's inner fibres, his bones the wood inside, and his marrow the interior pith. (2017, pp. 21– 22)

Yeong-hye's so called transformation to a tree is perceived when she tells her sister that she does not need to eat anymore. She seems relaxed when she tells her sister that her insides have atrophied, and can be associated with the shedding of her human nature. The Korean belief about the god in the zelkova tree can be weaved into the pattern of Yeong-hye's self as a tree. The deity of the zelkova tree punishing those harming the tree is analogous with Yeong-hye as she tries to protect her body from the incessant cruelty inflicted on her. She tells her sister, ". . . they don't even try to understand . . . they just force me to take medication, and stab me with needles"<sup>[10]</sup> (Kang, 2007/2015, p.156). Roy<sup>[13]</sup> (2017) writes, ". . . when I look back at the reasons for my disaffection with being human, and my desire to become a tree, I can see that at the root lay the feeling that I was being bulldozed by time" (p. 3). Yeong-hye as a tree thus fails to comply with human expectations and she remains

disobedient to human time as observed by Roy (2017). She believes she can live without eating and all she needs is sunlight, just like a tree. In-hye tries to comprehend the possible ways by which Yeong-hye could have become a tree:

Had Yeong-hye mistaken the hospital's concrete floor for the soft earth of the woods? Had her body metamorphosed into a sturdy trunk, with white roots sprouting from her hands and clutching the black soil? Had her legs stretched high up into the air while her arms extended all the way down to the earth's very core, her back stretched taut to support this two-pronged spurt of growth?<sup>[10]</sup> (Kang, 2007/2015, p.170)

Roy<sup>[13]</sup> (2017) when writing about the silence of trees mentions that the most urgent need to escape from is the noise of humans. Roy<sup>[13]</sup> juxtaposes the complaining tone of human work life and the silence of the industriousness of trees. Yeong-hye's transformation into a tree and her silence is thus contrasted with the hustle of the doctors, the nurses, the mentally ill patients, and the noise of every other human she encounters.

## 5. Conclusion

Yeong-hye is anatomized through the conceptual shifting—from anthropocentrism to biocentrism. Yeong-hye's eco-consciousness begins with the realization of violence, guilt, the need for innocence, understanding the truth about the fraternity of nature, which grows into a concern, love and finally the longing to become part of nature. From eco-conscious she moves on to become ecocentric or biocentric. However, the tale of Yeong-hye examines the non-feasibility of biocentrism, its impracticality when taking into consideration its core ideal of not hurting other living beings excepting the Jain or Buddhist ideals of non-violence which is considered unacceptable by people of other faiths. Kang accomplishes the impossible through Yeong-hye, who, although, is unable to have her longing fulfilled physically, is blissful about her inner transformation. Yeong-hye's eco-consciousness revealing of the fraternity of nature is critical of the present lack of affinity between humans and other living beings.

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