



PLANTS WITHIN US: POSTHUMANISM AND PLANT-HUMAN ENTANGLEMENT IN HAN**KANG'S *THE VEGETARIAN***

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ABSTRACT

*This paper focuses on the interconnection between plants and humans as portrayed in the novel *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang. It uses the theoretical tool of critical posthumanism and its genealogies such as new materialisms and critical plant studies to evaluate concepts of relationality, interconnection, plant thinking, and agency. By analysing the protagonist Young-hye's transformation into a plant-like existence, and the journey it takes her to reach there, it reveals how vegetal and human lives interact with one another and break the nature and culture binary to form a natureculture continuum. The study compares the non-conscious intentionality and the idea of 'thrownness' displayed by plants in nature to that of Young-hye's desire to live like trees. It highlights the symbolic representation of plants as selfless, interconnected, and adaptable forms of living matter. It defines the larger picture of how humanity becomes-with other lifeforms and how the protagonist becomes-with nature. It questions anthropocentric ideologies and sheds light on the ecological and philosophical importance of vegetal life.*

Keywords: *The Vegetarian*, new materialisms, critical plant studies, natureculture, agency

From the dawn of life on Earth, single-sense organisms such as plants have formed the foundation of the planet's ecosystem. These plants and trees are the basis of life, providing sustenance, breath, shelter,

clothing, and habitat. Within nature, these plants embody a permanence that renews itself endlessly, needing no external guidance. They anchor themselves firmly to the soil with roots, seeking the sun through their branches and leaves, maintaining their stability while transforming the earth into a fertile place.

Trees serve as a lifeline for humanity. Although their utility has made them indispensable to humans, trees' growth and demise align themselves with human actions when those who rely on them also exploit and destroy them. Across the world, no other life form enjoys the freedom trees possess. They are the only forms of life that are not held down by a violent cycle for their survival. From seeds buried in the earth to sprouting into the world, trees grow in an inverted form, with their roots functioning like a brain and their trunk akin to a heart-pumping sap, much like how blood flows in humans. Their branches spread out, issuing commands like the brain guiding limbs. In forests, trees act as protectors, similar to an army, efficiently preserving the earth. They never let the air become polluted, no forests have been drowned by floods, and they cool the planet without releasing heat. This quality in trees plays an important role in deciding whether humans merely exist or truly live. The indispensable roles of trees in oxygen-carbon dioxide exchange and in fostering life make them vital contributors to human existence.

From this understanding of plants as selfless, interconnected life forms, it can be argued that they embody principles that oppose human-centred views of life. This ideology can also be traced in theoretical frameworks such as critical posthumanism, new materialisms, and critical plant studies, which critique humanity's perceived superiority over the nonhuman, including plants. Posthumanist philosopher Rosi Braidotti believes that humans and nonhumans belong to an interconnected ecosystem and are thus interdependent on one another. Similarly, Coole, Diana, and Samantha Frost in their book *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* discuss how new materialism examines the relationality between both living and non-living matters, observing that they have agency of their own and can produce change. New materialism also proposes the concept of natureculture continuum wherein nature is attached to its economic and symbolic meaning. Critical plant studies, in turn, perceive plants to possess what is known as 'non-conscious intentionality.' This

paper explores the interconnection between plants and humans through the protagonist's transformation in *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang.

Theorists Prudence Gibson and Baylee Brits in their book *Covert Plants: Vegetal Consciousness and Agency in an Anthropocentric World* describe what is known as 'plant thinking.' They refer to it as moving agency away from the human and towards the vegetal life, while questioning the certainty of human exceptionalism. They justify this by reasoning that plants form the basis of all ecosystems and that disregarding them is a serious ecological as well as philosophical mistake (16). In *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*, Matthew Hall calls for plants to be respected as other than human persons. He defines moral considerations as simply letting other beings in our lives flourish.

Though nature and culture are binaries within the anthropocentric boundaries, new materialists overthrow this notion to promote a natureculture continuum. They argue that since all matters interact together, they must be given agency. According to them, agency is not an autonomous or inherent function, it is merely a consequence of interactions between different entities. The protagonist of the novel Young-hye's decision to stop eating meat is a result of her interaction with animals in her dreams, albeit in a gruesome way. When she reveals this to her brother-in-law, he wonders why she disrobes herself and absorbs sunlight like a plant if her dreams have nothing to do with them (*The Vegetarian* 91). Her actions erase the differences between plants and humans. She slowly tries to transform herself into a plant by behaving in unusual ways. When her sister gives her food, she replies, "Sister. You don't have to bring that stuff now." She smiled. I don't need to eat anymore" (*The Vegetarian* 147). With feverish intensity she says, "I need to water my body. I don't need this kind of food, sister. I need water" (*The Vegetarian* 148). She muses how all trees are related to each other like brothers and sisters and how they stand upside down. Wishing she were one with them, she explains, "I was in a dream, and I was standing on my head...leaves were growing from my body, and the roots were sprouting from my hands... so I dug into the earth" (*The Vegetarian* 148). Young-hye rejects the consumption of tra-

ditional human food and aligns herself with the plant's diet of water and sunlight. Her symbolic identification with the plant agency reveals she has 'become-with' nature.

Professor and philosopher Michael Marder in his book *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* claims that plants possess a 'non-conscious intentionality' where they respond and adapt themselves to their environment in order to survive. He gives the example of how plants contort themselves to grow in the direction of sunlight, "the turning and striving of a plant toward the sun is perhaps the most iconic illustration of its non-conscious *noesis*, or act of intending" (158). This response is not consciously made by the plants, and it demonstrates a kind of 'thinking before thinking.' Young-hye's inexplicable desire to mimic the inverted structure of trees by doing headstands for prolonged periods proves her non-conscious intentionality toward the vegetal life. She transcends the conscious level of human experience and enters into a vegetal intentionality.

Marder also talks about the non-identity of plants as they cannot be separated from the environment in which they grow; they lack autonomy. Plants are not restricted to their self and tend to grow without limit. This phenomenon is called as 'throwness.' The plant selflessly disperses seeds, flowers and fruits, scattering oxygen all around it. Similarly, Young-hye sheds her human constraints and adopts a plant-like existence. She withdraws into the silence of the trees and integrates into the vegetal world. One day she goes missing from the hospital she was admitted in, and the entire staff search for her everywhere. When one of the nurses finally finds her, Young-hye is in an "isolated spot deep in the woods covering the mountain slope, standing there stock-sill and soaked with rain as if she herself was one of the glistening trees" (*The Vegetarian* 124). Posthumanism answers the question of the nonhuman by explaining that plants can be subjective beings, and they can influence the world and be influenced by the world in return. One of the commonalities between humans and plants is they are both governed by time, with plants following the light, season and temperature. It is not possible to deny that both humans and plants intersect, and that there is a plant within every human.

Some people show their love for trees by nurturing them, some by protecting them, and some embody the selflessness of trees in their actions. However, Young-hye yearns to become a tree herself. She imagines and strives to live as a tree. Standing still, shedding her clothes, absorbing the sunlight, and refusing to move, she senses the unyielding nature of trees. When she spreads her hair and stands upside down, she feels an urge to bury herself like a tree, envisioning her hair as roots. Like trees that sprout again after being cut, she clings to life even after countless wounds, releasing herself repeatedly from the clutches of humanity. When a tree falls, it doesn't know where it will land, resting on the earth's surface like a child in a mother's embrace. Similarly, Young-hye collapses into her sister's arms, forgetting even that the other is her sister. She becomes the tree, her mind transforms into the tree, and the thought of trees becomes her breath. She is a new tree, one unable to perform photosynthesis, devoid of hunger or thirst, yearning to root herself in the earth for the sustenance of life and the planet.

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