

Examining the message of Eco-criticism and its exploration of the human relationship with nature in the novel "The Vegetarian"

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Abstract: This research paper analyzes the message of eco-criticism and the way it delves into the complicated issue of human and nature relationships in a novel *The Vegetarian* written by Han Kang. Through the novel, the separation between the natural environment and the modern human beings and the quest to balance the body, mind, and the environment is brought to perspective of power. Han Kang makes profound ecological and philosophical inquiries through the story of Yeong-Hye, a woman who chooses to forego meat consumption and lead a plant life because of violence and purity, identity, and specialization of humans over nature. This paper will examine how the novel symbolically talks about the nature as a place of resistance and repairing whilst also examining the devastating human tendencies that interfere with the harmony of nature.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*, nature, human-nature relationship, environmental ethics, violence, identity

Introduction:

Eco-criticism refers to the analysis of connection between literature and nature. It assists the reader in learning the way authors express nature, how human beings mistreat it, and what can be learned through these encounters. Fancy-free, eco-criticism aims at focusing on how literature instructs us to treat and nurture the nature. In this modern society, citizens are more concerned with technology, comfort, and material prosperity. This has established a widening gap between man and nature. It takes us sometime to remember that we are a constituent of the environment and we need it to survive.

The Vegetarian by Han Kang is a strong image of such disconnection. The novel narrates about the character of Yeong-Hye, a typical woman that suddenly resolves not to eat meat anymore as a result due to weird dreams she is experiencing involving blood and animals. It is her very easy choice to become a vegetarian and this choice makes her life a different one. She fails to explain her decision to her family and society and they begin to treat her as a strange or mentally unstable person. However, as a matter of fact, Yeong-Hye opposing meat is a more radical demonstrating against cruelty of human existence, violence that we produce to nature and animals.

The story of Yeong-Hye is used in the novel to demonstrate how the contemporary human beings lost their balance with nature. People make attempts to dominate nature and live peacefully with it, instead of coexistent with nature. Han Kang employs beautiful and shocking images to get the readers to think on the moral and emotional relationship between people and nature.

In eco-critical sense, *The Vegetarian* is not just the story of mental struggle of one woman it is also a story of disease of human world, the greed, violence, and its isolation of the environment. When Yeong-Hye turns into a plant, it is the symbol of her desire to get back to the place of a peaceful and natural existence. She does not wish to kill any life anymore; she desires to be like a tree and live, free and tranquil.



The story given by Han Kang makes the readers pose the right questions: Why do human beings consider themselves to be superior to other living beings? Why should we kill nature in favor of ourselves? What are the ways to live in harmony with every kind of life? The message of peace and purity and harmonization of man and nature are introduced into the novel through the silent rebellion of Yeong-Hye.

By doing so, *The Vegetarian* is a magnificent and provocative novel that can easily be categorized as part of the eco-criticism concept. It makes us aware that we should not only act to protect the environment because of plants and animals it is also important to safeguard our own humanity.

Review of literature:

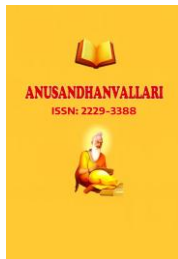
In his book, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021), Dipesh Chakrabarty gives a historical and philosophical interpretation of the environmental crisis by highlighting that climate change has changed the manner in which humans associate themselves with the planet. The book by Pramod K. Nayar, *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies* (2019), makes the major concepts of eco-criticism simple and shows how the ideas in literary works echo the knowledge about the environment and environmental ethics. In his book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), Amitav Ghosh writes about climate change being overlooked by the modern literature and the need to be more environmentally mindful in telling the stories and cultural narratives.

Ritu Sharma (2022) researches Indian English literature fiction because she intends to demonstrate how ecological themes have been used by the authors to show their concern of the environment, and Anindita Dey (2020) examines the element of environmental consciousness in literature and how authors raise awareness of the sustainability and ecological balance. On the same note, R. S. Singh (2021) examines the relationship of literature in depicting the human-nature relationship, with the conflict between human development and environmental conservation. Arpita Banerjee (2018) takes the feminist turn, relating eco-criticism to the feminine voice, which suggests in her writing, in most cases, a closer relationship with nature and increased sensitivity to ecological suffering.

Literature and Environment: An Ecocritical Approach, in its turn, by Binod Mishra (2012) provides the hefty basis of the Indian ecocritical studies, describing the way literary texts can stimulate environmental ethics and defend biodiversity. Seema Verma (2013) develops this issue by discussing the human responsibility to the nature and she underlines the ethical aspect of environmental protection. Meena Patel (2021) dwells on ecofeminism and reveals how women and nature are the victims of patriarchal and exploitative systems. Subhasree Das (2015) makes a comparison between Indian and global eco-critical views and demonstrates that environmental consciousness is a human issue which has no borders. Jasleen Kaur (2023) approaches the contemporary Asian fiction with an eco-critical understanding of the cultural variance of thinking about ecology.

The article by Rajesh Singh, *Eco-critical Studies in Indian Literature in English* (2018), gives a general idea of Indian authors who use environmental topics and emphasizes that literature may influence the environmental ethics of a reader. Rosemary George (2019) addresses the issue of the relationship between the female body and nature and connects it to the eco-critical issues and their ties with gender and identity. Lastly, Anu Thomas (2016) explains conflict and harmony between humans and nature, as well as that conflict can be learned in literature, balance, compassion, and respect to the environment.

All these compositions prove that eco-criticism has become an effective literary style to analyze the way writers interpret environmental issues, ethical duties, and the interaction between human and nature. The collective study also indicates that the scholars in India and the whole world are increasingly looking at literature as not only art but also a platform to express environmental awareness and sustainability.



Eco-criticism

Eco-criticism is a new approach in literature, where the close association of literature and human beings with nature is examined. It is an examination of how authors portray nature on their works and the influence of human activities like industrialization, urbanisation, and deforestation on the environment. The central concept of the eco-criticism is that nature is not provided as a backdrop or scene in literature but a dynamic, living force, that communicates with humans and determines their existence. It considers the natural world as a personality with its voice, feelings, and strength.

This research area started expanding in the late 20 th century when individuals started paying more attention to international environmental issues such as climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss. Eco-criticism links the world of literature and the ecological problem in the real world, and it demonstrates the ability of works, poems, and novels to impact the perception of the environment by people. It makes the readers aware that when the nature in literature is destroyed, the one in the real world is usually destroyed as well.

Literature as a reason to talk about such significant questions is made possible through eco- critical reading, as the following question: How is the human being supposed to treat animals and plants? So, what are we doing with regard to the planet? Or are we in harmony with nature or are we using nature on our selfish ends? Through all these question answers, the eco-criticism makes the reader question why environmental issues were caused in terms of morality, social and cultural.

Numerous eco-critics assume that literature has the power to change. Readers can sympathise with the natural world by reading about storeys that demonstrate the beauty of nature or the harm inflicted upon it by greedy human beings. Eco-criticism also allows individuals to recognise the fact that nature sustains human life and therefore, when individuals destroy the environment, they destroy themselves.

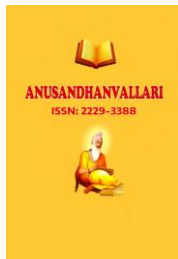
Eco-criticism is not, in a word, merely a book study of nature but it is an appeal to a greater environmental consciousness and responsibility. It teaches us that we belong to nature and we are not isolated by it. In such a manner, authors reveal their love, care, and admiration of the environment and attack human behaviour causing the ecological disbalance. Eco-criticism makes all individuals care about the earth, live sustainably and resume harmony between humans and nature.

Han Kang

Han Kang is a well-known South Korean novelist, poet, and short storey writer who has gained her widespread reputation in the depth, emotionalism, and symbolism of her narrative. Han Kang was born in the year 1970 in Gwangju, South Korea, where political instabilities and modernization were rampant hence resonated greatly in her literature. The themes in her works are usually based on human pain, trauma, silence, and identity seeking in a complicated and even violent world. Her writing possesses a sensitive, though strong, tone, a mixture of beauty and emotion, to dwell upon the darkest region of the human life.

Han Kang was initially known in Korea due to her short storeys and novels which covered the instability of human life and the conflict of moral bankruptcy that humans encounter. Nonetheless, she has gained international fame after receiving the Man Booker International Prize in 2016 in the category of the novel the vegetarian translated into English by Deborah Smith. Such acknowledgment introduced her distinctive literary style and the power to engage with universal topics of suffering, transformation, and freedom due to the specific cultural circumstances.

One of the main ideas of Han Kang is the contradiction between the human civilization and nature. Her characters tend fighting with the society and the people cruelty in a way to gain purity and peace in their isolation or by being changed. She relies on nature, particularly plants, trees and the natural world, as a representation of a symbol of innocence, freedom, and cure. It is such symbolic treatment of nature that



indicates that she is sensitive to ecological and spiritual issues and her works can be eco-critical.

In *The Vegetarian*, Han Kang looks at how refusal to eat meat by a woman is a rebellion against violence of the human world. Likewise, in other books of hers, such as *Human Acts* (2014) and *The White Book* (2017), she is concerned with the shared trauma, past trauma, and human search in the context of violence and loss. Her fiction tends to pose a question of what it really means to be a human being and how can people reach peace in the world full of suffering, cruelty, and unconcerned attitude.

The style of Han Kang is characterised by the lyrical colouring and vivid visual images. She makes use of silence and symbol to portray certain feelings that cannot be fully described in words. Her characters are also silent, reflective, and deeply in touch with nature which she introduces as a means of solace and a mirror of human insecurity.

On the whole, the work of Han Kang is a strong demonstration of her profound philosophical attitude to the human condition and life. She encourages the readers to see that there is more than meets the eye in the social conventions and also challenges the readers to deal with the ethical and emotional implications of human behaviours. There is her focus on topics of violence, guilt, identity, and the human nature relationship that ranks her among the most thinking writers of the modern world. With the help of her writing, Han Kang makes the readers remember that only after returning to our inner world and to nature that surrounds us, we will be able to find peace and compassion.

The Vegetarian

Vegetarian is among the best-known novels written by Han Kang. It narrates of Yeong-Hye, a normal woman in her decision to quit meat consumption after having nightmare dreams of animals and blood. This is because her decision is seen as changing lives of other people because her family and society cannot absorb her decision. The novel is split into three sections where Yeong-Hye gradually turns into a being that desires to live similar to a plant than a normal woman. Such transformation is not physical but also spiritual. The narration displays her quest to run out of violence and in her efforts to seek innocence and peace by becoming more in touch with nature.

Nature

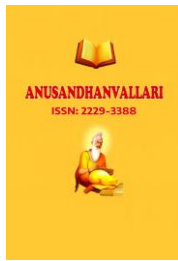
Nature is significant and symbolic in *The Vegetarian*. To Yeong-Hye, nature is the place of tranquilly and simplicity that is miles distant to the brutality of human existence. Plants and trees, and the earth are the symbol of non-violent life. Han Kang employs the natural imagery to demonstrate how people lost the connexion to the surrounding world. The society imposes rules on Yeong-Hye which she must follow but nature gives her liberty and recovery. When she renounces human life; nature is all she has left as her only companion and her home.

Human–Nature Relationship

The human-nature relations are one of the primary concepts in the novel. In contemporary modern society, humans end up utilising nature in a self-sacrificing manner cutting woods, killing or hunting animals and exploiting resources with a blind-eye to the effects of the same. The novel of Han Kang is a demonstration of the way this selfish attitude results in destruction and suffering. Yeong-Hye prefers not to eat meat, and a decision to adopt vegetarianism is a method of getting into harmony with the nature. She does not want to live and hurt other living beings. Her desire to become a tree can be said to symbolise her desire to unite with nature, live a serene life free of aggression.

Environmental Ethics

Environmental ethics refers to the moral obligation that human beings have towards nature. It poses such questions as: Is man entitled to abuse animals or destroy forests? What are we supposed to do with other forms



of life? The vegetarianism in *The Vegetarian* also indicates the ethical choice she had in not being involved in animal violence anymore. She goes to the extreme and this makes readers consider the extent to which human beings have gone in their quest to destroy nature in the name of indulging themselves. Han Kang reminds us through her character that saving the environment is not only an individual or a personal issue, but it is also a moral obligation.

Violence

In *The Vegetarian*, violence is also one of the main themes. It manifests itself physically as well as psychologically. The novel reveals the ways in which the society employs its control and pressure to make people obey to its regulations. When her family attempts to make Yeong-Hye eat the meat again she becomes a victim of violence on the hands of her family. Her body, which is a place of conflict between her natural impulses and what others want, turns into a confrontation between her own nature and the expectations of the other. Another form of violence humans due to nature is the slaughter of animals and blood as Han Kang depicts. This violence does not only symbolise ruthlessness to animals, but destruction of innocence and humanity.

Identity

The relationship with nature is closely associated with identity in *The Vegetarian* in regard to Yeong-Hye. In the very opening of the novel, we get to perceive her as a mere-housewife who listens to her husband and lives by the rules of the society. However, once she becomes a vegetarian, she begins to find out who she is. She denies societal conventions and attempts to seek a personal identity that is uncontaminated and calm. The changing into a plant being reveals what she wants to get away with the human corruption and seek the other kind of existence. It is through this transformation that Han Kang wonders what it is to be a human being to begin with. Is it given by the society that we can identify our identity or can we identify it in accord with the nature?

Conclusion

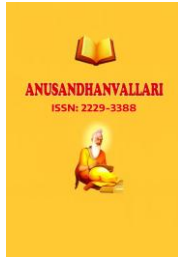
Finally, this paper demonstrates that eco-criticism can allow us to comprehend how much we are united with nature and eco-criticism in literature can teach us to be more conscious of environmental concerns. Numerous authors and scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Amitav Ghosh, and Pramod K. Nayar explained how storeys and books may lead people to think on the significance of preserving nature. Ritu Sharma, Anindita Dey and Rajesh Singh are also the Indian scholars who have demonstrated that the Indian English literature can be instrumental in building awareness about our responsibilities in the environment.

Eco-criticism educates us that nature does not exist apart of man who needs it to be a part of her. Human beings destroy their own nature whenever we destroy it. The works that I analysed in this paper make us remember to find the balance and harmony between human needs and the nature. Literature becomes such a voice which can make people realise beauty of nature and threats of their neglect.

In conclusion, eco-criticism helps humans develop more concerns about the environment and lead a life that is considerate and respectful towards all life forms. Literature can teach us how we can develop a more positive connexion with nature and establish a more harmonious and sustainable future of all humans.

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