

Identity performance in Kafka's Metamorphosis and Han Kang's The Vegetarian

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Abstract

Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* deals with the theme of transformation, in particular physical and psychological respectively. The scholars examine the transformation as a means of resistance against oppressive societal structures. Both works explore issues of identity, social isolation and the dehumanizing effects of the modern world. This study will explore the concepts of corporeality in the texts using the ideas of Erving Goffman and Judith Butler in Performance Theory. Both the protagonists provide scope for examining the tension between social expectations and bodily performance. By analysing Gregor's and Yeong Hye's embodied experiences, this paper demonstrates how the body is a site of identity performance shaped by the society.

Keywords: Social expectations, Identity performance, Resistance, Social structures

INTRODUCTION

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (trans. 2005) and Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2016) offer two different yet intricately interconnected idea of Ontological shift and existential isolation. To explain further, the two literary pieces, marked by variations in cultural context, timeframe, and structural composition, articulate the transformative implications of radical self-perception and the social isolation that often accompanies it. On one hand, Kafka's novella is considered a seminal text in modernist literature, distinguished by its exploration of the absurd and in-depth evaluation of the human condition. Han Kang's novel is informed by the cultural and historical backdrop of contemporary South Korean society to navigate feminist, political, and ecological ideologies in a uniquely modern and distinctive narrative style. Though differing in form, they employ physical transformation to signify the rupture within the spiritual and psychological self, confronting intersection of identity and imposed restrictions of societal expectations around the same.

Through this study, we will contend that *The Metamorphosis* and *The Vegetarian* converge in understanding and showcasing how the physical body can act as a site of resistance against the rigid societal structures. This resistance is realised through a form of transformation in a sense that estranges them from their own humanity, positioning them as outcasts in their familial and societal contexts. By exploring the intersection of corporeality, identity, and normative social structures in these two works, we can observe how each author addresses body as a site of identity performance.

Identity performance is an idea that identity of any individual is more than what one perceives of their identity. It is the actions they perform in their day to day lives. Ideally, these actions are to be motivated by the roles they are associated with by virtue of their gender role as perceived by the society. However, when one performs an act

outside the social structures one is bound by, they resist their imposed identity and liberate themselves. Hence, identity can be defined as perpetual.

Theoretical Framework

Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) defines gender as a culmination of behaviour one learns and enacts to fit to the societal idea of what their gender is. This theory of gender performance can be applied to analyse and define identity as well. One's identity is a gradual perception by not only oneself but also the people around.

Erving Goffman in *Presentation of self in Everyday life* (1956) introduced the concept of 'impression management' to suggest that individuals perform their roles in different social contexts. He further elaborates upon the same by suggesting that we perform certain aspects of identity (gender, class, profession) in ways that are understood by others. Thus, making the body akin to stage.

Based on the above mentioned, if the body were not the site of identity formation, then both the protagonist wouldn't cease to matter the way they did when their identity had remained in the confines of the social structures of capitalism and patriarchy. Since their body could no longer perform an aspect of their identity and could not serve the structures in the same way, they cease to exist.

1. Transformation exposes unspoken violence embedded in the roles inducted by society

Central to both *The Metamorphosis* and *The Vegetarian* is the figurative transformation of the protagonists, yet the nature of this transformation is distinct. Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* begins with Gregor Samsa, waking up as a giant insect. This seemingly abrupt beginning without a context and lack of explanation propels the reader into categorising the novella as absurdist in nature. The setting finds its confirmation through the acceptance by Gregor as well his family members of his current state. This visceral acceptance reflects Kafka's preoccupation with the absurdity of existence and exploration of how human identity is susceptible to external and internal influences.

Conversely, in *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye, a woman decides to give up eating meat after she wakes up to a series of disturbing violent dreams. Yeong-hye's choice to abstain from meat deeply unsettles her family and society. This decision sets a ground for unravelling of her identity and her place in the world. As the novel unfolds, Yeong-hye detaches from her bodily needs and desires, resulting in her rejection of food altogether. Metamorphosis she undergoes is psychological and spiritual, becoming apparent through her rejection of societal expectations concerning her body, her role as a wife and daughter, and thus exposing the unspoken violence embedded in those roles.

2. Dehumanization outside the social structure

Kafka and Kang use transformation as a means to illustrate the ephemerality of human identity, yet they approach this theme from distinct cultural and philosophical perspectives. The identities of both Gregor Samsa and Yeong-hye are defined by societal structures. Gregor's role is to earn money and contribute to the economy, thereby supporting the continuation of capitalism. In contrast, Yeong-hye's role centers around managing her family's day-to-day needs, reinforcing the patriarchal system in which she lives. This structure allows the economy to function smoothly, as capitalism and patriarchy are interconnected systems. Patriarchy is often justified because men are exploited under capitalism to earn a living, and they, in turn, exploit their wives within the household. Thus, both characters' identities are intricately tied to these societal structures. However, when they attempt to assert their identities outside of these structures—Gregor waking up as an insect and Yeong-hye, after a series of disturbing dreams, deciding to stop eating meat—they face dehumanization from those around them. This illustrates that identity is deeply dependent on societal structures. While there are similarities in their stories, there is also a key difference: Gregor, as a man, is defined by his role as a breadwinner, while Yeong-hye's identity is shaped by her role as a wife post marriage and a daughter at her parent's place. One could argue that the "insect" in Gregor Samsa's transformation symbolizes the dehumanizing effects of modern capitalism. In contrast, Yeong-Hye's implicit desire to become plant-like suggests a "vegetative state" of her mind—a reflection of her passive role in society as a wife. This leads her to choose this vegetative state of mind to escape the literal vegetative state of her physical body that served her husband's needs without allowing any growth or development of her own mind.

Gregor's grotesque body distances his family from him. It symbolically serves as a physical representation of his social and emotional alienation. Further, his inability to communicate his thoughts in human language states the

difference between him and those around him. While in his conscience, he remains aware of his humanity, his family can no longer recognize it for the body does not serve them the way it used to. Similarly, Yeong-hye's rejection of meat in *The Vegetarian* that extends to her participation in the role of a dutiful wife who cooked meat every day because her husband like it- makes her an outsider within her familial and social structure. In this way, even though her transformation is not as apparent as that of Gregor's, is equally disturbing because of the reaction of her husband and her parents. The marital rape that she endures post the rejection from her parents and her sister's inability to stop their father from force feeding the meat during their get together gives out the gravity of the transformation she undergoes for those around her. Her psychological transformation which no longer serves the purpose of a dutiful wife is dissentious in nature. Through Yeong-Hye's rebellion, Han Kang critiques the entrenched patriarchal values wherein women's bodies are often controlled in a way to conform to the norms of domesticity and submission. As Yeong-hye starves herself, it serves as a reminder that the rejection of food is infact a radical renunciation of her prescribed social role. She eventually rejects the idea of her body as a battleground upon which the desires of her husband and society clash with her own desire for autonomy.

3. The Body as a Site of Resistance

In both the texts, the body is positioned as a site of resistance against oppressive social structures. While Gregor's transformation into an insect is an extreme form of bodily rebellion, it also renders him powerless. As his insect body cannot participate in the demands of capitalist productivity, it reveals how his identity is not divorced from his daily act of going to the office and contributing to the economy. One can say that while Gregor's body is resistant to the economic and social order, it prisons his being that he cannot escape. Gregor's portrayal of how resistance to social systems also is a source of entrapment reflects the paradox of human existence. To exist us to subject oneself to these systems of control and yet the body is also the only means by which one can resist them.

Similarly, in *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-Hye's refusal to eat meat and her gradual withdrawal from food altogether can be seen as an act of resistance, though this is more deliberate than Gregor's passive transformation. Her husband and her father view her transformation as an affront to their authority. In the due course, as Yeong-Hye's mental and physical health deteriorate, her body symbolizes the ways in which women's autonomy is constrained by societal expectations. Like Gregor, Yeong-Hye's transformation isolates her from her family and society, but unlike Gregor, her transformation is a conscious act of defiance.

The discourse around Yeong-Hye's body as portrayed by Han Kang also engages with broader feminist and ecological concerns. Vegetarianism followed by Yeong-Hye's desire to become one with nature can be seen as a rejection of the imposed roles that the body bears. She rejects the commodification of both women's bodies and the natural world. Consequentially, her increasing identification with plants represent resonates with contemporary feminist eco-criticism, which explores the intersections of gender, environmental degradation, and capitalist exploitation. Given this understanding, Yeong-Hye's transformation transcends the idea of personal rebellion. It presents a critique of the systemic domination that permeate both societal as well as ecological frameworks.

4. Family and Social Isolation

Family and social isolation as a theme is central to both *The Metamorphosis* and *The Vegetarian* as each protagonist's transformation leads to alienation from their families. In Kafka's novella, the response of the family members to Gregor's metamorphosis changes from horror to indifference and then resentment. Once a primary source of income, Gregor, becomes a burden due to his family's inability to accept his transformation. Eventually, it leads to his untimely demise. The systemic breakdown of Gregor's familial ties reflects Kafka's critique of capitalist society that devalues individuals who cannot contribute to the economic order. Through Gregor's metamorphosis the conditional nature of familial bonds reveals that his worth to his family was contingent on his ability to sustain them financially.

Likewise, in *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-Hye's dietary choice becomes a reason of estrangement for her husband and her family led by her father. Dismissing her wish and understand her refusal to eat meat, her husband, Mr. Cheong, views her vegetarianism as a resistance that causes disruption to his orderly life. While her sister In-Hye, who tries to care for her, ultimately fails to fully comprehend Yeong-Hye's alienation and despair. As Yeong-Hye drifts away from her reality, her family's attempt to restore order and control her actions reinforce her isolation. Yeong-Hye's transformation too lays bare the precarious conditionality of family ties within the patriarchal and capitalist structures.

While Gregor's alienation results in his death, Yeong-Hye's transformation offers a more complex and ambiguous reading. In Part-3 of *The Vegetarian*, In-Hye examines her role in perpetuating the patriarchal values and her inability to prevent her sister's collapse. Thus, Han Kang's novel offers a more nuanced idea of how transformation and alienation go hand in hand than Kafka's.

CONCLUSION

Both texts explore how consequences of transformation lead to inevitable alienation. Through their depictions of bodily metamorphosis, Kafka and Kang show how people are treated differently once they stop enacting their assigned roles. They address the ways in which individuals are shaped by social systems—and ultimately dehumanized—by the societal and familial structures that impose control over them. They depict how body can be a site of resistance and a carriage for the tragic consequences that accompany it.

Authors Kafka and Kang employ body as a central metaphor to convey how identity is a make-believe of what society teaches of who we are within the confines of social systems, in this case capitalism and patriarchy. The protagonists' Gregor and Yeong-Hye transformation challenge the systems that seek to define and control them, eventually leading to their ultimate destruction. While this is a glaring commentary on limitation to human autonomy, it also serves to provide us with an understanding on why since time immemorial, people have used their bodies to convey their misery and pain and the constant dehumanisation that follows the social systems that become the central to human life and living. It is important to understand the cost of liberation is alienation; a warning indeed. When the transformation is not deliberate, it only creates a sense of mystery and despair around people and their aspirations for liberation from their pain. Recognizing what drives people to break the shackles whether with awareness points out the loopholes in the social system.

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