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Ensayo

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Resumen

La Vegetariana de Han Kang: Una alegoría posmoderna de la lucha de las mujeres por el poder y la libertad.

En este ensayo se analizará la novela posmoderna *La Vegetariana* (2015) escrita por la autora coreana Han Kang. El objetivo de este ensayo es desarrollar una lectura alegórica desde la perspectiva feminista, explorar diferentes problemáticas tales como las normas patriarcales, la objetificación de las mujeres y la violencia hacia ellas.

Desde la perspectiva de la poética posmoderna, realidades múltiples y verdades serán cuestionadas y la construcción/deconstrucción de zonas ayudarán a los lectores a pensar en diferentes mundos y representaciones.

Palabras claves: Literatura- Género - Sociedad- Poder- Posmodernismo

Abstract

In this essay, the postmodern novel *The Vegetarian* (2015) written by Korean author Han Kang will be analyzed. The aim of this paper is to develop an allegorical reading from a feminist perspective, exploring different issues such as patriarchal norms, objectification of women and violence against them.

From a postmodern poetics' point of view, multiple realities and certainties will be questioned and the construction/deconstruction of zones will help the reader to think about the different worlds and representations.

Key words: Literature- Gender- Society- Power- Postmodernism

Introduction

As it is explained in "Postmodern Fiction" by Brian McHale, "allegory is metaphor's inverse: where in a metaphor the metaphorical frame of reference is absent, the literal frame present, in allegory

48



it is the literal frame of reference that is missing and must be supplied by the reader—only the metaphorical frame is given” (McHale, 2004, p.141). In this sense, *The Vegetarian* will be analyzed as a case of postmodern fiction and also as a political text in which its political meaning—that is to say, its literal frame of reference— is hidden.

The aim of this paper is to develop an allegorical reading from the feminist perspective, exploring different issues such as patriarchal norms, objectification of women and violence against them. The text will be approached at the level of Worlds of Narrative, taking into consideration the different constructed zones and the notion of characters; as well as at the level of Worlds of Language, taking Topological Worlds into account. The paper will be structured into different parts to explore postmodern fiction and the effects of subversive narrative strategies of plot: postmodern fiction and postmodern topics, female oppression in *The Vegetarian*, exploring narrative worlds, zones, notion of characters and finally, the analysis' conclusion.

The theoretical background will be provided by different authors, for instance Brian McHale, Julie Lindas and Nasreen Banu M. Jamadar, among others.

Development

Postmodern fiction and postmodern topics

Postmodernism is a set of beliefs, a system of thoughts, according to John Barth, “awkward and faintly epigoric” Barth (cited in McHale, 2004). Postmodernist literature aims to subvert the possibility of a unique reality. It challenges institutions, binary oppositions, and questions representations of reality.

Brian McHale proposes the dominant of postmodern fiction as ontological as it deploys strategies that engage questions like “Which world is it?” (McHale, 2004, p.10). This idea opposes and contrasts the epistemological dominant of Modernist literature, which is centered around the pursuit of knowledge. Another important difference is the one explained by Julie Lindas

Modernism was preoccupied by a desire to portray subjective consciousness as more unstable and disorderly than previously thought. Postmodernism, on the other hand, preferred to concentrate its efforts on revealing fictionality, that is, the condition of being fictional: constructed, narrated, and mediated. (Lindas, 2013, p. 4)

Postmodern poetics goes against what is inherited and taken for granted.

This new perspective in which there are multiple realities, and everything can be questioned gives rise to multiple discourses on different topics such as ecology, different religions and some other thematic aspects related to minorities as, in the case of *The Vegetarian*, women and their oppression.

Female oppression in *The Vegetarian*

During the first part of the novel, the protagonist is seen as a property a man possesses. In addition, she is a property that can humiliate its owner -husband- by means of her rebellious acts, so she needs to be corrected by her first owner: the father: "Acting like this at your age, what on earth must Mr. Cheong think?" (Kang, 2015, p. 29) The patriarchal system affects women and men -or any other gender- all over the world but in Asian countries as Korea, Confucianism also influences gender ideas, "Especially the rules guiding the relationship between husband and wife was based on severe prejudice towards women, resulting in lower status of women. According to Confucian virtues, a woman was required to obey her father, husband, and son" (Kong, 2018, p. 7). In this context, Yeong-hye defies traditional roles by being obedient neither to her husband nor to her father, an act of subversion that a patriarchal system will not allow easily: "women either submit to what is expected, or they rebel and are punished" (Jamadar, 2016, p. 181).

Lack of obedience is punished with physical and sexual violence in order to maintain and reinforce male domination over women. Spousal sexual abuse is perpetrated in the novel,

I grabbed hold of my wife and pushed her to the floor. Pinning down her struggling arms and tugging off her trousers, I became unexpectedly aroused. She put up a surprisingly strong resistance and, spitting out vulgar curses all the while, it took me three attempts before I managed to insert myself successfully. Once that had happened, she lay there in the dark staring up at the ceiling, her face blank, as though she were a "comfort woman" dragged in against her will, and I was the Japanese soldier demanding her services. (Kang, 2015, p.30)

This event is also linked to the construction of Mr Cheong's masculinity,

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 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. (Kang, 2015, p. 1)

As the patriarchal system requires strong, virile men, Mr Cheong needs to reaffirm his virility and his superiority which is traditionally an inherently male condition: Yeong-hye 's freedom is presented as an obstacle. He displays his *masculine power* over his wife in order to satisfy that socially- constructed demand.

Mr Cheong expects his wife to fit in the traditional female role, “She hadn't said a single word on the way here, but I convinced myself that this wouldn't be a problem. There's nothing wrong with keeping quiet; after all, hadn't women traditionally been expected to be demure and restrained?” (Kang, 2015, p. 21). Yeong-hye does fit in at the beginning -before the dream. She is in charge of the domestic tasks, such as cleaning or cooking, “I thought I could get by perfectly well just thinking of her as a stranger, or no, as a sister, or even a maid, someone who puts food on the table and keeps the house in good order” (Kang, 2015, p. 30). Her identity is suppressed, and she is described as “completely unremarkable in every way” (Kang, 2015, p. 1). As Mee-Hae Kong explains, “Women who are alienated at home lose their identity and try to compensate their loss by pursuing the well-beings of their family” (Kong, 2018, p. 10). Everything changes after her dream: that dream marks the end of her domestic tasks' routine, “Not once did my wife bother to peer out from the kitchen in the time it took me to get ready, slinging my tie around my neck like a scarf, pulling on my socks, and getting my notebook and wallet together. In the five years we'd been married, this was the first time I'd had to go to work without her handing me my things and seeing me off” (Kang, 2015, p. 11). During five years, Yeong-hye was not only in charge of the household but also in charge of assisting Mr. Cheong but suddenly, as Savitri remarks, “... that 'madness' leads to a strategy for achieving independence as a woman and liberate herself from men's domination” (Savitri, 2018, p. 2). Mr. Cheong loses his “maid” (Kang, 2015, p. 30) and her freedom is attacked, “How on earth could she be so self-centered? [...] The very idea that there should be this other side to her, one where she selfishly did as she pleased, was astonishing” (Kang, 2015, p. 13). In spite of his attacks, Yeong-hye will try to gain her autonomy. The subversive narrative strategies analyzed below will reflect this process.

Exploring Narrative Worlds



Zones

The Vegetarian invites the reader to read and construct/deconstruct the different zones. Brian McHale defines a zone as a “heterotopian space” (McHale, 2004, p. 44) and these zones can be created by using different strategies. As McHale (2004) explains, “Postmodernist fiction draws upon a number of strategies for constructing/deconstructing space, among them juxtaposition, interpolation, superimposition, and misattribution” (p. 45).

A zone -Korea- is created by opposing two representations: the Korean society that implies old patriarchal norms and values of Confucianism, and a new Korean society with a new set of feminist beliefs in which a woman can be independent. The strategy used to give the idea of “space” is, in this case, *juxtaposition*, as two incongruent worlds are presented as opposites, creating a zone. This juxtaposition of worlds is cultural, sociological, and political. This juxtaposition is presented to demonstrate the crisis in which the protagonist is immersed: a crisis in which a new world is being created but crushing with another world with an old set of beliefs and a patriarchal system. This crisis is then reflected in her unstable state of mind.

Another constructed zone is the protagonist's mind. The strategy used is *interpolation*, as two spaces coexist creating a new, unclear, third space between those two ones. At the beginning of the novel, the reader can identify a woman who is oppressed. However, after her key decision of stop eating meat, she embarks on the process of “becoming a tree” ignoring societal norms, “...leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands...they delve down into the earth. Endlessly, endlessly...yes, I spread my legs because I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch; I spread them wide” (Kang, 2015, p. 127) This passage from her initial shape to her metamorphosis creates an in-between state of mind in which she is looking for her liberation and independence, but still suffering social oppression.

On pages 71-72, the author includes a passage that could help the reader identify these two zones, “It was a quiet tone of a person who didn't belong anywhere, someone who had passed into a border area between states of being” (Kang, 2015, p. 71-72). We can notice how the protagonist cannot find a place in which she is not in crisis (as it was said, not the old Korea, nor the new one) and she is also in an in-between state of mind (she is not so oppressed as she used to be but she is not a free woman either).



The construction/deconstruction of these zones collaborates with the depiction of postmodern times in which gender conceptions are no longer stable and fixed: traditional ideas and representations are questioned and subverted within the text.

Notion of characters

According to Brian McHale, postmodernist characters are “disturbers of hierarchy” (McHale, 2004, p. 123). The protagonist in *The Vegetarian* has not got the power and solidness of a typical, traditional main character; she is a woman “completely unremarkable in every way” (Kang, 2015, p. 1). In this sense, the author subverts character's hierarchies: the protagonist does not have a predominant voice, she is the object of perspective of other people, and she is presented as insubstantial with a lack of action and identity. This reveals that the strategy used to construct/deconstruct this character is *pieced together-apart: literalization of cliché*. Savitri considers that, “Based on its structure, this novel emphasizes the domination of the female main character” (Savitri, 2018, p. 2). The novel is structured in three parts in which she is not the narrator but rather her husband, brother-in-law and finally, her sister. Not only is Yeong-hye described as an isolated, oppressed woman, but the novel's structure also corresponds with the construction of her inconsistent, oppressed character.

Brian McHale states that “the cancelation or de-creation of a character has particularly disorienting consequences” (McHale, 2004, p. 211). The reader is disoriented in *The Vegetarian* as Yeong-hye's husband, Mr. Cheong, is canceled after her breakdown. When she is under care in the hospital, her sister is the one that visits and looks after her. Mr. Cheong's cancelation also “demonstrates the author's ontological superiority and “authority” (McHale, 2004, p. 213) as it is the author who decides to stop demonstrating Mr. Cheong's importance in part three, “Flaming trees”, focusing, in turn, on the protagonist herself, her health and her possible final liberation from patriarchal oppression.

Worlds of Language: Exploring Tropological Worlds

According to Brian McHale, the metaphorical frame of reference “approaches the status of an independent fictional world of its own, an autonomous (or at any rate quasi-autonomous) imaginative reality” (McHale, 2004, p.138). In this way, the reader gains access to a new dimension which gives some markers to interpret what is written, but with a new sense, “The metaphorical frame of reference comes to dominate the foreground, and the literal frame retreats into the background” (McHale, 2004, p. 138).

The metaphor can be then extended, inflated, and thus converted into an allegory, “The result is a text-length trope which preserves the two-level ontological structure of metaphor (literal frame of reference, metaphorical frame of reference), but in which, instead of being announced explicitly, the two-level structure remains implicit, disseminated throughout the text” (McHale, 2004, p. 140). This is the case in *The Vegetarian*.

During the first part of the novel, the protagonist is compared to an animal, “In-hye held her father by the waist to help her helpless sister. But he wasn't ready to give up. He split her lips with his strong fingers and crushed the pork on Yeong-hye's lips. She struggled with agony. He slapped her even harder so that the force of the slap knocked her mouth open and he jammed the pork in it. As soon as her father released her, Yeong-hye growled and spat out the meat. An animal cry of anguish burst from her lips, ‘...get away!’” (Kang, 2015, p.40). She is also described later as a “cornered animal” (Kang, 2015, p. 66) when her brother-in-law remembers that same event. In the essay *The Flowering of Human Consciousness: An Ecofeminist Reading of Han Kang's The Vegetarian and the Fruit of My Woman*, Chandran and Pai state that “The patriarchy is literal in this scene. This act of Yeong-hye represents the outburst of women towards the violent social norms. Social convention is very important to the family, and Yeong-hye is defying it. They read her apathy and passivity as insolence” (Chandran & Pai, 2017, p. 25). Her animal cry of anguish is the result of the patriarchal violence and her own lack of independence.

In this sense, we can say that Yeong-hye metamorphosis from an “animal” into a “tree” is a metaphor for her metamorphosis from an oppressed woman into a free, empowered one:

“I'm not an animal anymore, sister,” she said, first scanning the empty ward as if about to disclose a momentous secret. “I don't need to eat, not now. I can live without it. All I need is sunlight.”

“What are you talking about? Do you really think you've turned into a tree? How could a plant talk? How can you think these things?” Yeong-hye's eyes shone. A mysterious smile played on her face. “You're right. Soon now, words and thoughts will all disappear. Soon.” Yeong-hye burst into laughter, then sighed.

“Very soon. Just a bit longer to wait, sister.” (Kang, 2015, p. 153-154)

It seems to be that Yeong-hye wants to take control of her body and ideas, even when it implies a sacrifice. In *Revolt, Resilience and Remarkable Ardour in the novel The Vegetarian*, Jamadar wonders, “What kinds of choices can women make about their own lives and their bodies? No difficulty at all realizing that *The Vegetarian* is about women everywhere and their continued subjugation by men” (Jamadar, 2016, p. 1). As Yeong-hye wants her independence and her right to decide, she needs to revolt and resist, creating a new identity which means metaphorically, becoming a tree,

That ‘madness’ to consider herself as a tree, at the end of the story can be understood as her effort to resist and liberate herself from shackles of patriarchy construction that seize her ‘voice’. This also shows the freedom of a woman, to master her own self and release all of her social norm entanglement. (Savitri, 2018, p. 8)

Yeong-hye's change in the way she acts is noticed by the family and so is her metamorphosis, “Whether human, animal or plant, she could not be called a “person,” but then she wasn't exactly some feral creature either—more like a mysterious being with qualities of both” (Kang, 2015, p.88). This passage reveals one of the zones analyzed above: the in-between state of the protagonist, whose transformation started but remains uncompleted. Her humanity is put into question as she creates her new essence as well as the set of values and meanings that can define her as a human being, an idea that is not clear for her acquaintances. At this point, she cannot be defined or qualified by others as she used to be: She is not simply defined as a “completely ordinary wife” (Kang, 2015, p. 4), “the most ordinary woman in the world” (Kang, 2015, p. 18) or as a “child” (Kang, 2015, p. 27) anymore. She can only be defined by herself as she wishes, escaping from the strict norms a woman is supposed to respect.

As Brian McHale states: “...allegory offers itself as a tool for exploring ontological structure and foregrounding ontological themes...” (McHale, 2004, p. 141). In this way, the protagonist's final escape from the norms, abandoning her *animal* version –and her own definition as a *tree*– are used to portray and explore the ontological struggle against the patriarchal version of reality.

Conclusion



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In closing, it may be concluded that *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang is a case of postmodern allegory, as the reader has access to a new possible interpretation of what is written, a *metaphorical* interpretation.

As it was explained, multiple realities and certainties can be questioned within the postmodern poetics and, considering that postmodern fiction is ontological, the presentation of a unique reality will be subverted, and old beliefs will be challenged. In this postmodern novel, the allegory, as a tool, fosters the analysis of female oppression and final liberation from the patriarchal norms by means of a metamorphosis, threatening all traditional ideas as regards female and male status in Korea.

The construction/ deconstruction of zones helps the reader explore the different worlds and representations, which are coherent with the revision of inherited thematic aspects depicted in the novel. Moreover, the notion of characters disorients the reader and subverts hierarchies, for instance, presenting an atypical protagonist who does not have a predominant voice.

The final part of the paper deals with the protagonist's metamorphosis and its allegorical reading: How the protagonist seems ready to sacrifice her body in order to fight for her desired freedom. She was oppressed, abused, and raped and, at the same time, her human qualities were put into question -she was described as an animal. Her struggle to be transformed into a tree could be interpreted as her struggle to escape from that mental and physical violence she suffers- given the fact that being a tree is the only desire she expresses openly. Her process of *animal to tree* transformation is then, in fact, one of female liberation and independence.



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