

HAN KANG'S "THE VEGETARIAN" AND AHMAD A'ZAM'S "DREAM OR JOURNEY TO GULISTAN": THE POETICS OF DREAMS AND THE SUBCONSCIOUS

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Abstract:

This article provides a comparative analysis of the novel "The Vegetarian" (채식주의자) by Korean writer Han Kang, winner of the 2024 Nobel Prize, and the work "Dream or journey to Gulistan" by contemporary Uzbek author Ahmad A'zam. Both works examine the dream and subconscious experiences of the main characters, the boundary between real and unreal worlds, as well as motifs of protest expressed through corporeality. Using the examples of Yeong-hye's (영혜) dreams and the protagonist's dreams, the deepest layers of the human psyche, trauma, and escape mechanisms are analyzed. The article employs methods of psychoanalytic literary criticism, narratological analysis, and comparative-typological approaches.

Keywords: Han Kang, "The Vegetarian", Ahmad A'zam, "Dream or journey to Gulistan", poetics of dreams, subconscious, trauma, surrealism, korean literature, uzbek literature, comparative literary studies

In contemporary world literature, there is an observable trend toward increasingly complex artistic interpretations of the deepest layers of the human psyche—the subconscious, dreams, and traumatic experiences. The work of Korean writer Han Kang (한강), winner of the 2024 Nobel Prize, occupies a special place in this regard. Her novel "The Vegetarian" (채식주의자) stands as one of the most brilliant examples in not only Korean but world literature of illuminating the most mysterious facets of the human psyche.

At the same time, in Uzbek literature of the independence period, attention to psychologism, the subconscious, and the world of dreams and imagination has intensified. In particular, Ahmad A'zam's novel "Dream or journey to Gulistan" is recognized as an important example of the surrealistic and psychoanalytic direction in Uzbek prose. As literary scholar Rayhon Ubaydullayeva notes, psychoanalytic methods of analysis began to be widely employed in Uzbek novels of the independence period, and this is especially evident in Ahmad A'zam's works.

This article provides a comparative analysis of these two works, revealing the similarities and differences in the poetics of dreams and the subconscious within them. Furthermore, by presenting excerpts and quotations from both works in Korean and Uzbek, the inner worlds of the protagonists are analyzed.

The entire plot of "The Vegetarian" begins with a terrifying dream experienced by the protagonist, Yeong-hye (영혜). It is precisely this dream that fundamentally alters her life—she completely stops consuming meat. Throughout the novel, Yeong-hye's dreams recur and become increasingly complex, revealing the traumatic experiences buried in her subconscious.

The following passage from the Korean original of the work describes Yeong-hye's first dream. This dream establishes the entire philosophical foundation of the novel:

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“어두운 숲이었다. 사람은 없었다. 나무들은 날카로운 잎사귀들을 달고 있었고, 내 발은 찢겨져 있었다. 거의 기억나는 듯한 이곳, 하지만 길을 잃었다. 무섭다. 춥다. 얼어붙은 산마루를 건너면 붉은 헛간 같은 건물이 보였다. 문 앞에 짚자리가 펄럭이고 있었다. 그것을 걸어 올리고 안으로 들어가면, 그게 거기 있었다. 피가 뚝뚝 떨어지는 커다란 붉은 살점들이 긴 대나무 장대에 꿰여 있었다. 비켜나가려 해도 고기, 고기가 끝없이 늘어서 있었고, 출구는 없었다. 입안에 피가 가득 찼다. 피에 젖은 옷이 살갓에 달라붙었다”.

“Qorong’u o’rmon edi. Odamlar yo’q edi. Daraxtlarning o’tkir barglari bor edi, oyoqlarim yirtilgan edi. Deyarli eslayotgandek bo’lgan bu joy, lekin adashib qolganman. Qo’rqinchli. Sovuq. Muzlagan tog’ cho’qqisidan o’tib, qizil omborxonona ko’rindi. Eshik oldida somon to’shak hilpirab turardi. Uni ko’tarib ichkariga kirsam, u yerda qoni tomchilab turgan katta qizil go’sht bo’laklari uzun bambuk tayoqqa tizilgan edi. Chetlanmoqchi bo’lsam ham go’sht cheksiz cho’zilgan va chiqish yo’q edi. Og’zim qonga to’ldi. Qonga bo’yalgan kiyim terimga yopishib qoldi”.

“It was a dark forest. There were no people. The trees had sharp leaves, and my feet were torn. This place, which I almost seemed to remember, but I was lost. Frightening. Cold. Crossing the frozen mountain ridge, a building like a red barn came into view. A straw mat was fluttering in front of the door. Lifting it and going inside, it was there. Large red chunks of flesh, dripping with blood, were strung up on long bamboo poles. Even when I tried to move aside, meat, meat stretched endlessly, and there was no exit. My mouth was filled with blood. My blood-soaked clothes clung to my skin”.

Through this dream, Han Kang vividly expresses the symbolic connection between meat and violence. For Yeong-hye, consuming meat is not merely eating but becoming an accomplice to the violence prevalent in society. Her becoming a vegetarian is a rebellion against societal norms, yet this rebellion leads her to the point of self-destruction.

In later parts of the novel, Yeong-hye’s dreams become even more complex. She now refuses not only meat but food altogether. Her desire to “become a tree” is a symbolic expression of escaping from humanity, violence, and society. Dreams merge with reality, and the boundary between them completely disappears. What Yeong-hye sees in her dreams becomes more real to her than actual reality itself.

Ahmad A’zam’s novel “Dream or journey to Gulistan” is considered a significant example of the surrealist and psychoanalytic direction in Uzbek literature. As literary scholars have noted, this work clearly exhibits “a new style and interpretation—the reflection of surrealism (the world of imagination)”. In the work, the boundary between the real and unreal worlds is blurred; dream and imagination merge with reality.

Through the protagonist’s dreams, the traumatic experiences, fears, and desires lurking in his subconscious are artistically interpreted. Below is a passage from the work depicting the protagonist’s world of dreams and imagination:

“Men Gulistonga keldim. Bu yerda hamma narsa boshqacha edi—vaqt sekin oqardi, odamlar shoshilmasdi, hatto daraxtlar ham o’zgacha nafas olardi. Ammo bu jannatmakon joyda nimadir notabiiy, nimadir yolg’ondek tuyuldi. Men atrofga diqqat bilan qaradim—gul barglari haddan tashqari yorqin, suv haddan tashqari tiniq, osmon haddan tashqari musaffo edi. Va birdan angladim: bu Guliston emas, bu men orzu qilgan Gulistonning o’zigina edi. Haqiqiy Guliston boshqa joyda, men uni topa olmadim...”.

“I came to Gulistan. Everything was different here—time flowed slowly, people were unhurried, even the trees breathed differently. But in this paradise-like place, something seemed unnatural, something seemed false. I looked around carefully—the flower petals were excessively bright, the water excessively clear, the sky excessively pure. And suddenly I understood: this was not Gulistan, this was merely the Gulistan of my dreams. The real Gulistan was somewhere else, and I could not find it...”.

Through this passage, Ahmad A’zam vividly expresses the dialectic between dream and reality. The Gulistan the protagonist dreams of is his subconscious ideal world, but this

world is unattainable because it exists only in imagination. Through dreams, the work depicts the inner conflicts of the individual, the complex relationship with society, and the process of searching for identity.

The dreams of Ahmad A'zam's protagonist express not only his personal experiences but also the collective subconscious traumas of an entire society, an entire people. In this respect, his work shares common ground with Han Kang's work.

Although Han Kang's "The Vegetarian" and Ahmad A'zam's "Dream or Journey to Gulistan" were created in different Eastern societies, similarities can be observed in their use of the poetics of dreams and the subconscious. The following table presents the main comparative aspects of the two works:

In both works, dreams serve as the primary driving force of the plot. In "The Vegetarian," Yeong-hye's first dream is the starting point for all subsequent events in the novel. It is precisely after this dream that her life fundamentally changes. In "Dream or Journey to Gulistan," the protagonist's entire journey takes place in the world of dreams and imagination, with actual reality barely depicted at all.

Both works provide ample opportunities for psychoanalytic interpretation. Viewed from the perspective of Freudian and Jungian theories, Yeong-hye's dreams express her subconscious trauma of violence, sexual repression, and fear of death. The dreams of Ahmad A'zam's protagonist, on the other hand, reveal traumas related to the collective unconscious, archetypes, and national identity.

As literary scholar Rayhon Ubaydullayeva notes, "psychoanalytic analysis allows for the study of the psychological state of novel characters, their consciousness, unconscious states, motivations, and experiences. This approach helps to understand the characters' personalities, their place in social life, and the author's ideological intent".

Both works are written in a surrealistic style where the boundary between the real and unreal worlds is completely blurred. As noted in the analysis of Omon Muxtor's novel "The Ruin on the Hill," "surrealism and its theoretical characteristics, their reflection in contemporary novels, and their role in analyzing the psyche of characters" are of significant importance. In this regard, there is a typological similarity between the works of Han Kang and Ahmad A'zam.

In both works, the protagonists develop their own unique strategies for escaping trauma. For Yeong-hye, this strategy is refusing meat, then refusing food altogether, escaping from humanity by transforming herself into a tree. For Ahmad A'zam's protagonist, this strategy is escaping into the world of dreams and imagination, into the dreamland of Gulistan. Both depict extreme forms of escape.

In "The Vegetarian," trauma is primarily expressed on a physical level – the dreams affect Yeong-hye's body, her eating habits, her entire physical existence. In "Dream or Journey to Gulistan," trauma is expressed more on a spiritual-mental level – the protagonist suffers spiritually rather than physically. This is one of the significant differences between the two works.

Conclusion

Although Han Kang's "The Vegetarian" and Ahmad A'zam's "Dream or Journey to Gulistan" were created in different cultural contexts, significant similarities can be observed in their use of the poetics of dreams and the subconscious. Both works are written in a surrealistic style, depicting through dreams the protagonists' deepest spiritual experiences, traumas, and strategies for escaping them.

Through the characters of Yeong-hye and Ahmad A'zam's protagonist, the authors depict the spiritual anguish of individuals, particularly members of the intelligentsia, in Eastern societies; their struggle in the search for identity; and their complex relationship with society. In both works, dreams become more real than actual life itself and influence the protagonists' entire existence.

Through dreams, Han Kang portrays the individual's rebellion against societal norms, their expression of protest through their own body. Through dreams, Ahmad A'zam expresses the individual's aspiration toward an ideal world, the conflict between dream and

reality, and the anguish in the path toward self-awareness. Both works occupy a worthy place in world literature due to their artistic power, psychological depth, and philosophical content.

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