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EATING AND REFUSING TO EAT: A HEDONIC AND EUDAIMONIC READING OF ELIZABETH GILBERT'S EAT, PRAY, LOVE AND HANG KANG'S THE VEGETARIAN

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ABSTRACT

Patriarchal societies have always imposed constructed ideals of beauty, appearance and behaviour upon women. It is one of the prominent strategies to dominate their bodies and personalities and also to obstruct the pursuit of women to attain self-realization. The processes of eating and refusing to eat food are powerful modes of resistance against patriarchal structures. Elizabeth Gilbert in her memoir Eat, Pray, Love uses food as a means to reclaim and assert her bodily autonomy. She achieves both Hedonic and Eudaimonic well-being through food and enjoyment. Once she starts enjoying her life, she attains self-discovery and personal growth. Yeong Hye in The Vegetarian complicates and challenges the concept of self-realization. She adopts self- destructive modes of resistance against patriarchy by refusing to eat. She lacks Hedonic pleasure and does not achieve Eudaimonic well-being in the usual manner. She defines her own perception of Eudaimonic well-being and states that the concept of self-realization varies from person to person.

Keywords: Eating, Refusing to Eat, Hedonic Psychology, Eudaimonic Psychology, Well-Being, Self-Realization, Pleasure, Self-Destruction

1. INTRODUCTION

The socially constructed ideals of beauty, weight, appearance and behaviour are imposed upon women in patriarchal societies. The female body becomes a site where these ideological affinities come into play. They are expected by the society to regulate their bodies and personalities as per the beauty standards set by the society. Their day-to-day activities are determined by the control of such forces. Their recreational activities and even food eating, a biological necessity are being regulated by such power agencies. The dilemma of being caught between pleasure and discipline affects individuality of women to an extent. This can obstruct the pursuit of self-discovery of women.

Food emerges as a powerful medium in literature to articulate resistance against mechanisms of power and control. Social expectations control women to maintain their appearance. This will lead women to control her appetite through dieting, fasting or not eating certain foods. Most of the women succumb to such societal pressures to maintain particular body types. This societal demand to control pleasure in order to maintain discipline has led women to look upon eating as a socially controlled activity.

Elizabeth Gilbert's 2006 memoir *Eat, Pray, Love,* structured into three parts, represents her journey through Italy, India and Indonesia. She was suffering from emotional breakdown, following the failure of her marriage. She undertook this journey for her personal, emotional and spiritual fulfilment and deliberately wanted to overcome the trauma inflicted upon her by her troubled marriage. The first part of the memoir, titled *Eat* offers a discussion of the politics of the female body. This part records her experiences in Italy. This place offered her varied experiences to enjoy the pleasure of eating food. It was here that she began treating pleasure as something that should not be punished. A negotiation of female pleasure and bodily autonomy occurs in this part and she chose to satisfy her pleasure of eating varieties of food like pizza, pasta, gelato and other food items. This was her form of resistance as she wanted to have a temporary escape from the rigid norms of maintaining bodily discipline, imposed upon her by the society. Elizabeth identified food as a medium to transcend cultural pressures that force women to maintain particular body types. She used food to liberate herself from the body politics drafted by somebody else.

Self-love and self- acceptance should become the norms of the society, according to Elizabeth Gilbert. Women should become ready to accept their bodies as such. They must develop the spirit to overcome cultural regulations that restrict their desires and will lead to an assertion of female subjectivity. Women should train themselves to overcome the pressure to achieve an ideal body image, set by dominant Western beauty standards. Once women find means to satisfy their desires without any guilt feeling, they find themselves in a position to accomplish self-discovery. According to Elizabeth Gilbert, "Happiness is the consequence of personal effort. You fight for it, strive for it, insist upon it, and sometimes even travel around the world looking for it. You have to participate relentlessly in the manifestations of your own blessings. And once you have achieved a state of happiness, you must never become lax about maintaining it" (245).

Eating becomes a means to reclaim bodily pleasure in the memoir *Eat, Pray, Love*. This process of reclamation of bodily pleasure helps the writer to repair her damaged self. Thus, a recovery of self after emotional crisis occurs in the memoir *Eat, Pray, Love*. The opposite relationship of women with food is being discussed through Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian*. The protagonist Yeong-Hye, a South Korean woman, decides to stop eating meat. This was completely her personal dietary choice and had nothing to do with others. She took this decision after seeing disturbing dreams about blood, animal violence and human cruelty. But unfortunately, the patriarchal social set up in which she was a part of, was not ready to accept her choice. Her husband and her family members looked upon her personal choice as a rejection of social expectations of femininity and family life. She was not given freedom to assert her bodily autonomy. In a patriarchal society, the bodies of women are yet another site of social control. They should not take any decision transgressing patriarchal authority.

Yeong-Hye's determination to adhere to her decision of rejecting meat can be seen as a form of resistance against patriarchal violence inflicted upon women like

her. She fights to reclaim the rights over her body. The novel is divided into three interconnected sections. The first section is narrated by her husband, Mr Cheong. He described his wife as an ordinary woman who was undemanding and conventional. “She's a good woman, he thought. The kind of woman whose goodness is oppressive” (65). This was her thought about her. Therefore, he was not ready to accept his wife’s decision to choose her diet. This resulted in conflicts in her family. Thus, this novel discusses how her personal choice becomes a means to resist patriarchy. Non-conformity to rules set by patriarchy can lead to severe consequences.

The tripartite structure of the novel, narrated by three different people from Yeong-Hye’s family conveys the dilemma of a woman in a patriarchal society. She has no right to narrate her own story and her story is drafted on the basis of the viewpoints of others. Her father slapped her twice and forced her to eat meat. This was the immediate reason for Yeong Hye to indulge in self-destructive behaviour. She tried to cut her wrist and began to show signs of mental illness. She began eating less after this incident. Her brother-in- law also made her an object to satisfy his pleasures. He was obsessed with painting flowers on her naked body and wanted to film her having sex. He was an unsuccessful artist and exploited Yeong Hye to give a boost to his career and also to exploit her. This forms the narrative structure of the second part of the novel.

The third part, narrated in third person, through the character of Yeong Hye’s sister, In- Hye, discusses the slow disintegration of Yeong-Hye. She was gradually getting transformed from a vegan to an anorexic. Yeong-Hye’s nightmare was a detrimental force in converting her to a vegan. It is in the third section of the novel that we learn that this nightmare was triggered by her childhood trauma. The patriarchal hegemony was unwilling to care for Yeong-Hye, even when she was descending into mental illness. Her husband divorced her. Her parents abandoned her. She was supported only by her sister In-Hye. “Life is such a strange thing, she thinks, once she has stopped laughing. Even after certain things have happened to them, no matter how awful the experience, people still go on eating and drinking, going to the toilet and washing themselves - living, in other words. And sometimes they even laugh out loud. And they probably have these same thoughts, too, and when they do it must make them cheerlessly recall all the sadness they'd briefly managed to forget” (168). According to In-Hye, her sister Yeong-Hye was not able to overcome the trauma and violence inflicted upon her. Most people will find means to overcome traumas in their lives, some become successful and others unsuccessful. Yeong Hye belongs to the second category. In-Hye was the only person who supported Yeong Hye. She tried to motivate her by saying, “It's your body, you can treat it however you please. The only area where you're free to do just as you like” (179).

Yeong-Hye became completely unstable and started believing that she got transformed herself into a tree. She tells her sister, “Look, sister, I'm doing a handstand; 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...” (131). This can be considered as her means to escape from the human world of patriarchal pressures. She believed that a woman would be safer in a non-human form. This can also be regarded as her own defense mechanism against violence and rejection of her own bodily autonomy. This was her way of self-realization. She wished to seek an existence beyond patriarchal hegemony. Her pursuit of self-realization is in an extreme form. She wanted to acquire an alternative identity, rejecting the societal expectations imposed upon her as a daughter, wife and woman.

The paper attempts to analyse the works, *Eat, Pray, Love* and *The Vegetarian*, through the lens of Hedonic Psychology and Eudaimonic Psychology. Hedonic Psychology deals with the idea that well-being of a person can be ensured through the avoidance of pain by guaranteeing happiness and enjoyment. Human beings can experience positive emotions and satisfaction through pleasure. Elizabeth enjoys Italian food to rediscover sensory pleasure and overcome the trauma of her failed marriage. Self-realization of Elizabeth occurs through her emotional recovery. A renewed appreciation of her life occurs through her experiences in Italy. Italian food becomes a source of comfort for her. She was not bothered about the societal expectations to maintain her body stature. Hedonic psychological principles identify pleasure as a powerful means to resist patriarchal needs imposed upon women. She fought for the reassertion of her bodily autonomy. She achieved this by finding her own means of happiness, especially eating food. Excessive self-restraint can harm the emotional stability of a person. Thus, Elizabeth Gilbert enjoyment of Italian food is a means to resist the attempts to subordinate female bodily pleasure with the narratives of discipline and self-control.

Eating and refusal to eat form the centre of thought of this paper. Eudaimonic Psychology goes beyond pleasure and happiness and finds other means to attain self-realization. The concept of well-being is analysed from a different angle in Yeong-Hye's Eudaimonic Psychology. According to Yeong-Hye, if one lives in accordance with one's own perceived notions and ideas, one can achieve satisfaction. Yeong-Hye in the work *The Vegetarian* rejects conventional standard of living and urges to transform herself into a tree. She badly wanted to distance herself from conventional expectations surrounding family life and personal choices like eating food. She intensely wished to seek an existence that matches with her own personal convictions. If self-realization and self-actualization were achieved by Elizabeth Gilbert through pleasure principle, Yeong-Hye achieved her union with transcendence through physical deterioration and psychological instability.

Yeong-Hye devised her own means of resistance to go against patriarchal domination. She asserted her personal autonomy by challenging imposed identities. She had to suffer from intense psychological distress in the pursuit of personal meaning and identity. She chose self-erasure as a means to assert her non-conformity to patriarchal ideologies. Thus, her resistance was an extreme form of denial and deterioration. She presented a complicated version of Eudaimonic Psychology as it is generally about well-being with growth and development of one's life. Yeong- Hye's transformation and growth was intensely self-destructive. This is because of the intensity of psychological distress that she had been exposed to during childhood. She wanted to pay back all forms of violence and trauma inflicted upon her. People adopt different modes of resistance. For Yeong-Hye, self-erasure was her mode of resistance and retribution. Thus, her resistance becomes a problematic liberation.

Thus, Elizabeth Gilbert in *Eat, Pray, Love* identifies Hedonic well-being through food and enjoyment. Yeong- Hye's concept of well-being coincides with her rejection of food and nourishment. This was done as part of resistance against patriarchal structures. Elizabeth Gilbert reclaims bodily pleasure and asserts bodily autonomy, whereas Yeong-Hye rejects bodily pleasure and asserts her autonomy. When Elizabeth Gilbert develops meaningful connections gradually, Yeong-Hye becomes increasingly alienated and isolated. When emotional renewal occurs to Elizabeth Gilbert, Yeong Hye experiences intense distress and deterioration. Thus, the protagonist of *Eat, Pray, Love* emphasizes Eudaimonic well- being through self-discovery and personal growth, the protagonist of *The Vegetarian* attempts to

undertake Eudaimonic well-being through a search for freedom from imposed identity.

The memoir *Eat, Pray, Love* has elements of both Hedonic and Eudaimonic Psychology. Hedonic pleasure is identified as a means to achieve eudaimonic growth and well-being in this work. The memoir conveys the idea that, "You need to learn how to select your thoughts just the same way you select your clothes every day. This is a power you can cultivate. If you want to control things in your life so bad, work on the mind. That's the only thing you should be trying to control" (187). Thus, Elizabeth Gilbert reclaims happiness by selecting her thoughts and controlling her mind. *The Vegetarian* lacks elements of Hedonic Psychology. It discusses Eudaimonic Psychology elements in a different light. The protagonist Yeong-Hye does not achieve eudaimonic well-being. She complicates and challenges the concept of self-realization and asserts that it varies from person to person. For her, it was a self-destructive process. She adopts this mode of resistance to challenge patriarchal hegemonies. Thus, this paper attempts to state that the process of self-realization is closely connected with mental stability, support and a sense of competence. Without these factors, self-realization becomes a complicated process.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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