

## COMPARISON OF YEONG-HYE IN THE VEGETARIAN AND CATHERINE EARNSHAW IN WUTHERING HEIGHTS: A PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY

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### Abstract

*The study offers a comparative psychoanalytic reading of Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights and Hang Kang's The Vegetarian while dealing with two female protagonists, Catherine Earnshaw and Yeong-Hye respectively. Both novels are written by female authors, depicting the two patriarchal societies and psychologically unstable female characters. Adopting a qualitative approach, close-reading technique, the analysis applies Freud's psychological concepts of defense mechanism and dream work/interpretation. While analyzing both characters, they were found to balance their internal and external worlds by using defense mechanism such as asceticism, undoing, displacement, rationalization and projection. For instance, they stopped eating, projected their worries to others, justified their behaviors and directed their anger toward less threatening targets. However, their behaviours also differed due to different cultural and contextual contexts. Yeong-Hye's dreams reflected childhood trauma, whereas Catherine's dreams revealed repressed fears about her future. Moreover, the conclusions revealed that both the characters suffered from madness as Catherine was affected by hallucinations and Yeong-Hye acted totally absurd, denied human basic urges/needs such as food, physical intimacy, violating social norms and declared herself a tree. In short, psychology played a greater role in lives of both the characters and due to different causes both of them lost their mental balance.*

**Key Words:** Psychoanalysis; Defense Mechanism; Displacement, Dissociation; Projection

### 1.Introduction

#### 1.1. Background of the study

This research aims to use psychoanalytic theory to compare and contrast two protagonists, *Yeong-Hye* from the novel *The Vegetarian* and *Catherine Earnshaw* from *Wuthering Heights*. *The Vegetarian*, the 2024 Nobel Prize Winner in Literature, is a novel written in 2007 by South Korean author, Hang Kang. It is based on her short story "The Fruit of My Woman" written in 1997. This novel has three parts, set in modern day Seoul which tells the story of *Yeong-Hye*. The protagonist is a lady who decides to stop eating meat after a horrible night mare about human cruelty which results in a devastating change in her personal and familial life. According to New York Times the novel *The Vegetarian* is translated into at least thirteen different languages including English. *The Vegetarian* is Han kang's first novel to be translated into English by British translator Deborah Smith. In May, it won the 2016 Man Booker International (Khakpour, 2016).

On the other hand, Emily Jane Bronte's only novel *Wuthering Heights*, written under her pen name Ellis Bell was published on 24 November, 1847. After her death, her sister Charlotte Bronte published it a second time under her sister's original name in 1850 (Sullivan & McCarthy 2021).

The originality and power of *Wuthering Heights* has made it a widely read book and has earned Emily Bronte a win lasting fame (Linda Peterson, as cited in Kareem, 2011). Ala Abdul Kareem (Willy, as cited in Kareem, 2011) in his master thesis gives another reference from Margaret

Willy, arguing that Emily Bronte has make use of “strikingly modern psychological insights”. The very book *Wuthering Heights* tells the story of Heath cliff and Catherine Earnshaw. But this research would focus on the female protagonist Catherine Earnshaw considering her from the psychoanalytic perspective. Lionel Trilling (Trilling, as cited in Kareem, 2011) argues that Freud’s experiment of psychoanalysis is an inspired experiment based on his interest in reading literature and its result. The same researcher argues that Peterson (Peterson, as cited in Kareem, 2011) mentions that Sigmund Freud states, “If by understanding human psychology. We can appreciate literature on a new level, then we should acquaint ourselves with his insight. *Wuthering Heights* has inspired critics to focus it through the psychoanalytic lens. Likewise, the novel “*The Vegetarian*” contains elements of human psychology for its readers. To clarify, this study aims to compare the two characters on the basis of some similarities and differences though both belong to completely different societies. To highlight, both the novels are written by female writers, the two characters are female, the two societies in the novel are patriarchal, both the females are psychologically unfit and finally both suffer from madness. These were the reasons that led the researcher to comparative analysis of the two characters. Let us elaborate on few key terms i.e. psychology, psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic theory. Psychology is the science of mental life or the mental characteristics of a particular person (World Web (n.d.) psychology, world web.com dictionary). Psychoanalysis is a set of techniques for exploring underlying motives and a method of treating various mental disorders, based on the theories of Sigmund Freud (World web (n.d.). Psychoanalysis, world web. Com dictionary). Psychoanalytic theory which is based on an assumption that individuals have unconscious thoughts, desires, memories, and feelings which may cause clinical symptoms. This theory was established by Sigmund Freud in the early 1890s, whose work was inspired largely by Dr. Josef Breuer. Later on other psychologists like Jacques Lacan, Hermann Rorschach and Anna Freud, Freud’s daughter also contributed to the field. But this research mainly focuses on two aspects of this theory i.e. Defense Mechanism and Dream Work. A brief introduction to both terms is necessary. Defense Mechanisms are unconscious or conscious mental processes that help ease or avoid anxiety. Individual may or may not realize these methods, many of which are responses to the trauma, stress or anger. These mechanisms include displacement, projection, introjection, dissociation, rationalization, asceticism repression etc. Interestingly, both the female characters undergo these processes. In addition, Freudian terminology Dream work is the process by which real events or desires are transformed into dream images. Dreams, like literature do not usually make explicit statements. Both tend to communicate obliquely or indirectly, avoiding direct or open statement, and representing meanings through concrete embodiments of time, place, or person (Barry, 1995 - 2000). It is crucial to shortly define the defense mechanisms and elements dream work before going to the problem statement. As we put it earlier that displacement is one of the defense mechanisms so in displacement a person redirects negative emotions towards a less threatening recipient (Cherry, 2025). And to redirect your negative attitude towards another person is projection (Vinney, 2024). To add, the term Asceticism is originated from Greek *askeō* which means “to exercise,” or “to train”. It is a form of denial from physical or psychological desires for accomplishing a spiritual goal (Britannica, 2024). Moreover, in rationalization an individual justifies his behaviors, thoughts, or feelings using logical explanation (Cherry, 2023). Now, turning on to dream interpretation elements i.e. condensation, displacement, symbolization. According to Freud, displacement is modification and rearrangement of the latent dream content (Freud, 1916). Every dream has two components latent content and manifest content, the former refers to the mysterious meaning which the manifest thought can’t directly decipher. It is symbolically disguised because such things are often frightening (Cherry, 2024). In contrast, the manifest content refers to the images, to the

things one see in a dream. This is the exact opposite of latent content with carries meaning of the things came in dream (Cherry, 2020). Let's redirect our attention towards elements of dream interpretation. Of these elements one is condensation which refers to the hidden urges or thoughts represented in the form of a single image. This helps to disguise the real meaning (Cherry, 2024). The other element is symbolization. According to Freud dream is satisfaction of need or wish fulfilment. Symbolization works in this way by satisfying the urges in a symbolic way (Cherry).

### 1.2. Statement of the Problem

Despite obvious chronological, cultural, and literary background distinctions (the time and cultural context of *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë and *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang belong to different centuries and even worlds), the authors share the most important feature in both novels: portraying female characters, whose psychological conflicts occupy the central place in the plot. The two characters are existing in patriarchal societies and have psychological instability in addition to other behaviors that can be viewed through the psychoanalytical theory developed by Freud, especially the defense mechanisms and dream work. In spite of these similarities, relatively nothing has been done in terms of comparative research in assessing how these mechanisms and interpretations of dreams provide insight into inner conflicts, desires, as well as reactions to external pressures of the protagonists. That gap is covered in this study, in which the psychological experiences of Catherine and Yeong-Hye related to this movie are analyzed and contrasted to identify existing similar patterns in their coping mechanisms and subconscious manifestations.

### 1.3. Research Questions

1. In what ways do Yeong-Hye in *The Vegetarian* and Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights* exhibit Freud's defense mechanisms and dream work in response to their psychological conflicts?
2. How do similarities and differences in these manifestations reflect the protagonists' distinct historical, cultural, and patriarchal contexts?

### 1.4. Research Objectives

- To explore the ways in which Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights* and Yeong-Hye in *The Vegetarian* exhibit Freud's defense mechanisms and dream work in response to their psychological conflicts
- To analyze how the similarities and differences in the manifestations of defense mechanisms and dream work reflect the distinct historical, cultural, and patriarchal contexts of the two protagonists

## 2. Literature Review

The only work of Emily Brontë *Wuthering Heights* has been explored from many perspectives such as feminism, capitalism, class struggle, gender oppression and even from psychoanalytic lens. Looking through the feminist lens Biswanath Mahapatra (2014) writes about *Wuthering Heights*, as the writer is a female, the novel's main character is female and it tells the story of female sacrifices, hardships, transformation and construction of her personality. Henceforth, it's an appropriate category to consider in feminist criticism. Similarly, according to another study, Victorian age was a male dominated era and Emily Brontë has challenged this patriarchal culture by breaking the norms of literature while introducing a female (in early works protagonist was always male) protagonist Catherine Earnshaw (Pedrone, 2019). To continue, it is explored in another study that Catherine is a part of patriarchal society where she is surrounded by two men i.e. Linton and Heathcliff, who want her to become a different version of herself according to the choices of each (Mahapatra, 2014).

Another master thesis studies defense mechanisms in leading characters. Of these methods the author has applied denial, sublimation and repression to Isabella Heathcliff and Catherine

Earnshaw. Escape of Heathcliff and originating as a wealthy man later, is repression. In addition, the author argues that Heathcliff shows denial in his negative feelings of jealousy and dislikeness towards Edgar. As Edgar is handsome, civilized and praised by Catherine Earnshaw (Kareem, 2011). An article, talks about the male dominated society of South Korea where the protagonist *Yeong-Hye* suffers by refusing to eat meat which is a symbolic of male hegemony. The author further argues that her refusal of eating meat is result of her childhood trauma. And this incident of mercilessly killing dog by her father both physically and psychologically disturbs her. Furthermore, dreams are considered in this article which reflects her childhood pain and led her to become a vegan (Chung, 2019). Another study, explores the novel from feminist lens developing a postmodern Allegory. Its aim is to highlight issues such as patriarchal norms, objectification of women and violence. Bica (2023), writes that woman is treated as a possession, in the first place of her father and secondly of her husband. This exploitation of woman, putting her at object position and snatching her freedom, is projected through the image of *Yeong-Hye*.

### 3. Research Methodology

The study follows a qualitative research design that incorporates close reading as the main analytical procedure which explores the psychological aspects of the protagonists in *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang and *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bront. The close reading method provides the opportunity to analyze the texts in great detail to allow the researchers to trace subtle instances of the defense mechanism and dream work concept as developed by Sigmund Freud as expressed by *Yeong-Hye* and Catherine Earnshaw.

This is analyzed in two steps. First, both texts are analyzed to determine where the actions, thoughts and dreams of the characters indicate the use of a psychological defense, e.g., repression, projection, denial or sublimation, and to determine whether there are aspects of dream work evident in condensation, displacement and symbolic representation. This phase answers the first research question by outlining the processing and expression of inner conflicts of each of the protagonists.

Second, the results of the analysis of both pieces of work are compared to see how similarities and differences in these manifestations can serve as the reflection of different historical, cultural, and patriarchal backgrounds of the protagonists. Such a comparative perspective answers the second research question and locates the psychological reactions of the protagonists in their socio-cultural contexts: Victorian England of the 19th century and modern times South Korea.

The primary data are taken from the novels themselves whereas secondary data are the scholarly articles and psychoanalytic criticism and culture-historical studies applicable to each piece of work. The blend of psychoanalytic thinking represented by Freud and the use of close reading makes it possible to have a textual richness as well as theoretical persistence in making meaning of the psychological arc of the characters.

### 4. Analysis and Discussion

#### 4.1. Section (A) Defense Mechanisms in *Catherine Earnshaw* and *Yeong-Hye*

This section aims to shed light on both the novels applying the two aspects i.e. dream interpretation and defense mechanism of psychoanalytic theory. It is clear that a hundred of defense mechanisms are defined by psychology. But including all of them here is out of the scope of this study. Therefore, few would be focused here.

##### 4.1.1. Catherine Earnshaw and Defense Mechanisms



We have studied four defense mechanisms in Catherine. The first mechanism is undoing, as Nelly quotes, “*For when once she made you cry ...she would not keep you company, and oblige you to be quiet that you might comfort her* (WH, p, 47).” A second mechanism is rationalization. When Catherine is asked by Nelly that does she love Linton to marry him. She rationalizes the situation by praising Linton saying, “*well because he is handsome... (WH, p.80).*” To further clarify Catherine uses denial here as well according to a master thesis. Mohealudeen (2019), in his thesis takes a statement from Robert Kiely that Catherine shows denial by betraying her feelings for Heathcliff and marrying Linton for getting a good status which results in her destruction later. Next is projection. Catherine tries to create a warm relationship between her lover and her husband. But Linton denies to be on good terms with Heathcliff and therefore she blames her husband and asks Heathcliff, “*You and Edgar have broken my heart, Heathcliff! ... You have killed me.... (WH, p.15).*” Asceticism is the fourth mechanism which Catherine uses as the narrator elaborates on, “as she never offered to descend to breakfast next morning...same question...at dinner and tea; and again on morrow after, and received the same answer (WH, p. 118, 119).” Mohealudeen (2019) is of the opinion that Catherine’s starvation to death, means asceticism, is to punish both Edgar and Heathcliff.

#### 4.1.2. Yeong-Hye and Defense Mechanisms

Like *Catherine*, *Yeong-Hye* also uses defense mechanisms. For instance, displacement, denial, dissociation, introjection and rationalization etc. The very first place where she undergoes this mechanism is narrated by her husband in the first part of the novel. “*...my wife brandished the knife. “Blood ribboned out of her wrist.”* Later on, when her father come to know that she no longer eats meat, he tries to forcefully feed her but she spits out the pork. To add, the protagonist is a part of a patriarchal society and she cannot resist her father, therefore she displaces her anger from father to a less threatening thing which is herself. Yeong-Hye just like Catherine quits eating food she first stops eating meat and then gradually overall meal. To highlight, her husband narrates her wife’s situation at dinner; “*....my wife .... hadn’t even touched the sticky -rice porridge..... Involving beef stock .... (The Vegetarian, Part 1)*”. This is the first stage of her asceticism, a worse situation of hers is sketched by her sister in the last part of novel, as she from vegetarian converts to completely quitting food. Like *Catherine Earnshaw*, *Yeong-Hye* also uses rationalization mechanism. To elaborate, *Yeong-Hye* rationalizes her many acts such as refusing to wear a bra, refusing to keep meat stuff in the fridge, refusing to eat meat, exposing her body to sun and finally refusing to eat at all.

#### 4.2. Section (B) Dream Work in Catherine Earnshaw and Yeong-Hye

Cherry argues that according to Freud, mind uses many ways to censor the latent content of a dream. These ways or mechanisms working in Dream Work include displacement, symbolization, condensation, and rationalization etc. (Cherry, 2024). Thereby, in this section we would talk about a single dream of Catherine Earnshaw and then projection many dreams of Yeong-Hye. Let’s start with Catherine Earnshaw first!

##### 4.2.1. Catherine Earnshaw’s Dream and its two contents

Nelly tells about the single dream of Catherine in the dreamer’s Catherine says, “*... heaven didn’t seem to be my home... they flung me out into the middle of the heath on the top of Wuthering Heights; where I woke sobbing for joy (WH, p.82).*” This dream suggests that Catherine Earnshaw is in Heaven but she is not happy there and she wants to go back to Wuthering Heights. Therefore, she further claims that Angels angrily takes her back to Wuthering Heights. Here two images are used Heaven and Wuthering Heights. The Heaven is a symbolic of Thrush Cross Grange where Catherine is at misery, while the image of Wuthering Heights reflects nostalgia.

##### 4.2.2. Mechanisms of Dream Censorship through Mind

There are two mechanisms conveyed i.e. displacement and condensation by dream of Catherine Earnshaw. In case of Catherine displacement occurs because image of Thrush Cross Grange is converted to Heaven, which appears a less troublesome thing to her. The same dream can also be interpreted through lens of condensation. In this dream the overall idea of going away from Wuthering Heights to the dream house Thrush Cross Grange. And then becoming nostalgic at the end and feeling sad in the heaven like house Thrush Cross Grange is condensed into a single image of Heaven.

#### 4.2.3. Yeong-Hye and her Dreams

In the text four dreams of Yeong Hye are there. The first dream conveys two layers of meaning. Apparently there is blood, meat, wood, a family enjoying picnic but deep down it refers to her childhood trauma where their pet dog is killed and feast is held at her house and everyone enjoyed the meat including her. As shown in the text, *“Dark woods. No people... my torn feet... Frightened, a red barn-like building... Hide, hide behind the trees. My bloody hands. My bloody mouth. .. Pushed that raw blood into my mouth, felt it...”* The second dream reveals many images such as butcher’s shop, salivary mouth of Yeong-Hye, bright eyes of a cat. Likewise, she is sweating in fear, the image of her scared situation is also there. The core focus is on Yeong-Hye’s fearful condition as she sees herself as killer or near to kill the cat. The hidden meaning shows that butcher’s shop is a symbol of her father’s violent attitude like butcher who has mercilessly killed the dog. Again, we see displacement, as instead of father she in her dream witnesses herself cruelly approaching the cat. As the text shows, *“Dreams of my hands around someone’s throat ...slippery eye balls...my fingers flexing to kill... My trembling legs, the cold sweat on my brow...”* In the third dream there is a murder scene. She claims that things are not clear they are blur. However, the only visible thing is the violence. And she hears a sound of metal that struck someone’s head. This dream also carries some hidden meaning. The appearance of a violent scene characterized by a beating sound, can be witnessed. Like the first dream this dream is also a symbol of awakening of Yeong Hye’s unconscious memory. As given in the text, *“Murderer or murdered....hazy distinctions....a sound...metal struck...black darkness (The Vegetarian, Part 01)”*. In last part of the novel she narrates her dream to her sister In Hye, *“.... in a dream, and I was standing on my head....leaves were growing from my body, and roots were sprouting from my hands...I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch.....” (The Vegetarian, Part 03)*. The last dream shows her transformation into a complete plant with leaves ready to bloom flowers. The literal meaning of the dream conveys her full body transformation into a plant. But the hidden meaning is her wish fulfillment to become a tree.

#### 4.2.4. Mechanisms of Dream Censorship through Mind

There are three major mechanisms such as condensation, displacement and symbolization. We would apply these mechanisms to dreams of Yeong-Hye in order to understand how Dream Work/Interpretation works in the novel. In case of Yeong-Hye displacement occurs in the very first dream. Because, if we recall her past, there was a feast held to cook the mercilessly killed dog. There was a gathering and fun at her house, she equally enjoyed the soup made in the dog’s meat. According to Freud it would be more irritating if that exact gathering come in her dream. Therefore, the gathering is displaced to a less troublesome thing which is a picnic of a family with kids in the forest. Condensation occurs as in her second dream she hears a sound a brutal sound. This image of sound produced as a result of someone beating victim’s head with a metal stick represents a violent event from her childhood as her father mercilessly kills their pet dog which has bitten her. Therefore, that cruel memory reveals itself time to time in this condensed shape. Lastly, symbolization occurs as Yeong-Hye wishes to become a vegetarian in order to stop harming the ecosystem especially animals. For this purpose she wants to

completely transform to a tree as plants benefit the environment and take nothing except water as a payment. Therefore, in her dream she sees herself as a tree.

## 5. Conclusion

This study found out similarities as well as differences in both the ladies. For example, both the characters experienced dreaming as well as defense mechanisms such as asceticism, displacement, rationalization and projection were common in them. Taking the defense mechanisms, so both stopped eating, both projected their worries to others, both justified their and both directed their negative emotion i.e. anger towards less troublesome recipients. In contrast, differences were also found, as both the characters represented different societies. For instance, Catherine belonged to 16 Century England and *Yeong-Hye* was a modern day South Korean lady. But interestingly even in their differences one thing was common, both belonged to patriarchal societies. Moreover, their dreams were also poles apart. For instance, the dreams of *Yeong-Hye* were a reflection of a childhood trauma while Catherine's dream revealed her repressed fears. To further clarify both the characters suffered from madness as Catherine was affected by hallucinations and *Yeong-Hye* acted totally absurd, denied human basic urges and needs such as food, physical intercourse, violated dress code and finally declared herself a tree. In chapter 12 Nelly narrates, "*She increased her feverish bewilderment to madness...*" (WH, P.121). Likewise, the last part of *The Vegetarian* shows that *Yeong-Hye* has been admitted to a psychiatric hospital. To add, *Yeong-Hye*'s absurd behavior we discussed earlier reveals that she went mad. In short, psychology played a greater role in lives of both the characters and due to different causes both of them lost their mental balance.

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