THE SECOND DEATH AND THE ADVENT OF AN ETHICAL SUBJECT: A LACANIAN APPROACH TO HAN KANG'S THE VEGETARIAN

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Abstract- The metamorphosis of the protagonist Yeong-hye in Han Kang's The Vegetarian has been examined in terms of the physical death of the body. However, Yeong-hye's death as well as her struggle of becoming a tree can be most adequately explained in terms of the Lacanian "second death." The second death accompanies great pain as it is closely related with a realm beyond the pleasure principle of the symbolic. Though it causes pain, it should be persistently pursued as it allows a subject, chained to desire the desire of the Other, to have access to its authentic desire, the death drive. In Lacan's point of view, only the subject confronting its true desire is the authentic subject, namely the "ethical" subject beyond the morality of society. This ethical subject is important in that it can reveal the lack of the symbolic. Through never yielding to her desire, Yeong-hye awakens In-hye to see that the symbolic is far from totality and that is why Yeong-hye and her death as the second death should be interpreted as 'an ethical subject's ethical act.'

Index Terms- desire of the Real, Han Kang, Lacan, second death, The Vegetarian

I. INTRODUCTION

Han Kang's The Vegetarian has received great attention not only in Korea but also abroad as it was the first Korean literary work winning the Man Booker International Prize. In accordance with the rising interest of the literary circles, academic researches on the novel in Korea have doubled since 2016 (from about 16 academic articles to 33 articles), resulting the broadened range of research topics: in addition to such previously widely studied topics as ecofeminism and violence, there has been in depth study in terms of trauma, tree motif, translation problems, and so on. However, in contrast to the active discussions in Korea, there has been relatively few academic discussions international-wise, fundamentally limiting the benefits of sharing ideas from various perspectives. Furthermore, the previous studies on the protagonist Yeong-hye's metamorphosis into a tree and her death, the main focus of this article, are chiefly conducted in terms of her biological death: her death is interpreted either as the inevitable result of a human being's fatal attempt in becoming a tree, of a human's insatiable desire, or of a human's very desire of entering into the state of nirvana, that is Freudian "death drive."[1] Yeong-hye's struggle of becoming a tree, however, can be most adequately explained in terms of the Lacanian "second death,"[2] propelled by another "death drive."[3]

II. THE SECOND DEATH AND THE ADVENT OF AN ETHICAL SUBJECT

In Seminar Ⅶ, Jacques Lacan suggests the distinction of the two deaths: the first death is the biological death whereas the second death is the symbolic death which occurs when a subject pursues its desire, breaking the symbolic rule, i.e. taboo. To put it another way, it is the death of a subject who becomes stripped of every possible meaning, because it goes beyond the pleasure principle of the symbolic. Putting strong emphasis on it, Lacan maintains that the second death is the only way for the subject to have access not to the desire of the other but to the desire of the very self, namely the desire of the Real, the desire of the mother oppressed by the paternal prohibition (the "Name-of-the-Father"),[4] the death drive, or, in short, "jouissance."[5] And he adds that it

[1] Sean Homer, "Freud called this beyond of pleasure principle 'the death drive' and suggested that the primary purpose of life is to find the correct way to death," *Jacques Lacan*, London and New York: Routledge, pp.89, 2005.

[2] Dylan Evans, "The second death is that which prevents the regeneration of the dead body, 'the point at which the very cycles of the transformations of nature are annihilated,'" *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, London and New York: Routledge, pp.31, 1996.

[3] Ibid., "The death drive is the name given to that constant desire in the subject to break through the pleasure principle towards the THING and a certain excess jouissance," pp.92.

[4] Bruce Fink, "language protects the child from a potentially dangerous dyadic situation, and the way this comes about is through the substitution of a name [name of the father] for the mother's desire," *The Lacanian Subject*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, pp. 57, 1997.

[5] Slavoj Zizek, "by being filtered through the sieve of the signifier, the body is submitted to castration, enjoyment[jouissance] is evacuated from it, the body

is only when confronted with such desire that the subject can uncover the illusional veil of the symbolic, the deceptive guarantor of the subject's identity, and see the truth of the symbolic: in Lacanian term, the process "traversing the fantasy" [6] made possible because of the "second death," in turn, makes possible the advent of an "ethical[7]" subject.

The advent of the "ethical" subject brings about pain not only to the subject but also to the other subjects witnessing the process because first, in the case of the subject it is only possible when the subject completely destroys its identity, once believed to be its everything, and second, in the case of other subjects it unconsciously causes indescribable discomfort and agitation due to the fact that it goes beyond the symbolic, i.e., violating the symbolic. Having said that, the advent of the "ethical" subject is highly important in that as mentioned above, only the ethical subject can show what it means to desire not the desire of the other based on the primordial oppression but the desire of the self, jouissance, and in doing so it can reveal the impossibility of the symbolic, namely the incompleteness or the lack of the symbolic.

Yeong-hye's struggle of becoming a tree causes tremendous terror as it designates a realm which can never be explained with the signifiers of the symbolic: the Real. The more she pursues her desire for a plant like being, her voice is recognized not as that of a human but as that of a wild beast: she becomes a terror striking riddle in the eyes of the symbolic. As the failure of the medical diagnosis clearly indicates, she is beyond reason. Crossing the boundary of the symbolic in pursuit of the desire of the Real is painful as can be seen in the deformed and "ghostly"[8] image of Yeong-hye: an ambiguous and terrifying being who is between an adult and a child, a human and a beast, and a human and a tree. Though the confrontation with the Real is painful, there certainly exists the possibility of some positive change it may bring about. Such possible change is detected in In-hye, the older sister of Yeong-hye. In-hye is one of the most typical characters in the novel guarding the values of the society. To put it differently, she is the one who most patiently and responsibly plays the roles which the symbolic has given her: Kim In-hye, the daughter of a Vietnam veteran, Ji-woo's mom, Yeong-hye's sister, a video artist's wife and so on. However, she, in the process of watching Yeong-hye's firm determination to pursue her desire in spite of the symbolic death, i.e. second death, comes to realize that her life has not been her own but someone else's, that is a mere ghost or a "television drama."[9] Yeong-hye's second death awakens In-hye to see that what she believes to mean everything is in fact not everything, that is the symbolic is not everything.

CONCLUSION

Yeong-hye's metamorphosis into a tree, namely the second death, shows in the most distinct way Lacan's aphorism "Do not give up on your desire." [10] In Lacanian theory, language is a start point of everything: the subject, the unconsciousness, the

survives as dismembered, mortified," *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, pp.136, 2009

[6] Ibid., "the final moment of the analysis is defined as 'going through the fantasy'…experience of the fact that the fantasy-object, by its fascinating presence, is merely filling out a lack, a void in the Other," pp.148.

[7] Dylan Evans, op. cit., "Lacan continues to locate ethical questions at the heart of psychoanalytic theory. He interprets the soll in Freud's famous phrase 'Where id was, there ego shall be,' as an ethical duty, and argues that the status of the unconscious is not ontological but ethical," pp.57.

[8] Han Kang, "And she [In-hye] sees her sister's face, flickering like a ghostly afterimage overlaid on the silent scene," *The Vegetarian*, Trans. Deborah Smith, New York: Hogarth, pp.141, 2005.

[9] Ibid., "She [In-hye] took one more look around at the various objects inside the house. They did not belong to her. Just like her life had never belong to her. Her life was no more than a ghostly pageant of exhausted endurance, no more real than a television drama. Death, who stood by her side, was as familiar to her as a family member, missing for a long time but now returned," pp. 170.

[10] Calum Neill, "This has commonly been taken as the encapsulation of Lacan's stand on ethics, as his ethical imperative; do not give way on or do not give up on your desire. As desire would be taken to point to the Real, that is, as desire is such that it cannot, by definition, find its satisfaction within the symbolic, then the conception of ethics being advanced here must be one which prioritizes the Real, which situates the Real as the proper realm of the ethical," *Lacanian Ethics and the Assumption of Subjectivity*, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 237, 2011.

Mari Ruti, "Badiou expands on Lacanian ethics by proposing that to the degree that desire is constitutive of the subject of the unconscious, it by definition connects the subject to the "not-known" of its life-to the "immoral" aspects of its being. This, Badiou asserts, implies that "'do not give up on our desire' rightly means: 'do not give up on that part of yourself that you do not know,'" *The Singularity of Being: Lacan and the Immortal Within*, Fordham University Press, pp.94, 2012.

pleasure principle and the symbolic. However, it operates by the paternal prohibition, that is "the-Name-of-the-Father." The primordial oppression caused by this prohibition is inscribed in language, and therefore everything that starts from language cannot escape from this oppression. That is why the subject must become the "ethical" subject such as Yeong-hye, pursue its desire and obtain the absolute freedom. This act, though painful it must be, will open the symbolic which ceaselessly aims for totality and wholeness. In this sense, Yeong-hye's metamorphosis into a tree and her death should be read as a new possibility to widen the symbolic, creating new signifiers and new systems.

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