

Mythology, Memory and Gender: A study of Three Fictions of Metamorphosis.

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Abstract- The aim of the proposed paper is to look into the workings of myth and memory, and how these two factors in turn help in the re-establishment of the gender hierarchy either implicitly or explicitly. With the birth of a human, he/she is at the very moment of birth marked either as a man or a woman; this division is arbitrary and primarily social in its conception.

Index Terms- Myth, Cultural Memory, Gender Hierarchy, Metamorphosis, Structures.

I. LITERATURE REVIEW

The first divisive action that the human entity faces after its birth is the division based on gender. It is categorised either as a male or a female. However, what must be kept in mind is the fact that gender divisions are socio-cultural in their being, that is, they have come out of the society's structure and are not natural to one's being¹. One is not naturally a man or a woman. So, what becomes important is to read into these structures that lead to the creation of these categories and further, how these categories manifest themselves, that is, once they come into being how they multiply and proliferate through unending cycles. Memory plays a very crucial role in this propagation, for it is through the use of collective memory that the society disseminates the structures. The discourse², that is, certain forms of knowledge seeps into the collective memory and it makes the imposed ideologies look natural.

"Cultural Memory" a term taken from Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith's "Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction"³ is also a type of collective memory. In this article they describe cultural memory as "an act in the present by which individuals and groups constitute their identities by recalling a shared past on the basis of common, and therefore often contested, norms, conventions, and practices"⁴ Thus, this cultural memory marks the consciousness of one and all that resides in that space and thereby, conditions it, and since memory is passed on from one generation to the next, the knowledge that is embedded in the memory is also passed on unhindered. Myths are a certain form of knowledge that have been passed from ancient generations and they have in them deeply embedded certain structures which have been formed as a result of the society from which they have emerged.

Mythology plays a crucial role in this aspect for it is a special form of collective memory. To quote from J.A. Arlow's "Ego Psychology and the Study of Mythology"⁵ "The myth is a particular kind of communal experience. It is a special form of shared fantasy, and it serves to bring the individual into relationship with members of his cultural group on the basis of certain common needs."⁶ Myth therefore teaches one to naturalize oneself to the structure and this is done implicitly, the process is carried on the level of the unconscious which leads to "psychic integration"⁷. When an individual becomes a part of the group his/her individuality is compromised for the sake of cohesiveness of the group. Therefore, individual memories face erasure and there is a creation of a monolithic memory which represents the community. However, the erasure or subjugation of the personal memory for the sake of the

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 238.

² Michel Foucault- Foucault describes 'discourse' as a social system that produces knowledge and meaning.

³ Marianne Hirsch, Valerie Smith, "Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction." *The University of Chicago Press*, (Autumn 2002): 1-19.

⁴ Marianne Hirsch, Valerie Smith, "Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction," 5.

⁵ J.A. Arlow, "Ego Psychology and the Study of Mythology," *Journal of American Psychoanalytic Association* (1961).

⁶ J.A. Arlow, "Ego Psychology and the Study of Mythology," 375.

⁷ J.A. Arlow, "Ego Psychology and the Study of Mythology," 375.

communal is done not through coercive force but through the use of knowledge. Memories are edited and formed through knowledge, that is, memories themselves become structured in accordance to the prevailing discourse.

In Roland Barthes's essay "Myth Today"⁸ Barthes talk about the naturalizing tendencies of mythology. He writes – "We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature...it is not read as a motive, but as a reason."⁹ Therefore, by turning history into nature, myth provides for the reinforcement of the structure, it re-establishes the discourse, and as the myth passes on from one generation to the next, the discourse is furthered strengthened. In this respect Roland Barthes's concept of myth as a "a type of speech"¹⁰ becomes paramount in its significance for any kind of speech is motivated, and its motive is to serve the prevailing discursive structure.

Gender in itself is a societal system, a set of rules and structures, and therefore can be argued that it unfolds itself in accordance to the needs of the society. A possible answer to the question of gender is given by Judith Butler in her seminal work "Gender Trouble"¹¹ where she calls gender not a thing but a 'performance'¹². In her other work "Critically Queer" she writes – "performativity is a matter of reiteration or repeating the norms by which one is constituted: it is not a radical fabrication of the gendered self. It is a compulsory production of prior and subjectivating norms, ones which cannot be thrown off at will, but which work, animate, and constrain the gendered subject, and which are also the resources from which resistance, subversion, displacement are to be forged"¹³. One therefore becomes a woman by repeating a set of behaviours and in the process defines what a woman means; similar is the case for a man, he too is a product of the society. It can then be remarked that there can be no way out of this gyre, one keeps on circling around the same set of rules and structures, and in doing so strengthens it further.

Transformation of humans into non-human entities though fantastical in nature and mainly allegorical, play an important role for they are the indicators as to how the human entity is judged in the society. Moreover, such transformations provide for fissures in the monolithic structure and thereby, help the observes to understand the motive and meaning behind such transformations. Now the question arises as to how should one look at those that transform into some non-human forms. Such transformations have been encountered in mythologies and literary texts like Ovid's "Metamorphoses"¹⁴. John Heath's "Diana's Understanding of Ovid's "Metamorphoses"¹⁵ becomes important as he traces the fates of the huntress nymphs – their rape by figures such as Apollo, Mercury and others- and their consequent transformation or death. The story of Actaeon and Diana plays a crucial role as it is the only story where a male is transformed and this transformation ultimately leads to death. In the stories of the huntress nymphs the result of the action of rape is either a metamorphosis or death; but in the story of Actaeon the result of an unintentional rape is a transformation resulting to death¹⁶. Actaeon is transformed into a stag by Diana and is then hunted down by hounds. This visible difference that one notices in the stories has to be questioned. The one reading such stories will inherently question as to why does the huntresses either metamorphose or are led to death, and why does Actaeon's metamorphosis lead to his death? Can these differences in outcome be a result of their primary sexual difference? And if so, why?

Jennifer Wawrzinek in the chapter "Introduction: Sublime Politics" of the book "Ambiguous Subjects Dissolution and Metamorphosis in the Postmodern Sublime"¹⁷ describes the sublime as "a space where one hears an undefinable Urgeräusch, a subsonic noise that lies within and beyond silence, an index to the existence of that which and those who cannot be represented. Quite simply, the sublime involves the perceiving subject's encounter with a power that simultaneously exceeds and defines the self."¹⁸ The transformation of

⁸ Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (France: Les Lettres Nouvelles, 1957).

⁹ Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," 127.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," 107.

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (United States: Routledge,1990)

¹² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 25.

¹³ Judith Barthes, "Critically Queer," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (1993), 17-32.

¹⁴ Ovid, "The Metamorphoses" (8 AD).

¹⁵ John Heath, "Diana's Understanding of Ovid's "Metamorphoses", " *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 86, No. 3, (Feb. - Mar 1991), 233-243.

¹⁶ John Heath, "Diana's Understanding of Ovid's "Metamorphoses", " 239-242.

¹⁷ Jennifer Wawrzinek, *Ambiguous Subjects Dissolution and Metamorphosis in the Postmodern Sublime* (New York: Rodopi B.V.,2008)

¹⁸ Jennifer Wawrzinek, *Ambiguous Subjects Dissolution and Metamorphosis in the Postmodern Sublime*, 15.

humans into some other non-human form can therefore be called a sublime experience. The new entity that comes out of the transformation is beyond the self that is engaged in the process of watching. The bystander is awed by the metamorphosis and is at the same time initiated in the implicit discourse that is embedded in this transformation. Through the telling and subsequent retelling of the myth, gender identity is created and through its retelling this creation is re-established. Wawrzinek writes “the sublime in its traditional form depends on hierarchies that (re)instate mechanisms of power and domination. The construction of the autonomous subject that is enabled by these accounts depends on the (re)institution of borders and boundaries that frequently serve to keep some individuals, groups and nations in power at the expense of others.”¹⁹ The sublime becomes a “strategy of appropriation”²⁰ which frames the working of the world. The transformations work as warning signs for those that come to see them, and these transformations warn one against taking subversive steps, they urge one to carry on within the bounds of the structure.

Barbara Claire Freeman in “The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women’s Fiction”²¹ talks about the “female sublime” where the sublime creates “a site of passage and border crossing in which meanings collide and transform one another [in] an ongoing process of re-metaphorisation”²². The “female sublime” remains a “radical alterity that remains unassimilable to representation”²³. Freeman discusses how the hierarchical structuring of the sublime silences the female voice and leads to its subjugation. The power structure that is implicit in gender structure is re-established through the “female sublime” as the otherness of the female sex is further othered, and the process is doubly subjugated.

In the proposed paper while dealing with the three texts: Franz Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis”²⁴, Han Kang’s “The Vegetarian”²⁵ and Han Kang’s short story “The Fruit Of My Woman”²⁶ the above discussed concepts become important, for through these concepts the questions about the metamorphoses that happen in the stories can be answered. The stories have a visibly explicit mythological basis and outcome, and this urges one to look at the transformations not simply as literal transformation but symbols or acts that hint at something that is far more pervasive. The metamorphoses of the various characters, some explicit and others implicit, follow the norms of the patriarchal structuring but the question that remains unanswered is whether in the plethora of transformations there exists one that is subversive? In particular, does the metamorphosis of In-hye or Grete dare to subvert, although not fully, but to a certain extent the power structure perpetrated by patriarchy, that is, is it at all possible to subvert a power structure while residing in it and talking in its language? And if it is feasible, is this then the beginning of an egalitarian society which is structure-less, the path to which has been paved by the sacrifices of those that came before it?

II. INTRODUCTION

Living in the twenty-first century where digital intelligence plays such a mammoth role, it is often taken for granted that those that are born and bred in this environment are naturally cut-off from the mythological past of which it is a product. The mythological past is often thought to have been forgotten, or considered to be superfluous in the workings of the everyday life in the twenty-first century. However, what in this process of thinking is ignored, is the fact that, mythology which is considered external to our everyday life forms the building blocks of the selves. Mythology is tangentially linked to individual and communal histories, that is, mythology is a history told in a different mode. However, while history is more fact based, mythology while hinging on facts, mainly stresses upon ideologies.

¹⁹ Jennifer Wawrzinek, *Ambiguous Subjects Dissolution and Metamorphosis in the Postmodern Sublime*, 16.

²⁰ Jennifer Wawrzinek, *Ambiguous Subjects Dissolution and Metamorphosis in the Postmodern Sublime*, 16.

²¹ Barbara Claire Freeman, “The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women’s Fiction” (Berkeley: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 1997)

²² Barbara Claire Freeman, “The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women’s Fiction”, 10.

²³ Barbara Claire Freeman, “The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women’s Fiction”, 11.

²⁴ Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* (Austria-Hungary: Kurt Wolff Verlag, Leipzig, 1915).

²⁵ Han Kang, *The Vegetarian* (South Korea: Changbi Publishers, 2007).

²⁶ Han Kang, *The Fruit of My Woman* (Granta Publications, 2016).

Mythology just like history gains importance if one thinks of it as a kind of memory that is passed on from one generation to the next, it is not a static monolithic block that is exploited by the fiction writers but is a sort of living body that grows and develops into new forms as suited to the age and time. As J.A. Arlow in his work "Ego Psychology and the Study of Mythology"²⁷ expounds - "The myth is a particular kind of communal experience. It is a special form of shared fantasy, and it serves to bring the individual into relationship with members of his cultural group on the basis of certain common needs."²⁸ This remark becomes important for it remarks on the fact as to how myths are used or can be used to "individuals into relationship with members of his cultural group on the basis of common needs." The relation of myths to the daily lives of individuals is need-based, that is, it is used by groups to draw in members on the basis of common needs so as to build a cohesive and coherent unit. Myths therefore are instruments that used as cohesive forces to make units that work towards a common goal.

Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith's "Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction"²⁹ describe "cultural memory" as "an act in the present by which individuals and groups constitute their identities by recalling a shared past on the basis of common, and therefore often contested, norms, conventions, and practices"³⁰. As seen the definitions of mythology and cultural memory, they are almost similar concepts; therefore it can be concluded that mythology itself is a type of cultural memory that is transferred through the passage of time and in doing so the main aim of those that are instrumental in this transfer of knowledge is, the maintenance of cohesive groups, that is, units that have predominantly similar ideologies on which it works, and that the opposing forces are silenced adequately. Mythology as a sort of naturalizing force, naturalizes one and all into the structure that is predominant; it makes the dominant discourse seem natural and makes it a taboo to question the authorities that are the sources of the dominant discourse. Roland Barthes in his essay "Mythologies"³¹ talks about the naturalizing tendencies of mythology, he writes - "We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature...it is not read as a motive, but as a reason."³² Therefore, by turning every occurrence that is motivated by the thinking and working out of the dominant discourse into nature, what myth does simply is to silence all the other discourses that are into play during the same time, all the other opposing voices of dissent are muffled.

The position of gender has always been tricky, and continues to remain so in the present. One is confused even further as to how one should see himself or herself as gender now is no more a set of discreet categories but is a large spectrum. Gender itself is a part of the societal structures, that is, it is not normal but is a category that society creates for its easy, smooth working and in doing so often curbs the freedom of individuals who do not fit into such discreet categories. As Judith Butler remarks gender is a "performance"³³ where a set of norms is repeated and, through this repetition one is formed. She goes on to write that gender is a set of "subjectivating norms, ones which cannot be thrown off at will, but which work, animate, and constrain the gendered subject, and which are also the resources from which resistance, subversion, displacement are to be forged"³⁴. But the question remains as to how will one resist, subvert and displace the system from within which it operates? Moreover, is it at all possible to subvert a system in which one is so psychically integrated without even the knowledge of such a deep integration?

The women who have been from time immemorial seen as the category that is subordinated to that of the men, have tried to change their position, they have tried hard and long to resist and subvert but in vain. Though one might remark that women in the twenty-first century have greater freedom than those that were given to women of the nineteenth century, it can then be said that these freedoms are not enough when measured in comparison to those that are enjoyed by the men. The female kind is seen as the 'weaker sex', always in need of protection, always emotional and incapable of logic and reasoning. On the other hand, the male kind is the epitome of logic, and cold-hearted reasoning. These differences are thought to be inherent, as if genetical in nature, and they are accepted in silence even by those that are oppressed by such illogical reasonings. The oppressed internalise the structures,

²⁷ J.A. Arlow, "Ego Psychology and the Study of Mythology," *Journal of American Psychoanalytic Association* (1961).

²⁸ J.A. Arlow, "Ego Psychology and the Study of Mythology," 375.

²⁹ Marianne Hirsch, Valerie Smith, "Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction." The University of Chicago Press, (Autumn 2002): 1-19.

³⁰ Marianne Hirsch, Valerie Smith, "Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction," 5.

³¹ Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (France: Les Lettres Nouvelles, 1957).

³² Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," 127.

³³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (United States: Routledge, 1990), 25.

³⁴ Judith Barthes, "Critically Queer," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (1993), 17-32.

that is they are made to internalise the structures that are in the favour of the patriarchy, the females see themselves as inferiors who always have to succumb to the wishes of those that are above them, that is, the males. The females are almost like the slaves who are born into slavery and have not known a day in which they have existed as the masters of their own selves; and this lack of knowledge is the problem. The fact that they cannot return to a past where they have been subjugated, where they have been free and were able to function as free entities is what makes it doubly difficult for them to subvert the structure under which they are now pressed every moment of the day.

The novels Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*³⁵, Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*³⁶ and the short story *The Fruit of My Woman*³⁷ by Han Kang deal with the motif of metamorphosis, the three protagonists of the three stories metamorphose into non-human entities; also the other characters by the virtue of being able to witness such physical metamorphoses, themselves undergo the process of metamorphosis, although in their case it is psychological. The present paper here aims at dealing with all the various sorts of metamorphoses that the plethora of characters undergo and aims at probing into the nature of these transformation. The transformations that the readers encounter, though are apparently supernatural in the first glance, in reality point towards a more complicated issue, the issue of women's position in the society and how this position is dictated by the myths which are a part kind of collective/cultural memory. Moreover, the fact that these stories themselves have such heavy structural borrowings from mythical stories render the position of the above-mentioned stories problematic, that is, are these stories a try at subverting the dominant structures of gender notions? If so, how successful are they? For if they cannot succeed at subversion then they run the risk of further establishing the patriarchal notions of gender norms.

Also, another important aspect to probe into is the fact of gender difference in the three protagonist and other characters of the stories who undergo either physical or psychological metamorphosis, and how the difference in gender leads to a different kind of ending for each character. The main aim is to see whether gender roles and hierarchies are manipulated by the myths that are so deeply etched in the everyday consciousness of human beings.

III. PROBING INTO FRANZ KAFKA'S *THE METAMORPHOSIS*

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*³⁸ (German: *Die Verwandlung*) published in the year 1915 deals with the life of the travelling salesman Gregor Samsa and his family consisting of his father, his mother, and his beloved sister, Grete. The physical transformation is undergone by the character of Gregor and this transformation is sudden. He wakes up one morning from an "uneasy dream"³⁹ to find himself transformed into a "gigantic insect"⁴⁰. He asks himself the question "what has happened to me?"⁴¹ The question is gradually revealed through the plot of the story. The readers understand as the story unfolds that the fatigue of everyday travelling and the carrying of the burden of life has been too great for Gregor to carry and this has led to his sudden transformation into a giant insect. "Oh god, he thought, what an exhausting job I've picked on!"⁴² such thoughts cross his mind as he remain lying down on his bed in his newly acquired form. The fact that he had to take up a tiring job to pay off his father's debts is indicative of the role that he has to play as a man in the society where the role of the provider is always dumped on the male. Gregor being the son is responsible of paying back the debts and he gratefully accepts this role, he does not question it, neither does he think it to be a burden that has been wrongfully placed on him. He thinks that it is his duty, that is, it is natural that his parents expect him to carry their burden, and therefore, he almost carries the burden with a sort of gladness.

³⁵ Franz Kafka, "The Metamorphosis", *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, trans. Willa Muir and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books):67-132.

³⁶ Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*, trans. Deborah Smith (London: Portobello Books, 2015).

³⁷ Han Kang, *The Fruit of My Woman* (Granta Publications, 2016).

³⁸ Franz Kafka, "The Metamorphosis", *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, trans. Willa Muir and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books).

³⁹ Franz Kafka, "The Metamorphosis", 67.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, 68.

The myth of a man, a figure that protects and provides is what Gregor has naturalized and this naturalization has done him no good. He is so encumbered that he is almost choked with the burden of his every day drudgery and even when metamorphosed into an insect he cannot but look “at the alarm clock ticking on the chest.” The change in his voice is first described as his “own voice... but with a persistent horrible twittering squeak behind it like an undertone”⁴³ The voice which in a character symbolises the individuality of that character is here minimalised into a continuous squeaking, Gregor’s transformation into the giant insect is not only a physical transformation but also a mental one, for he has like insects no voice, that is, strength of character. He is a pawn at the hands of the societal structure and is so thoroughly naturalised in the teachings of the society that he has absolutely lost the power to comprehend the present situation that he is in.

It is Grete, Gregor’s sister who announces in a whispering tone - “Gregor, the chief clerk’s here.”⁴⁴ From here on the life of Gregor starts spiralling downwards. He is unable to appear in front of the chief clerk and this makes the chief clerk furious. The chief clerk announces – “For some time past your work has been unsatisfactory” and goes on to threaten him by declaring that – “your position in the firm is not unassailable.”⁴⁵ To this Gregor retorts back, but as fate would have it, he is too late and now all the others get to here is a voice which they describe as – “That was no human voice”⁴⁶. However, Kafka interjects and remarks – “The words he uttered were no longer understandable, apparently, although they seemed clear enough to him, even clearer than before, perhaps because his ears had grown accustomed to the sound of them.”⁴⁷ The fact that he is the only one who can understand his own words shows how isolated an existence he lived and that this isolation was a product of the rules that one was supposed to carry along even when it led to a death in life situation.

The myth of a man, the perfect, all-enduring, non-complaining, forever strong and brave takes a toll on everyday human characters. They cannot reject such notions for they are from the very moment of birth brought up within such a structure, neither can they keep carrying such titles in the face of the challenges that everyday life puts before them. Therefore, they are split from the middle, the characters are broken down and they become non-humans. The fact that it is Gregor’s father who is the first to attack Gregor and is the primary aggressor with “stamping feet”⁴⁸ and flourishing stick is significant. The father, a figure of patriarchal authority cannot accept a transformation, an act which in itself is subversive. Within the structure one and all should be identical copies of each other, playing out identical roles; any kind of change or transformation is a threat to the structure and therefore should be handled with aggression. As the father slams the door behind the “freely bleeding”⁴⁹ Gregor what he basically does is to contain the germ of subversion that Gregor now bears within himself.

The metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa into an insect is a product of the strict, claustrophobic structures that society implants on each individual. But this very transformation can itself be the source of the subversion of the structure that is the cause of such a metamorphosis; for by changing his Gregor and individuals like him can transcend the boundaries of human existence. They can become the pioneers of a new kind of life, a life which is led according to the individual’s preference. However, in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* Gregor remains unable to bring any such subversion. He both physically and mentally is restricted to his room, which is symbolic representation of the society within whose boundaries one is always constrained. Gregor even in his present decrepit state worries about his family and mainly his sister for whom he has all the high dreams. He is conditioned to not think about his own-self, he dreams of sending his sister to the Conservatorium and in providing all sorts of pleasure to his family even as he drudges through his life.

⁴³ Ibid, 70.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 75.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 77.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 79.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 79-80.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 86.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 87.

The emotion elicited at the death of Gregor showcases how invaluable each individual is when that individual is of no use to the propagation and proliferation of the dominant discourse. The charwoman is the first to lay her eyes on the dead insect and she exclaims – “Just look at this, it’s dead; it’s lying here dead and done for!” Mr. Samsa is only able to come up with the remark – “now thanks be to God.”⁵⁰ It is Grete who remarks on the emaciated body of the corpse, and by doing so points towards the state of the body that had bore such atrocities at the hands of his own family once he was of no use to them. His death brings a sense of calm and peace in the family for once again they can resume to their earlier life, a life that is bereft of contradictions and opposing forces. A life that can be led without questions and a life that is not unique but is identical.

The other metamorphosis that one notices in the story is that of the character of Grete. She in the beginning is depicted as the confidante of Gregor, the one who understands and cares for him; but slowly as the plot progresses, she turns into the possessor of Gregor. She limits the visitations of Mrs. Samsa to Gregor’s room and is the one who decides how the furniture of Gregor’s room should be arranged even when it is apparent that Gregor is not happy with the way she envisions the setting of Gregor’s domain. The fact that it is Grete who is the first to utter – “things can’t go on like this. Perhaps you don’t realize that, but I do.”⁵¹ Shows her sharp change in attitude from the first section of the story where on finding the metamorphosed Gregor she is the one who volunteers to bring him his food and to keep his room in a liveable state. Grete finds a solution to end the misery that has befallen them after Gregor’s metamorphosis, and the solution is – “He must go,”⁵². She goes on to say that – “If this were Gregor, he would have realized long ago that human beings can’t love with such a creature, and he’d have gone away on his own accord.”⁵³ This is significant for it points out the fact that once one is no longer a part of the dominant social structure, one cannot continue to reside in that zone, the individual will be removed and ostracised, just as Gregor was and will ultimately be killed.

Maybe Grete herself understands this unsaid rule of the society, the rule that is passed on implicitly by those that precede, in the story represented by the three lodgers who “had a passion for order”⁵⁴; and it can therefore be remarked that it is through this understanding that Grete transforms from a girl with a naïve view of the world into a lady who understands the structures and is ready to be initiated into it through the institution of marriage. Both Mr. and Mrs. Samsa become “aware of their daughter’s increasing vivacity, that in spite of all the sorrow of recent times... They grew quieter and half unconsciously exchanged glances of complete agreement, having come to the conclusion that it would soon be time to find a good husband for her.”⁵⁵ This awareness of the fact on the part of the parents provide them with the confirmation of a new dream, a dream of a new world where things continue to work as it had worked earlier, without disruptions and subversions. As Grete stretched her “young body”⁵⁶ she becomes the confirmation of the structure of patriarchal hierarchy, for it is through her that once again the old regime shall be continued and established, and the subversion that could have been a result of Gregor’s metamorphosis be erased from the memories of those that encountered it and therefore risked the chance of being influenced by it.

However, the very fact that Gregor is allowed a kind of respite from the wheel of his torturous life through the act of death, whereas, Grete’s transformation leads her into the eye of the storm, for she now has to be the bearer of the dream of the family, which is the smallest unit of the social structure. Through the character of Grete, Mr. and Mrs. Samsa dream of a newer world, one that is free of the obstacles that they had to face through the figure of the metamorphosed Gregor. They are oblivious to the sufferings that Grete might have to suffer to fulfil their dreams, or has already suffered as she had had to take care of the giant insect that had become of her brother. This dynamic difference of results that the two metamorphoses bring can be attributed to the difference in sex of the two characters. In a society which provides men with higher status allows them rest at the end of his life, but the women are not allowed such rests; their transformations are steps that lead them towards eternal doom in the form of roles of a mother or a wife or a daughter.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 128.

⁵¹ Ibid, 124.

⁵² Ibid, 125.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 117.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 132.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

IV. QUESTIONING THE METAMORPHOSES IN HAN KANG'S *THE VEGETARIAN*

Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian*⁵⁷ published in the year 2007 in South Korea is heavily based on the mythical stories of metamorphosis that is so widely available to the present-day westernised society. In the Anglo-Saxon literatures that are so heavily indebted to the Greek-Roman mythology, the mythical stories of transformation of huntresses and nymphs are readily available and have in the course of time become a part of the unconscious. One is aware of the fact that when a nymph is subjected to some kind of savagery, like that of rape or voyeuristic gaze, she swiftly changes her form to become a non-human entity. The change in form acts as a source of protection against the cruelty that would otherwise had defiled her. However, what one forgets to notice in such fantastical tales is that as the nymph or the huntress changes form, she in the process loses her voice, she can no more be considered logical and reasoning being and the safety is provided because she is not a human anymore. For a female safety can only be achieved only when she ceases to remain a sexed/sexual being.

In Ovid's *The Metamorphoses*⁵⁸ the readers come across a plethora of such transformations where each nymph that undergoes transformation is saved from the cruelty of the male gaze because they are in the nick of time able to change themselves into beings that are not sexual, or otherwise, it is after they have been defiled that they undergo the process of metamorphosis, as if in shame so that they will no more have to face the world and its people. The shame falls on the shoulders of the female, her defilement is considered her fault, as if somehow, she is the one who is promiscuous and this promiscuity has resulted in her moral downfall. Daphne's transformation into the laurel saves her from Apollo's intent to have her, Io is transformed after she is raped by Jupiter and Syrinx escapes rape at the hands of Pan by her hasty transformation into reeds.

Similarly, in Kang's story the two sisters, Yeong-hye and In-hye, transform – one after defilement and one before it. The younger sister, Yeong-hye, who is the protagonist of the play, gets transformed into a tree as she digs her hands into the soil and stands head down with her legs spread wide, hoping that flowers would bloom from her crotch. She says – “I need to water my body. I don't need this kind of food sister. I need water.”⁵⁹ The fact that Yeong-hye needs water and not food is significant for it shows that after her metamorphosis, she has become fluid like water, she can no more be contained in the form of her body and now she is beyond it, and therefore, is desexualised. Her remark that “Sister...all the trees of the world are like brothers and sisters”⁶⁰ point to fact that only in a vegetative state can there be safety from the cruelty of the human world which look upon individuals as objects.

In the first section of the book titled “The Vegetarian”, the narrator who is the husband of Yeong-hye remarks – “Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way...The passive personality of this woman in whom I could detect neither freshness nor charm, or anything especially refined, suited me down to the ground.”⁶¹ The unremarkable nature of the woman was the reason for the man to choose her as the wife because she would be unthreatening and docile, that is, easy to deal with. However, her turning into a vegetarian had changed the game, for she was now an-other, with her “face turned away”⁶² from the husband “as if she were some kind of ghost, silently standing its ground.”

Like in the case of Kafka's Gregor Samsa it is a dream that leads to the metamorphosis, however, while for Gregor the transformation seems sudden, for Yeong-hye the transformation happens through a course of time. Yeong-hye repeats the words “I had a dream”⁶³ thereby, laying great significance on the dream. According to Freud dreams are the representation of individual's unconscious desires, thoughts and motivations; it is through dreams that the repressed is showcased. The fact that Yeong-hye dreams of “Dark woods. No people. The sharp-pointed leaves on the trees, my torn feet.... My clothes still wet with blood.... My bloody hands. My bloody mouth... that vivid, strange, horribly uncanny feeling”⁶⁴ all point towards something in the past, something that she feels guilty of but cannot come to accept when she is in her senses. It is later that one realises that she is guilty about the killing

⁵⁷ Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*, trans. Deborah Smith (London: Portobello Books, 2015).

⁵⁸ Ovid, *The Metamorphoses* (8 AD).

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 148.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 144.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 3.

⁶² *Ibid*, 7.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 8.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 12.

of animals for food, and this guilty is a product of the fact that just like her, these animals that she had consumed in the past were innocent and were simply pawns at the hands of the society that used to the ingratiate its own selfish wants. She through her metamorphosis into a tree wants to subvert this forever ongoing cycle of torture and cruelty, however, her subversion is neither complete nor successful, it is able to reach a middle point whereby, it is able to influence her sister, In-hye who has for all of her life being the one in control of her self and has been the one to follow the rules set by the society to go beyond the societal structures, the myth of the woman as the mother and abandon her child. Ji-woo.

In the last section of the novel titles “Flaming Tree”, In-hye realises that the dreams that Yeong-hye had are also a part of her and that the difference between her and her sister is only that she could not let herself “dissolve into them,”⁶⁵ let them take over her. She realises that “the blood that Yeong-hye had vomited”⁶⁶ could have been her had Yeong-hye not “smashed through all the boundaries”⁶⁷.

Both the sisters in the story are victims of myths that have been propagated by the society about the women. In-hye, as the eldest of her three siblings had from a very early age taken up the responsibilities of the household on the account that their mother was sick. It was Yeong-hye as Kang writes who “had been the only victim of their father’s beatings.... Only Yeong-hye, docile and naïve, had been unable to deflect their father’s temper or put up any form of resistance. Instead, she had merely absorbed all her sufferings inside her, deep into the marrow of her bones.”⁶⁸ On the other hand, the In-hye’s self-sacrifice “had been a sign not of maturity but of cowardice. It had been a survival tactic.”⁶⁹ Though one can say that In-hye does by the end of the story take up a rebelling stance, yet it cannot be emphasised and said will absolute surety that she can or will be able to follow that path that she has chosen because even in the very end she says – “...but surely the dream isn’t all there is? We have to wake up at some point, don’t we? Because...because then...”⁷⁰

Jennifer Wawrzinek in the chapter “Introduction: Sublime Politics” of the book *Ambiguous Subjects Dissolution and Metamorphosis in the Postmodern Sublime*⁷¹ describes the sublime as “a space where one hears an undefinable Urgeräusch, a subsonic noise that lies within and beyond silence, an index to the existence of that which and those who cannot be represented. Quite simply, the sublime involves the perceiving subject’s encounter with a power that simultaneously exceeds and defines the self.”⁷² She goes on to write that –

the sublime in its traditional form depends on hierarchies that (re)instate mechanisms of power and domination. The construction of the autonomous subject that is enabled by these accounts depends on the (re)institution of borders and boundaries that frequently serve to keep some individuals, groups and nations in power at the expense of others.⁷³

The metamorphosis of the characters can therefore be called a sublime experience that at the one point of time exceeds the self that encounters it and also defines it; and as it defines the one who encounters it, it makes the one encountering the sublime well versed in the “traditional forms”⁷⁴ of hierarchical power. The one encountering the sublime learns through the process of encountering to naturalize the power dynamics and this is used for the “(re)institution of borders and boundaries”⁷⁵.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 182.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 181.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 157.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 158.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 182.

⁷¹ Jennifer Wawrzinek, *Ambiguous Subjects Dissolution and Metamorphosis in the Postmodern Sublime* (New York: Rodopi B.V.,2008).

⁷² Jennifer Wawrzinek, *Ambiguous Subjects Dissolution and Metamorphosis in the Postmodern Sublime*, 15.

⁷³ Jennifer Wawrzinek, *Ambiguous Subjects Dissolution and Metamorphosis in the Postmodern Sublime*, 16.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

The mythical structure of the story also becomes significant for through the mythical structure the sublime experience is recreated, and through this recreation the hierarchies are re-established. The fact that the author even in this modern usage of the myth does not allow for an absolute subversion of the gender power relationship, and all she is capable of doing is the blurring of boundaries showcases how deeply rooted the gender norms are, and that maybe it is impossible for one to cross it while at the same time residing within it. The cultural memory in the form of myths are deeply embedded in the self and one carries it on, and even propagates it unconsciously as is done by the scope of this novel. The two characters of Yeong-hye and In-hye are made to cross the everyday boundaries but at the very crucial moment when they are capable of toppling the institution that constricts them, both of them choose ways of escape. Yeong-hye could have chosen to use all the suppressed anger and disdain to revolt, to turn into a wild animal that is capable to killing for the sake of its own self, but she chooses to transform into a tree, an entity that is voiceless and desexualised. Similarly, In-hye does abandon her only child, but for how long no one knows.

Also, the fact that all the three sections of the play- “The Vegetarian”, “Mongolian Mark” and “Flaming tree” - are narrated by three different narrator, all three who are related to Yeong-hye and not by the protagonist herself is a pointer to the fact that a woman cannot tell her own journey, she is always in the void and only those who encounter her journey can talk about her; and in doing so her personal, subjective experiences are lost in the web of several objective descriptions. The only redeeming fact in the narration is the final section which is told by In-hye, who although a separate human being can at least relate to the harrowing experiences of her sister Yeong-hye and therefore, her narration is free from the tone of patriarchal domination, although not completely for she too is a product of the system.

V. THE SUPERNATURAL METAMORPHOSIS IN HAN KANG’S SHORT STORY *THE FRUIT OF MY WOMAN*

The short story *The Fruit of My woman*⁷⁶ is narrated by the husband of the protagonist, and from the very first line the narration is steeped in nature imagery. However, the image that Kang builds is not completely pure and innocent. The petals were sprayed out like “severed tongues”⁷⁷ and the pavement was “clotted with rotting white blooms, trampled beneath the shoes of passers-by.”⁷⁸ Amidst this scene of chaos, the narrator for the first-time notices “the bruises on my wife’s body.”⁷⁹ Slowly through the unfolding of the plot of the story the readers see the literal transformation of the woman into a plant, which is then potted in a tub and watered by the husband.

The bruises that appear on the body of the protagonist remain a mystery to both the protagonist and her husband, the narrator. The remark – “I don’t know . . . I just assumed I must have knocked into something without realising, and the bruises would go away . . . but they’re actually getting bigger”⁸⁰ is a proof to this fact. However, the narrator notices that there is a sense of guilt that is apparent on the face of the woman, there is something unfamiliar in the gaze and this the narrator remarks were “almost unreal; nothing like what one would expect given that we were in our fourth year of cohabitation.”⁸¹

The transformation of the woman into a tree in this story is a direct result of the fatigue of living in a concrete world, a world where love is not found and life is carried on mechanically. As the narrator himself recounts – “How could I have failed to notice such deep bruises on the body of the only person I lived with?”⁸² – it shows the lack of warmth and companionship in their relationship. Another very interesting part is the curbing of personal dream that the protagonist had to face after her marriage. When young she had always dreamt of “Living and dying freely”⁸³, she wanted to “go and get some new blood”⁸⁴ in her veins but all she could manage to do was to protest by voicing out that – “I hate these hundreds and thousands of identical buildings, identical kitchens,

⁷⁶ Han Kang, *The Fruit of My Woman* (Granta Publications, 2016).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

identical ceilings, identical toilets, bathtubs, balconies and lifts, and I hate the parks, the rest areas, the shops, the pedestrian crossings. I hate them all.”⁸⁵ The husband being a man of the world never understood the need she had to connect with nature and that what could be the consequence if she was not allowed to connect herself to the soul of nature.

The very fact that every plant the couple planted in the balcony of their flat ended up in death was because the “upper-floor flat, was too far removed from the ground’s energy”⁸⁶. The death of the plants, their not yielding of any crop was indicative of the death of the couple’s relationship, the death of the wife’s wish to “live my whole life without settling in a single place.”⁸⁷ However, what is interesting to note that even when the wife transforms herself into a plant it is the husband who is the first to find her in the balcony metamorphosing into a tree –

My wife was kneeling down, facing the grille that stretched across the balcony window, her two arms raised as though she was cheering. Her entire body was dark green. Her formerly shadowed face now gleamed like a glossy evergreen leaf. Her dried radish-leaf hair was as lustrous as the stems of wild herbs.... Her pliant waist torqued painfully. Her atrophied tongue swayed like a water plant between her deep blue lips. Already, there was no sign of her teeth.⁸⁸

- The husband is the one to water the morphed body of his wife.

The ending of the story is doubly meaningful for in this section the wife writes a letter to her mother thanking the husband for taking care of her. She writes –

He’s been extremely kind. He bought a huge flowerpot and planted me in it. On Sundays, he spends all morning sitting on the balcony threshold catching aphids.

He, who used to be so exhausted all the time, climbs the mountain behind our block every morning, returning with a pail of mineral water to water my legs (he’s remembered that I don’t like tap water). A while ago, he emptied my flowerpot and replaced my soil with an armful of rich new loam. When the previous night’s rain has scrubbed some of the dirt from the city air, he throws the front door and windows wide open to let the fresh air circulate.⁸⁹

The story transforms from the story of the woman’s metamorphosis into the story of the metamorphosis of the narrator and what this transformation does is that it upholds the ideal that only through the sacrifice of the woman-kind, can men achieve clarity, peace and understanding in their lifetimes. The life of the woman becomes a journey for the sake of the men that surround her, her journey becomes a passage for the betterment of her husband, son, father and all other male characters that surround her. She becomes a cipher, a secondary character in relation to the first, that is the alpha male.

The self that is denied its basic right to choose what it wants to and to live in the manner it prefers leads to the death of the self. In the short story the wife who had since childhood dreamt of never settling is forced to settle in a claustrophobic high-rise where all she is able to lay her eyes on is the concrete jungle of the city; her wish to be one with nature is therefore fulfilled when her body itself, which is the first zone of all the conflict is transformed into a tree. It is through this transformation that she reaches a step closer to her dream, yet it is only because she is nurtured by her husband as a plant is she able to continue living. She even when transformed into a non-human entity is dependent on those that hold the centre position in the power structure of society, the male members. However, Kang is sensitive to this issue and the last lines of the story – “When spring came, would my wife sprout again? Would her flowers bloom red? I just didn’t know.”⁹⁰ – remind the readers of the fact that as long as the patriarchal structure is in play, no amount of nurturing on the part of the males can be of positive value for every act of nurturing has a motive, which is the motive to control the subversive elements, to keep under a strict regime the other.

⁸⁵ Han Kang, *The Fruit of My Woman* (Granta Publications, 2016).

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Han Kang, *The Fruit of My Woman* (Granta Publications, 2016).

As in Kang's *The Vegetarian* so in her short story the metamorphosis of the character act as a sublime experience which in the long term reinforces the dominant power structure. Moreover, as Barbara Claire Freeman in *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*⁹¹ writes the "female sublime" remains a "radical alterity that remains unassimilable to representation"⁹² and through this process the female who had been from the very instance of birth considered to be the other is further removed from itself and the society to which it belongs. The process of metamorphosis that the character undergoes makes her an alien element that can never be assimilated into the system because it is not a part of it and in making it an alien the threat of subversion that is inherent in the act of metamorphization is annihilated.

VI. CONCLUSION

The three pieces of fiction dealt with in the paper are drawn from pre-existing mythological stories of metamorphosis. As seen in the Greek-Roman myths of metamorphosis, characters undergo the process of transformation as a method of escaping the clutches of some power that is greater than the one who is escaping it, or the transformation is brought due to the perpetration of some cruel act on the victim. The victim is the one who transforms and through the transformation she/he is provided with protection.

In the three stories – *The Metamorphosis*⁹³ by Franz Kafka, *The Vegetarian*⁹⁴ by Han Kang and *The Fruit of My woman*⁹⁵ by Han Kang – the characters undergo transformation for the sake of escaping oppression and cruelty at the hands of the regime that they are living under. The characters of Gregor, Grete, Yeong-hye, In-hye, and the unnamed wife are all victims to the societal myths, like the myth of a man, the myth of a woman, the myth of the man as a provider and the myth of the woman as the nurturer. Each character tries to escape his or her fate by transforming into a non-human element for they realise that that innocence and the probability to live a free life is absolutely impossible in this world. Each individual is destined to act out the role that the society sets for it.

The authors of these pieces of fiction try to create characters of subversion, however, since the authors themselves are the products of the society they cannot emerge successful in their endeavour. Each character in the stories end up a step short to the toppling of the system. Gregor dies in an emaciated state, Grete through the development of the plot becomes the provider figure but in the end all she ends up becoming is a lady now ready to be married off, Yeong-hye like Gregor metamorphose and ultimately dies, her transformation then becomes a personal escape and does not provide for any sort of social revolution. In-hye on the other hand, takes a revolutionary state, she abandons the role of the mother which is what is assigned to every female, and which is thought to be the ultimate goal of the female kind, however, the author provides for no concrete evidence that she will follow through with her decision. The short story *The Fruit of My Woman* is most prototypical of the gender power

structure, for even when the wife transforms into the tree, it is husband who is source of her survival. Through the story it becomes amply clear that without the husband the existence of the wife would have not been plausible.

The stories worked with in this paper can be considered to be reworkings of ancient myths in modern context. One might expect to reach towards a different kind of ending in these stories, however, as one explores the deeper meanings and implications as upheld by the stories one is able to realize that, like in the Greek-Roman myths so in these modern interpretations those that are below on the ladder of hierarchy will always continue to remain so. Judging this from the angle of gender power struggle, the females will always constitute the lower ranks whereas the male will constitute the position at the apex of the pyramid.

⁹¹ Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* (Berkeley: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 1997).

⁹² Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*, 11.

⁹³ Franz Kafka, "The Metamorphosis", *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, trans. Willa Muir and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books):67-132.

⁹⁴ Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*, trans. Deborah Smith (London: Portobello Books, 2015).

⁹⁵ Han Kang, *The Fruit of My Woman* (Granta Publications, 2016).

When a human baby is born, at the very moment it takes its first breath of air it is categorised as a male or a female. This division though arbitrary in this nature is a division that one has to carry through out one's life. Every role that an individual plays is based on the category to which she/he belongs. As Judith Butler writes in her work "Critically Queer"⁹⁶ – "performativity is a matter of reiteration or repeating the norms by which one is constituted: it is not a radical fabrication of the gendered self. It is a compulsory production of prior and subjectivating norms, ones which cannot be thrown off at will, but which work, animate, and constrain the gendered subject,"⁹⁷ it becomes amply clear that a woman is a woman because she throughout her life time replicates and repeats certain sets of rules and through this repetition creates a picture of the self; similar is the case for a man. But the basic difference that lie at the heart of the two cases is that the man is seen as the primary, whereas the woman is considered to be the secondary element. She is always someone who is placed below the man and therefore, she is not and cannot be in control of herself. Thus, the norms that a woman repeats and replicates throughout her life span are made by the patriarchal power, whose singular aim is to maintain the status quo. In this process of creating discourse and propagating it, what is patriarchy does perfectly is to appropriate an voice that a woman might inherently seem to possess, the patriarchy as an institution silences women for they consider women to be a kind of threat to their status quo.

Following this line of thought then any literature that is born out of such a structure is bound to replicate the norms within which it is born. Therefore, the three fictions dealt with in this paper can be no exception. Though they try to topple the power politics at play, they fail miserably and as they fail they in turn establish the invincible nature of the structure. The very fact that the authors of the three stories use a mythological base as their ground to develop their own plots shows how deeply etched these types of cultural/collective memories are; and thus, it becomes apparent that the erasure of such deep memories can only be made slowly and steadily over a long period of time. Though a reader cannot say that the authors have succeeded in bring any sort of ground breaking change in the dominant discourse, it cannot either be said that they have failed to produce an impact on the discourse of gender.

The metamorphosis of the characters into non-human entities do act as warnings, that is, signs that say that if such atrocities might continue for longer periods of time those that are being oppressed are bound to revolt; and that after a certain point in time it will then become impossible to contain the revolt. Michel Foucault describes 'discourse' as –

ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern⁹⁸ (Weedon, 1987, p. 108).

It is "... a form of power that circulates in the social field and can attach to strategies of domination as well as those of resistance"⁹⁹ (Diamond and Quinby, 1988, p. 185). Foucault in his studies looks into the discontinuities between 'epistemes' which he refers to as the dominant forms of knowledge that are at work in a given age and period of time and the social context in which certain forms of knowledge are made permissible whereas some are considered as taboos. For Foucault power and knowledge go hand in hand and are not distinct separate entities. He studies as to how certain discourses have gained the status of truth and how these truths are used in the proper working of the society, while on the other hand the other discourses have been silenced, however, in their very silence, they provide for spaces of ruptures through which the dominant discourse can be questioned. This becomes important in the course of this paper as the various metamorphosis are such zones of ruptures which though not successful in the ultimate toppling of the dominant discourse of gender power politics, do in the long term help in questioning the discourse, and it is only through such question can one hope to reach a point in time where the various strands of opposing discourses can come to create a sense of balance where neither is subjugated or ostracised at the hands of the more powerful one.

⁹⁶ Judith Barthes, "Critically Queer," GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies (1993), 17-32.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ C. Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 108.

⁹⁹ Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby, *Feminism & Foucault: reflections on resistance* (Northeastern University Press, 1988), 185.

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