



The Insane Vegetarian: Gender, Sanity, and Food Politics in World Literature

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Abstract .his paper examines the intersections of sanity, madness, and vegetarianism in literary and biographical texts spanning the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries across Britain, America, India, and South Korea. Using a qualitative research framework grounded in close reading, the study analyses texts such as Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*, Urmilla Deshpande’s *IRU: The Remarkable Life of Irawati Karwe*, Margaret Atwood’s *Edible Women* to interrogate how dietary practices are represented as markers of mental stability, deviance, or resistance. Drawing on theories of madness as performative (Bernaerts et al., 2009), colonial critiques of vegetarianism (Reagan, 2014), and recent approaches in mad studies (Taylor, 2020), the paper highlights the cultural, political, and gendered dimensions of food choices in literature. Vegetarianism emerges variously as a form of ethical resistance, a site of colonial epistemic violence, and a catalyst for pathologisation, particularly of women. Ultimately, the paper argues that vegetarianism in literature is frequently represented either as a pathway to sanity or as a condition that emerges from it, thereby destabilising fixed boundaries between insanity and reason.

Keywords: Vegetarianism, Food Politics, Insanity, Feminist Studies, Epistemic Violence

1 The Insane Vegetarian: Gender, Sanity, and Food Politics in World Literature

“You are what you eat” is a popular phrase in India; perhaps you are also what you do not eat. This paper aims to explore female characters depicted in English literature and translated works from the 1800s to 2022, originating from Britain, America, India, and South Korea, to understand how their sanity, as represented in these works, is associated with vegetarianism or, in contrast, how insanity is associated with non-vegetarianism. The paper looks at multiple works, such as *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang, *Sita* by Amish Tripathi, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, *IRU - The Remarkable Life of Irawati Karwe*, and *Edible Women* by Margaret Atwood.

The researcher wants to begin by asking the question of how madness is different from insanity, although the two are often used interchangeably. It occurs to me that while insanity is perhaps the lack of sanity or a negation of what is considered to be

sane, madness, perhaps, is a category defined by its own characteristics rather than being the binary opposition of sanity. The negotiation of the sanity- insanity binaries in 20th-century literature is perhaps best captured by Virginia Woolf in her work *Mrs Dalloway*, where the psychiatrist Sir William elaborates thus:

Health (mental) we must have; and health is proportion; so that man comes into your room and says the is Christ (a common delusion), and has a message, they mostly have, and threatens, as they often do to kill himself, you must invoke proportion; order rest in bed; rest in solitude; silence and rest; rest without friends, without books, without messages; six months rest; until a man who went in weighing seven stone six comes out weighing twelve. (Woolf, 2024, p.92)

The west's conceptualisation of Sanity as proportion and the East's idea of 'Swasthya' or balance become mere cliffhangers as psychiatry took over the entire world with its shock therapy and fixation with the brain as the CenterPoint of sanity. While Woolf's work does not comment on the diet of the character Warren Smith, a war veteran who may in current times be diagnosed by PTSD and his domestic counterpart Dalloway who suffers from an imbalance that was characteristic of women of her times and later, literature at large has representations of a wide variety of representation of madness, sanity and insanity and curiously some cases have tied them with their relationship with food. Vegetarian and non-vegetarian diets and their associations, especially with female characters in fiction and their psychological situations, is analysed here. This can be traced from medieval narratives such as the *Ramayana* from the east as well as in this specific case, *The Book of Margery Kempe* from the West, as is exemplified here. Vegetarianism shifts its influence in literary representation, moving from a cultural symbol to a psychological mystique. This paper explores the breadth and depth of this evolution across cultures and timescapes to unravel the various ways in which it takes place by employing the methodology of narrative analysis.

One begins by asking the following questions: Has vegetarianism been equated with insanity as part of Eurocentric epistemic violence over countries like India, which had generations of upper caste brahmins who were the power centres in India? Is there a physiological association between vegetarianism and insanity, as cited by certain research studies? What is the politics of representation of feminist vegetarianism in select literature from across the world?

Lars Bernaerts et al. in their paper "Narrative threads of madness", discuss how madness is represented in literature and how its definition exceeds just extremities in mental functioning. They say that "madness in fiction is more than 'just' a represented state of mind. The authors go on to say that the madness here is not merely about the character's interior monologues on interiority but encapsulates the representation of their behaviour.

Although it typically implies the accentuation of mental functioning, fictional madness most often involves the wider domains of language and behaviour. More specifically, the impression of insanity in fiction is generated by certain speech acts and by certain forms of behaviour. Madness thus turns out to be a performance or a rhetorical figure rather than an essential property of a character's mind". (Bernaerts et al., 2009, p. 284)

An interesting connection made between one's dietary behaviour and mental health is perhaps best captured in the paper "Narrative Shelley and Narrative Pathology". The author discusses how Shelley, "... to ease his distraught nerves, he adopted a vegetarian diet in March 1812". (Burwick, 2009, p.88) The author also elaborates on how Shelley in his work "A Vindication of Natural Diet" mentions how mankind being naturally vegetarians moved into disease and crime after adopting an 'unnatural diet'. In his poem Queen Mab, Shelley mentions how war, slavery and lust for power are all by productions of carnivorous consumption. (Burwick, 2009, p.88) Although this is not the representation of a character, rather a poet, it can be seen from the above sample that the author's life is also reflected in his writings.

Mad Studies, an emerging field characterises the association of veganism and sanity as a socio-political construct. Taylor argues for this approach and suggests that there are several factors that shape this connection.

"I have argued for a mad studies approach to the psychiatrization of veganism that does not so much insist on the sanity of veganism, or of characters such as Yeong-hye, as it accepts that in an alimentary normalising and speciesist society, being vegan and loving animals enough to not eat them may be a mad, queer, crip, or abnormal identity. This mad studies approach stresses that even if we grant that to be vegan is a bit mad, this is not a fundamental, ahistorical, or scientifically objective category but is through and through social, sociogenic, political, and contingent." (Taylor, 2020, p. 231)

While this introduces us to the idea that there are several psycho social factors influencing this association, one is tempted to take a closer look at the same. With regards to my question on the Eurocentric perception on vegetarianism, Marguerite M Reagan, in her essay "Feminism, vegetarianism and colonial resistance in the Eighteenth Century" articulates the following:

This belated attention to the proto-vegetarianism of the eighteenth century is not surprising, given that the word "vegetarian" was not coined until 1847, and vegetarianism did not find its institutional expression until 1849 with the founding of Great Britain's Vegetarian Society. Figuring prominently into this proto-vegetarian discourse are British perceptions of India. In eighteenth-century writings on India, the vegetarianism of the Hindus was at first considered a curiosity and later as evidence of racial inferiority. (Reagan, 2014, p.278)

Reagan also discusses the cultural context set by imperialism regarding the vegetarian diet followed by the Indian Brahmins. While certain scholars and writers from the West consider the advantages of the diet which make the Indian brahmins more 'virtuous and humble' in nature, there are also others who believe that the vegetarian diet has resulted in this populace being effeminate, passive, inferior in strength and easier to overpower and colonise. (Reagan, 2014, p. 278)

2 The Politics of Representation

In a popular retelling of the Mahabharata named "Sita" by Amish Tripadi, one can see how Urmila, Lakshman's wife, is reminded how challenging it would be for her to

accompany her husband to the forest for 14 years, since she finds it difficult to eat meat. Sita tells her sister, "We'll live off the land, including eating meat, and I know how you despise that." (Tripadi, 2020, p.295) Here, one can see that there is a 'natural' disposition towards vegetarianism, especially among the royals; however, it is also to be noted that the royals would belong to the Kshatriya community and not to the Brahmin community, who is known for their vegetarianism.

The biography of Irawati Karwe, a pioneering anthropologist from India, written by her granddaughter Urmilla Deshpande, traces the difficulties faced by this scholar as she travelled to the West for her education. In *IRU: The Remarkable life of Irawati Karwe*, the author writes thus:

For Irawati, a Chitpawvan Brahmin woman who had never eaten the flesh of any animal, bird or fish, there was not much to eat but potatoes and vegetables that were so severely cooked that they were barely recognizable as plants. Every morning, she thought about eating the eggs, but put it off for the next day, and the next. There were strips of the pink meat and at dinnertime sometimes she saw the thick brown sausages on the plates of other people at the table and she was surprised that the smell did not offend her, in fact she found it quite pleasant. (Deshpande, 8)

The time she was forced to finally give in and start consuming non-vegetarian food during her stay in Germany is narrated by the author. While the host uncovered a pot of beef and the other guests appreciated it, "Irawati gasped, and, much to her own horror, began to weep silently." (Deshpande, 2024, p.19) The host explains to the other guests that this is because "She's a Hindu, a Brahmin. Since there is a scarcity of food and Irawati was surviving merely on vegetables, she was, over a period of time, forced to consume them. "Irawati cut a piece and put it in her mouth. She had never eaten the flesh of any animal, let alone a cow, until then. She chewed it slowly and swallowed it, and then finished all the food on her plate. She didn't think about it again. She was no longer a vegetarian, after that, not in Germany, nor anywhere else." (Deshpande, 2024, p.20)

While vegetarianism can be considered a cultural indicator in one part of the world, in another it is the exact opposite, where non-vegetarian food is the norm. Moving from a cultural signifier and assuming a psychological depth, vegetarianism becomes a symbol of the feminine consciousness, transcending the animalistic to the 'natural'.

One can see that the relationship to non-vegetarian food is not one of hatred, but probably one of a mental block or religious absenteeism. One cannot help but notice how vegetarianism also becomes a cultural identity for the 'Hindu's and 'Indians' in the global context, where these categories are in no way interchangeable for the absolute heterosexuality within both the categories. However, much like how Tripadi in his works try to romanticise the past with what can be considered now as a 'nationalist' agenda, the despise to meat exhibited by Urmila is only a representation of that which is followed by certain classes and castes in India who vouch to rent out houses to 'vegetarians' only, to this day. On the other hand, one can also see that characters like Ram and Sita in *Ramayana* would've certainly consumed non-vegetarian food during their time in the forest. There is a part in *Sundarakanda*, where Hanuman, as he meets Sita

and narrates the plight of Rama, tells her that Rama has given up eating meat in the grief of being away from Sita. This also suggests that non-vegetarian food was considered a pleasure, as it is accounted for along with other pleasures he has given up in grief. “न मांसं राघवो भुङ्क्ते न चाऽपि मधु सेवते। वन्यं सुविहितं नित्यं भक्तमश्राति पञ्चमम्॥” (Ramayana. 36.41). Another sloka that discusses this is in the Ayodhya Kanda चतुर्दश हि वर्षाणि वत्स्यामि विजने वने । मधुमूलफलैर्जीवन् हित्वा मुनिवदामिषम् ॥ (Ramayana 17.15.) This is another verse that refers to how Rama and his entourage spend fourteen years in the forest, consuming only honey, roots and other tubers and forest produce, including meat. There have been interpretations that the word *mamsa* here may stand only for the fleshy part of fruits and not necessarily meat. One justification for this could be that Rama belongs to the Kshatriya caste, since he is a warrior and not a Brahmin, however, these categories dissolve in popular narratives where these characters are considered the custodians of a sacred culture.

3 Vegetarianism and the Female Body - Mind

In the Booker winner novel *Vegetarian* by Hang Kang, initially we see a husband struggling to make sense of his wife's sudden change of diet to vegetarianism. For a traditional Korean family where meat eating is the norm, this change causes turmoil in the family and is integral to the protagonist's transformation. The husband, who is the narrator, elaborates thus: “I was lost for words, but at the same time I was aware that choosing a vegetarian diet wasn't quite so rare as it had been in the past. People turn vegetarian for all sorts of reasons: to try and alter their genetic predisposition towards certain allergies. For example, or else because it is seen as more environmentally friendly not to eat meat.” (Kang, 2015, p.11)

While these explanations give temporary respite of logic to the husband's rational mind, the episodes that follow are of a proportion that is unforeseen by him. His wife's descent into ‘abnormality’ and eventual ‘insanity’ to the extent of being institutionalised unfolds dramatically. The disturbing picture of Yeong-hye emptying the fridge and throwing out tons of frozen meat is also described by the author. Further, the physical changes that Yeong-hye goes through as an aftereffect of her diet and how “she grew thinner by the day, so much so that her cheekbones had become indecently prominent,” and how she resembled a hospital patient. He goes on to mention that it was more than a simple case of vegetarianism. “If it just had been another instance of a woman giving up meat to lose weight, then there would have been no need to worry, but I was convinced that there was more going on here than a simple case of vegetarianism.” (Kang, 2015, p.14)

In the “Book of Margery Kempe, one of the first autobiographies credited to a woman from England, dating back to the 14th Century, Margery speaks about her spiritual experiences and her journey, which started with abstention. She has a vision where God speaks to her thus: “My beloved daughter, you must give up what you love best in this world, and that is the eating of meat. And instead of meat, you shall eat my flesh and my blood, that is the true body of Christ in the sacrament of the altar. This is my

will, daughter, that you receive my body every Sunday, and I shall cause so much grace to flow into you that everyone shall marvel at it. (Kempe, 2015, p. 21)

In the extraordinary paper titled “The 14th-century religious women Margery Kempe and Catherine of Siena can still teach us lessons about eating disorders today”, authors who are medical professionals consider Margery Kempe and Catherine of Siena, two historical figures who, in the face of spirituality, abstained from non-vegetarian food.

Mystics in the 14th century were often women who interpreted God through the body and senses as the association of femininity with fleshliness/bodiliness could actually serve to privilege their physical expression of *Imitatio Christi*. By employing and exploiting their feminine physicality, they sought to escape it in an attempt to achieve a higher spirituality. Restricted eating was one manifestation of this. (Sukkar et.al, 2017, p.5)

The association with God claiming one's body and their union through flesh is also an interesting aspect that is seen in Margery's narratives. The paper further discusses how the private, personal and public merge in the context of dietary choices and also attain metaphysical meanings.

Eating does not simply sustain life in an organised post-antiquity culture. Eating is embedded with deep symbolic value and a history of traditions and meaning. Captured within the religious sphere, it was found to have very personal meaning for the two historic figures presented here. These extraordinary lives provide exciting examples of context and culture that shaped destinies and still reverberate today.” (Sukkar et.al 2017, p.5)

The authors look at eating disorders, particularly anorexia nervosa, from the perspective of socio-cultural influence, but do not take into account the psycho pathological representation of vegetarianism, especially in women. While the authors do suggest that there is an aspect of gender, this is not discussed elaborately.

In a paper titled *Ethical Vegetarianism and Vegan Poetics in Han Kang's 'The Vegetarian'* authored by Hussein and Adbulla, the authors look at the piece as a discussion on speciesism and anti-speciesism as well as from the perspective of carnophobia, which is the fear of consuming meat. (Aldoory & Najm, 2025, p. 408-42) However, a close reading of the novel reveals that it is not merely a fear, but rather a ‘becoming’, a transformation that

In Margaret Atwood's *Edible Woman*, the protagonist Marian also develops an aversion towards meat and later to food in general. Published in 1969, this work views the female body as not just the consumer but also as the consumed. The rejection of meat and other foods does embody a kind of insanity that is similar to *The Vegetarian's* madness, which is also a tight rope walk between a complete mental breakdown and what can be considered as an awakening.

In the paper, “Meat Consumption as a Metaphor: Gender Differences in Margaret Atwood's *Edible Woman*”, the author discusses feminine abstinence of meat as resistance to patriarchy itself. More interestingly, the authors conclude by stating that the protagonist undergoes a transition from product to process, realising that she is not a passive object but an active subject. (Meklash, 2024, p.142)

While there is no direct, homogenous, universal relationship between abstinence or subscribing to a vegetarian diet, with the spectrum that extends from what is considered sane to insane, its representation in fictional literary discourse is a complex amalgamation of several factors with multiple implications. It is, on the one hand, ideological and acculturated and on the other, deeply subjective and phenomenological. It is at times resistance to patriarchy and at times submission to God. However, several cultures across the East and West have interpreted these choices as manifestations of feminine mental dispositions.

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