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The New Monster-Woman: Centrality of the Transformative ‘Monster’ in *Chlorine*, *The Vegetarian*, and *Nightbitch*

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Abstract: In English, Greek, and Roman mythology, the monster existed in the margins of society, forever a threat and the Other, destined to be defeated by a ‘heroic’ man. In a gendered binary, this historical imagination of man as ‘hero’ demanded the existence of woman as either the ‘victim’ or the ‘monster’. The human-woman existed to be saved, and the monster-woman was made to be killed or conquered. Through a contextual reading of *Chlorine*, *Nightbitch*, and *The Vegetarian*, this paper aims to explore the transformation of the monster-woman as the ‘hero’ of her own text, and the contradictory nature of that role. In traditional stories, the monster already exists at the beginning, a creature of fear and repression lurking in the margins of the narrative. In contrast, in these three works, the monster is created progressively through the anxieties of the protagonists. This paper examines how the contemporary monster-woman and her transformation is central to the narrative; she yearns to escape patriarchal society and surpass the restrictions imposed upon the female and human body by achieving ‘monsterhood’. The paper highlights the fractured personhood of the three main characters in the selected works: Ren, Mother, and Yeonghye, and how that necessitates the transformation of their respective ‘monstrous’ and hybrid bodies. This paper traces the links between monster and woman in ‘Western’ mythology and literature, from Beowulf and Homer to Jean Rhys. Finally, through a comparative and historical analysis, the three contemporary works are used to highlight the shift in the position and depiction of the monster-woman. This shift is also influenced by the blurring of boundaries between ‘man’ and ‘creature’ in posthumanist thought. The paper compares the monster-woman of yore, condemned by society, to the monster-woman of today, condemning society.

Keywords: *Monster Theory, Abject, Hybridity, Monster-Woman, Comparative Literature, Body Politics, Feminist Literary Criticism*

The history of monsters is a history of man's fears. All cultures, with their mythologies and literature, gave birth to varying monsters. It is a difference, an existence beyond the structures of society, and a threat to culture, that creates the monster. Cohen states that "the monstrous body is pure culture" (4), and is also political, racial, economic, and sexual.

To 'defeat' the monster, there is the hero, laying down the codes of culture through story. The hero has many forms, and the hero, too, is pure culture. In Greek mythology, the hero is Odysseus; in Anglo-Saxon literature the hero is Beowulf; in Irish folklore the hero is Cú Chulainn; in China, there is Sun Wukong; and in Hindu mythology the hero is Durga.

In 'Western' mythology, man has been deemed the hero. In the earliest Anglo-Saxon text, it is Beowulf who sets out on great adventures, and in Geoffrey of Monmouth's tales, it is Arthur who sits at the head of the round table. The hero feasts while the monster lurks, and this story has been told through time immemorial. *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* by Mary Shelley, written in 1818, is widely considered the first book to profoundly 'humanise' a monster, looking beyond the binary of monster and man. The lurking man-made monster escaped the margins of the narrative. A creature that was neither fully man, nor fully monster, came to represent not just society's fears, but also its flaws.

While the evolution of the hero has its own twists and turns, so does that of the monster, and it is the monster that this paper sets out to find.

Woman as Monster

The word "monster" is derived from the Latin *monstrum*, which can mean a miracle or an omen. Historically, it was used to refer to a 'deformed' infant (human or animal) whose birth was considered an omen, often ritually sacrificed (Martínez 16), or was used interchangeably with *ostentum* or *prodigium*, also to define beings or behaviours that are contrary to laws of nature (21). Aristotle, in *Generation of Animals*, stated that, "the female itself is a deformity, though a natural deformity" (LXXV). Greek philosophy and mythology have exerted extensive influence on European literature, and subsequently on English literature, as is evident in the Renaissance, Neo-classical and Romantic period. Thus, the mythological existence of woman-as-other was established early on.

The heroic ideals of courage, strength, and resilience, supposed characteristics of masculinity, have consistently kept monsters at bay, and this masculinity is established by contrasting it with the supposed cowardice or fragility of women; for instance, Alexander the Great reminds his soldiers, deep in the Indian forests, "to be brave and not to give up in adversity like women" (Asma 23). The monsters in this case were the unfamiliar animals and the 'barbaric' dwellers of the Indian forests. As

the otherness of women, Indian men, and the ‘exotic’ animals are established, the ‘Western’ man remains central, human, and ideal. ‘Central’ here implies the place occupied by men in folklore, typically as the hero. ‘Human’, the spirit of humanity, is protected and represented by masculine prowess. The body of the hero-man is also ‘ideal’ and ‘symbolic’, as opposed to the hybrid body of the monster, or the ‘incomplete’ and ‘physical’ body of the woman.

In *The Question of Lay Analysis*, Freud writes, “...the sexual life of adult women is a ‘dark continent’ for psychology” (212), declaring women’s sexuality as unknown and uncharted, a colonial pursuit. In ‘Western’ folklore, the woman and the monster are both ‘not-man’, and therefore must be defeated, killed, or colonised. Women in Anglo-Saxon and English literature, and Greek mythology, also appear as ‘damsels in distress’. The human-woman exists to be saved, and the monster-woman exists to be conquered. In some instances, the role of the woman is to aid the hero, and then be abandoned by him. Latin poets Ovid and Catullus both wrote on Theseus slaying the Minotaur, Ariadne’s half-brother, and Ariadne’s subsequent abandonment at Naxos. The tale of the sorceress Medea is also a tale of abandonment by the hero Jason, appearing in the epic *Argonautica* and Euripides’ *Medea*.

In the late twentieth century, with the dominion of machines and technology, the centrality of masculinity, humanity, and society’s ideals (shaped by religion) came to be questioned. In posthumanist thought, as the idea of ‘human’ is decentred, so is the construction of ‘man’. In the absence of this *man-animal*, *man-woman* and *man-monster* binary, the woman-as-monster is revealed to be a creation of the very social order that fears it.

The ‘monster’ in this paper is not one to be defeated, but is already injured in the process of transformation. As the patriarchal social order forces the protagonists in *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang, *Chlorine* by Jade Song, and *Nightbitch* by Rachel Yoder, to conform, their bodies become abject to themselves. To be ‘abject’ is to escape or be separate from the self (defined by social, moral, and cultural norms)—i.e., the rejected parts of the subject that live outside the symbolic order (Kristeva). Man is symbolic, his existence extending beyond his physicality. Woman, however, is a ‘physical’ existence that can be wounded, mutated, and altered, and is therefore not entirely ‘human’, rather akin to ‘monsters’ or animals.

Thus, this paper seeks to examine the narrative role of the contemporary monster-woman as the protagonist, the conditions that result in her ‘monsterhood’, and place this transformation in a historical context, highlighting their relevance in accordance with literary and cultural patterns.

Literature Review

Making and Unmaking the Monster

The history of monsters is woven throughout the history of patriarchy, colonization, and religion. Ancient Greek monsters are creatures of pagan myths, and the monsters of Anglo-Saxon or Old English literature were influenced by Christianity.

The monsters of English literature, then, have been shaped by both Ancient Greek and Christian traditions. In the Book of Genesis, Eve ate the apple from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and put in motion the chain of events that led to the fall of man. Greek poet Hesiod wrote the myth of Pandora, who opened a jar (or a box), and unleashed curses upon mankind. The role of women in mythology is a complex reflection of their perceived role in human society. Folklore links collective memory with our literature. While the use of literary sources to investigate social sciences can be controversial, folklore bridges the gap between social objectivity and creative imagination (Kim 220).

Before delving into the intricacies of monsterhood, let us first define the monster. The monster is a hybrid creature, threatening both identity and order, and is therefore abject. The monster exists in a liminal space, and is a threat that must be eradicated; yet, it keeps on returning, ready to terrorise our cultural consciousness (Cohen 5). However, the separation between identity and order and that which disrupts it may not be so distinct. In gothic fiction, such as *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the ‘Self’ and the monstrous ‘Other’ that terrifies it, can exist within the same being (29).

In these contemporary texts, as the abject protagonists, at war with their bodies, become ‘monstrous’, it is the patriarchal social order that becomes pitiful, challenging, and terrifying. It must be noted that although the ‘monster’ in these texts is not a sinner or an abomination as per traditional depictions, these ‘monstrous’ bodies are not something to aspire to, as their transformation is caused by societal oppression. That is to say, ‘monsterhood’ is not innate to ‘womanhood’, nor is this abjection to the woman, as is also clarified by Creed. Rather, the perpetuated belief is that a woman’s monstrous nature is intertwined with her “difference as man’s sexual other” (83).

‘Abject’ as defined in Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* is as follows: “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4).

The monster-women of the three selected works are abject: they make the rest of the characters question what they know of their own sense of self and their identity, and cause revulsion with their transformation and self-mutilation. Their desire to escape their body, their ‘physicality’, and move

beyond the boundaries of what is considered human is seen as revolting and alarming. They reach a state of inbetweenness—Ren (mermaid), Yeonghye (tree) and Mother (dog)— straying on the territory of nonhuman, their bodies taking on an ambiguity that causes revulsion as well as a perverse desire, characteristic of the abject.

A Cultural Distinction

Monsters in South Asian and East Asian cultures do not necessarily follow the Christian binaries of good and evil, of morality and sin, and tend to be more fluid.

In *Chlorine*, Ren dislikes the mermaids of folklore or myths that are “too desperate, too frivolous” (4). She dislikes not just European mermaids, such as the one in *The Little Mermaid*, but also Chinese mermaids that were dependent on men. While in Greek mythology, Echidna, half-woman and half-snake, gave birth to monsters, Nüwa, a Chinese deity with a woman’s face and a serpent’s body, made human beings out of clay sculptures to drive away her loneliness. Ren is also dismissive of Nüwa’s need for human companionship, finding the human condition to be limiting.

The Vegetarian by Han Kang has been translated from Korean to English, entering global literary conversations and significantly impacting the postcolonial Anglophone canon of the monster-woman. This contemporary depiction of the monstrous feminine adds a cross-cultural aspect to the study of women’s transgressions, repression, and transformation. Campbell notes that heroes share similar traits across cultures; the ‘proto-heroes’ of the Joseon dynasty represented godlike perfection (Kim 222). The appearance of women, however, is dependent on the prevailing ideology of the time. Confucian ethics produced virtuous women, and the Japanese invasion of Korea inspired stories of women protecting their chastity.

Kim writes of four archetypical heroines: prototypical, virtuous-but-not-virtuous, pioneering, and resisting. The ‘Hanful resistance’ is depicted through the story of a nightingale rising out of the ashes of a tormented woman, a poem by Kim So-wol (225). Resistance of the weak in the face of injustice, leading even to death, is a form of ‘passive and persistent’ resistance that is absent from the heroines of ‘Western’ feminism (Kim 226). In *The Vegetarian*, this resistance is witnessed by society as ‘monstrous’, and the impositions forced upon Yeonghye necessitate a transformation, leading to an ambiguous end.

What Constitutes the Monster-Woman

In *Beowulf*, one of the earliest Old English and European epics, the hero is celebrated for his masculine traits, even if the monster, a descendant of Cain named Grendel, exhibits hypermasculine traits.

Grendel's mother, another monster defeated by Beowulf, remains unnamed; the narrator also adds that Grendel's mother is less terrifying than her son (1282–1287). Unlike the fight with Grendel, Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother takes place underwater, and she is found in a cavern deep inside the lake, evoking images of the womb, the amniotic sac, and the 'monstrous mother' (Creed 504), seeking revenge for the death of her son. Her uncivilized and incomprehensible existence away from the male-dominated social order is further emphasized when she 'mounts' Beowulf to kill him, reversing the roles of the male-female binary.

The writers of Ancient Greece also wrote of many monsters, and among them were the monster-woman. The vengeful Furies were born after Uranus' castration, daughters of emasculation (Zimmerman 113). Homer's Odysseus, in his travails, comes across the famed cyclops colony, along with Polyphemus, which posed a challenge to the 'civilized' Greek men. Beyond that, Odysseus faces Scylla, the woman who has snarling dogs in place of genitals; Circe, the temptress who turns men into pigs; the Sirens, luring men to their deaths with their voice; and Charybdis, a giant gaping maw in the middle of the ocean that swallows all men that come near her.

Ovid's works also contain women who were transformed, in order to escape men or gods. Daphne, the water nymph, is metamorphosized into a laurel tree in order to escape Apollo's chase. Arethusa was transformed into a spring to escape the river god Alpheus. The sisters Philomela and Procne were transformed into birds by the gods, in order to escape Tereus' wrath. The nymph Syrinx was transformed into a reed pipe, and Pitys (Greek) turned into a pine tree, both escaping Pan. In some instances, this transformation is also punitive, such as in the case of Arachne and Medusa. In *The Vegetarian*, we witness Yeonghye's desire to transform into a tree, in a similar attempt to escape violence.

In the Arthurian tales of *Lanval* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knights*, women are enemies, enchantresses, fairies, or moral personifications, such as Morgan le Fay, Guinevere, Elaine, Enid, or the Lady of the Lake. The knights establish their codes of chivalry through the presence of the women and the 'enemies'. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with the *Malleus Maleficarum*, and the influence of King James VI's *Daemonologie*, heresy and accusations of witchcraft spread throughout Europe, and subsequently America. Women and men became victims of persecution by the Church.

The Witch, the 'Madwoman', and the Femme Fatale have always been a threat to the masculine social order. Mental and physical afflictions, as well as sexual autonomy, have inspired 'monsters', the 'indiscipline' of the mind and the body leading to disorder. Vampires, werewolves, and zombies, reigning monsters of our era, could have spawned from a lack of understanding regarding diseases or comas (Barber 99). From *The Taming of the Shrew* by Shakespeare to *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte,

leading to the postmodern narrative in *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, patriarchal oppression, resulting in a fractured personhood and psychological oppression, has always ‘defeated’ the female monster.

Haraway, in her “Cyborg Manifesto”, writes that by the late twentieth century, “we were all chimeras”, or “hybrids of machine and organism” (7). With industrial and technological revolutions, the border between organism and machine was at stake, along with the territories of “production, reproduction, and imagination” (7). The influx of women workers into the manufacturing sector during the 1970s also led to dramatic shifts in gender identity (Kim 227).

In the posthuman and postgender world of the cyborg, the boundary between human and animal is also ‘breached’. Adam and Eve are no longer separate from the animal, and the need for such separation is also unconvincing. As boundaries are transgressed, and “gender, race, or class consciousness” is revealed to be an “achievement forced on us by...contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism” (16), the mythological understanding of ‘us’ and ‘them’ is rendered meaningless.

The Contemporary Transformative ‘Monster-Woman’

The contemporary monster-woman is, by all means, a member of society. She is a mother, a wife, or a teenage girl with the ambitions and passions that are expected of her in the twenty-first century. The transformation occurs as she realises that the restrictions of the female and the human body, under the strain of patriarchy, do not let a woman exist beyond it.

Her transformation is not necessarily like Lady Macbeth’s ‘unsexing’, but rather, an extension of the shortcomings imposed on her body—a desire to not only become ‘unsexed’, but also ‘unhuman’. It is not a transformation into a masculine or destructive monster, but a process that confronts the restrictions imposed on her. This transformation is a synthesis brought by the many facets of her personhood that break under the strain of social impositions and patriarchal transgressions.

The monster-woman is not classified as such merely because of distinguishing ‘monstrous’ physical features; there may be no scaly skin or talons to speak of, but she is monstrous regardless. Her monstrosity exists beyond physical manifestation: there is an ambiguity to it. The monster-woman is not monstrous only due to her transformation; the moment she “oversteps the boundaries of her gender role”, she becomes a monster, “a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith (“die erste Eva,” “la mere obscure”), Bertha Mason, or Gorgon” (Cohen 9): a liminal figure lying in between boundaries, evoking revulsion and escaping categorization.

From Antagonist to Protagonist: The Monster-Hero in ‘Chlorine’, ‘Nightbitch’ and ‘the Vegetarian’

Ren, Mother and Yeong-Hye have their own reasons to yearn for transformation. All three of these women are hybrids: they stray on the borders of two selves. These protagonists have the unifying theme of transformation, central to each narrative. They are not monstrous at the beginning, there is a strain that causes the transformation to begin, in an attempt to escape the imposed constraints of their human and female bodies. According to Kristeva, biblical abominations contain three major taboos: food taboo, bodily change ending in death, and the female body and incest, leading to the ‘tremendous forcing of the subordinated maternal power to symbolic order’ (Creed 69).

In *The Vegetarian*, for Yeonghye, the trigger is the dream of a bloodied face. This leads her to want to shed the violence around her and *in* her. She does this by trying to cut out all forms of meat and animal products from her diet. Her body becomes a canvas for the violence inflicted throughout the world; this decision to turn into a vegetarian turns her into a target of abuse: verbal, emotional and physical, enacted by others as well as self-inflicted.

In Yeonghye’s case, the simple act of cutting out meat from her diet and her life causes scorn, and she is shunned in social circles. Zimmerman writes that outsize hungers are the “province of the monsters”, and for women, all hunger is monstrous. Yet, to refuse is petulant, and more demanding than to ask for a second helping (32). When she accompanies her husband to a work dinner, her refusal to eat meat and lack of a bra causes a multitude of negative reactions from his colleagues, and they project their guilt and assumptions onto her vegetarianism.

Yeonghye challenges the biggest social code of humanity when she asks her sister, “Why, is it such a bad thing to die?” (Kang 162), forgoing the basic human instinct of self-preservation. She gets more insistent about her transformation as time passes, losing interest in all food and only asking for water. She tells her sister: “...all the trees of the world are like brothers and sisters,” (150) showing more kinship with the trees than her sister.

The extremities of her transformation cause her body to shrink further, despite her presence and transformation taking the centre stage. Yeonghye’s body becomes an empty space, thinning the line between male-female and human-monster as she descends into androgyny forced by her diet. Language and understanding breaks down, despite her explanations as to why she is cutting meat out of her life, and nobody is willing to comprehend her intentions, or the circumstances that led to it.

Ren, the teenage girl in *Chlorine*, by Jade Song, who dreams of becoming a mermaid, draws constant distinctions between a ‘human girl’ and a ‘mermaid’. Mermaids have existed across various

cultures; in some, they are fearful creatures dragging sailors to their deaths, vilified and sexualised. Ren's desire to become a mermaid leads her to become a swimmer. She has a shrine dedicated to mermaids in her room, she dreams at night of mermaids, and she wishes to live in the water. Juxtaposed with the life she dreams of is her reality as a teenage athlete. Her food habits, her body, her ambition, and her sexuality are all dictated by the norms of her sport and of society. The constant sexualization of her body as a 'human girl', especially by her coach, is in contrast with the freedom she imagines she will have as a 'mermaid'.

Ren's transformation into a 'mermaid', as she sews her legs together to swim faster, gravely injures her. In *The Monstrous Feminine*, Barbara Creed states that the monster is abject because it is wounded, and the boundary between the 'self' and 'other', and 'inside' and 'outside' has been violated (82). To be noted here is that Ren is not a 'monster' in the sense that she seeks to threaten society, but rather that she sees herself as abject, and desires to be beyond human. She seeks to shed the limitations placed on her as a 'human girl' and become 'monstrous', or a mermaid. In fact, she "bursts into being" only after she "becomes a mermaid".

The depiction of her desire to be a mermaid is in direct contrast with the traditional hero-man's desire to kill or court mermaids, and other sea-monsters. The book begins with Ren establishing herself as a mermaid, telling the readers that what we know of mermaids is wrong.

Discarding the myth of the creature, Ren tells us:

Mermaids wear one-piece swimsuits sculpting severe camel toe. Mermaids have neither hair nor scalp, but latex swim caps, squeezing forehead fat out like dollops of leftover toothpaste from near-empty tubes. Mermaids swim in chlorine, thrive in locker rooms, and dive under and over lane ropes. Mermaids sprout thick and luscious body hair, until shaved off for aerodynamics. Mermaids would rather eat four bowls of pasta than a man—though a man does taste good, mermaids prefer not to waste precious stomach volume on such non-nutritious fare, for a man is not sustenance but an occasional dessert (Song 2).

It is interesting to note that this depiction mixes the human girl with the monster. She eats food for human sustenance but is also a cannibal (only consuming men). The transformative aspect of the monster is also established immediately after, as she says, "Mermaids are not born. We are made" (2). Like Ariadne and Medea, the Chinese mermaids in Ren's stories were also dependent on the goodwill of men, and she vowed to free herself of this curse to write her own legend.

In *Nightbitch* by Rachel Yoder, the central character is a mother, and she is unnamed, reminiscent of Grendel's mother in *Beowulf*. Her personhood is limited only to her identity as a mother, and this motherhood, in turn, is made abject and monstrous.

Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* and Creed's *Monstrous Feminine* lay the groundwork for the womb as monstrous, and motherhood as abject. Creed argues that most horror movies represent women as monstrous with respect to her "mothering and reproductive functions" (7). Motherhood is abject, according to Kristeva's definitions, as the state of giving birth and mothering is associated with violence and bodily fluids that question the limits of humanity. *Nightbitch* tackles two forms of monstrosity and abjection through the character of Mother: motherhood and her transformation into a dog. The maternal body is abject and monstrous due to its generative powers; Creed remarks that a womb is abject as it "contains a new life form which will pass from inside to outside bringing with it traces of its contamination—blood, afterbirth, faeces" (48). Mother's transformation into a dog is abject as it strays into the territory of animal (Kristeva) as "were-creatures, whose bodies signify a collapse of the boundaries between human and animal, also belong to this category" (Creed 12).

Mother's denial and repression do not begin with her progressive monstrous transformation, but is manifested in her internal debates over motherhood and career. While she realises she might be turning into a dog and brushes it off as a joke, the internal struggles between her identities are already set in place. She finds herself getting angry over the loss of a creative identity, only to step back and find a solace in being a mother, which does not last long. The longer she represses her desires, the stronger it returns with an animalistic need.

Her transformation begins when her husband criticises her behaviour after a night of her son's endless crying. She lashes out mildly, cutting her feet on shards of a broken lamp. Refusing to clean herself up, she goes to sleep, bloodying the bedsheets. In the morning her husband tells her, "You were kind of...a bitch last night." He then chuckles, to "show it wasn't meant meanly, just as observation." In response, she says, "I am Nightbitch." (9)

She laughs off the derision with a joke, despite rising frustrations about the choice of the word 'bitch', with its gendered connotations; she knows that Nightbitch is "not even that far below the surface" (9). She begins to note a patch of fur growing on her back, and then all over her body. She notes that her teeth have sharpened into canines, and a few days later, a growth appears at the base of her back. She self-mutilates by cutting the growth open and is astonished to find something resembling a tail. She begins to feel an animosity towards her pet cat that she used to adore before having her son.

Mother, unlike the other two central characters, does not accept this transformation at once. She carries on doing her duties as a mother, but her refusal to believe in her transformation worsens her relationship with her son and her husband.

Monstrous Femininity: A Fractured Personhood

The ‘monsterhood’ of the women in these texts differ from each other, while retaining the status of being the Other.

In *Chlorine*, Ren mentions finding joy in winning as a ‘human’ girl, but as a ‘mermaid’, she refuses to place herself in a hierarchy of bodies. Everything that chains Ren to the human condition is looked down upon, and the human condition is seen as inherently hierarchical. In a similar vein, she also dismisses the university recruiters, knowing that her ‘rightful brethren’, the mermaids, are waiting for her. The act of ‘transformation’, of wounding the self and sewing her legs together, also happens on the day when college recruiters were meant to see her perform.

Ren describes her periods as her stomach eating itself from the inside, a “clean eater” (39) gnawing on her uterus and her fallopian tubes. Needless to say, Ren saw her menstruation as something that was antithetical to itself—an abjection. Ren’s menstrual pain becomes a toothed creature, an act of cannibalism devouring herself from the inside. The uterus and fallopian tubes, which evoke images of birth and creation, are destroyed by her own body. Her menstruation is a threat to herself, and is therefore ‘monstrous’. Her insides are also compared to “pot roasts” and “holey cheese”: repeated imagery of food and wounds. The pain reminded her of the physicality of her being, along with the limitations it imposed on her as an athlete. Yet, she deems the pain, trauma, and violence of her existence as necessary to justify the existence of ‘myth and marvel’.

Her coach, in the event of a failure, forced Ren to bind her feet together and swim. Although the binding felt ‘abnormal’ initially, she endures it and later begins to see her bound legs as a ‘tail’. Under her coach’s strain, her identity as a mermaid becomes a means of escaping failure. The stories on mermaids that she had in her room were consumed by her, both literally and figuratively, as she ate the pages one by one, “upon near dissolution from my saliva” (156). She dreams of enacting her revenge, driving Jim to his death through song and violence, yet deems him unworthy, as the act of biting his jugular would debase her. In her narrative, the monster is pure and ‘clean’, and human blood, saliva, and cologne is ‘disgusting’.

In *The Vegetarian*, although seemingly lucid and in complete control of her devices, Yeonghye refuses to eat food or participate in society. Her dreams of transformation, her food loathing, and her refusal to participate in patriarchy leads to her own physical deterioration, but they also form a threat to

the social order. For the people around Yeonghye to acknowledge the harm inflicted on her, or the reason why she is seemingly ‘monstrous’, they must also come to terms with their own transgressions. The father, the husband, and the brother-in-law actively seek to harm her, and her mother and her sister become bystanders. Even as the readers comprehend the self-harm inflicted by Yeonghye, we are also made aware of the absurdity of the seemingly ‘perfect’ or ‘normal’ impositions on her.

Interestingly, Inhye, Yeonghye’s caring and responsible older sister, is also shown as someone capable of the same transformation as Yeonghye. Her husband’s fascination with flying entities and her son’s nightmare of her as a bird flying away, fed into her doubts. When she consoles him, saying that she has not turned into a bird, she gives him “an uncertain smile” and tells him it had just been a dream. Later, in the ambulance with her dying sister, she wonders, “But was that really true? Right then, in the ambulance, she wasn’t sure. Had it really been just a dream, a mere coincidence?” (Kang 185).

However, unlike Yeonghye who begins to yearn for a transformation due to a dream, Inhye is able to convince herself that it was *just* a dream. She returns to the space of the subject without being led into the space of abject. She wonders if it might have been her in her sister’s place if things were different, as she muses upon the unspoken boundaries crossed by her and her husband—not merely boundaries of social code but also the boundaries of humanity.

The book ends ambiguously, further honing in on the abject; it leaves the question of Yeonghye’s transformation (and end) unanswered, but the final lines serve a dual purpose:

She sees a black bird flying up toward the dark clouds. The summer sunlight dazzles her eyes, makes them sting, and her gaze cannot follow the bird’s flight anymore.

Quietly, she breathes in. The trees by the side of the road are blazing, green fire undulating like the rippling flanks of a massive animal, wild and savage. In-hye stares fiercely at the trees. As if waiting for an answer. As if protesting against something. The look in her eyes is dark and insistent. (187-88)

Here, the use of ‘black bird’ is also ambiguous. It serves both as an omen of death as well as Inhye’s possibility of a transformation. She loses track of the bird and looks at the trees instead, ‘protesting’, and this can be read either as her denial of Yeonghye’s transformation, despite understanding it, or her denial of Yeonghye’s possible death, as she does not want to give up on her sister.

In *Nightbitch*, before becoming a stay-at-home mom, Mother used to be an artist. She tries to juggle both and finds herself too exhausted. Angered over the indifference of the caretakers, she decides to leave her job and look after her son, a decision not completely under her control; it seemed an ‘obvious’ choice because she earned less than her husband. Her ambitions are sidelined to make space for her motherhood.

Mother remarks on the redundancy of the term ‘working mother’, as all mothers work. Unable to come to terms with the end of her career, despite her need for a creative outlet, she pours all of her energy into her motherhood. She yearns to return to her art, reminisces over it, and justifies her abandonment of it: “He was her only project. She had done the ultimate job of creation, and now she had nothing left. To keep him alive—that was the only artistic gesture she could muster” (24).

Mother lets the canine take over after attempts at repressing it in the second part of the book. During a dinner, frustrated by her fellow artists and her own stagnated career, she forces “animal sounds from herself” and yells “I could crush a walnut with my vagina” (146). This highlights the monstrous powers of the maternal body, the vagina in particular. The transformation is not fulfilled here, as she reverts back to herself, mortified. Classical art often contained depictions of women with snarling jaws and teeth, although this was meant to represent her ‘genital trap’ and ‘evil intent’ (Creed 108). Wild cats, beasts with teeth bared and more, are often used in popular depictions, reflecting man’s castration anxiety.

Despite her claims to have the dog-mother part of her under control, she finds herself howling on her way back home; diving into the darkness to hunt down a raccoon. She kills the raccoon with swift precision of a predator, returns to her backyard, and lays down on the dirt. She kills her pet cat, splitting its belly with a knife. She wraps her teeth across the nape of the cat’s neck and shakes its body, spilling and ingesting blood. In the interlude, Mother recalls her childhood: she remembers a dream she had of her mother, who wanted to be a singer, getting ripped apart by foxes and even while tending to them. This she associates with motherhood and the sacrifices that generations of mothers have had to make while their dreams get extinguished.

Mother feels regret after killing the cat as she tries to return back to her life of normalcy but this act allows her to regain a sense of purpose and transform into her dog-form.

Sexual and Reproductive Autonomy

Ren, the teenage protagonist, writes about “closing her heart to human advances” (Song 41). She recounts tales of mermaids being dragged forcibly from oceans (homes), mermaids condemned to

marriages with men, and voiceless mermaids. In all these instances, human beings are said to be the downfall to myths.

Hunger, or sexual desire, also became a state of liminality for her, between girl and mermaid; her hunger tied her to the human body. Although Cathy, being human, is incapable of comprehending her, Ren would fantasize about men, mermaids, and of Cathy, consumed by her ‘fever dreams’. She also admits that her fear of approaching Cathy in real life was a ‘silly human girl fear’. Ren wonders if Cathy would want to ‘join her in mermaidhood’, reflecting her desires.

Ren refers to men as ‘easy prey’, or as conquests, ‘seduced’ through an almost formulaic method. As the monster-woman in the centre of her narrative, the unidimensional depiction typically reserved for monsters was imposed on men, her ‘prey’. The sexual nature of her relationship with another athlete, Brad, is ‘fleeting’, primarily due to their human bodies. Ren’s vision of herself as a dangerous siren is also ironical, as her bodily autonomy is constantly transgressed upon by her coach, her doctor, and even her teammates. As her body ‘consumed and performed’ all that was expected of her, as an athlete and a teenage girl, her mind plotted a future as a ‘mermaid’, an escape from her human body. While mutilating herself, she states that human skin is “false protection” (172).

In *The Vegetarian*, Yeonghye’s brother-in-law, an artist, begins to regard her body sexually when his wife mentions a Mongolian mark on Yeonghye’s back. He is entranced by the “image of a blue flower on a woman’s buttocks, its petals opening outward” (67) and constructs an art installation centring on this mark. The brother-in-law asks Yeonghye if she wants to be a part of his video, in which he will be painting flowers on her, highlighting her Mongolian mark. For Yeonghye, this is an act reminiscent of her desire to become a tree. For the brother-in-law, however, this is an act that becomes sexual in nature, centring around not just the human body but also her female body. While he is afraid of the memory of her slitting her wrists, he is attracted to the forbidden nature of her existence, and to her abjection. The ‘monstrous’ creature, while terrifying, can also become an escapist fantasy, a “temporary egress form constraint” (Cohen 17). The brother-in-law’s art also envisions an ‘escape’ through sexual acts, trapped as he felt in his dull domestic life.

His final vision for the project contains a sexual act with a man. He contemplates on the boundary he would cross if he were to be her counterpart. In his state of unfulfilled desire for Yeonghye, he dreams of her with pale green skin. In his dream, he cannot see anything above her breasts, as if “the source of the light was somewhere around her face” (103), illuminating the distance he creates between Yeonghye’s role as his sister-in-law and as his object of desire.

He spread her legs; her thighs parted with an ease that could only mean she was awake. A green sap, like that which oozes from bruised leaves, began to flow out from her vagina when he entered her. The acrid sweetness of the grass was so pungent he found it difficult to breathe. When he pulled out, on the point of climax, he saw that the whole of his penis was stained green. A blackish paste was smeared over his skin from his lower stomach to his thighs, a fresh sap which could have come from either her or him (103-04).

Creed notes that secretions, used in horror films, mark the body as an ‘imperfect’ site (62). The symbolic man is perfect, as he is not afflicted with the impure secretions that a ‘physical’ body is riddled with, such as menstrual blood. Kristeva also states that any secretion from a masculine or feminine body defiles itself (104). One such fascination with bodily secretions is through blood. Here, the secretion is a ‘green sap’ oozing out of Yeonghye. The sap then ‘contaminates’ him, as he is painted green, and this is also reminiscent of Campbell’s ‘vagina with teeth’, the mythical fear of the castrating woman (73). The interesting aspect of his imagination is that the ‘blackish paste’ could have come from either him or her—if the ‘symbolic’ is defiled by the ‘physical’, then the narrator’s admission could be a sign of guilt. The brother-in-law is unsure if the paste is from him or her, although, ultimately, they have both been ‘defiled’ in his imagination.

Yeonghye’s consent does not speak to sexuality, but rather the yearning she feels to retreat from humanity, to return to a state of nonviolence, and to transform. She lets him paint flowers on her as it brings her closer to the transformation she yearns for; the subsequent desire she experiences has nothing to do with sexual desire for the male body, but the flowers that are painted on him. She tells the brother-in-law: “It’s stopping the dreams from coming” (104).

His interest in her Mongolian mark grows into an obsession. He remarks that the blue mark reminds him of “something ancient, something pre-evolutionary, or else perhaps a mark of photosynthesis,” and he realizes when he’s done painting on her, that there was nothing at all sexual about the mark, that “it was more vegetal than sexual” (90).

It should be noted that even the brother-in-law functions as an abject presence, someone who moves beyond the social code, and questions the limits of humanity. He wonders, when they couple, if they would “seem like one body, a hybrid of plant, animal and human” (120). He likens her to a plant basking in sunlight when he thinks: “Why did you use to bare your breasts to the sunlight, like some kind of mutant animal that had evolved to be able to photosynthesize?” (98). When he has sex with Yeonghye, however, the transgression reveals a human-male desire, making him not a monster-man, but rather a part of the patriarchal social order that imposes sexuality onto the human-woman.

The third part of the book, titled “Flaming Trees”, is from Inhye’s point of view. Through her sister’s eyes, Yeonghye is desexualised—the closest to ‘vegetal’ that she has ever been in the narrative, in both senses of the word (relating to plants but also sedentary). Her condition is diagnosed by a psychiatrist as a form of anorexia nervosa, which is a cause of schizophrenia.

The more she transforms, the further she returns to an androgynous and preadolescent body. Inhye remarks that “she lies there looking like a freakish overgrown child, devoid of any secondary sexual characteristics” (156) and this transformation is unwanted by Yeonghye. At the beginning of her transformation, she claims that she likes her breasts the most because “nothing can be killed by them” (41).

Motherhood and Monsterhood

Early humans were, most likely, terribly scared. Early twentieth century anthropology sees male aggression as an evolutionary benefit due to hunting and primitive warfare. Asma points out that aggression is also a response to vulnerability (23). Ehrenreich, in *Blood Rites*, states that “man the hunted” possibly pre-exists “man the hunter” (46).

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell writes:

The mystical marriage with the queen goddess of the world represents the hero's total mastery of life; for the woman is life, the hero its knower and master. And the testings of the hero, which were preliminary to his ultimate experience and deed, were symbolical of those crises of realization by means of which his consciousness came to be amplified and made capable of enduring the full possession of the mother-destroyer, his inevitable bride. With that he knows that he and the father are one: he is in the father's place (101).

Monster killers have famously been fathers, or “family men forced to the extremes” (Asma 24). The father-as-hero has always captivated the audience’s imagination. The role of the hero, as a saviour of humanity is shrunk down to the saviour of his family, as a father. The father will protect the mother, the subordinate human-woman, and the child, sexless until adolescence, from all ‘monstrous’ threats.

In *Chlorine*, Ren refers to her house as ‘fatherless’. Her father returned to China, unable to exist as an immigrant in America, and she lived with her mother. She says, “the week after my father left, blood clots ejected out of me like burst water balloons. Red mucus came skidding out of me...” This is also reminiscent of Creed and Kristeva’s associations of ‘secretions’ as defilement.

In *The Vegetarian*, the deeper Yeonghye sinks into her transformation, the more she lets go of patriarchal and social conventions, and the stronger the impositions on her get. To everyone’s horror at

a gathering, her father tries to force feed her meat, wrestling her down into submission, and Yeonghye, in turn, tries to slit her wrists open. Each character remarks on the sheer animality of her being in that moment. Additionally, no one objects to the father's actions, even when they seem critical of it. Inhye recalls how heavy-handed he was with Yeonghye when they were younger. The violence of the father looms over the narrative of *The Vegetarian*.

In *Nightbitch*, Mother becomes a maternal authority that is associated with the abject elements of the excremental. Kristeva says that the excremental rites of defilement seek to point out the 'boundary' between the semiotic maternal authority and the paternal symbolic law, (74) but in the Boy's world, there exists only a maternal authority as the father is absent most of the time.

Mother is a 'monstrous' maternal figure from whom her son, the Boy, is unable to disengage from. Her son replaces her art and becomes further entangled in her Self. He has not hit all the developmental goals expected of his age; he clings to his mother and his pacifier, and refuses to be potty-trained. When Mother transforms into a dog and indulges in what her instincts point her to, like running through the grass on all fours or eating raw meat, so does the Boy, with great excitement.

Father's absence, his lack of involvement with the Boy, furthers Mother's acceptance towards her transformation. In a bout of paranoia, she goes to the library and comes across "*A Field Guide to Magical Women*," by Wanda White. She tries to find information on White to no avail, apart from an email and a short biography. Mother writes emails to White, and these interactions are likened to praying to a God: one-sided interactions that bring comfort to Mother but not an answer. This can be compared to a purification rite to get rid of the abject, but as she reads through the book and comes across women/creatures that are in-between— bird women of Peru, the Slaythe and Weremothers of Siberia— she begins to feel comforted, especially by the Weremothers, letting herself accept her transformation.

Mother is accosted by a trio of dogs that resemble three of the mothers she meets, dubbed the 'The Book Mommies'. The dogs approach her one morning on her walk with her son, and she is relaxed as she is led away by the golden retriever who smells of strawberries, like one of the moms, Jen. She breaks away from the dog only when she notices that they seem to be putting her son to sleep and whispering into his ear. Despite the initial gratitude for a moment of rest, she shoos them away. Next morning, when she opens the door, there is a pile of small animals with a raccoon on top, as if a peace offering.

Mother tries to return to normalcy, yet, her frustrations with not being able to create art, her incoming transformation, and the lack of her husband's presence in childrearing, all reach a

culmination as she struggles to keep her canine instincts in check. Mother transforms one night when her husband returns to find a dog next to the Boy. Despite his mockery of her paranoia, he wonders if that dog is Mother. She snarls at her husband, feeling protective over her son. She runs out of the house, elated, and takes canine revenge on the neighbour, who was unpleasant to her son, by taking a ‘monstrous shit’ on his grass.

The Nightbitch experiences joy as she prowls the night, chasing animals and hunting them down. She renews her interest in art, sleeps in the guest bedroom, and mingles with a group of mothers she suspects to be the trio of dogs, despite her initial reluctance to bond over the only thing they have in common: motherhood.

Mother claims that being a dog is making her a better mother. She bonds more with her son through their ‘doggy-games.’ Through her monstrous form, Mother becomes more endeared to her son, and finds all facets of her family life improving. Once her husband accepts his responsibilities of parenting, she finds acceptance in her ‘monsterhood’ as well. The rage in her is soothed once the burdens of motherhood are seen and eased; her husband says that he understands the ‘dog stuff’ and encourages her art. Her return to art is through a performance piece of her transformation. She prowls through the crowd, running like a dog and hunting rabbits while some members of the audience shriek, scared but unable to do anything about being drawn to the monster. Some mothers in the audience understand the performance due to their own experience, and join her howls. Mother’s joyous return is marked by her acceptance of her ‘monsterhood’ and motherhood.

Conclusion

A heroine that attempts to embody both masculine and feminine traits ‘contains the seeds of her own undoing’ (Zimmerman, 4). These protagonists, despite being central to the narrative and facing multiple adversities, cannot be ‘heroic’ in a traditional sense. The ‘masculine’ traits—courage, nobility, selflessness—that are not characteristic to only men, yet seen as such, are ‘heroic’. The presence of ‘feminine’ traits, passivity and fragility, would negate these ‘masculine’ traits, thus rendering the heroine antithetical to her own existence.

The monster-women in *Chlorine*, *The Vegetarian*, and *Nightbitch* are abject and ‘monstrous’, and any ‘heroic’ trait would be their undoing. The minds of all the women, at various stages of their lives, ‘break’ under the conditions that they live in. They are, however, not made ‘fearful’ due to their transformation or monstrosity. Contemporary novels, such as *Circe* by Madeline Miller, have reframed the existence of the monster-woman; yet, the monster remains a creature of tragedy.

Even reframed and made anew, the monster cannot exist without being wounded. While we may extend our sympathies to the monster-woman, as long as the codes of patriarchy prevail in society, so will the monsters that threaten it.

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