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An Comparison of Indigenous and Epistemological Perspectives of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and Haruki Murakami's Select Novels

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Abstract

*This research paper explores and compares the indigenous and epistemological perspectives of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and Haruki Murakami's select novels. It also examines the authors' integrate indigenous ways of knowing and a holistic understanding of the world through the themes of nature, dreams, spirituality, and bodily transformation. *The Vegetarian* dredges into the rejection of societal norms through a return to nature and transformation. Murakami's novels depict mystical experiences that align with indigenous epistemologies. By analyzing these works through the lens of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), this paper highlights the subversion of dominant western knowledge systems and the reclamation of alternative, ancestral forms of wisdom.*

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge System, Epistemology, Holistic Understanding, Spirituality, Bodily Transformation, Mystical Experience.

Introduction

Contemporary literature often serves as a site for negotiating cultural identity, spiritual consciousness and epistemological conflict, Han Kang and Haruki Murakami, two prominent East Asian writers, present narratives that challenge hegemonic knowledge systems by invoking indigenous and alternative ways of knowing. In a global literary landscape dominated by Eurocentric modes of narrative and reasoning, these both authors present unique textual landscapes that unsettle dominant epistemologies. While their national and cultural contexts differ both authors explore marginal subjectivities, often revealing tensions between individual agency and collective norms. This paper proposes that *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang and Murakami's select novels present a radical epistemological departure from western rationalist traditions by embracing elements that resonate with indigenous knowledge systems (IKS)- such as, non-linear temporality, spiritual connectivity, ecological sensitivity and embodied epistemology.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) refer to holistic, community-based systems of understanding the world, passed down through generations via oral traditions, rituals, ecological practices and spiritual beliefs. These systems are deeply embedded in the cultural, spiritual and environmental contexts of indigenous communities.

Unlike dominant western epistemologies that often prioritize objectivity, empiricism and linear reasoning, IKS values intuition, interconnectedness and harmony with nature. Knowledge is not only held in texts or institutions but also in landscapes, dreams, ceremonies and embodied experiences. In the context of literature, IKS can be traced in narratives that emphasize ecological sensitivity, ancestral memory, spiritual transformation and non-linear perception of reality.

Kang and Murakami present their protagonists whose experiences reflect indigenous ways of knowing, whether through communion with nature, visionary experiences or resistance to rationalist norms. By comparing the texts through the framework of IKS, this paper aims to uncover how literature can serve as a vessel for alternative epistemologies, offering a deeper understanding of identity, knowledge and the human relationship with the world.

Indigenous epistemologies and Han Kang

In *The Vegetarian*, the protagonist Yeong-hye rejects meat and by extension, the human world, embodying an indigenous resistance to patriarchal and anthropocentric norms. Her transformation is not only physical but spiritual, representing a withdrawal into a pre-colonial, non-violent epistemology. Yeong-hye's desire to become a tree reflects a realignment with such indigenous values. Kang subverts Western binaries of sanity and madness through Yeong-hye's spiritual journey, suggesting an indigenous form of knowledge grounded in embodiment and ecological harmony. Her rejection of meat can be read as a symbolic revolt against capitalist and patriarchal violence. As Kang writes, “I had a dream... I was a plant” (*The Vegetarian*, p. 46). This dream serves as an initiation into a new epistemological framework, one that embraces the animate world beyond human-centered rationality. Indigenous knowledge systems often reject human supremacy and views nature as animated and sacred. Yeong-hye's wish to become a tree reflects non-anthropocentric philosophy. “I don't need to eat. I'm not a person. I'm a plant” (Kang, p. 146), she declares repositioning herself as part of nature, not superior to it.

Murakami and Epistemological Fragmentation

Murakami's novels similarly challenge Western epistemologies but from a different angle. In *1Q84*, the dual worlds experienced by Aomame and Tengo reflect a reality in which truth is subjective and fragmented. Murakami often relies on dreams, symbols and alternate realities, suggesting a postmodern epistemology that resonates with indigenous and Eastern spiritual traditions. “The world of 1Q84 is not the world I knew... it's a different world” (*1Q84*, p. 321). Aomame reflects, highlighting the disjuncture between empirical reality and spiritual perception.

In *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, the protagonist Toru Okada experiences dream-like episodes that blend memory, trauma and spiritual insight. These sequences draw from shamanistic journeys, in which the boundaries between the physical and spiritual realm blur. According to Deloria (2006), indigenous knowledge often comes through dreams, visions and rituals (p. 102). Toru's descent into the well and his subsequent awakening is akin to a vision quest, an initiation that reorients his understanding of reality. In many indigenous cosmologies, specific places carry spiritual significance. Murakami's symbolic use of the well in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and the Tokyo nightscape in *After Dark* creates sacred geographies where spiritual knowledge is accessed and transformation occurs.

Dreams, Visions and Ancestral Knowledge

Dreams and visions play a crucial role in IKS, serving as mediums through which knowledge is passed down from ancestors or the spirit world. Both Kang and Murakami use dreams as central narrative devices, challenging the western emphasis on empirical knowledge.

In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's transformation is triggered by violent, surreal dreams drive her to reject meat and ultimately, human society. Indigenous traditions often value dreams as sources of guidance and Yeong-hye's experience mirrors shamanistic rituals in which individuals receive visions leading them to enlightenment or transformation.

Murakami's protagonists frequently navigate dreamlike realities, where metaphysical encounters provide them with hidden truths. In *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Toru Okada undergoes dream-induced journeys that reveal deeper layers of reality. Similarly, in *Kafka on the Shore*, Kafka interacts with spirits and supernatural beings, evoking the indigenous belief in the permeability of the physical and spiritual worlds.

Embodiment and the Subconscious

In IKS, the body is often seen as sacred, with its transformations reflecting deeper spiritual or ecological truths. Both Kang and Murakami use bodily metamorphosis as a way of challenging hegemonic knowledge systems. Both authors delve into spiritual knowledge, Kang focuses more on the embodied experiences of trauma and transformation. Yeong-hye's body becomes the site of resistance and knowledge. Her journey represents an act of resistance against patriarchal and societal control. As she withdraws from human consumption patterns, her body begins to mimic plant-like qualities, aligning with indigenous notions of bodily interconnectedness with nature. This transformation can be compared to indigenous initiation rites, where individuals undergo physical changes that signify spiritual awakening.

Murakami's protagonists, on the other hand, often experience detachment from their bodies. In *After Dark*, Eri Asai lies in a deep sleep while her consciousness drifts into a surreal otherworld. This disembodied travel through urban spaces and digital realms resonates with cyber-shamanism, a modern iteration of indigenous dream-travel. Murakami writes, "The TV screen fills with static... but the girl inside is watching us" (*After Dark*, p. 79), illustrating the porousness of subjectivity and space. In *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, the protagonist's mind is split into two realms, echoing indigenous shamanistic experiences of traveling between worlds. Such portrayals reject the Cartesian mind-body dualism prevalent in western thought, embracing an interconnectedness, holistic view of existence.

Moreover, the subconscious in Murakami's narratives operates as an archive of suppressed truths and ancestral memory, paralleling indigenous views of the dream world as a realm where intergenerational knowledge is accessed and preserved. His narrative style includes long digressions and embedded stories, mirrors this method. His use of storytelling as a way to reveal hidden truths aligns with the oral-centric nature of indigenous knowledge systems.

Holistic Healing and Resistance

IKS embraces a holistic model of healing that incorporates body, spirit, community and the environment. Yeong-hye's physical withdrawal and psychic transformation point to a different form of healing- one not recognized by western medicine but resonate with indigenous purification rites. In both *The Vegetarian* and Murakami's novels, resistance to dominant epistemologies takes the form of withdrawal, silence or madness- strategies often employed by marginalized voices. Yeong-hye's silence becomes a powerful mode of non-verbal communication with the natural world. Her healing, though never fully realized, lies in her refusal to return to normative existence. Silence as resistance, reflecting societal expectations. "There's nothing wrong with keeping quiet, after all hadn't women traditionally been expected to be demure and restrained?" (Kang, p. 117).

Murakami's characters often find healing through connection to others in liminal spaces. The communal rituals of cooking, music and conversation serve as epistemological anchors. In *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, the characters named May Kasahara and Toru creates a space where alternative truths can surface. The interconnected realities in *Kafka on the Shore* is expressed

as the character Oshima explains, “Things outside you are projections of what’s inside you, and what’s inside you is a projection of what’s outside.” (Murakami, p. 328). Healing in both authors’ works is non-linear and often metaphysical. The notion of time as cyclical and interwoven with personal transformation is a shared theme with indigenous cosmologies that rejects western linear temporality.

Gender Role and Authority

Kang’s novel is deeply feminist, presenting indigenous knowledge as a way for women to reclaim agency. The male gaze in *The Vegetarian* attempts to discipline Yeong-hye’s body, but she escapes this through her transformation.

Murakami’s treatment of female characters is more ambivalent. While women often act as spiritual guides or symbols of truth, they are also objectified or mystified. However, their roles as carriers of knowledge remain central. In *1Q84*, Fuka-Eri, a mysterious girl with a speech disorder, becomes the conduit for otherworldly knowledge. Her muteness echoes Yeong-hye’s silence, suggesting that truth may reside outside language.

Both authors illustrate how patriarchal and capitalist systems suppress alternative epistemologies through gendered violence. Their female characters resist such systems not through confrontation but through transformation, silence and metaphysical re-alignment.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that indigenous knowledge systems offer a compelling framework for reinterpreting modern literature beyond the confines of western rationalist thought. Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* and Haruki Murakami’s novels collectively illustrate how indigenous epistemologies - centered around dreams, nature, spiritual embodiment and resistance to societal norms- are deeply embedded in literary narratives. These works subvert binary divisions between the body and the human and the natural, aligning with the holistic worldview of IKS. Both authors destabilize western notions of rationality, instead offering pluralistic often mystical ways of knowing that resonate with indigenous philosophies.

By focusing on the interconnectedness of life, the sacredness of the body and the legitimacy of non-linear, dream-based knowledge, both authors invite readers to reconsider dominant paradigms of knowledge and reality. This comparative analysis not only affirms the relevance of IKS in literary discourse but also underscores its potential as a transformative tool for decolonizing epistemology, fostering cultural resilience and enriching global narratives.

Ultimately, this study positions literature as a vital medium through which indigenous perspectives can be preserved, reimagined and shared- bridging cultural gaps and opening pathways toward a more inclusive understanding of knowledge, identity and existence.

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