Isolation in Pigmentation: The Lonely Fight for a Dream

Marja, starved and weak, sees the thin cow across the barn. Taking a pair of shears, she cuts a wound in the neck of the animal and begins to lap its crimson blood. Yeong-hye, afraid that meat will once again be thrust upon her, ribbons crimson blood from her wrist with the slash of a knife. In these moments, Marja and Yeong-hye felt so isolated, so desperate, that bloodletting was their only option. Yet the situational differences between them are almost comically dichotomous. Marja is starving, while Yeong-hye is being forced to eat. Still, they share this link of isolation and struggle, a thread of kinship as crimson as the blood. How can we use color to contextualize the struggle of isolation in the lives of Yeong-hye and the starving migrant Finns such as Marja? In *White Hunger* and *The Vegetarian*, the colors of the protagonists exemplify their isolation both internal and external in their harmony and discord with their environment.

Red blood, red meat, her mind fixates on it awake and in dreams. In sleep, she is reminded of her consumption of animal flesh. She intimately feels that hunger, as she “*Pushed that red raw mass into my mouth, felt it squish against my gums, the roof of my mouth, slick with crimson blood*.”(18) The height of her animalism is jarring to her. She does not wish to reconcile this part of herself, a part that would so willingly kill and maim for the simple pleasure of flesh. It is her refusal to partake in all this red that isolates Yeong-hye in Part 1 of *The Vegetarian*. She recoils in disgust from the consumption of meat, and in this action isolates herself from her family, her husband, and general society. She is compared twice to “that of a Buddhist monk”(82), serene, austere, and actively separating herself from her previous surroundings. Unlike, perhaps, Buddhist monks, those surrounding her do not accept her choice of separation. They refuse to allow her to become vegetarian. It begins with scolding, first from her husband and then from her family. When that does not work, they move into coercion which likewise fails. Eventually, when they have exhausted all the avenues they are willing to tread (simply accepting her decision not being one of them), her father forces the meat through her lips, “mashed the pork to a pulp on [Yeong-hye’s] lips”(45) and teeth, using slaps and physical force to accomplish this. She immediately spits out the offending piece, and in a fit of desperation, slashes her wrist. “The shock of red splashed over white china.” Since her dream, this is the only blood Yeong-hye has spilled – only her own. So disgusted was she by the meat that it was her only choice in this situation, lest she be forced again into eating the meat. This issue – choice – seems simple at first but is actually rather complicated. She is compared to Buddhist monks because her family sees her refusal of meat as a choice. Yet when her husband initially walks in on her, all she can say is “I had a dream.” (14) Yeong-hye feels that her choice is no choice at all. She must not eat meat; it would be akin to a betrayal of herself. This even further isolates her as all ascribe intentions to her that are far beyond mere intentions. Her refusal of meat is ingrained. In Part 1, it is her refusal of the colors of her environment that exemplify her isolation.

Her Mongolian Mark distinguishes her to the artist as special. At first, he finds a strange eroticism within its pigment. Part 2 is dominated for him by the blue-green flower, gently unfolding. “a Mongolian mark on her buttocks became inexplicably bound up with the image of men and women having sex, their naked bodies covered with painted flowers.” (65) His sexualization of her separates this woman in his mind. She is again isolated from those around her simply by function of her own birthmark. In his own, small way, he distances her from the world of everyone else. To him, this is praise, not an isolation but a powerful distinction of beauty. The blue green wash in a field of grey. But it is isolation, and separation, all the same. Later, he comes to realize that her mark is not in fact sensual, but vegetal, “something ancient, something pre-evolutionary, or else perhaps a mark of photosynthesis”. (88) This is closer to the truth for both of them, as shown in the later events of their filming, but for now we will stick with the initial association – the sexual. This association – isolation, sexuality, color – is difficult to entirely pin down. Indeed, Yeong-hye does not seem to have a problem with the sexualization the artist has attributed to her. Even when his shoot with her and his coworker, J, takes a turn far beyond art as he asks them to have sex on camera, she shows “no flicker of shock or revulsion in her face … but J suddenly pushed her away as though her skin were burning him.”(109) It does not make her feel alone or put aside. Why is it then isolation? There is of course the simple fact that she is being valued solely for her physical form, yet this would be a trite explanation for the depth of this association. To gain further comprehension, we must look at the events that happen next, specifically how this color contextualizes her participation in the next phase of the artist’s work. We must look at how he watered the seed in her mind which would grow into full self-isolation.

After she is painted, she asks the artist if the paint will come off with water, stating “I don’t want it to come off.” (94) This is a little heartbreaking, and shows a further extent of isolation the artist placed upon her. These colors, these flowers, “her naked, paint-mottled body” (141), are a beautiful collection of vibrancy and life. They are indeed as photosynthetic as her Mongolian Mark, a testament to harmony with the environment, to living without the need for destruction. More than that, these are flowers. Even as they reproduce these trees manage to give back to their environment, producing fragrance, nectar for bees and other insects, and soon perhaps fruit, which will further nourish those surrounding. They are entirely without adverse effects for their surroundings, and so entirely non-human. With his art, the artist allows her to live this vibrancy through her skin. She is made one with the nature with which she has so desperately craved to find association. And yet, it is just paint. She will never be able to nourish her environment. She will never be able to embody this ineffable beauty – beauty without start or end, beauty without conditions, beauty without pain. His gift, if you can call an entirely selfish act such a word, is a cruel gift indeed. Her colors, her lushness, is only the promise of an existence verdant in its nonviolence, and a promise that cannot be kept. Perhaps it is too much blame to place upon the shoulders of the artist. For some, the mere association with these flowers, with such integration into nature may have been enough to last a lifetime. But Yeong-hye is different. Her will is like the willow she so craves to become, bending with the breeze, but never breaking. The paint along her skin refreshes her desires, reminds her of her dream, of her removal of meat, and what it could mean if taken further. An odd sort of proof by contradiction is what shows the height of her isolation. Her environment may be grey, yet she is emblazoned with the beauty and the vibrancy of the most beautiful forest. In the end, however, the vibrancy washes off, and underneath all that beauty is the pallid skin of a troubled woman. Her beauty was farce, mere playacting. This was the worst of all the things the artist did to her. Worse even than practically destroying her relationship with her sister. For it was this that fully broke her mind to the point we see in Part 3. This is what allowed her to completely realize an existence in which her corporeal form could never take part – an existence which, once realized, was the only thing she could desire. The existence, of course, of a tree. Part 2, her colors are not only in conflict with her outside world, but with her very being. Mere paint cannot affect biology.

Part 3 we see Yeong-hye truly pushing towards this existence of a tree. Entitled Flaming Trees, it depicts her wasting away in a hospital bed, fighting intubation for feeding. She is surrounded in this hospital by the dreary hallmarks of industrial care: “… gray concrete walls …”(138) with “…gray faces [through the windows] …”(138) all under a “…dark grey sky…”(163). As she decays in her hospital bed, she too matches her lifeless surroundings. Listless and bedbound, the only times she displays liveliness is when she is fighting her feedings and when she is standing on her head. When she stands on her head, she can imitate the trees. The trees stand all around the hospital, leaves and stems twisting and swirling “like huge green fireworks… green fire” (172 & 181). Yet Yeong-hye cannot stand on her head forever, nor can she continue to starve herself forever. The trees, just beyond the walls and restrictions of the compound, live an existence that will forever be out of reach. She lives in a pocket of gray, encircled by green, yet there is no escape from her pocket. Even when she does escape her hospital, she finds her colors are inherent. She will always be yellow, red, grey, with just that little splash of blue and green. She cannot escape the prison of her body, at least not without relinquishing life itself. She is human, much as she may wish otherwise. She lives in complete rejection, “what she had renounced was the very life that her body represented”(90). She denies food, denies all the requirements of her own body. In the end, it would seem she does manage to escape the bounds of the human body through death, but she is not welcomed into the realm of her desire. Her soul, if you like, is seen flying through those dark clouds in the form of a “black bird flying up toward the dark clouds” (185). Even in death she cannot find her way into the fraternity of the trees, though one can hope she found a home amongst them nonetheless. In Part 3, her colors finally match her environment, but it is this environment that evidences her isolation. The colors of the trees lie just beyond her reach.

“Red changed into yellow, then yellow, too, vanished, leaving grey, which is now fading gradually into white.” (22) Juhani lays in bed, the life seeping out of him, slowly turning white and bloodless, yet outside Finland has long ago done the same. In *White Hunger*, there is no escape from the white. It both is caused by and embodies the cold, and the snow, relentless and endless. As we trace the journey of our narrators, we see the effects this cold and snow have wrought upon its people. They too become cold, inside and out. Brittle and brutal, so many on the edge of survival has left many too desperate to care. Most of all, white. They are robbed of their vitality. “Roope said there is no soul inside a human being, only blood and black water…” (47). The blood-drained faces of our various narrators witness the brutality stemming from this black water, which has long since superseded the soul. Throughout this journey they are alone, yet they come into contact with people almost every day. The villages they pass through are hardly uninhabited. It is this black water that leaves them isolated, even amidst the crowds. For the crowds, too, joy does not grace the cheeks, only desperation and relief. As Marja, Mataleena, and Juho trudge through the snow they find themselves alone, only concerned with their own family pod. They become closest to animals in behavior and in unity, locked into their familial pack. The animal they most represent is Willow-Lauri’s kitten, for “Hunger is the kitten Willow-Lauri put in a sack” (45). As their actions are further dictated by the hunger animal which tears apart their stomachs, they return to the animal nature of the pack for comfort. However, this is a fierce arena, and most other packs have disdain at best for our protagonists’ pod. Thus, their little pack faces isolation in the larger environment of all the other desperate packs, unfamiliar and afraid. There are those who do not follow this narrative, such as Teo and Dr. Berg, yet their kindness is simply evidence of their lack of desperation. Their various hungry nights are rarely interrupted by help, and when it is given, it is usually grudging.

The isolation is not only external. The fight for survival has not frozen away the rest of their humanity, leaving only hunger and avarice behind. Yet it is clear that those two traits are some of the only expressed in the ensemble, at least in those who face similar struggles to Marja. But indeed, their humanity is not lost, merely isolated. Just as they are isolated on the outside, their darker emotions have come to dominate and shun their lighter ones. For those who would be aware of such a thing, how even more isolating? For those unaware, the isolation merely cuts deeper. Not only are these lighter emotions shunned, but in the current state of these survivors, they are nigh inaccessible. When Marja dreams, and it is not nightmare, she does not dream of happy times with her family. She does not even dream of St. Petersburg (excepting hallucinations). Instead, “She has a dream in which she does not exist. A dream that contains no dream, only boundless, colourless darkness.” (100) Her isolation is so great in the unforgiving wilderness, that the only thing she can desire is escape. Even in dream her world is devoid of color – yet not white. Darkness is the only retreat for her, just as darkness is the retreat of the mind – leaving the joy, generosity, and kindness behind, making room only for that which will aid survival.

The exceptions to this fact simply make the rule. The Senator, Lars and Raakel, Teo, and Doctor Löfgren live a life completely different to those who spend each day trudging through snow. It is not only their daily lives that speak magnitudes of difference, but the palette of their lives as well. Sure, they face the worry over winter, the same melancholy. But theirs is the worry over their China Rose. “The same fear over winter… when Lars comes back from work to find his wife caressing the leaves of the rose shrub”(9). This China Rose alights the room with lush green, in harsh contrast to the interminable whiteness outside. They are the privileged, to have a break from such monotony. While their fellow Finns are isolated in their fight for survival, they mire themselves in political jockeying. Raakel sees the crimson blooms of this China Rose, painted in her bowl and in its pot. The only crimson Marja sees, her only respite from the interminable white, is when she bleeds a starving cow with a pair of scissors, as she “licks the wound and starts sucking blood” (100) for some sort of nourishment. In their tending of this plant, it is clear they have no way to relate to the plights of those tramping through the snow in their country. This is not to say they are somehow evil, or what they are doing is wrong. This simply demonstrates how disconnected they are from the lives of those around them. Teo realizes this in his own monologuing: “He is not clinging on to life’s hem, begging for bread. And he does not even know what makes the masses out there, his so-called compatriots, do so. For Teo, this is inexplicable, a great mystery. (64)” He is unable to relate – he has never faced the hunger. The experiences of this mostly Swedish upper class contextualize the differing color palettes not merely as chance. Indeed, even the coloring of the Swedes themselves is different, light hair and eyes instead of dark hair and eyes. They are prime examples of the many hues seen in a life not dominated by the next meal and the next mile.

If we can take the color of isolation in life to signify the color of isolation in death, then Mataleena and Marja unfortunately slip into the coldest, barest isolation of all when their light fades out. When Marja is on that precipice, “A merciless cold awaits, never-ending snow.” Death is, by its very nature, the most individual experience one can undergo. They cannot bring anyone with them into that blinding whiteness, so indeed, it would seem that death is their final isolation – “The color of death is white” (22). Perhaps this is fitting, for while this is a final, and deeply individual isolation, they know they are not alone in facing it. This fate will not be spared for the Senator, or Lars, or Raakel. In this they are finally equalized, not separated from the upper crust of society. As they step into the final, deepest isolation, one small isolation of life is stripped away.

There exists one key difference between these two stories. Marja and Juho exist in a much larger frame than Yeong-hye. They are fighting a war truly against the elements. Their foremost struggle occurs externally, even as its effects echo internally. Thus, it makes sense that their color of isolation would match the color of their environment. They are as white and blood drained as the snow falling outside. Deprived of color and vibrancy, the same as their surroundings. The only true shift we see is Juho’s life following the Hunger. Yet, while some could make an argument that he is again isolated in his new environment, it is obvious at least that he no longer experiences the isolation of the trudge he and his mother took to get to this point. It is less of a shift and more of the end of one thing and the start of another. Yeong-hye, on the other hand, experiences a gradient of increasing self-isolation. In Part 1, it would seem that her environment is the problem. One could imagine a situation in which becoming a vegetarian was simply met with polite interest, or support. Yeong-hye instead receives consternation, challenges to her own agency, and abuse. In Part 1, her environment is the issue, and thus the color she is fighting against, the color which isolates her from her family and from a meat-loving society, is red – the color of meat. She lives in contrast to the colors of the environment. In Part 2, she is again contrasting her environment. The gray of Seoul, of her apartment, of the artist’s studio, all pale in comparison to the beautiful explosion of color making its way down her back. She is indeed still in conflict with her environment in Part 2. The art she is making with the artist will be considered overly erotic and perverse, especially as they are brother and sister in-law. Thus it would stand to reason that her colors are again in disregard of that of her environment. However, her color also stands in larger harmony with an idealized version of a forest, or botanical garden. This idealized environment is her internal wish and goal. This leaves her color in contrast with her external environment, yes, but also perfectly in line with her internal wishes. The problem, of course, lies in its temporary nature, which is further explored in Part 3. Finally, in Part 3 she physically matches much of her environment. Yet she is still in riotous conflict. The difference lies internally. She has tended the idealized garden-forest in her mind with great care, and it has grown to consume her very being. Thus, her external colors are well in line with her environment, but her internal colors are very much contrasting. Over these 3 parts, we see her progress from a woman simply desiring to become vegetarian to a self-starving person hell-bent on life as a tree. Her conflict very much shifts from external to internal, and her colors shift to match in relation to her environment.

In *White Hunger* and *The Vegetarian*, isolation takes many different shapes, sizes, and especially colors. The struggles faced by the characters are heightened and framed by their surrounding hues. In conflict and in harmony with the pigments of their environment, the protagonists demonstrate the fight for a dream. Marja, in her dreams of St. Petersburg and a home, and Yeong-hye, in her dreams of meat and its renunciation. Their struggles are violent, messy, and most importantly, as beautiful as the largest rainbow.