

**TEXTURES OF DESIRE: EXPLORING SENSUOUSNESS AND SENSUALITY IN HAN KANG'S *THE VEGETARIAN*****SHRIKANT NIRANJAN PURI**Head,  
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Warora, Dist. Chandrapur**ABSTRACT:**

*The terms sensuousness and sensuality are different. However, when the sensuousness crosses its limits, it sinks into sensuality. In literature, the author describes the concept, situation, object, or person in detail, which appeals to all five senses of readers. The exhaustive description of the body and intimate relations arouses sexual desire among the readers. A skilful author can stimulate sensuality through the description of reproductive organs, bodily smell, intercourse whisperings, physical touch, and/or some particular taste. The novel *The Vegetarian* (2007) by the Korean Booker and Nobel Prize winner Han Kang shows a fine texture of sensuousness and sensuality. The present paper is an attempt to find out such elements from the novel, *The Vegetarian*. The present novel also aesthetically employs animalism and vegetarianism as supportive themes that enhance the effect of sensuousness and sensuality.*

**Keywords:** Animalism, Vegetarianism, Sensuousness, Sensuality, Aestheticism.**Review of Literature:**

Many scholars have explored different themes from the present novel. Most of them have written on Eco-Feminism, Eco-criticism, violence, nature and human relations. As far as the reading of the researcher of online and offline material is concerned, no one has written on the sensuousness and sensuality from the present viewpoint.

**Objectives:**

- The major objective of writing this paper is to find out the depiction of sensuousness in the present novel.
- The second major objective is to find out the elements that stimulate sensuality among the readers.
- To study the theme of animalism that supports the main objectives of the paper.
- To study the theme of vegetarianism that supports the main objectives of the paper.
- To study the novel from an aesthetic point of view.

**Hypotheses:**

- The present novel is full of sensuousness.
- The sensuousness, especially part two of the novel, crosses its limit and degrades into sensuality.
- The theme of animalism supports and enhances the major objectives of the study.
- The theme of vegetarianism supports and elevates the main objectives of the paper.

- Aestheticism is employed in the novel only to get an excuse for the use of offensive and vulgar narration.

**Scope and Limitations:**

The present paper studies a single novel, *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang, translated into English by Deborah Smith in 2015. No other text or book by her or any other author is explored here for the detailed analysis.

**Research Methodology:**

The present paper uses descriptive data analysis by exploring primary and secondary online and offline sources. Additionally, the MLA style 9th edition is used for citing references.

**Introduction:**

The readers of *The Vegetarian* can find the themes of animalism, vegetarianism, and sensuous description in the novel. All three things are intermingled with one another that no one could separate them without causing any harm to the main structure and plot of the novel. The plot, especially the second part, is crowded with sensuous language. The novel, quoted from *New Statesman*, and printed on the front-in cover page of the novel, is “irresistibly weird and sensuous”. The centre of the second part (Mongolian Mark) of the novel is the husband of In-Hye, the sister of the protagonist, Yeong-Hye. His thoughts, imagination, painting, and shooting make the part sensual. The themes of animalism and vegetarianism grow up in the second and the third part (Flaming Trees) of the novel. The intimacy between nature and human beings is highlighted here.

**Hypotheses are tested below:****Hypothesis 1: The present novel is full of sensuousness.**

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the term sensuousness means, “the quality of affecting or relating to the physical senses, rather than pleasing the mind or the intelligence” (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sensuousness>). The quality of words appeals to the readers’ senses and provides them with a sensory experience. The quality of words providing a visual experience appeals to the sense of sight/eye. The words that provide the audio experience appeal to the sense of the ear. These two are the most common sensuous qualities found in literature. Other than these two, there are the words that appeal to the senses of nose (odour), tongue (taste) and skin (touch). The works in literature that appeal to all five senses are but rare thing. Only the great writers could achieve this in their works.

Some quotations from *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang, a Korean novelist, will demonstrate whether the novel possesses the quality of sensuousness.

In the novel, Mr Cheong is the husband of the protagonist, Yeong-hye. He is also the narrator of the first part of the novel, ‘The Vegetarian’. When he first saw Yeong, he described her in the following words: “Middling height; bobbed hair neither long nor short; jaundiced, sickly-looking skin; somewhat prominent cheekbones; her timid, sallow aspect ...” (Kang: 3). It gives the sense of sight. The visual pictures are also visible in the description of the skeleton-like body of Yeong after completely abandoning meat and becoming a vegetarian (Kang: 18). One can also visualise the whipping and whipped calves of a young eighteen-year-old Yeong by her father (Kang: 29).

The sight of dramatic action can be visualised when Yeong's father asks her brother to hold her arms to feed her meat forcefully. She rejects that and spits out everything that sprouted in her mouth. It has made her father get angry and hit her face, but her reaction to it was that she cut her wrist-vein off (Kang: 39, 40).

The sense of sight is also evident in Yeong's dreams of murder, slaughter, skinning animals, and mutations (Kang: 28, 32, 33). She dreams of animal blood all over her body. She cannot bear the scenes of blood and severed limbs. Yeong also remembers the dog-bite, when she was nine. She vividly remembers how the dog was killed after an exhaustive run after a bike. The dog was killed because of the saying,

for a wound caused by a dog-bite to heal you have to eat that same dog, and I did scoop up a mouthful for myself. ... The smell of burnt flesh, which the perilla seeds couldn't wholly mask, picked my nose. I remember the two eyes that had watched me while the dog was made to run on, while he vomited blood mixed with froth, and how later they had seemed to appear, flickering on the surface of the soup" (Kang: 41, 42).

The description provides the readers with the senses: sight, smell and taste.

The sense of smell is evident in the conversation between Yeong and her husband. She complains of a meaty smell emanating from her husband's body whenever he eats meat, even after he takes a shower (Kang: 17).

All five senses are appealed to in the following quote:

**'Dark** woods. The **sharp-pointed leaves** on the trees, my **torn** feet.... Frightened. **Cold**. Across the **frozen** ravine, a red barn-like building. Straw matting **flapping** limp across the door. Roll it up and I'm inside, it's inside. Long bamboo sticks strung with great **blood-red gashes of meat, blood still dripping** down. Try to push past but the meat, there is no end to the meat, and no exit. Blood in my **mouth**, blood-soaked clothes sucked onto my **skin**. ....

... Families picnicking, little children running about, and that **smell**, that **delicious** smell. .... The **babbling** stream, people spreading out rush mats to sit on, snacking on kimbap. Barbecuing meat, the **sounds** of singing and happy **laughter**. (Kang: 12) [Bold mine]

There are plenty of examples offering the readers a sense of taste. At many places, different rich and delicious foods, soups, gravy, fruits, juices, and dishes are described in such a way that the reader secretes saliva. There is a mention of "lettuce and soyabean paste, plain seaweed soup without the usual beef or clams, and kimchi, rice powder, frozen fresh chillies, and a pack of minced garlic" (Kang: 13).

At the office party, there is a list of delicious dishes and fruits. The course of food includes: fried chicken in a chilli and garlic sauce, raw tuna, salad and kimchi, squash porridge, sticky rice porridge involving beef stock to give it a rich luxurious taste, fruit for dessert, slices of apple and orange segments (Kang: 25). The novel has references, on page numbers 35, 36, 37, 77 and so on, to foods and dishes like - beef, sweet and sour pork, steamed chicken and octopus noodles to secrete saliva of the readers.

Thus, all five senses of the readers are satiated by reading the description of different situations. All three parts of the novel appeal to the readers' five senses. However, the second part, 'Mongolian Mark', is more sensual, rather than sensuous.

Hypothesis 2: The sensuousness, especially part two of the novel, crosses its limit and degrades into sensuality.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines the term sensuality as “the expression or suggestion of physical, especially sexual, pleasure or satisfaction” (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sensuality>). The novel, *The Vegetarian*, especially the second part, Mongolian Mark, is pornographic. On the very first page, there is an offending word named 'pen\*s' (Kang:3). Cheong sensually describes Yeong at the office party. He says, “She was wearing a slightly clinging black blouse, .... the outline of her ni\*\*les was clearly visible through the fabric. ... she'd come out without a bra” (Kang: 21). The executive director's wife glances sideways at Yeong's breasts (Kang: 23).

The description of the way Cheong behaves with his wife, Yeong, after she decides to be a vegetarian, is also sensual. It is not easy for a young man like him to go without enjoying married life. His physical needs have not been satisfied for a long time. Therefore, whenever he returns home late and intoxicated, he

would grab [his] wife and push her to the floor. Pinning down her struggling arms and tugging off her trousers .... She put up a surprisingly strong resistance and, spitting out vulgar curses all the while, one time in three [he] would manage to insert ... successfully” (Kang: 30).

There is also a note of sensuality in Cheong's feelings when he speaks with In-hye, the sister of his wife, on the telephone. He says she resembles his wife, but her eyes are prettier. She is “much more feminine.” “Her voice ... never failed to send me [him] into a state of sexual arousal” (Kang: 27). The sensual description comes when Yeong writes the condition of his wife in the hospital garden. He says, his wife has removed “her hospital gown and placed it on her knees ... emaciated breasts and brown ni\*\*les completely exposed” (Kang: 51).

Brother-in-law, that is, the husband of Yeong's sister, sees the sensual posters of naked men and women covered with flowers on their bodies (Kang: 55). The brother-in-law usually goes to the theatre. Once he sees that the actors have worn gaudy costumes, a kind of showy nudity, doing overtly s\*xual gestures (Kang: 56). He also watches a video by the Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama. The video has “scenes of promiscuous sexual practices, featuring around ten men and women ....” (Kang: 57). After watching the video and the show, he becomes obsessed with the naked bodies with flowers all over, and the bodies showing desire. He prepares a blueprint for blue film in the form of notebook sketches. In the sketches, “the naked bodies of the men and women were brilliantly decorated, covered all over in painted flowers ... were having sex” (Kang: 58).

The sensuality also comes in the thinking of the location of the Mongolian Mark on Yeong's body. Yeong's sister, In-hye, unconsciously tells her husband about the Mongolian mark on Yeong-hye's buttock, which is still there even after Yeong's twenties. After listening to this, her husband becomes obsessed with the mark and wants to be one with Yeong (Kang: 59). So, in his sketches, the woman has a Mongolian Mark. He imagines and takes naked Yeong as the model for his sketches and the future blue film. He paints flowers on Yeong's back, paints

“blue petal in the middle of her buttocks, and he’d got an erection. ... he’d felt such intense sexual desire.” He also paints a man with arms around her neck, attempting to throttle her, thrusting himself into her (Kang: 59, 60). After the suicidal attempt, she has lived with In-hye. There, her physical structure is quite attractive. “Her breasts had now rounded out into softness. Her waist narrowed sharply, her body hair was fairly sparse, and the overall effect, aside from the line of her thigh ....” (74).

He gets consent from the schizophrenic Yeong to paint her body and shoot s\*xual videos. However, before shooting the actual video, “every time he looked at his wife’s [In-hye] face, he saw her sister’s face overlaid on hers” (Kang: 63). His wife is a good-looking woman, but he feels something is lacking in her. When he meets Yeong (wife’s sister), “everything about her pleased him” (Kang: 63). She is less beautiful than In-hye, but he is attracted to Yeong since their first meeting (Kang: 63, 64). He remembers his body pressed against Yeong’s when he carried her to the hospital (65). He imagines “the feel of her chest, buttocks, imagined himself pulling down her trousers” to see the Mongolian mark (Kang: 65). He has not had sex with his wife for two months. But in the bathroom, “his pe\*\*s’s sudden rigidity was nothing to do with her [In hye]” (65). It has all to do with Yeong and his promiscuous thoughts about her. A reference to sensual desire occurs when he remembers how Yeong lived with his family. Whenever he recalls Yeong’s sprawled sitting, her white ankle, baggy tracksuit, her body, half-naked legs, and the blue Mongolian Mark, he feels his skin grow heated (Kang: 71).

The sensual description comes again when he goes to visit Yeong at her house, and she comes naked from the bathroom. There is slight moisture on her naked body. She slips on scattered clothes one by one (Kang: 73). When she puts on the clothes, she eats some fruit. At the time, he has a sudden urge to throw his arms around her, (76) to suck on her index finger, sticky with sweet pear juice, and lick the last of the juice from her lips and tongue, and to pull her baggy tracksuit bottoms down right then and there. (Kang: 76, 77)

Again, sensuality peeps down when the reader reads that Yeong, whenever she is alone at home, enjoys being naked. After listening to this, the brother-in-law feels his pen\*s becoming engorged. He takes his cap to conceal the erection (Kang: 74). Henceforth, the description of his imagination of her naked body is “a kind of mental pornography”. “The image of her naked was now stamped indelibly on his brain, burned into him like a brand” (Kang: 76).

Sensuality again arises when he presents his video proposal to Yeong. He simply asks to take her clothes off, and he would paint flowers on her body and shoot (Kang: 78). The melting of ice cream is also sensually symbolic. He proposes the video shooting in a restaurant where they are having ice cream. The heated subject of the proposal and her consent to the video made his situation like melting ice cream (Kang: 79).

The description of how he has slept with his wife after meeting Yeong is highly sensual. He has uncontrollable impulses, like newlywed couples.

He’d put his hand over her mouth then, so he wouldn’t have to hear that nasal voice. He pushed himself towards the image of *her* [imagining In-hye as Yeong] .... With her ni\*\*le standing straight and hard in his mouth, he reached down and pulled off her knickers. Every time he wanted to get the image of the small blue petal to open and close, he shut his eyes... (Kang: 81).

It is also sensual when, on his demand, Yeong slowly and one by one takes off her clothes in the studio (Kang: 82, 83). Then he starts painting buds, flowers, petals on her neck, back, shoulders, buttocks, etc. While painting, he feels her flesh quiver delicately as if being tickled, and he shudders. Later on, he zoomed the camera and shot each flower on the back of her body (Kang: 84). Tremulous quivering she feels in her when he is painting the front side of her body (Kang: 88). Description of Yeong's front part of body, especially breasts (slender and elongated like those of a young girl) (87), and painted flowers on neck, stomach, thighs etc (88) is also sensual.

Brother-in-law of Yeong names his first porn video 'Mongolian Mark 1', where he shoots flowers painted on her prone body. It runs 4:55 minutes long (Kang: 94). He names the second video 'Mongolian Mark 2'. He imagines the second video in his mind first, then he brings that to reality. "The image of a man and woman, their bodies made brilliant with painted flowers, having s\*x against a background of unutterable silence. Their shifting limbs matter-of-fact in that vacuum." In fact, he wants to shoot only the acting of s\*xual actions, but then, for the authenticity of the video, he needs actual penetration (Kang: 95). He imagines his second video in his mind. She lies naked in front of him like a leaf, and a dazzling light comes from her naked body. Because of the light, he could not see the area above her breasts. Then "... he spread her legs; her thighs parted with an ease ... A green sap, like that which oozes from bruised leaves, began to flow out from her va\*\*na when he entered her. ... he saw that the whole of his pe\*\*s was stained green" (Kang, 96).

The description of his painting of his friend, J's naked body, compared to the painting of Yeong's body, is less sensual. J is also asked to take off his clothes, and then, he paints J from top to thighs from front to back (Kang: 101). He paints a huge flower around J's pe\*\*s. His hair seems the sepals and the pe\*\*s the pistil. At the time, J's pe\*\*s has slightly stiffened. It has again stiffened at the time of the actual shooting of his video with Yeong (Kang: 102).

Brother-in-law directs the acting of the pornographic video. His commands while giving direction arouse sensuality among the readers. Some of his sensual directions are on page number 102. In the video, she holds J's neck and drew towards her. The breathing of the three people is also mentioned in the text. They are rubbing their necks against each other. At the time, "J's ni\*\*les quietly hardened and his pe\*\*s became erect." Meanwhile, the director commands, "Lie down like that, on top of each other" (Kang: 103).

The act of J and Yeong is described in the following way.

J's pe\*\*s was already fully erect, and he couldn't bear the pressure any longer. She slowly lay down on her stomach, her breasts resting on J's chest, and her buttocks lifting up into the space above them. ... her back was arched like a cat's, ... around J's belly button, about his rigid pe\*\*s (103). ... The soles of her feet curled up and her hands clasped J's waist. Her body was sufficiently animated, flushed with desire, .... They spent ten minutes or so in that position" (Kang: 104, 105).

Then, he asks J to do real sex. But J refused to do so (104, 105). J does not like the brother-in-law's idea of real sex with an unknown woman. So, he leaves the studio. While zipping her pants, Yeong laughs when she finds that she is "all wet". After listening to her, he locks the door and clutches her and tumbles down onto the white sheet. When he tries to tug her jeans down for the physical union, she says, "No". "He stood up, stepped close to her and pushed her still-fevered body up against hers, probing with his tongue, she shoved him away again" (Kang: 106).

The third video shot by the brother-in-law is purely pornographic. For this video, he paints his body with flowers. When he comes to the studio, Yeong has already been there with no clothes on her body. He goes to her, "... laid her down with a snarl, clutching at her breasts with one hand and haphazardly sucking her lips and nose as he hurriedly unbuttoned his shirt. ... as soon as he was naked he pushed her legs wide apart and entered her. A constant panting sound, ... with a moaning which rose into an eerie shriek. ... he'd never made a sound during sex ... into her already soaking wet va\*\*na, which was contracting alarmingly, he released a jet of se\*en with a gasp of pain, falling forward as though swooning." "Their sex ... hadn't even lasted five minutes" (Kang: 112).

After the sex, he, still naked, sets the camcorder to shoot his pornographic film. During their shooting, "Every time they changed position he readjusted the camcorder. Before he took her from behind, ... he first took a long close-up of her buttocks. After he inserted himself, he checked how the image looked in the exterior monitor, then started to thrust" (113). "His red flower closed and opened repeatedly above her Mongolian mark, his pe\*\*s slipping in and out of her like a huge pistil" (113, 114). "He waited until her sobs had subsided before laying her back down on the sheet. In their final minutes of sex she gnashed her teeth, screamed rough and shrill, spat out a panting 'stop' and then, at the end, she cried again" (114).

These and many other references show the excessive and unnecessary presence of sensual content in the novel.

Hypothesis 3: The theme of animalism supports and enhances the major objectives of the study.

The website "Medium" describes animalism. "An animalist considers the animals as individuals and as sentient beings, able to feel physical pain. ... Animalism can be seen as an expansion of humanist values towards all other animal species able to suffer." (What is animalism? <https://theanimalist.medium.com/what-is-animalism-dc1bb9f9f822>)

Yeong has had a dream of slaughtering animals. This transforms her eating habits. She begins to feel the pain and agonies of other animals. The cover page, the wounded bird that she gets in the hospital, and her decision to become a vegetarian symbolise her empathetic feelings towards animals and birds. She started eating only those things that came from vegetable plants and trees. She thinks, if a human being has a right to live, then all the animals, including birds and fish, have an equal right to live and not to suffer. Therefore, she decides to be a vegetarian. Moreover, she feels schizophrenically first that she is an animal, and then a tree. To become natural means to live like animals. They are the organisms that have evolved very little in comparison to human beings. At the beginning, she enjoys being naked whenever she is on her own/ alone (Kang: 74, 118). There are many references to her being naked in the house, hospital and jungle. Later on, she starts holding her body to the sunlight, "like some kind of mutant animal that had evolved to be able to photosynthesise" (Kang: 91).

Yeong's empathy for the animals makes her behaviour animal-like. This changed behaviour of Yeong helps the narrative to evolve into nude and sensual scenes. Her changed behaviour also helps the writer to describe her body, to paint her body, to shoot a pornographic film under the disguise of the union of flowers.

**Hypothesis 4: The theme of vegetarianism supports and elevates the main objectives of the paper.**

According to Britannica, “All forms of flesh (meat, fowl, and seafood) are excluded from all vegetarian diets.” (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/vegetarianism>) To be a vegetarian is a common thing in India, where people believe in the ideology of the Omnipresence of God. Buddhism also avoids eating meat. They believe that every natural or manufactured, animate or inanimate thing has derived from God, and possesses a particle of it. However, the number of such people is reducing day by day. On the other hand, for people in other countries, especially those in coastal countries like Korea, eating meat and fish is very common. To think of going without meat or fish is just an impossible thing for them. They know that “Five hundred thousand years old, apparently, and even back then humans were hunting for meat .... Meat-eating is a fundamental human instinct ....” They believe that vegetarianism is an action against human nature. It is just unnatural (Kang: 23).

Non-vegetarian people believe that one should be a vegetarian in exceptional conditions only. The reasons to be vegetarian are “genetic predisposition towards certain allergies, to lose weight, to alleviate certain physical ailments, or to avoid disturbing one’s sleep from indigestion (Kang: 14). In other conditions, to have meat or fish is a normal thing.

Yeong Hye is haunted by the dreams of blood, mutation, peeling off skin, and so on. therefore, she goes against the established tradition of meat-eating. She refuses to eat meat, but is forced all the times to consume it. Her father slaps her for refusing to eat meat. Her mother makes her drink the soup of black goat, telling her a lie that it is a herbal medicine (Kang: 45, 46). There are many names, tastes and descriptions of delicious dishes made of meat or fish. All these descriptions stimulate the sense of taste, appealing to the rest four senses too, among the readers. This supports the main objective of the paper.

Yeong’s vegetarian habits isolate her from society. She begins to spend her time alone in the house. This gradually transforms her into an animal-like behaviour. She stops wearing clothes on her body. This develops schizophrenia in her, and she starts behaving like a tree, standing nude in sunlight for photosynthesis. The husband of her sister exploits her physically because of her changed behaviour. He offers her to paint flowers on her body and shoot a film of two painted bodies of a male and a female. This gives scope to turn the book into sensuality.

**Hypothesis 5: Aestheticism is employed in the novel only to get an excuse for offensive and vulgar narration.**

According to *Oxford Learner’s Dictionary*, the term aestheticism refers to “an approach to art and life based on the belief that art and beauty should be valued for themselves, not for a social or moral purpose.” (<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/aestheticism>) In the present novel, one can find aestheticism at its extreme level. The narrative, especially the second part, does not pay any attention to moral considerations. It has the only didactic message to stop violence against animals and women. However, the didactic message is conveyed through the method using an undidactic way. The painting of flowers and their union is highly aesthetic, but in the background, the writer uses naked bodies. Moreover, she stretches the events of the painting of bodies and the union by illustrating every detail, which makes the second part a pornographic one. The writer could have depicted the same thing by using symbols and avoiding obscene and vulgar, that is, sensual descriptions.

Definitely, the aesthetic quality of the novel is shown by the sentences like “While painting, he felt something deeper than arousal” (Kang: 84). “Her naked painted body, object of desire, yet it was a body from which all desire had been eliminated” (Kang: 85). Her taking off clothes for painting was “nothing at all sexual, but vegetal, like a plant to the sun” (Kang: 83). She seems something sacred to him while painting from the front (Kang: 88). However, how could a young reader control his/her passions while reading the sensual matter? Can a word “SORRY” make someone forget all the abusive and insulting words used for him/her? The answer is “No”. In the same way, a few aesthetic sentences cannot stop the feeling of arousal of a young reader. S/he would forget these sentences and focus on the remaining context. So, aestheticism is a kind of excuse for offensive and vulgar narration.

### Conclusions:

The novel, *The Vegetarian*, has a high quality to appeal to the readers’ five senses. It has visual imagery, audible sounds, smells of foods, tastes of food, and feelings of touch, cold, rain, etc. However, the second part and many references from the remaining two parts are greatly sensual. The second part is more sensual, like a cheap pornographic book on the roadside than a part of sublime literature. The incidents in the second part are narrated most aesthetically. There is no doubt about the expertise of narrative skill, but the situation described there seems more immoral than relevant to convey the message. The unnecessary description could be avoided without losing the overall effect of the narrative.

The theme of animalism also helps the narrative portray the protagonist, Yeong, boldly. First, her empathy for animals, and then her thinking of herself as a tree, have emancipated her from the social moral values. Her behaviour, like an animal or a tree, has nothing to do with the morals and ethics made by and for humans. Therefore, she responds to her brother-in-law as he demands. If the theme of animalism or animal-like behaviour of Yeong had not been employed, there would have been very little scope for writing sensual incidents. The vegetarian ideology of Yeong makes her draw flowers on her body and then stimulate her during the shooting. Though the flowers on her body stop her from dreaming nightmares (Kang: 97), her desire for the male body of painted flowers grows intensely. In a way, this leads her to and helps the writer to write the sensual scenes in the novel. Thus, the novel abounds in sensuousness and sensuality.

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