



The Violence of Silence: A Feminist-Trauma Critique of Marginalized Subjectivity in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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Abstract

This paper investigates the interdependent relationship between structural erasure and mental fragmentation in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. Through the perspective of trauma studies and postcolonial feminist thought, the paper studies the way in which Yeong-hye's apparently individualistic refusal to consume meat becomes a sublime embodied rebellion against rigid patriarchic power. Her eventual slip into silence, dissociation and enforced detention is a statement of how transgressive controlling is punished within powerful social systems. Based on the trauma framing proposed by Judith Herman (1992), the paper examines how repeated experiences of familial violence and emotional neglect can ultimately lead to the break-down. In parallel, the *Subaltern Theory* of Gayatri Spivak, is employed to question the epistemic silence of Yeong-hye, by examining how her subjectivity is systematically forgotten within a society that makes the female voice in the act of denouncement unintelligible and incomprehensible. The primary methodology of the research is the qualitative close reading that allows situating *The Vegetarian* in wider discourses of gender, power, and institutional violence. It suggests that the physical withdrawal of Yeong-hye acts not only as the final act of resistance against a society that devours and defines female identity according to its own terms but also as a way of expressing the deeply embedded trauma with its roots in the past. At the end, this article can frame *The Vegetarian* as a globally significant tale of disruptive subjectivity, which provides a critical perspective on how trauma, gender, and silencing converge in the modern socio-literary fabric.

Keywords:

Marginalized Subjectivity, Psychological Trauma, Identity Fragmentation, Female Disempowerment, Silence and Voice, Bodily Resistance, Mental Deterioration.

Introduction

Psychological trauma has long been a central theme in literature, reflecting both personal suffering and systemic oppression. Existing feminist and trauma theorists argue that marginalization and silence shape women's subjectivity, however, much of this work has focused on Western texts. Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* provides a striking case study of how patriarchal silencing and trauma converge in a South Korean context. The novel offers a brutal depiction of psychological trauma



and marginalization, where the protagonist Yeong-hye slowly unravels into their trauma when placed in a male centric and compliant Korean society. The novel functions on a variety of levels from ecofeminist, post- humanistic perspective to exploration of personage—but fundamentally shows how social rejection and personal trauma lead to a complete physical and emotional breakdown. Yeong- hye’s decision to stop eating meat is by no means a simple dietary choice, nor does it sell close to anything, but a condemnation on the level of some absurdist blasphemy; it is an act of defiance of the phallogocentric social structures, of everything that has ever kept her in her place and set its own in their place.

The symbolic refusal of Yeong-hye against eating meat points to her opposition against the deep-rooted carno-phallogocentric¹ structure which Jacques Derrida conceptualized. Derrida explains that this concept shows how the phallus becomes internalized into meat while requiring its pathway through the mouth (113)². His explanation associates the act of meat eating with heterosexuality that portrays aggression and violence through its phallis-centered structure. The resistance shown by Yeong-hye to consume meat sparks hostility from others because it questions the men's authority and disrupts mainstream societal traditions. The sexist meat-based society which needs social harmony and conformity views her refusal to comply as threatening her well-being and destroying its social structures This psychological trauma past and present is inseparable from this process of marginalization. For a long time, Yeong-hye has been restricted in emotional expression and physical violence, activities that now rise up into the subconscious, as her mental health deteriorates. Silent suffering starts in her childhood when she is subjected to her father's abusive control and continues in her adulthood when she is deprived of love by cold indifference from her husband, and then it bursts out through her radical transformation. She withdraws more and more from societal norms, she becomes a target of ridicule, medical examination and institutional punishment, which further isolates her, as is the way with societies that ostracize the nonconformist.

In an effort to break her spirit for her family and society, she slips into a world in which her body is both the site of rebellion and destruction. This shows how trauma and marginalization work together to suppress any voices that threaten the norm, the more she resists, the more aggressively she is silenced.

¹ Carno-phallogocentrism is a concept by Jacques Derrida that critiques the interconnected dominance of meat consumption (carno-), masculinity (phallo-), and human-centered reason (logocentrism)

² Derrida, J. (1991). *"Eating well," or the calculation of the subject: An interview with Jacques Derrida*. In E. Gadava, P. Connor, & J.-L. Nancy (Eds.), *Who comes after the subject?* Routledge.



The Vegetarian combines the themes of trauma and exclusion to offer a chilling assessment of the fates of all those who challenge social assumptions. Yeong-hye's story is one of how nonconformity is met with violence and dehumanization rather than with curiosity or acceptance. In this paper the mechanisms whereby psychological trauma effects disintegration of Yeong-hye will be analyzed while also studying the manner by which her resistance leads to complete exclusion from the social sphere and coining in the institutional sphere. Through this lens, *The Vegetarian* can be seen as a sharp critique of a world that perpetually punishes difference, detailing the repercussions of defying structures of control entrenched so deeply.

Research Questions

- 1) How does Han Kang represent the character's journey in a patriarchal and marginalized society?
- 2) How the destructive eruption of psychological trauma shape and break the identity of the protagonist in *The Vegetarian*?

Research Objectives:

- 1) To trace the sufferable journey of the protagonist in a marginalized and a patriarchal society.
- 2) To highlight the repercussions of repressed psychological trauma in shaping and breaking the identity of the protagonist.

Research Methodology

Using a qualitative analysis of text, this research draws on the works of Gayatri Spivak and Herman (1992) to examine how the novel, *The Vegetarian*, by Han Kang explores themes of psychological trauma and subjugation. This study uses close readings of the text in order to examine how the experiences of Yeong-hye mirror larger structures of oppression, and to explore how trauma affects the individual psyche. The analysis is organised into two principal chapters. The first chapter explores the theme of marginalization looking at how societal norms and the patriarchal structure silences Yeong-hye, turning her into an outsider who ultimately has her agency systematically taken from her. Hence, this discussion attempts to look into the issue where Yeong-hye's silence and withdrawal itself can be considered as Spivak's critique of social hierarchies and the erasure of certain voices. In the second chapter, I examine how Yeong-hye's disintegration and subsequent removedness from reality evokes the components of the pattern of response to trauma. Referencing Herman (1992), this portion then shows how trauma makes itself present in bodily alienation and fragmented identity, as well as in resistance to imposed structures of control. By synthesizing these perspectives, the study seeks to offer a nuanced reading of how *The Vegetarian* addresses the issue of the intersection of gender and trauma and of how it can be seen as a potential standpoint for the exploration of systemic oppression more broadly, along with other socio psychological concerns which the novel engages in.

Literature Review

The Vegetarian by Han Kang receives extensive critical study through feminist analysis, as well as ecological analysis and sociological investigation. The novel prompts most readers to view it as a



tragic downfall while scholars search for hidden meanings about societal power dynamics and the oppression of gender. Ecofeminist critics interpret Yeong-hye's changes as a response which opposes patriarchal rules, yet other analysts label them contradictory to societal expectations. Several analytical approaches fail to encompass the complete analytical framework of the novel's complex narrative patterns along with its international literary relegation. The novel uses ambiguous writing techniques combined with international acclaim to problematize readings which treat it as either a whole-hearted rejection of human-focused views (posthumanism) or an absolute denunciation of male-dominated structures. The text produces complications regarding the contemporary literature methods of resisting yet merging with global capitalist organizational systems.

Carol J. Adams (1990) situates *The Vegetarian* within a broader feminist critique of meat consumption and patriarchal oppression. For Adams patriarchy works through destroying human qualities in both female beings and animal creatures which establishes a power structure that reduces them into subservient objects. Adams explains in his research that meat represents male power and Yeong-hye's non-compliance with this dietary and social system results in extreme hostility towards her and dehumanizing treatment. Yeong-hye refuses meat as an expression of her rejection toward patriarchal social patterns. Despite her initial efforts to gain empowerment Yeong-hye experiences rising abuse and solitude which demonstrates the extreme level of societal system enforcement.

Jeremy Rifkin explores the novella through *Beyond Beef* the way meat consumption has protected traditional social strata and gender structures in history. According to Rifkin, meat-eating has for many years served as a masculine display which connects to aggression and power thus any opposition toward it threatens patriarchy. Yeong-hye's vegetarian lifestyle encounter violent reactions from her father because he interprets her choice as an assault against traditional cultural values within *The Vegetarian*. The relationship between diet and masculinity explained by Rifkin shows how Yeong-hye's personal dietary choice created these severe outcomes. Patriarchal control achieves its maintenance through violence along with coercion because Yeong-hye's father compels her while his family seeks to force her compliance.

Beyond ecological and feminist views scholars established cultural and societal conformity as another approach to analyze *The Vegetarian*. Scientists claim that Yeong-hye faces complete ruin because she will not embrace traditional societal standards. Her nonconformist tastes for abstaining from meat alongside rebelled gender stereotypes in South Korean culture cause community isolation while triggering her mental collapse. Society views her transformation as a dangerous deviation from social norms instead of self-liberation because conformity holds high importance in this community and demands rectification of this transgression. In accordance with this interpretation the fights of Yeong-hye symbolize cultural and societal forces that push people who refuse to conform to traditional norms.



In its complex narrative *The Vegetarian* showcases the three central themes of resistance along with oppression and identity. Through three perspectives including feminism and ecology and sociology the novel depicts how defying established societal systems creates horrifying outcomes. Through Yeong-hye's metamorphosis we can see that the structure of violence functions independently of any outside agency because it reacts by strengthening oppression towards defiance regardless of whether it is conscious or unthoughtful.

Theoretical Framework

To examine the themes of marginalization and psychological trauma in *The Vegetarian*, this study explores the theoretical works of Gayatri Spivak , and Judith Herman (1992), respectively.

Spivak's subaltern theory, and Herman's trauma theory highlight the destructive intersection of the mental repression and bodily marginalization in the novel. These frameworks provide insight into how Yeong-hye's suffering is both a personal response to trauma and a reflection of a larger societal structure that silences and controls women.

Gayatri Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988)³ talks about the marginalization and the silencing faced by the women, particularly the non-western and the lower class women. She argues in her essay how these women are being denied of their agency and are systemically silenced. Her description of the subaltern is someone who exist outside the powerful and dominant realm of society, and the one who lacks the ability to represent themselves. According to Spivak, these subaltern women are considered as irrational, and unimportant in the society. They are punished for the nonconformity to the so-called established social norms. Any defiance to these social principles is met with exclusion and violence.

Judith Herman, in her seminal work *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), describes psychological trauma as the outcome of experiences that restrict an individual from finding a solution, causing a strong emotional numbness, and identity fragmentation. Her main focus in her work is on the concept of chronic trauma, that is caused by then prolonged exposure to a certain type of traumatic triggers in one's life. Such triggers, according to Herman, are not only limited to domestic levels—but rather, are highly linked to the social systems as well. Herman defines three stages in her work, that shows how the triggers often intersect, leading to a destructive outburst. The first one is the Hyperarousal—the stage where the victim is repeatedly silenced and remains in that state out of fear and anxiety. The second one is Intrusion—where the past traumas invade the present in the form of flashbacks or obsessive thoughts. *The Vegetarian*, vividly depicts this stage as the protagonist is repeatedly haunted by the traumatic last the obsessive flashbacks of her violent dreams. This cause emotional numbness and psychological withdrawal from the situations and the surroundings. These constrictive symptoms also disrupt the normal future planning by anticipating it. Through all these descriptions of the trauma, Herman argues that trauma is not an isolated issue, merely limited to a personal or domestic level. It is also shaped by the social and political atmosphere where the individuals live, shaping their perception an experiences.



Findings

Two key strands of the analysis of the *The Vegetarian* can be identified as relating to the research questions; the systematic marginalization of the main character in the patriarchal community and the devastating effects of the psychological trauma on her identity.

First, the novel describes how Yeong-hye is gradually silenced or marginalized at various social life levels. Her husband objectifies her by viewing her refusal to eat as a challenge to the stability of a marriage, and her father is much like her husband by trying to forcefully exercise patriarchal control in compelling her to eat meat. Her nonconformity is subsequently understood by medical institutions as pathology, which places her in psychiatric care and deprives her of agency. All these moments show how the experiences of Yeong-hye are not necessarily characterised by personal choice but by a series of pressures exerted upon her by patriarchal and institutional structures which relegate her to the periphery of social belonging.

Second, the text draws attention to the symptoms of psychological trauma that gradually disrupt the identity of Yeong-hye. Her nightmares and hallucinatory experiences of turning into a plant are examples of intrusive symptoms whereas her growing lack of attachment to family life and her subsequent mute state are indications of dissociative withdrawal. These tendencies echo the trauma phases of intrusion, hyperarousal, and constriction by Judith Herman, wherein the psychic world of Yeong-hye is broken down through years of repression and violence. The fact that the nightmares have developed into full withdrawal is a sign of how the trauma has affected her self-concept.

Put together, these results follow the path of the protagonist toward social ostracism to psychic fragmentation. They show how *The Vegetarian* does not identify marginalization and trauma as two distinct phenomena but as two connected elements of the downfall of Yeong-hye.

Discussion

Marginalization: The Voiceless Within

Yeong-hye's rejection of the societal norms has set her apart from her environment. She is being looked upon as a stranger or alien who does not belong to the place where others of her social community live. Her rejection of eating meat is not only her resistance to the human's cruelty, but also illustrates the fragility of the so-called rigid structures of the society. This non-compliance to the social conformity has caused her to be outcasted within her home and surrounding; rather than getting her

³ Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) applies to diverse feminist and regional themes, particularly in South Asian contexts, where women's voices are silenced by both patriarchal traditions and Western academic frameworks. She critiques how postcolonial feminist struggles are often overlooked or co-opted, emphasizing the need to center local agency and cultural contexts rather than imposing universal feminist narratives.



acceptance from those around her. The contemptuous attitude from her husband and father show the patriarchal traits within the society as well, as women are not allowed to take decisions for themselves. During the first part of the novel, the protagonist is seen as a property a man possesses. She is not allowed to express herself in any way that would offend the men around her. In addition, she is a property that can humiliate its owner -husband- by means of her rebellious acts, so she needs to be corrected by her first owner: the father: “Acting like this at your age, what on earth must Mr. Cheong think?” (Kang, p.29)⁴. The act of marginalizing her started from her very own house, where, like her mother and other sisters, Yeong-hye was always asked to bow down before decisions of the men of the house.

The marginalization does not only take place at the individual level, but it is a long systemic journey; shaped by the social and political atmosphere around. Due to patriarchal realities, there is aggressive male need and demand, and in such a system, Mr Cheong is required to assert his dominance, which is inherently a masculine thing. These patriarchy-affirming requirements of society define boundaries. He displays his masculine power over his wife in order to satisfy that socially- constructed demand. Mr. Cheong always make sure that his wife remains under his control, and for this very purpose, he tries to subjugate her through words and force, both. Since the very beginning, Yong-hye has been placed in a position where her own authority and freedom is limited to certain abstract values and parameters. “To be frank, the first time I met her I wasn’t even attracted to her. Middling height; bobbed hair neither long nor short; jaundiced, sickly-looking skin; somewhat prominent cheekbones; her timid, sallow aspect told me all I

needed to know” (p.1). Mr. Cheong derogatory description about his wife exhibits his sense of authority over her. This description itself is a great evidence of how marginalized Yeong-hye must feel within her own home by living with a man like him. Mr. Cheong expects his wife to fit in the traditional female role, “She hadn’t said a single word on the way here, but I convinced myself that this wouldn’t be a problem. There’s nothing wrong with keeping quiet; after all,

hadn’t women traditionally been expected to be demure and restrained?” (p.21).

Yeong-hye used to be the kind of that traditional wife which her society expected her to be, but after the dream, everything changed for her. It felt like that dream was something she needed the most, in order to break down the chains of the traditional and patriarchy. This lack of obedience is seen to be punished with physical and sexual violence in the novel, in order to maintain and reinforce male domination over women. Spousal sexual abuse is perpetrated in the novel,

I grabbed hold of my wife and pushed her to the floor. Pinning down her struggling arms and tugging off her trousers, I became unexpectedly aroused. She put up a surprisingly strong resistance and, spitting out vulgar curses all the while, it took me three attempts before I managed to insert myself successfully. Once that had happened, she lay there in the dark staring up at the ceiling, her face blank, as though she were a “comfort woman” dragged in against her will, and I was the Japanese soldier demanding her services. (p.30)

⁴ Han, Kang (한강). *채식주의자* (The Vegetarian: A Novel). Translated by Deborah Smith, Hogarth, 2015.



As Mee-Hae Kong⁵ explains, “Women who are alienated at home lose their identity and try to compensate their loss by pursuing the well-beings of their family” (p.10). Mr. Cheong, who was once so dependent on his wife for literally everything, now loses his maid after Yeong-hye sees the dream. This sudden change in her behavior is completely unacceptable for Mr. Cheong. He repeatedly tries to restrict her and subjugate her, but this time.

The psychological breakdown which transforms Yeong-hye emerges from her reaction to continuous cultural and familial oppression that eventually transforms into a mental collapse. Her transformation into a perceived plant state stems from extreme psychological breakdown that results from her suppressed trauma due to violent and emotionally neglected experiences. She abandons human agency to create a new reality where she loses her identity because society left her powerless. Through its portrayal of patriarchal system-based trauma the novel reveals that trauma does not need to produce resistance among victims but can completely dissolve their relationship with self. Yeong-hye rejects eating any form of human food as she dissolves her identity at the same pace her autonomy was progressively taken throughout her life. The violence she survived has absorbed so thoroughly into her being that it changed her existence completely while she abstains from speech and food and refuses interpersonal interactions. *The Vegetarian* does not portray an empowered heroine fighting back against suppression because it portrays the traumatic effects of a society that controls women's identities and bodies to an extreme extent.

Psychological Trauma: The Misdiagnosed Mental Pain

Kang's novella offers a profound exploration of the long term traumatic experiences and their consequences in one's life. The protagonist's journey through all these painful years portrays the violence and the nature of suffering in our world. The resistance showed by Yeong-hye is not only a dietary resistance, but also a spiritual and psychological resistance to the male-orientated society.

In the course of the novella, Yeong-hye's first encounter with her trauma occurs when she experiences a horrific nightmare. Trauma, as Herman (1992) defines, as an event that “overwhelms the ordinary adaptations of life”. This nightmarish apparition propels her to become a vegetarian. As she recalls, “I had a dream. I was drenched in blood. I opened my eyes and saw the darkness was still there” (p.12). The repeatedly occurring nightmare hints at some unresolved trauma from the past, where she must have repressed her desires or had been subjected to immense psychological pressure. Trauma typically does not stem from one single instance. Instead, it usually arises from the chronic exposure of violence and oppression, which supports Herman's claim that, “trauma not solely being an event, but the aftermath of consistent violation”. The gruesome details of Yeong-hye's dream implies that there is a severe psychological issue that has no means of being expressed—which in this case, is likely to be inexpressible.

⁵ Kong, M. H. (1997, October). Rethinking women's status and liberation in Korea. In *Conference on Asia-Europe Relations, Soest, Germany. Retrieved November* (Vol. 12, p. 2000).



Yeong-hye, who was already struggling with her sense of self, by being marginalized by her husband since the beginning, confronts the collapse of her identity after her decision of not eating meat. This decision of her was met with hostility by her family, who sees this transformation as something irrational and threatening. Herman argues that such traumatic events call into question “basic human relationships”, and “shatters the construction of self”. As the time passes, Yeong-hye greatly dissociates from her surroundings. She begins to isolate herself from her husband, family and even the environment she lives in. The very first instance if such dissociation can be seen in the beginning when she experienced the horrible dream, and that triggered her past traumas.

- “She was standing, motionless, in front of the fridge... Her face was submerged in the darkness... barefoot, in thin summer nightwear, ramrod straight” (p.5). The stage, called as constriction by Herman in her trauma theory, where the person becomes numb to his surroundings. Mr. Cheong observes the dramatic changes in her behavior that occurred all of the sudden, but little does he know that it is the culminated trauma that has been put there repressed. “Dreams of murder. Murderer or murdered... hazy distinctions, boundaries wearing thin. Familiarity bleeds into strangeness, certainty becomes impossible” (34). The phrases that Yeong-hye repeatedly utters, shows the mental fragmentation caused by the prolonged exposure to trauma and alienation by her family. This is the “Intrusion” as defined by Herman that how the past trauma invades the present through obsessive thoughts. This misdiagnosed pain manifests in the physical appearance of Yeong-hye as well. As her sister describes her that, “Her face was blanched, a result of protracted insomnia. A stranger coming across her in the street would have assumed she was a hospital patient” (89). These instances depict the destructive consequences of the prolonged exposure of Yeong-hye to trauma. Not only her perception has been damaged badly, but also her physical appearance has also been affected.

Conclusion

The Vegetarian is a tale of psychological trauma and marginalization that unfolds horrifyingly when a woman defies societal norms in a very patriarchal and oppressive place. Yeong-hye’s different transformation from a quiet, obedient wife to a desperate woman who tries to regain her body’s independence from the social institution, therefore, marks her as an outsider who strengthens the novel’s message about the systemic violence that results in one’s erasure of rights and liberty. Not only does her refusal to conform result in psychological fragmentation, it also provokes extreme measures from her family and medical institutions, indicating that marginalization is mandated both through personal relationships and institutional mechanisms. Additionally, the novel shows how trauma is repeated in various dimensions such as familial, medical, and social levels, making Yeong-hye a victim of both patriarchal rule and cultural nationalist rigidity. Her fall into silence and catatonia is finally the ultimate act of resistance or surrender only, this lynch in the fence of the autonomous and the subjugated. Doing so, *The Vegetarian* forces the reader to rethink the price of not following the crowd, uncovering the paradox that such a society stands on protest and conformity at the same time, punishing those who simply say no to it.



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In the end, Han Kang's novel illustrates that trauma and isolation devour the agency and make invisible the marginalized, who not only lose voice in the larger tragedy, but are displaced and forced into invisibility as their identities are robbed by their inability to suffer. A powerful meditation on the intersection of trauma, identity, and the violence of societal expectations, *The Vegetarian* interweaves psychological depth and social critique into a story both beautiful and horrific.

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