

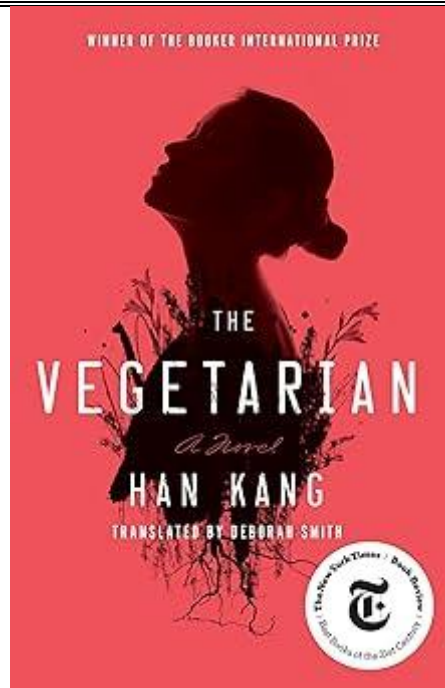
Cultural Resistance and Gender Dynamics: A Vegetarian Ecofeminist Reading of *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang

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Abstract

Meat is considered an integral part of Korean culture, and anyone who diverges from this dietary regimen is often labelled as abnormal or insane. The novel, *The Vegetarian*, by Han Kang, delves into how the predominant meat-centric culture of South Korea marginalises vegetarians, particularly women who choose a vegetarian lifestyle. The

protagonist of the novel, Yeong Hye, during her transformation into a vegetarian, resists the patriarchal pressures that seek to establish the practice of meat consumption as a dominant cultural norm. This paper analyses the novel, *The Vegetarian*, through the critical lens of the Vegetarian Ecofeminism theory formulated by Carol J. Adams. Adams establishes a connection between vegetarianism and the life of women in her theory relating to her social environment, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. She argues that there is association of meat consumption with masculinity, and how women in patriarchal western societies are often expected to cook meat in accordance with the dietary demands of their husbands.

Keywords: *The Vegetarian*, Han Kang, Food and Culture, Male dominance, Meat dominance, Vegetarian Ecofeminism

The food that a person consumes significantly influences their identity, and society often attempts to characterise individuals by projecting its ideas of food symbolism onto their character. Food items are also endowed with rich symbolisms that bring a cultural association to the food that a person consumes. Michael Fox, in his theoretical book, *Deep Vegetarianism*, argues that an individual's diet defines their identity in a dual sense, "because our corporeal selves would not exist without it, and because what we are is due to the meaning we superimpose on our food" (24). He concludes that the symbolic meaning associated with food is indeed a social construct of self-identity. From primitive times, men were considered natural hunters while women were engaged in feminine chores such as gathering food.

Vegetarian Ecofeminism is an interdisciplinary theory of study that makes use of concepts from food studies, feminist studies, environmental studies, and cultural studies. The theory mainly studies the interconnection between vegetarianism and ecofeminism in literature. It focuses on the domination of human beings over non-human animals and a parallel domination of men over women in a typical patriarchal society. The major argument of the theory is that these two forms of dominance are invariably interconnected. A few notable thinkers of the movement of vegetarianism include Peter Singer, Tom Regan, Carol J. Adams, Greta Gaard, Laura Wright, and Nick Fiddes.

Greta Gaard, in *Vegetarian Ecofeminism: A Review Essay*, defines the theory of vegetarian ecofeminism as the third generation of feminist studies and as the "logical

outgrowth of both feminism and ecofeminism” (117). She emphasises the feminist dictum of the personal being political and further explains how the vegetarian ecofeminist theory helps in understanding the political context of dietary choices and the ways in which a person’s diet is taken by the society as a means to assess their femininity and masculinity. While practices such as meat eating, hunting, and poaching are perceived as attributes denoting masculinity, vegetarianism is frequently viewed as a feminine trait in many civilizations. We need to note here that in South India, assumed caste hierarchy is linked to vegetarianism/nonvegetarianism.

One of the seminal texts on the theory of Vegetarian Ecofeminism is *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* by Carol J. Adams. The book addresses the issue of the interconnected oppression of animals as well as women in a conventional western patriarchal society. Adams’ theory focuses on the interconnectedness of women’s and animals’ oppression by incorporating several theoretical concepts such as the Absent Referent, the cycle of Objectification, Fragmentation, Consumption, Vegetarian interruption, etc.

Han Kang is a South Korean writer who mostly delves into the complexities of the human psyche and deals with themes such as human nature and individuality, suffering and trauma, nature and civilization, gender and sexuality, isolation and alienation, etc., in her narratives. Her novel, *The Vegetarian*, originally published in 2007 and later translated into English in 2015 received international acclaim after winning the Man Booker International Prize in 2016. The narrative is based on a novella written by the author herself titled “The Fruit of My Woman”, the plot of which centres on a woman literally as well as symbolically transforming into a tree.

The novel, *The Vegetarian*, is set in the meat-dominated society of South Korea and the protagonist, Yeong Hye chooses her vegetarianism as a means of resistance against South Korea’s prevailing norm of meat consumption. South Korea is a predominantly meat-eating country and meat forms the staple and inevitable part of the diet of the majority of its population. Throughout the novel, Yeong Hye tries to reaffirm her vegetarian identity by resisting the physical, sexual, as well as ecological violence perpetuated by the Korean patriarchal society.

Yeong Hye's deviation from the conventional food habits of South Korea is viewed as a form of insanity by the society and several male and female members of her own family could be seen pressurising her into consuming meat. The societal intolerance of her vegetarianism inflicts severe mental trauma upon Yeong Hye. The objective of the paper is to explore how food forms an integral part of a person's identity and how it can impact their emotions, feelings, perceptions of the world and its people, sexuality, and identity. The study has been carried out with the help of the theory, Vegetarian Ecofeminism as advocated by the theorist, Carol J. Adams in her book, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*.

Han Kang's emotionally intense novel, *The Vegetarian* translated into English by Deborah Smith traces the protagonist Yeong Hye's gradual descent into madness as a result of the ill-treatment from both her family members and the society. The novel is divided into three parts, each narrated from a distinct perspective and revealing the complexity of the characters in it. The first part of the novel titled "The Vegetarian" is narrated from the point of view of Yeong Hye's husband who along with her father is depicted in the novel as a representation of the traditional male-dominated South Korean society.

The novel begins by highlighting Yeong Hye's decision to embrace vegetarianism prompted by a horrific nightmare involving animal abuse and the mistreatment of animals on a factory farm. In South Korean society it was a prevalent belief that the poison of a dog bite could be cured only by consuming the meat of the same dog. Consequently, Yeong Hye's father served her the meat of the dog that had bitten Yeong Hye. This particular incident from her childhood triggered an aversion to violence against animals. She kept seeing nightmares connected to this particular childhood incident and the recurrence of this dream eventually caused Yeong Hye to renounce meat consumption.

Yeong Hye's seemingly inconsequential choice to abstain from consuming meat has profound repercussions on her personal as well as familial life. Both male and female members of her family attempt to forcibly feed her meat, and out of the stress of being coerced into eating meat, Yeong Hye makes an attempt at suicide. Inflicting harm to her own self seems more welcoming to her than the need to inflict violence on other creatures for survival. Yeong Hye's family eventually takes her to a mental asylum where she starts to identify herself as a plant rather than as a human being.

The issue of associating compassion towards animals with maladies is addressed by many theorists in literature. The word “Animaladies” was coined by two such theorists, Lori Gruen, and Fiona Probyn Rapsey in their critical compilation titled *Animaladies: Gender, Animals, and Madness* to refer to the triangular association between animals, women, and madness in the form of maladies. Yeong Hye’s compassion towards animals and restraint from consuming the meat of animals is similarly seen by society as one form of such malady. This perception of Yeong Hye’s vegetarianism as an abnormality and a malady further aggravates her depressive condition.

In her vegetarian ecofeminist theory, Carol J. Adams argues that the absence of meat is most often interpreted by the male members of the patriarchal society as a justification for violence. The wives are expected to prepare meals in accordance with the dietary demands of their husbands and a failure to do so is taken as a pretext for violence against them. Mr. Cheong Ho finds Yeong Hye’s decision to become a vegetarian as a defiant act and he calls her family to seek their assistance in persuading her to resume her meat consumption. A wife is expected to not make any decision that contradicts the wishes of her husband, and here, Yeong Hye’s decision to stop cooking meat aggravates into a major problem as it does not align with her husband’s expectations.

Instead of seeking to understand the motivations behind Yeong Hye’s vegetarianism, both her mother and father accuse her of defying her husband’s desires. This is an instance of how, in a typical patriarchal society, women are even denied the freedom to eat the food of their choice. The family organises a gathering, and when Yeong Hye refuses to consume meat, her father tries to forcefully feed her, leading her to cut down her vein. She is admitted to a hospital, and it is subsequently revealed in the narrative that Mr. Cheong even divorces Yeong Hye because of her refusal to cook or eat meat.

The prevailing discourse of the meat-eating culture in the novel discussed here also makes it difficult for vegetarians to communicate their meanings. They are questioned about their reason for becoming a vegetarian and any other excuse for vegetarianism, apart from health and medical reasons is considered to be strange. Since vegetarianism is pictured to be a strange practice that deviates from society’s standard norm in Korean culture vegetarians are frequently questioned about their decision. In the narrative as well, Yeong Hye is questioned by the members of her family and her friends about her choice of diet.

At a dinner party arranged by Mr. Cheong's boss, Yeong Hye is asked by the members of the party about the reason for her vegetarianism. As she starts to tell them the truth about her dream, Mr. Cheong interrupts and lies that it is for health reasons that she has become a vegetarian. The director's wife also claims that people who cut off meat arbitrarily from their diet are narrow-minded.

Yeong Hye's aversion towards meat is labeled by the society as a kind of abnormal and irrational meat phobia. She is even admitted to a mental asylum following her resolute decision to stop consuming meat, which the society considers as a deviation from the conventional norms of the society.

Adams' theory of the Vegetarian Quest is identified in the novel, *The Vegetarian*. Adams identifies the Vegetarian Quest as a four-step process where the first step is to experience "the revelation of the nothingness of meat as an item of food" (227). Yeong Hye realizes that meat is not an inevitable and irreplaceable component of the diet and that it is tasteless if not for the sauces, gravies, and marinades added to it. The second step is "naming the relationships" (229) which includes identifying similarities between the meat on the table and the living animal, and also between ourselves and the animal butchered for meat. Yeong Hye refuses to indulge in any physical relationship with her husband as she finds similarities between the animal odour and the odour of Mr. Cheong.

The third and final stage in the process of the vegetarian quest is "rebuking a meat-eating world" (230). At the asylum, Yeong Hye starts to rebuke the whole meat-eating world as she sees the world as a place of violence and cruelty towards animals. For this reason alone, she prefers to associate herself with the plants and trees, rather than with the human species involved in violence. She agrees when her brother-in-law expresses a wish to paint leaves and flowers on her body and shoot the whole process, as Yeong Hye is impressed with the idea of being painted with flowers and leaves and the painting also seems to stop her from seeing nightmares. In the climax of the narrative, Yeong Hye stands upside down in the hospital yard and claims that roots are sprouting from her head while the branches sprout from her legs.

It is through her ecofeminist vegetarian identity that Yeong Hye tries to resist the dominant cultural norms dictated by the society in the form of confirming to the dominant

choice of food, culture, sexuality, etc. Throughout the novel, Yeong Hye chooses to lead a non-conformist life by not succumbing to the demands of the patriarchal society. It also becomes apparent to the readers that if society had been more empathetic towards the feelings and emotions of Yeong Hye, she would not have faced such a great extent of trauma and would not have ended up in the asylum.

As Yeong Hye progresses through the different stages of the vegetarian quest, which include understanding the nothingness of meat, finding similarities between herself and animals, and rebuking a meat-eating world, her transformation becomes a powerful representation of resistance against societal norms and a patriarchal culture represented in the novel. By embracing a vegetarian identity, Yeong Hye also symbolises a wider protest against violence committed towards animals and herself in her society.

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