



The Ethics of Refusal: Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and the Challenge of Animal and Gender Justice

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ABSTRACT

This study reads Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* alongside contemporary debates in animal ethics and feminist theory, centring on the refusal embodied by its main character, Yeong-hye. Tracing her vow to stop eating meat after a vivid dream, the argument shows how personal defiance unsettles the cultural scripts and patriarchal hierarchies that shape twenty-first-century South Korea. Yeong-hye's choice, meant to affirm her integrity, quickly becomes a battleground on which her family and wider society pour out alienation, scorn, and even physical violence. Employing Carol J. Adams' idea of the "absent referent," the paper draws out telling analogies between the objectification of livestock and the erasure of women, arguing that both are made invisible whenever dominant discourse insists they can be safely ignored. In this light, Kang's tale moves beyond mere social critique; it portrays agency and ethical resistance as possible, though they frequently demand painful sacrifice. By weaving together gender studies, animal theory, and narrative ethics, the article positions *The Vegetarian* as a timely meditation on food politics, the politics of refusal, and the uneasy cost of living one's convictions.

Keywords: Vegetarianism; Sexual Politics; Meat; Violence; Consumption; Fragmentation

FULL PAPER

Introduction

In a cover feature titled “Four Asian Voices,” author Han Kang notes: “Violence is part of being human, and how can I accept that I am one of those human beings? That kind of suffering always haunts me.” Kang’s novels feature women characters who reject the pervasive presence of violence, often at a tremendous personal cost. Whether it is the ‘Silent’ woman in her novel *Greek Lessons* who recognises the violence in language and stops using it altogether, or Yeong-hye’s obsession with following a vegetarian diet after an eye-opening dream in the 2007 novel, *The Vegetarian*. Kang’s narratives reject violence. This rejection of violence extends beyond just large-scale acts, such as wars and revolutions, which undoubtedly cause severe bloodshed, but also encompasses the smaller acts of violence that people commit on a day-to-day basis. These acts often go unnoticed due to their repetition, leading to their normalisation. In the 21st century, acts of violence are performed almost without a moment of thought, leading to a contestation of human agency. In *The Vegetarian*, Kang is seen reversing this power imbalance, emphasising her belief in human will and the ability to move beyond the ambit of violence. Yeong-hye’s rejection of meat can be interpreted as an act of resistance against the ingrained cultural practices that dictate behaviour and reinforce oppressive structures (Roth, 2005).

The social consequences

Yeong-Hye inspires various emotions in her husband’s mind, both before and after her act of quitting meat. These emotions rely on what he considers to be his wife’s unassuming passivity, which aligns with his values, the ‘middle course in life,’ he has always aspired to. However, as unassuming and flat a character as he considers his wife to be, before Yeong-Hye’s conversion to vegetarianism, there were still two things which puzzled him about her. The first was her general aversion to bras, and the second was her love for reading. The first, while it caused him a moment of embarrassment at a dinner party organised by his boss, the embarrassment was not felt as intensely as the fear, the shiver down his back, when Yeong-hye repeats the reason behind her newfound aversion to meat, “I had a dream.” Her husband had so far failed to inquire as to what that dream was, just as he failed to inquire into her reading habits. For some unfathomable reason, reading was something she was able to immerse herself in—reading books that looked so dull I could not even bring myself to so much as take a look inside the covers (pg.14).

Her husband does not attempt to understand his wife, and as a result, she is forced into situations where her beliefs are repeatedly questioned. Yeong-hye is made to feel alienated at both public and private events; the conversation at the dinner party organized by her husband's boss, ends up tangled in a colorful debate on vegetarianism, and later we have another dinner scene, this time with Yeong-hye's entire family, which culminates into a strange and violent feast. At the former, the primary concern put forth by the executive director's wife creates an atmosphere of subtle social tension. It seems preposterous to her that some people could exclude certain foods without proper medical reasons; she claims proper vegetarianism to be nothing but narrow-mindedness and promotes the idea of a balanced diet. There is much social judgment involved in the entire scene, not only regarding Yeong-hye's dietary choices but also her body. The executive director's wife had been sneaking sideways glances at my wife's breasts for some time now. "A balanced diet goes hand in hand with a balanced mind, don't you think?" she remarked (pg. 28).

This scene gives an insight into the cultural practices of South Korea, emphasising the importance of conformity over individual choices while also reflecting South Korea's complex social hierarchy, a sense that people in positions of higher social standing feel entitled to judge others who are different. Yeong-hye is both absent and present in this dinner scene. Her plate remains empty throughout, while the restaurant continues to serve meaty dishes. She only voices her thoughts twice: once to say that she does not eat meat, and another time to explain why, but she is cut off. While the group laughs at the "imagine snatching up a wriggling baby octopus with your chopsticks and chomping it to death—and the woman across from you glared like you were some kind of animal" joke, one is forced to imagine the acute sense of isolation Yeong-hye must feel. She is present as the wife of a subordinate employee, yet absent because of the inequality and discomfort she is forced to tolerate on an empty stomach. She is the wriggling baby octopus that people from the higher social order pick at with their chopsticks and chomp down on, never giving her the right to make an individual decision. She is an 'absent referent.'

Through rough butchering, animals become absent referents. Animals are absent in both name and body to make meat exist. Animals' lives precede and enable the existence of meat. If animals are alive, they cannot be meat. Thus, a dead body replaces the live animal. Without Animals, there would be no meat eating, yet they are absent from the act of eating meat because they have been transformed into food (Carol J. 66).

The Meaty Woman

Another dinner scene follows—a private dinner with Yeong-hye’s family running interference on her husband’s behalf. However, before the dinner, we get scenes of her family, especially her mother and sister’s attempt at bringing Yeong-hye back into the fold of meat eating, to no avail. An irate phone call from her father also does nothing to shake her resolve, but ends up revealing a deep-rooted patriarchal discourse in the act of eating meat. Yeong-hye’s father, is a big man with a loud voice, a man of pride and valor having fought in the Vietnam war, a man like that does not apologize, which is why the husband, Mr. Cheong is reasonably shocked when these words are heard over the phone speaker, “No, I am the one who is ashamed.”

Ashamed, he is ashamed of his daughter becoming a vegetarian. Not only is the vegetarian diet causing Yeong-hye to lose weight and become increasingly weak, but what truly seems a matter of shame to her father is not his daughter’s worsening health but the effect her decision is having on her husband, who is being deprived of his regular diet at home. Mr. Cheong is portrayed as the martyr of Vegetarianism; in this context, vegetarianism transcends a mere dietary preference; it becomes a potent symbol of defiance against societal expectations and a quest for self-expression (Taebum & Yoon, 2015). At home, the absence of meat meant the absence of violence against animals, but the absence of any form of violence at home is emasculating. The animal’s body is absent but soon replaced by the woman’s, by Yeong-hye.

Through the structure of the absent referent, patriarchal values become institutionalised. Just as dead bodies are absent from our language about meat in descriptions of cultural violence, women are also often the absent referent. (Carol J, pg. 67-68). Her husband justifies the act as a physical need gone unnoticed and unfulfilled for too long. As if he had been deprived of his protein, something needed to build up his strength by a defiant act committed by his wife. He attacks her, and it seems that the very act of sexual violence turns him on, as his wife struggles to get free, only adding to his building arousal. So yes, on nights when I returned home late and somewhat inebriated after a meal with colleagues, I would grab my wife and push 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, one time in three, I would manage 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 (pg. 34).

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